CHAPTER TWO

OUR ANCESTORS USED TO LIVE ON THIS MOUNTAIN…

Our ancestors used to live on a mountain named Mgbang Sii. They lived in several different villages that were all equal. No one decided over the others. When the Fulbe from Rey-Bouba arrived, they tried to conquer us by starvation. They cut our harvest before it was ripe. But our ancestors made reservoirs of the grain sad, an herb whose grains are very small and which was the first cultivated food source known among the Dii. They put these grains in huge jars that were hidden in caverns in the mountain, in case of a siege (...). But our ancestors were beaten and fled, leaving behind their villages, where no one ever again set foot. But the sad grains are still there, they sleep inside the mountain. But no one knows exactly where they are. Maybe, one day, a hunter will discover them? But no one dares to touch them, no one knows what to do with them.¹

Through this short history a Dii from Mbé presented himself and his people to the Canadian researcher Jean-Claude Muller. It is a history that emphasises the unity and peace that once reigned among the Dii people before the arrival of the Muslim Fulbe. But it is also a myth with an open end; it ends with a question and uncertainty concerning the future.

In this chapter we will be introduced to the Dii, their symbolic departure from the mountain and their encounter with Islam, European colonialism, and Christianity. The chapter will thus present the historical

¹ "Nos ancêtres vivaient autrefois sur cette montagne, nommée Mgbang Sii. Ils étaient groupés en un certain nombre de villages tous égaux. Aucun ne commandait à l'autre. Lorsque les Peuls de Rey-Bouba sont arrivés, ils voulaient nous conquérir en nous affamant. Ils prirent l'habitude de couper nos récoltes avant mûrissement. Mais nos ancêtres firent des réserves de la céréale sad, une plante dont les grains sont minuscules et qui est la première culture connue des Dii. Ils mirent ces graines dans d'immenses jarres cachées dans des cavernes et des crevasses de la montagne, ceci en prévision d'un siège (...). Mais nos ancêtres furent vaincus et se dispersèrent, abandonnant leurs villages où il ne reste plus personne depuis lors. Cependant, les graines de sad sont toujours là, qui dorment à l'intérieur de la montagne, mais personne ne sait exactement où elles sont. Peut-être, un jour, un chasseur les redécouvrira-t-il? Mais alors, personne n'osera y toucher et personne ne saura qu'en faire." This version of the myth is presented by Jean-Claude Muller (1992: 4). Author’s translation. Parts of this chapter has formerly been published in an article intitled: "The Role of Religion in Social Change: the Arrival of Christianity among the Dii People in Adamawa, Northern Cameroon (1934–1960)" in Swedish Missiological Themes 93, no. 4 (2005): 479–503.
forces that moved the Dii toward new plausibility structures (Berger 1969), and toward the social reorganisation of traditional structures that will be analysed through different approaches throughout this study. The chapter will also contain analysis of two ‘sociological turningpoints’ as an introduction to how the Dii manoeuvred through the spiritual and political changing landscape of Africa in the first part of the 20th century.

The Dii

The Dii people (also known under the name Dourou/Duru) who live in the two provinces Adamaoua and Nord in northern Cameroon number between 40,000 and 50,000 people. The Dii form one linguistic group with several dialects among approximately two hundred fifty different languages found in Cameroon. They are spread in approximately one hundred villages numbering from some thirty inhabitants to around one thousand, but several chiefdoms can form a bigger village or a town. The majority of the Dii live on the so-called Dii-plain along the paved road between the two big cities in the region, Ngaoundéré and Garoua. Smaller Dii communities are also found on the Adamaoua plateau and further northeast near the lamidate of Rey-Bouba. Mbé, situated some seventy km north of Ngaoundéré, is the administrative centre on the plain with a sous-préfecture, a small government hospital and the only high school on the plain. In Mbé you also find the Dii Muslim leader, the lamido, and the Lutheran Church has a primary school, a dispensary, and their literature centre here. The Dii traditionally are farmers (sorghum, yams and recently corn), but have also been engaged in trade and are renowned for their blacksmith clan. The last decades a large number have been employed in government administration and in the administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC) as a result of the high level of education among the

2 Dourou/Duru was a name given to the Dii by the Fulbe.
3 No official population statistics are available, Podlewski estimated 35,000 in the late 1960s (Podlewski 1970: 24), Muller’s more recent estimations varies between 30,000 and 40,000 (Muller 1997a: 8), 40,000 (Muller 1995: 39), 40,000 and 50,000 (Muller 2002: 13) and 50,000 (Muller 2000: 41), whereas Djesa proposes 50,000 (Djesa 2001: 41).
4 Église Evangélique Luthérienne du Cameroun.