

Chapter 1

The Wimbum People

THE WIMBUM PEOPLE OF THE DONGA-MANTUNG DIVISION

The Wimbum and other people who also inhabit the Northwest Province have similar institutional structures and beliefs about the extended family. Wimbum views and beliefs about witchcraft are somewhat the same among the people of the Northwest Province, commonly called “The Grassfields.” The Wimbum people inhabit the Donga-Mantung Plateau (formerly Nkambe) of the Northwest Province.¹ The name “Wimbum” is descriptive and means the “Mbum people.”² They speak *Limbus*; the prefix “li” means language, thus *Limbus* means the “language of the Mbum people.”³ The Wimbum language shares certain affinities for other languages of the Northwest Province. For example, both the Wimbum and the Nso people use the title *kibai* to designate a council of elders, also called by the Wimbum *ptala*, the heads of different families.⁴ The Northwest Province has polyglot populations that fall under three broad classifications of languages—the Momo, Ring, and the Mbam-Nkam. *Limbus* falls in Mbam-Nkam group as do Adere, Mungaka, Bamoum, Bafut, Mankon, Jo, Fefe, Dschang, and Bangante (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 35). The Nso language is placed in the Ring group, along with the Babungo, Kom, and We, but it is important to point out that despite multiple permutations, the different peoples of the Northwest Province have 57 percent of their vocabulary in common (Ibid., p. 19). Thus, although *Lamnsó* (the language of the Nso people) and *Limbus* are in different language groups, there

are similarities in much of their vocabulary. Many words in both languages sound similar and have similar meanings.⁵ There are three clans in the Wimbun community (the Wiya, Witang, and Wiwarr). The clan heads are not paramount chiefs, but rather each Wimbun village has its own village head called *nkfu*, otherwise called *fon* by other ethnic groups of the Northwest Province.⁶ The *fons* govern their villages with the assistance of a council of elders. The villages are generally divided into quarters, and each quarter is ruled by a sub-chief called *fai*. Members of a quarter constitute an extended family and practice exogamy.

The Wimbun consider themselves one people. In his well-known essay on the Wiya people, Dr. Jeffreys, a social anthropologist and colonial district officer of the area, referred to the Wiya as a "tribe" (Jeffreys 1962, 83ff). This designation is misleading, because it implies that the Wiya people belong to a different group from the other groups of the Wimbun people. Perhaps Jeffreys did this because of the migration theory, which holds that the Wiya are part of the Tikar people who migrated into the Northwest Province from Kimi.

THE PEOPLING OF THE WIMBUN AREA

The peopling of the Donga-Mantung Plateau, in general, and the Wimbun area, in particular, is a complex subject, and no single theory can account for this process. Earlier studies that addressed the settling of the Wimbun on the present site include those by Nkwi and Warnier, Dr. P. Mafiamba, and Jones Mangoh (Mafiamba 1969; Mangoh 1986). Mafiamba argues that the Wimbun people who are related to the Tikar group of the Northwest Province arrived on the plateau from Kimi. According to Mafiamba's reconstruction, the Warr, who were the first people on the plateau, settled at Mbirbaw, the present Mbot (Mafiamba 1969, 64). Mangoh argues that the Warr were the aborigines of the area and were later joined by the Wiya and Witang (Mangoh 1986, 28).⁷

Some members of the Warr people moved to different locations on the plateau and formed the different towns that make up the different Warr people; indeed the name "Warr" itself means "scatter." According to Mangoh, the first Warr to move away from Mbirbaw was Ntumbaw, followed by Sop and Chup. By the seventeenth century, other towns of the present Warr people were founded at sites including Nkambe, Kungi, Binshua, Saah, Njap, Mbaa, and Wat (Mangoh 1986, 32). At first, these towns, which were known in *Limbum* as *m_laa* (meaning "compounds"), did not establish the

same kind of authority structure they left behind at Mbot. Later they developed a similar structure by establishing the institution of the *fon* when they crowned their leaders as *nkfu*. The *nkfu* of Mbirbaw was still regarded as their leader, but he had no direct control over the affairs of the newly established realms. In this structure, a *fon* or *nkfu* ruled the town and was assisted by several leaders known as *kibai*, *tar nte*, or *tallanwe*. These leaders were in charge of family groups within a specific town ruled by *nkfu*.

The other two groups of the Wimbun, the Wiya and the Witang, are believed to have migrated to the area as part of the Tikar wave of immigration provoked by Borno and Hausa expansionism and slave raiding (Mangoh 1986, 37). The Wiyah people migrated to the present area, where they now live, from Kimi, under their leader, Nyankimji. Part of the group settled at Mbiriqua under the leadership of Nyankimji's brother. The rest proceeded to the present site, making brief stops at Konchep and Fuh. When the Wiya settled on the plateau, the first dispute with the Warr people started when the Wiyah leader and his people refused to offer a buffalo they had caught as homage to the *nkfu* of Mbirbaw. As a result of this dispute, the Wiyah people moved to Mbandfung.

The Witang first moved to Nguu when they left Kimi. They settled briefly at Mbajeng but moved because the Wiya people claimed that Mbajeng was their territory. Some of the Witang went to Mbasong, others to Mbam and Nseh, but both are now part of the Bui Division. The group that remained on the Nkambe Plateau formed the present Tang clan, out of which came the towns of Sinna, Talla, Ngarum, Taku, Kup, Tabenken, and Bi (Mangoh 1986, 41). The groups that arrived later, such as the Ngang, Sehn, Njilah, and Ngulu were either part of the Wiyah or Tang group. The leader of the Ngulu (a Wiyah group, which settled near Ntumbaw) enjoyed more autonomy than other Wiyah leaders. Both Mangoh and Mafiamba have pointed out that the Luh were an autochthonous people originally driven out of Nso, who settled at the present site and joined the Wiyah group (Ibid., p. 42).⁸ When these two groups, the Wiyah and Witang, settled on the plateau, they adopted the settlement patterns set by the Warr people and settled where they thought they could sustain themselves while still maintaining their identity.

THE WIMBUN COMMUNITY

The integration of the Wimbun people into a highly structured society was the result of a slow, complex process that will not be

addressed in this book. Other writers suggest that at the center of this society is the *nkfu* of each town. This is partly true because the *nkfu* exerts much influence, but I would argue that the center of the Wimbum society is the family and the extended family system. The configuration of the Wimbum society is family oriented, because the *nkfu* rules the town as head of the royal family. The *ptala* who rule the different extended families that make up the town have control over all of the members of the particular extended family who are descendants of one ancestor. In addition to these political arrangements, economic and social affairs are structured around the family and the family head who also acts as the religious leader. Furthermore, the leader of each family group, along with his advisors, acts as the authority in adjudicating conflicts and is called upon from time to time to settle disputes and even to take actions to ward off threats to the family.

THE STRUCTURE OF WIMBUM SOCIETY: THE WARR PEOPLE

The people of the Warr clan are believed to be the autochthonous residents of the area. They trace their beginnings to Mbirbaw, where their leader, Bomsa, ruled. His four sons later separated, and these individuals formed the nucleus of the present towns of Ntumbaw, Sop, Chup, and Mbot (Mafiamba 1969, 104). Although, the *nkfu*, the town's *fon*, plays an important role in the lives of the people in the town, the families and extended family control the day-to-day activities of the society. Each family lives together on a piece of property that they claim as their own. These families are exogamous and patrilineal. The main leader is called by several names, including *Tallanwe*, *Kibai*, and *Tar nte*, but generally these leaders are called *fai*. Occasionally people refer to them as "big man." The *fai*, as head of the extended family, is responsible for almost all of the business and affairs of the extended family. For instance, he speaks to the *nkfu* on behalf of the family, he makes sure that the family land and resources are well guarded, and he decides where members will build and cultivate. The *fai* thus controls economic production and distribution. This is not to suggest that the individual members of the extended family have no voice and cannot take any initiative; there is freedom within this structure that recognizes individuality and personhood.

THE ROLE OF THE *Fai* IN THE FAMILY

The *fai* is responsible for the spiritual well-being of his people and is generally the one who will be consulted in case of any difficult problems such as witchcraft accusations. Thus if there is a death, the death celebration will be held in his quarters. All of the women will gather in the house of his senior wife, and all of the men will gather in the court where he receives people. In Ntumbaw, *Fai* Ngafansi has a large room where he receives his guests. This same room is used for other ceremonies, such as death celebrations, and the weekly *ngwa*, a financial association. It is the *fai*'s responsibility to lead or delegate powers to someone who will carry out investigations of "witchcraft." The *fai* also must ensure that the right diviners are consulted when there is a problem (Probst 1992, 148). The *fai* and his elders, and in some cases, the elders of the entire town, including the *fon*, determine the penalties for crimes as well as the rituals that will be done to cleanse and purify the community.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the *fai*'s authority as much as the marriage transaction. He coordinates all marriage arrangements within the family, choosing the men and women from his own family who will go to the home of the new in-laws when anyone in the family has become engaged to a woman in or out of the town. In some cases, he may make the trip himself. He pays the bride wealth from the family's resources. He would have received this wealth in the past as the bride wealth from others who have married women out of his family. He cannot spend this money for his own personal affairs; rather, he will use it to pay the bride wealth demanded by other families when members of his extended family marry. This structure does not prevent individuals from coming up with their own bride wealth if they can afford it.

I further illustrate the structure and role of the *fai* by looking at *Fai* Ngafansi, who carries out his functions in consultation with several elders who represent different families within *Fai* Ngafansi's extended family. *Fai* Ngafansi's extended family is made up of five households headed by family heads who work with *Fai* Ngafansi to govern the family. These include *Ndap Fai*, the immediate household of the *Fai* himself, *Ndap Ndzi*, *Ndap Ngwang*, *Ndap Gwei*, and *Ndap Yongka*.⁹ *Fai* Ngafansi works together with the head of these families to make decisions on behalf of the extended family. Those who head these individual families owe their authority to seniority. For instance, the head of *Ndap Ngwang* today is Samuel

Ndzi, a man who has a good reputation not only in the family of *Fai* Ngafansi but also in the entire town of Ntumbaw. When Samuel Ndzi can no longer exercise his functions as head of the Ngwang family, that role will not necessarily be taken by any of his sons but will go to the most senior member of that family—perhaps one of his brothers, or anyone else in the Ngwang family who is the most senior member. This arrangement has been challenged recently in the neighboring town by Moses Tansi, who has argued that his uncle, Usumanu Nfor, has no right over the Tansi family because he, Moses, is the rightful successor of his father.¹⁰ Moses has lost the case in every court that has tried it, both within the Wimbun community and in the magistrate courts of the Donga-Mantung Division.

Although a *fai* shares the governing of his *rfa* “extended family” with heads of individual families, the heads of these families cannot succeed him when he dies. Only members of a *fai*’s family can succeed him in that role—his children or his brothers. His successor is usually decided on by the leaders of the families in consultation with the other *fais* of the town and the *nkfu*, who has the ultimate responsibility in seeing that the transition is smooth. When a *fai* dies, at the time his successor is crowned a female member of the family also is installed as *mankfu*. She assists in ruling the extended family. She cannot marry, but she can take on lovers who live in the compound and have children with her, but these children belong to the *fai*’s family.

The role of the *fai*, along with other Wimbun institutions, is facing challenges posed by the introduction of Western education, Christianity, and capitalism. In the past, those who occupied this office worked less than those today. In his illuminating discussion of some of these changes in the context of witchcraft, power, and medicine, Probst has noted that in the past, the *fai*, like the *nkfu*, was supposed to exercise his function by refraining from certain public activities. The needs of a market economy, however, have changed all of this and now a *fai* is frequently obliged to participate in economic activities such as commercial agriculture and normal day-to-day business dealings such as trade in the market (Probst 1992, 149).¹¹ Elites are now taking the positions of *fai* among the Wimbun. They do not have to be restricted and secluded; instead, they are urged to use their offices and power to foster the growth of the community, provide fees for education, and encourage participation in the activities of the extended family (Ibid., 150).

Carrying out these responsibilities has become complicated because *fais* not only have to depend on the heads of families but now have to contend with the “modern elite,” who are expected, and who themselves want, to be involved in the running of their towns of origin, even though they may live in urban areas of Cameroon. In addition to going back and forth between their urban area and their hometowns, the modern elite have structured their involvement by the formation of associations and development committees that carry out different projects in their areas.¹²

WIMBUN WORLDVIEW AND RELIGION

The Wimbun worldview is the interplay of social, religious, and political roles, working together to ensure the well-being of the people. Within the Wimbun world, no neat compartmentalization of the sacred and secular exists. The Wimbun believe in the pervasive role of divinity. Religion, culture, and social life come together, making it difficult to isolate purely secular or religious activities. Missionary George Dunger has observed that religion and life among the Cameroonians are one (Dunger 1946, 19).¹³ Dunger notes that some Cameroonians see natural phenomena as a representation of the powers of the spirit. However, Dunger’s claim that “native” religion cannot contribute to practical ethics is problematic because the preoccupation among the people of the Northwest Province with ethical violations is predicated on a certain ethical code (Ibid., 21, 22). The pervasive religiosity of the Wimbun bears some resemblance to what has been noted in other parts of Africa.¹⁴ In the Geertzian sense, religion and life among the Wimbun are part of a cultural system (Geertz 1973b, 87ff).

THE PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT OF A “HIGH GOD”

Although it is difficult to locate a single word in *Limbum* that describes the concept of religion, the Wimbun people do have a word for god, *Nyu* (the plural form is *Mnyu*). The Wimbun people refer to several divinities called *Nyu ngon*, “the god of the world,”¹⁵ *Nyu lah* “the god of the compound,” *Nyu roh*, “the god of water,” *Nyu kop*, “the god of the forest,” and *Nyu mmkfu*, “the god of the farm.” Apart from these many divine beings, there also is a strong temptation to speak of a supreme being similar to a Christian God.

The attempt to search for a supreme God among the Wimbum cannot be solved by dismissing the notion of a personalistic god. By interpreting the religious experience of the Wimbum people as an activity that deals with “ultimate concerns,” one need not accept or deny that there is such a thing as a personal god. Pool dismisses the notion of a personalistic High God among the Wimbum, arguing instead that, “Witches are ultimately responsible for the activities which are attributed to the *Mnyu*” (Pool 1994, 251). It is not immediately clear whether Pool specifically rejects the Christian notion of a High God imposed on the Wimbum and other African communities, or personalism in religion *en toto*. If it is a rejection of any notion of personalism in religion among the Wimbum, it seems to me that such a conclusion does not take into consideration the personal references that abound in Wimbum conceptions of God.

Pool’s position, and that of his informants, is understandable if one realizes that conversations on illness tend to focus on who is doing what to whom. In such conversations, witches are at the center of the alleged activity, but to attribute all that happens in Wimbum society to witches and to deny that they may have a personal God take the evidence too far.¹⁶

The notion of a High God among the Africans is a very popular theme. For example, missionary and anthropologist Paul Gebauer writes that among the Yamba of the Nwa Sub-Division, “Beliefs about *Nwie* came nearest to the idea of a high god” (Gebauer 1964, 26). The nearness to a High God that Gebauer describes refers to attributes the Yamba people give to their God *Nwei*, including invisibility, being present everywhere, the ability to change one’s abode, one who sees and knows all things, and the creator of the earth and the sky (Ibid.).

The Nigerian scholar Bolaji Idowu argues that there is both a High God and divinities (Idowu 1973, 140). In his attempt to demarcate a different understanding of God in Africa, Idowu has introduced the concept of “diffused monotheism” (Ibid., 135). He argues that there is a monotheistic belief in Africa, making African religions similar to other monotheistic faiths. Attempts to define divinity as a “High God” based on the influence of Christianity are not very helpful, however, because African conceptions of divinity do not necessarily correspond to Christian categories of God. Although the Wimbum people talk of God, gods, and spirits that inhabit the world, they do not raise any questions regarding a supreme deity and the relationship of that deity to other divini-

ties such as *Nyu Ngon* and *Nyu Ro*. I have found Benjamin Ray's polymethodic and multidimensional approach to religion helpful (Ray 1976).¹⁷

This approach stresses symbols such as deities, ancestors, sacred actions, and images, which all converge to present different elements of society. His approach also encompasses ritual activities that bring together the imaginary and lived worlds. Mythical symbols and rituals are community based and enacted for the good of the people (Ray 1976, 17). During the colonial struggle, community-based activities that employed rites that appealed to a divine power were undertaken in some parts of Africa. From other parts of Africa, we know that indigenous religions have played an essential role in political movements. Both David Lan (1985) and Matthew Schoffeleers (1992) present good examples of how indigenous religions have been part of the colonial protest.

THE WIMBUM PEOPLE AND THE BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF SPIRITS

The Wimbum also recognize the existence of several intermediaries such as spirits and ancestors who interact with humans. The Wimbum speak of good spirits and bad spirits, a designation different from the Christian conception. Among the Wimbum is a spirit called *nyir*, believed to be the spirit of someone who has died but come back to bother people. When people become aware of such a presence, community leaders offer sacrifices to appease these spirits. Pool's informants suggested that ancestors, or *bkfubsi*, as they are called in *Limum*, do not do all of the things that people say they do. This view certainly calls for further probing, because it is possible that Pool's informers want to dissociate ancestors from negative activities. Ancestors cannot and should not always be associated with negative activities in the community. Jean-Marc Ela argues that ancestors should not always be seen as harmful powers needing to be appeased through rites (Ela 1988, 19). The Wimbum people have a strong belief in the reality of ancestors and their interaction with the community. Whether or not *bkfubsi* cause the difficulties that some attribute to them is a subject for further investigation, but there is no doubt that the Wimbum people believe in their existence and their participation in the lives and activities of the people.

COMMUNITY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE REINFORCED WITH RITUALS

The Wimbun people carry out many rites in the practice of their religious beliefs. Rituals involve the life cycle of an individual and are meant to ensure the prosperity and well-being of the people. They sometimes call this practice *mshep*.¹⁸ The practice of *mshep* as a ritual may involve preparing medicines for members of the family when the family needs cleansing. On such an occasion, it is customary for a fowl to be offered either to the gods or ancestors. Wimbun people refer to this as “fixing,” or *kupse mshep*. This activity can be undertaken as a precaution against illness, a perceived or an apparent danger, or to appease the gods so that treatment for a particular illness can be effective. Since twins are considered very powerful, it is important to give them medicines in a ritual, which is called *nusi* (Ngala, 2000). In a family where twins have been born, a specialist prepares medicines and performs rituals because it is believed that twins become people who can see and do things that other people cannot. The person designated to do this usually mixes local raffia or palm wine with herbs and other medicines, giving it to the twins to drink so that their power will be tamed and channeled into positive actions. It is believed that if the twins are not treated this way, they can eventually hurt their parents. No one associates twins with witches and evil actions; rather, the belief is that twins are special children who have special powers, in a different category than witches.

The most important religious ritual among the Wimbun is an offering called *tangsi*. The Wimbun people perform *tangsi* in several ways. If it is a family *tangsi*, the head of the family, or someone designated by the head, can perform it at the family shrine. If it involves the entire town, the religious leaders of the town, under the supervision of the *fon*, will enact it. *Tangsi* is undertaken for almost everything imaginable. If the people are preparing to go hunting, they can hold a special *tangsi*.¹⁹ *Tangsi* can be undertaken before the planting or weeding season, or to purify the land. When they do *tangsi* to purify the land, it is different from the protective measures taken by the closed society called *Nsingong*, responsible for placing medicines on the borders and all of the strategic points of Njirong and Ntumbaw to prevent evil doers and witches from bringing misfortune into the towns.

At Ntumbaw, for instance, a *tangsi* can be enacted at one of three places. The first is the *Ndap Ngong*, the sacred spot where

most of the religious rituals that pertain to the entire town are performed. At Ntumbaw, only a select few enter *Ndap Ngong*. The second place where the *tangsi* can be performed is in a shrine centrally located at the entrance to the palace. The third place is known as *tseri*, a site about 200 meters from the palace. The *tseri* itself refers to a tall boulder that has a round shape. The stone is planted in the ground and rises about six or seven feet. This *tseri* has been allowed to fall down and is now broken into pieces. It is not clear whether this was caused by vandalism or if the people simply neglected it. At all of these places, a ritual performance may include the sacrifice of a fowl. If this particular *tangsi* is offered for hunting or during farming season, the blood from the fowl is spread on the hoes or spears. During these ceremonies, special palm wine is blessed. Participants drink the wine and eat the fowl that was sacrificed. They also offer prayers to *Nyu* and call on ancestors to bless the land and to bring prosperity (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 164).²⁰

These religious activities usually are combined with different types of divination, which remains an important means of forecasting the future or determining the cause of an illness or a death. In pidgin English, divination is known as *ngambe* and is practiced by many of the peoples of the Northwest Province. The Wimbun typically refer to divination as *seng*; the person who performs divination is called *Nwe Seng*. In most Wimbun towns, there are people who specialize in different forms of divination. These people use various objects to assist them in deciphering the problems that their clients bring. If there is a dispute, the people consult another diviner. In the past, if a problem was not resolved after proper divination procedures were followed in Ntumbaw, people went to a town in the Nwa Sub-District area to consult with the diviner known as *Tonga*, who was highly reputable.

The classic work on divination in the Northwest Province is Paul Gebauer's *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* (Gebauer, 1964). Gebauer writes about the Yamba people who are neighbors to the Wimbun, and he indicates that the *ngam* divination is the predominant method employed among the Yamba people. Gebauer, however, gives it a wider context.

It is used for any practice of any oracular nature, but it is also the name for the gods or ancestors who speak through a diviner or his instruments. Variations of this term appear among neighboring grassland tribes, such as *nga* in *Limbuni*, *ngamb* in *Bikom*, *ngamo* in Kwang (Gebauer 1964, 35).

Gebauer describes the process of *ngam* divination as an activity that involves the interpretation of a message from a set of leaf cards held in the hands of the diviner. After initial descriptions of the problems, the diviner proceeds to determine the voice of the powers he is consulting.

Holding the pack of cards between his two hands he blows them repeatedly, then with the set of cards pressed between the thumb and index finger he lowers his hand and rests it on the piece of fur. Still holding the cards securely with the left hand he now brings his right hand behind the cards and with the index finger snaps the center of the pack letting the cards scatter forward along the outstretched fur and across the bar. . . . In a leisurely manner the diviner picks up the cards that have crossed the bar to read their meaning to his client (Gebauer 1964, 38–39).

Gebauer indicates that this process can go on until the diviner is assured that the powers he is consulting have given him a clear picture about the issues involved.

Divination among the Wimbum and their neighbors, the Yamba, bears some resemblance to Victor Turner's understanding of the practice of divination as social analysis (Turner 1975). He argues that such social analysis involves ambivalence that comes out in the diviner, characterized by Turner as a marginal individual whose activity reflects the conflicts inherent in the society that has rejected him or her. Turner portrays the resolutions that clients seek as a solution that the diviner brings out in conflictual terms. "Resolution is achieved only at the cost of running total hate, and sometimes of the actual ostracism or physical punishment of the secret plotter, 'the witch'" (Turner 1975, 24–25). However, I do not believe that the ritual process is only the unveiling of the world of marginality. The goal of divination is to attempt to find some resolution that should not be seen only as hate and punishment, since the diviner who undertakes a diagnosis can also tell his or her client to hold a celebration. Divination also can lead to healing, although the diviner who may only serve as a diagnostician may not do the healing. There are indeed times when diviners may demonstrate a certain amount of hallucination, and this does not necessarily imply that there is marginality involved in their background. Some of the diviners tend to be rather organized and operate in a structured environment. The ones Gebauer observed were organized and demonstrated a clear structure.

The role of the diviner—*nganga*, as they are known in the literature—continues to be important. Schoffeleers argues that the *nganga* could, and should, be seen as a paradigm for Christology in Africa (Schoffeleers 1989, 157–183). Schoffeleers demonstrates that the *nganga* performs certain roles such as preparing charms, using herbal medicines, healing, detecting, and eradicating witchcraft. The image of Christ as healer is the parallel Schoffeleers draws from these different roles, though prominent clergy in Africa, such as Milingo, who have had a well publicized healing ministry are reluctant to see themselves as *nganga*. Members of the clergy are sometimes called *nganga* in parts of East Africa. Michael Kirwen's work overturns previous interpretations of the diviner, viewed by missionaries as an enemy and agent of the devil (Kirwen 1987).

In his brilliant, programmatic essay, "Perspectives on Divination in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa," Renaat Devisch proposes a praseological approach to the understanding of divination (Devisch 1985, 50–83). Devisch argues that such an approach, while drawing from previous attempts, focuses on the subject, namely, the diviner, his or her congregation, and the "decision-making group constituting itself in the source of the divinatory process." This approach stresses the "purposeful articulation of meaning" and praxis in which "the oracle of the diviner brings out what is problematic by giving it metaphoric form, through rhetoric, or dramatic bridging of physiological, sensitive, cognitive, social, historical and cosmological domains" (Ibid., 77). In my view, what Devisch proposes takes the insights of Turner further by seeing the communication of meaning through the process as an all-encompassing revelatory transaction on which healing and emancipatory projects can be constituted by the community. I would argue that, beyond self-legitimation and generation of the concerns of the individual, a praseological approach to divination opens liberating dimensions. "This performance can bring about insight, mastery of cognitive complexity, transition in the existential or social condition of the individual or of the group. It can bring about a change in the relations of power, mediation between the individual and the group, the old and the new, or can perform other dynamic functions" (Ibid., 77).

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO WIMBUN

Christianity was first introduced to the Wimbun people in the early part of the twentieth century by Cameroonian evangelists who became Christians while working in the southwest area of

Cameroon. The Baptist church dominates in the Wimbum area, which also has the largest number of professing Baptists in the Cameroon Baptist Convention. This church was started through the initiative of Jamaican Baptists and spread from the coastal areas of Cameroon inland largely through the efforts of Cameroonian evangelists (Gwei 1966; Kwast 1971; Sanneh 1983; Mangoh 1986; Weber 1993). Christianity moved into the Wimbum area via Songka and Fonfuka in the Mentchum Division, where Joseph Mamadu, a Grasslander who became a Christian on the coast, started the first Baptist churches.²¹

Later, missionary Johanness Sieber established a station at Mbirpka in the Mbaw Plains. He was forced to move the station to its present location at Ndu Town in 1932 (Ibid.). In typical missionary language, Kwast notes that the station was destroyed by "hostile enemies" in 1933. It was rebuilt, and the work spread throughout the area (Ibid.). Since Kwast writes about church growth history, he accounts for the spread of the Baptist church in the area in the pragmatic, programmatic language of the church growth school. The factors of growth were the tenacity of missionaries, the contribution of schools, the responsive nature of the Wimbum people, and, to a certain extent, the establishment of a theological school at Ndu.

Mangoh argues that the missionaries succeeded among the Wimbum because they established local headquarters. The Baptists also did not have a strong central system, and this seemed to fit well with the Wimbum people, who are organized into clans, though each town is independent and has its own *fon* (Mangoh 1986, 151). I should point out that what is missing from the account given by Kwast and Mangoh is the extent to which the indigenous religious worldview might have played a role. Given the nature of the religious world of the Wimbum people, it seems that Lamin Sanneh rightly argues that in carrying out the *Missio Dei*, the church has not always been willing to recognize that in places such as Africa, "Divine love and reconciliation . . . was long diffused in the local religious traditions before the missionary came on the scene" (Sanneh 1983, 247).²²

WIMBUM RELIGION AND SOCIAL TENSIONS: EXAMPLE FROM NTUMBAW

The practice of the Wimbum religion is alive today. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a difficult period for the people of Ntumbaw.

This also was a time when a serious attempt was made to revive popular culture. A major chieftaincy dispute in the town lasted over a decade. In addition, a chieftaincy dispute occurred among the Hausas and the Fulanis who lived in Ntumbaw. Thus, among the Wimbun who claimed to be the original settlers of Ntumbaw, there were two *fons*. One was installed in 1961 but was deposed by the people in 1972 after numerous accusations of witchcraft and moral failures. The people installed a member of the royal family to rule in his place, but the former *fon* did not go away. He received the backing of the divisional administrators, who argued that to depose a *fon* was unlawful. Among the Hausas of Ntumbaw, there were two people, each claiming to be the rightful *Sarki Hausawa*, and among the Fulbe residents of Ntumbaw, there were two individuals, each claiming to be the *Ardo*.²³ In addition to these problems, which made Ntumbaw a fertile ground for bribery, corruption, and all kinds of intimidation from the divisional officers and the ever-present gendarmes, attendance in the Ntumbaw Market declined significantly.²⁴

Several reasons have been given for these problems. First, concerning the decline of the market, some members of the Ntumbaw community argued that the chieftaincy disputes in the Wimbun, Hausa, and Fulani communities were a factor. Second, others observed that the economic decline of the town was brought about because the *fon* had allowed the market to be transferred to a new, unsuitable location. Furthermore, they argued that a symbolic tree planted at the site of the market had been cut down. It was a Wimbun practice to concretize the reality of a market and all of the economic transactions that would be undertaken there by placing medicines and charged objects in a hole at a center of the market and planting a fig tree there. The tree that was planted was supposed to grow and stand forever as a symbol of the market. It was argued that since the *fon* of Ntumbaw had ignored customs and had allowed the tree to be cut down, the market also had been destroyed.²⁵

Other members of the Ntumbaw community have given a reason for the conflicts in their town. Some have observed that these conflicts developed because no one was concerned about the religious practice of the town. The *fon* had converted to Islam. Many people became devout Muslims in Ntumbaw, which has an important Mosque in the division. The *Fon* became a Moslem because Ahidjo, the president of Cameroon at that time, was a Moslem. In addition to the *fon's* conversion to Islam, many of the *fais* and other leaders of the town became Christians and claimed that they had

given up the practice of indigenous religions. Thus, when they faced many difficulties, even while trying to revive indigenous culture, some people argued that the town of Ntumbaw was paying a price for the neglect of religious customs. The elites of Ntumbaw Town worked hard in the late 1970s and most of the 1980s to restore some of these traditions, which some members of the Ntumbaw community believed their chief and others neglected. During this period of crisis, *tfu* accusations and alleged activities of witches and sorcerers forced a return to the practice of some Wimbun religious values that had been neglected. The crisis is far from over, but this rough sketch of aspects of the Wimbun worldview that is intertwined with religious values helps set the stage for my hermeneutics of *tfu*, discussed in the next chapter.