CHAPTER 9

The Opportunities of the Margin: The Kapsiki Smith and his Road to Prosperity

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Introduction

Many West African societies harbour an internal echelon of ‘special people’, usually artisans, who combine two striking features: on the one hand, they have been crucial for the survival of the group; on the other hand, they have a lower social status. In the ethnographic literature they are routinely referred to as ‘blacksmiths’ (in French, forgerons), but the array of specialized services they render is much larger than just iron work, be it smelting or forging. They do a lot more, as we shall see. In West Africa, artisanal tasks tend to cluster, and the resulting ‘general specialists’ are assigned peculiar slots in society. In this contribution, I will call them ‘smiths’, reserving ‘blacksmiths’ for iron workers. Not all work iron, not by far. They are distinct from the non-smith bulk of the village population, in ways that range from a guild-like artisanal organization to a caste-like arrangement in which society is divided into two rigidly separated echelons.

My case here is an example of the second type, viz. the smiths in Kapsiki/Higi society in North Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria. With other similar groups in the Mandara Mountains, which mark the border between Cameroon and Nigeria, these smiths (called rerhe) have all the hallmarks of a small-scale ‘caste’: they are despised by the majority of non-smiths (called melu, who comprise 95% of the population, with smiths forming just 5%); are feared to some extent as strange and dirty people; are endogamous, so can never marry a non-smith; and have their own food customs, and thus can never eat and drink with their fellow villagers. Yet, without them, Kapsiki society can hardly survive now, and definitely could not in the past. For any iron tool or brass jewellery, one had to go to the smithy; and the smith’s compound is still the first stop for medicinal services, for divination, or whenever one needs music at a festival. Few rituals can be performed without a smith, and absolutely no one will get a proper burial without their crucial input, since they are the essential and inevitable funeral directors for the village (Van Beek 2012a).

From this curious situation the question immediately arises: Why is a sub-group this important relegated to such a low status? That is the conundrum
I address in The Forge and the Funeral: The Smith in Kapsiki/Higi Culture (Van Beek 2015). Here I want to focus on the options for economic betterment: What does their curious social station imply for their chances for prosperity? Does their caste-like status hamper their way on the ‘road to prosperity’? And what are the specific dynamics of ‘smith-modernity’?

The first issue is how tenacious the distinction between the rerhe and the melu appears to be. Viewing the long history of hierarchical organization in West Africa, and of the relation between professional closure and group formation in the region, one surmises a deeply rooted institution. Social hierarchies do not disappear overnight; even the distinction most rejected by our present-day society, the one based upon slavery, has a much longer half-life than often thought (Pelckmans 2011). And professional closure is a phenomenon of all times. Indeed, as we shall see, the deep rift in Kapsiki society between rerhe and melu has not disappeared at all and is still very much present. That means that the smiths enter on their search for prosperity first and foremost as rerhe, as smiths. Their options in modernity seem to be primarily informed by their social status, their inevitable smith-hood.\(^1\)

I will begin with a portrait.

Smiths on the Move

Speaking in January 2012, Zeme, an old smith from Sir, remembers well the coming of the first Roman Catholic missionaries to his native village about 60 years before. He was a young boy at the time, and those nasara (white men) were looking for builders. With two rerhe friends, he volunteered, finding that other smith boys had done the same. These missionaries started out building a small storehouse, and the project branched out into a dispensary, a house for the nuns, and the mission station; and by then, the melu came into the project as well. Zeme worked during the whole project as a mason, learning the craft from six masons the Catholic fathers brought in from outside, and then he stayed on in the mission. Building was not finished by far, as other houses, the chapel, and later the school followed. His family had a smithy, so he was a blacksmith proper and later learned bronze casting from people from Guili, thanks to the missionary father who encouraged him to do so. As he was engaged with the mission since he was 12 years old, he ‘never danced with the corpses’, the icon of

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1 For an overview of the smith situation in this area, see Wade (2012), Vincent (1991), and Langlois (2012); and, for a wider area, Schmitz-Clever (1979), Wente-Lukas (1972), and Rasmussen (2013).