CHAPTER TEN

DE-SEXUALISED BACHELORS

In Mankon, I collected genealogies concerning some 5,000 different persons. Analysing this database, I came to the conclusion that in about 1900, one in two men remained a bachelor for life, and most of these were also excluded from sex. The slave trade concerned mostly young men. As a result, the proportion of bachelors must have been reduced to a “mere” 30 per cent of the total adult male population residing in Mankon. This however was not a temporary situation for the men concerned. One in three adult males never married or had sex throughout his lifetime. In a village setting where there is little privacy, especially for junior men, it was extremely difficult to have extramarital affairs. The rumours concerning the young “wood carriers” of the kings’ and notables’ wives belong to the folklore of the white colonialists who were convinced that sex is an irrepressible drive, especially in Africans.

As far as Mankon is concerned, the fact that the bachelors were excluded from genital sex reveals their childlike status throughout their lifetime. Age was not predicated on the astronomical or objectified calendar, it was mostly a matter of status and seniority. The cadets were the junior members of the society even at an advanced age. They could not claim ownership on anything like tools, furniture, the product of their labour, let alone land and livestock. All this remained in the corporate estate of their descent group, and it was managed by the head of the group.

The social category of the bachelors is an enigma. Why did they comply? How could they do so when faced with the narcissism of the polygamous father (often a half-sibling of their own generation) without being plunged into depression, or rebellion? The enigma is all the more puzzling when it can be seen that, well into the 1970s and even beyond, all the Mankon, even bachelors and spinsters, said that they owed everything to their father: “he gave me everything, he clothes me, he feeds me and when the time comes, he will provide me with a wife”. Those are the most common (and it seems sincere) comments, even when the speaker has been fed by his mother, when he purchases his own clothes with the money he earns as a petty trader or a taxi
driver, and gives out what is left of his earnings to his father. The cadets confess they have a debt to their father that they cannot repay because they owe their life to him. (I would comment that they owe everything to him as the arch-container of the ancestral substances that are the origin of all life and wealth.) In the 21st century, young migrants who work in African towns, or in Europe and the USA, deprive themselves in order to send part of their earnings to their ‘father’ who, more often than not, is not their genitor.

All the more so as one looks further back into the past. For example, the colonial administrators—British and French—who were unanimous in underlining the compliance of all the subjects to the basic tenets of the kingdom, even when they registered the protests voiced against ‘abusive’ kings. Tardits (1960) has summarised them for the Bamileke part of the Grassfields under French mandate.

More recently, a venomous pamphlet by Patrice Kayo (1984) entitled *An open letter to a Bamileke king*, took issue with the many misdeeds attributed to the king of the fictitious city of Todjom. Yet he did not challenge the very principle of kingship which, he said, went awry in the hands of the local elites. He does not contemplate any political alternative. His position exemplifies the compliance of those who would be most likely to renege on the kingdom: the academics, the intellectuals, the professionals. In actual fact, most of them do not renege.

The Gramscian question of the compliance or adhesion of those who, in my view, bore the burden of the hierarchy, leaves me bewildered. Most Marxist analyses search for the mechanisms of oppression and exploitation. They search the minds of the oppressed to find out signs of awareness and rebellion. They fail to understand consent and even support. In the case of the Mankon kingdom, if there was any dissent on the part of unmarried cadets it is hard to detect. Its expression, if any, is muted and diverted. Whereas their most vocal, frequent and no doubt sincere statements are in favour and in support of the king and notables “to whom they owe everything”. The most accessible expressions of discontent can be found in the rivalry—even the hatred—experienced against one another by those who were in a position to expect a wife or the succession to a title. This rivalry concerned those whose age, performances, ambitions and social networks qualified for the competition. Such conflicts between agnates backfired on the mothers of the contenders who intrigued to support the claims of their offspring. This provided a fertile ground for witchcraft accusations and intra-familial violence. Here is an example given by Miaffo