THE PALACE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS IN THE CHIEFDOM OF NGAMBE

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I. Introduction*

The chieftdom of Ngambe is one of the ten Tikar chieftdoms which are situated to the east of the north-south divide formed by the Mbam and the Mapé rivers. The capitals are shown on Map 1. The stretch of the Mbam above its confluence with the Mapé has been a provincial boundary throughout this century which has meant that Bankim and Bandam have been administered separately from the Tikar chieftdoms to the south. In the 19th century, too, it was politically important, marking a limit between the spheres of influence of Banyo and Tibati. The southern chieftdoms were administered directly from Yoko from the advent of the Germans until 1974 when they were grouped together as the District of Ngambe-Tikar within the Sub-prefecture of Yoko. The village of Ngambe then became the headquarters of the local administration.

In the second quarter of the 19th century, the Tikar chieftdoms south of the River Mbam suffered raids from Fulani-ruled Tibati and certainly by the late 1840's they had been made tributary1. Franz Thorbecke, who was the first ethnographer to visit this region in 1907–8 and again in 1911–12, spoke with informants whose memories spanned the second half of the 19th century. To judge from their accounts, Ngambe's emergence as a major power amongst the southern Tikar chieftdoms occurred c. 1860 (Thorbecke 1916: 17; 1919: 72, 75). At that time, the capital of Ngambe was located near modern day Mb'sndi (Map 2), at a site now called Mbuma2.

According to oral traditions, a conflict arose with Ndiam which forced the people of Ngambe, led by their chief Mb'sndj-Djwa, to retreat northwards. They found temporary respite

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For the sake of economy and simplicity Tikar terms have only been very approximately rendered, and tones have been omitted. Ellen Jackson (S.I.L.) who is working on the Bankim dialect of Tikar has kindly informed me that Tikar has three level tones and three glides, low-mid, low-high and high-low. I should make it clear that the present transcription does violence to semantic distinctions, as will appear, in due course, when Miss Jackson publishes her material.

The vowel phonemes of the Ngambe dialect of Tikar are:

\[ i, u, e, o, \hat{e}, \hat{o}, \hat{a}, \hat{a} \]

[fh] and [vh] have been used to transcribe respectively voiceless and voiced bilabial fricatives, and [b'], the voiced implosive stop at the bilabial point of articulation.

1 Barth collected an itinerary from a participant in a slaving expedition mounted by Mohammad Sambo of Tibati in 1848–9. It provides firm evidence that the southern Tikar chieftdoms were then part of Tibati's domain (1857: 507, 624–7).

2 Mbuma is a contraction of Mbumi-mb'em. Mbumi means a site that has been abandoned and mb'em is a term used to distinguish a village (ns5) which is a chieftdom capital from other villages.
Map 1. The Capitals of the Ten Tikar Chiefdoms East of the Mape and the Mbam Rivers in Relation to the Neighbouring Urban Centres
on an island in the River Kim, now called Mbumw-ngishi\textsuperscript{3}, 2 km east of modern M\text{"o}nk\text{"a} (Map 2). The area immediately north of the Kim was then under the authority of the chief of T\text{"a}, a village 4–5 km north-east of Ngambe\textsuperscript{4}. Mondji-Djw\text{"a} is said to have requested his permission to settle at the present site of Ngambe. This was granted but Mondji-Djw\text{"a} managed to supersede the chief of T\text{"a} who eventually moved with his people to the village of Ngambe.

Mondji-Djw\text{"a} is said to have abused his people by taking their children to use as tribute for Tibati; in return he was given horses and fine clothes. His councillors and his wives conspired to murder him — there is no constitutional mechanism for removing a bad chief at Ngambe — and on his death he was succeeded by Ngarwe\textsuperscript{5}.

Tibati failed to maintain continuous control over the southern Tikar chiefdoms. It was itself under considerable pressure at times, particularly from the other Adamawan lamidats under the suzerainty of Yola, who besieged Tibati on four occasions during the reigns of Hamadou Arnga Nyamboul and Hamman Bouba (c. 1851–1888). On his accession in 1888, Hamman Lamou found that Tibati's authority over the Tikar chiefdoms had dissipated and, in that year, he embarked on what was to be an eleven year campaign to attempt to bring them to heel. He established his military headquarters at Sansani, several kilometres north-east of Ngambe, from where he directed expeditions against the recalcitrant Tikar chiefs. Initially, Ngambe collaborated and provided him with forces. Having quelled the rebellious chiefdoms, Hamman Lamou intended marching against the Bamoum to the west, but his plans were thwarted when Ngambe declared war in 1891 or 1892. Ngambe was besieged until the arrival of forces of the "Wute-Adamawa Expedition" led by von Kampfz on 13th April 1899.

The Germans gave the chief of Ngambe authority over much of the Tikar region south of the Mbam, but the French colonial administration gradually reduced his area of command in order to make it more manageable. By 1949 at the latest, it had reached its present limits\textsuperscript{7}.

Owing to the low population density of perhaps less than one person per km\textsuperscript{2} on land that is extremely fertile, much of this administrative district is not under human use and precise boundaries between the chiefdoms have yet to be determined\textsuperscript{8}. However, the points on the major footpaths where one passes from one chiefdom to the next are well known locally. Extrapolating from them, one can estimate the area of land to which the chief of Ngambe could lay claim with some justification to be approximately 1,300 km\textsuperscript{2}. This area is marked on Map 2, which also indicates the subordinate villages of the chiefdom.

\textsuperscript{3} Mbumw-ngishi, means literally "Mbumw of the fish" (see note 2). Fruit bats (budu) roost on this island. The chief of Ngambe gives permission to people to hunt the bats when the water level of the River Kim drops. They are obliged to give half their catch to him.

\textsuperscript{4} This village is said to have been located on a hill now called Kpa’ Ngwa’, which is at the fork in the footpath which runs north-east from Ngambe (Map 2).

\textsuperscript{5} He is referred to by the people of Ngambe as Ngarwe nè du\text{"u} we, "Ngarwe who fought the war". The war in question is the war against Tibati. The Tikar name for Ngambe is Ndjwé-fhs where ndjwé is the name of a vegetable rather like a tomato in appearance, and fhs is an adjective meaning "fresh", "cool" or "calm". The Germans named the village and the chiefdom Ngambe after Ngarwe who was its chief when they arrived.

\textsuperscript{6} For a full account of Tibati's vicissitudes during the 19th century see Mohammadou (1965).

\textsuperscript{7} In 1949, Dougast that the following chiefdoms south of the Mbam were independent of each other: Bangbeng, Ina, Wé, Kong, Ngambe, Ngouné and Nditém (1949: 129). She omitted Ga though it was made independent of Ngambe in 1924 (Geißler 1944–45).

\textsuperscript{8} The area of the District of Ngambe-Tikar comprising the eight southern Tikar chiefdoms is approximately 6,800 km\textsuperscript{2}. I lack accurate population figures, but I was told by a member of the administration that this district has been estimated to support a little more than 5,000 people.
Map 2: The Chiefdom of Ngambe (1975) Showing the Arterial Footpaths and the Settlements Classed as "Villages" (mens5, ns5)
II. The Village of Ngambe

The village of Ngambe, the chiefdom capital, is surrounded by a trench (*nshi*, pl. *mënsi*) of approximately two metres depth for most of its length (Map 3). It is the innermost in a series of concentric trenches which are the remains of the village’s 19th-century fortifications. Such trenches, supplemented by palisades and sometimes incorporating natural watercourses, were a common feature of Tikar villages in the 19th century, though the inhabitants of some villages, notably Ina, Wé and Bengbeng, would withdraw to mountain retreats when threatened.

Though there may well have been others which are no longer readily visible from the footpaths, when travelling out from Ngambe in different directions, I never saw more than four trenches, the outermost being about 2 km from the village centre. According to local informants, chiefdom capitals, including Ngambe, had seven, whereas subordinate villages had three. This distinction is likely to be notional rather than actual, reflecting the symbolic significance the Tikar attach to particular numbers. There are numerous social forms in which the appearance of seven, either as the number of units employed or as the times a single operation is repeated, indicates the special status of the chief; the number three is usually associated with male authority in general.

It is the innermost defensive trench which marks the bounds of the village of Ngambe and everything beyond it is said to be “outside” (*pis*) the village. The vast majority of permanent residents who consider themselves to be Tikar (*Mëtigë, s. Tige*) live within this limit. Though they intermarry with the Tikar, the people of *Lumu*, just outside the village (Map 3: 14), classify themselves as Hausa. They claim to be the descendants of a Hausa marabout who was sent by Sultan Njoya to convert the chief of Ngambe to Islam. As a reward, he was given six Tikar princesses as wives and land on which to settle. Nowadays, it is customary for the chief to convert to Islam on his succession if he is not a Moslem already. The people of *Lumu* supply the chief with a northern-style oboe player (*légirê*). He and two drummers are the chief’s musicians and they are classed as retainers of the chief (*mëtikpu, s. tikpu*).

The rectangular houses within the village are built close together and there is little to distinguish one household (*dvô*) from another. In 1975, the administration divided the village, apart from the palace precinct, into three “quarters” to serve as bases of the local party system and for the organization of communal labour. Earlier, the leading princess, *Mwimbiwô Flwô*, had been responsible for recruiting the women of the village when their labour was required. As work parties in time of peace, or armies in war, those able-bodied men with no special duties precluding them were divided into two groups according to their relative ages. The elder men, said to be of the right, were led by a man entitled *Mburumb’ô*; the younger, of the left, by his subordinate *Nsômburu*. These titles still endure and it is widely assumed that, in the event of war, the organization of the armies would revert to its traditional form. When *Mburumb’ô* dies, *Nsômburu* takes his place and a new man is chosen by the chief from non-royals to take the latter title. When the installation ceremony conferring these titles has taken place, the two men are said to be married.

The chief’s retainers, known as *mëtikpu* (*s. tikpu*, lit. “possessor of the rat”) are recruited by the chief from the non-royal members of the community. They number approximately 35 and each has a title which often refers to a specific duty he is expected to perform for the chief. When the armies of *Mburumb’ô* and *Nsômburu* went to face the enemy in times of war, the chief’s retainers remained with the chief to act as his personal bodyguard. When there are jobs to be done at the palace, it is they who provide the work-force. Often they are
Map 3. Sketch-map, Showing Features of Interest in and around the Village of Ngambe (1976)
referred to, perhaps jocularly, as mënangwo (s. neungwo, lit. "chief's wife") and this reflects the fact that they are permitted free access to all parts of the palace precinct, excluding the royal cemetery, Shimwa, and that their duties centre on the person of the chief.9

Three of the chief's retainers are senior: Dja', Wembi and Mšsšingbe. Each is distinguished from the junior retainers by the appellation neungwo-udu (lit. "chief's wife-big"). In their case, the ascription of a fictional feminine status receives further symbolic expression, for example, on the death of one of them, the cult of Ngwambe performs for four days, as it does for a woman, rather than the three days usual for a man.

Dja' is the leader of the junior retainers and, following the commands of the chief, he organizes their various activities. In addition, he has the power to arrest people who have broken village regulations. The examples commonly given are fighting within the village, transgressing palace boundaries and failing to observe the appropriate signs of mourning during an interregnum.

With two junior retainers, Djasie and Nudjwâ, Wembi is responsible to the chief for initiating new members into, and organizing the meetings of, the cult Ngwambé (see later). His other major duty is to care for the chief's ceremonial chinstrap, mbî, which is the supreme symbol of chiefship (for a photograph, see Price 1979: 96). When it is necessary to replace its beads, he makes a clandestine journey to a secret lake on the other side of the River Mbam from whence these beads are purported to emanate. Only Wembî is allowed to remove this chinstrap from its leopard-skin bag. When he does so, the chief sits on the ground before it and performs the seven-clap royal salute three times. The importance of this action is that it signifies that the chief is inferior to the line of his predecessors who have worn the chinstrap before him and of whom the chief is but the living representative before his people.10

Mšsšingbe's household, Dwâshili (Map 3: 5) is situated directly in front of the main entrance to the palace precinct. His duties demand that he has a good knowledge of events occurring at the palace. He is aided by a junior chief's retainer entitled Mékwumbwâ (lit. "the feet of the chief") who lives with him. Mékwumbwâ should report to him all of significance that has been done or said at the chief's court. Also, he should tell if there have been any disturbances amongst the chief's wives because it is Mšsšingbe's responsibility to regulate their affairs when the senior chief's wives fail to do so. Equally, Mékwumbwâ should inform the chief about important occurrences at Dwâshili. At the death of Mšsšingbe, Mékwumbwâ normally takes his place as he has had ample opportunity to learn all that this position entails.

Mšsšingbe is the only statutory member of the legal council which meets in front of his house to hear cases (béké') brought before it by people who have disputes with others not of their patricians11. In recent years, the three other members of this council have usually been the chief's councillor, Fhuu Ngwambe, and Mgbè Dwânku and Ntwâ Mundji, two well respected

9 People at Ngambe state that it is as dangerous to climb a palm-tree as it is to kill a buffalo. There are only several wine-tappers (métikûgbe') and, like the chief's retainers, they are included in the category of men who are said to be "chief's wives". Each wine-tapper is obliged to deliver about 5 litres of wine to the palace every day. For reasons of discretion, they approach the palace by routes other than that used by most members of the public. They believe that, should they earn the chief's displeasure, he could make them fall. I have witnessed arguments between the chief and two wine-tappers: afterwards, they were too frightened to climb and they said that they had "left the marriage" (kwâ dâ), the same phrase that is used for divorce.
10 This is a salute which is normally performed by notables for the chief.
11 Disputes between members of the same patrician which cannot be settled by the clan head, are taken before the chief for a final judgement.
patrician heads; but in their absence, or when the case involved a member of their own families or patricians, other notables stood in. If the parties involved do not accept this council's rulings, they have the right to appeal before the chief. Alternatively, they can petition the chief for permission to submit to one of the truth ordeals, mbe or mbe-nshu 12, which are administered at dawn, in front of Mâshîngbe’s house and under his supervision.

Minor titles, such as those of the junior retainers, are conferred by Mâshîngbe at Dwôshili on the command of the chief. It is there, too, that a candidate for one of the more important titles must spend a three day period of seclusion, during which time he is supposedly vetted by his ancestors (mêshwê', s. nshwê'). Having met with Ngwâ on the final night (see later), he emerges for the public ceremony which takes place beneath Ndji-Ndwândji, the tree in the centre of the village (Map 3: 10).

The present chief, Ngbaruma Felix, walks along the main thoroughfares of the village about once a week. The only house he enters is that of the princess, Mwâmbwâ Fhâwô, unless there happens to be a visiting chief lodged with one of his villagers. He leaves the palace precinct and sits in front of Mâshîngbe’s house to observe public ceremonies held farther down in the village. He sits there, too, when he wishes to make announcements to his people. Three guava trees used to provide shelter at this spot, but they were cut down by order of the district administration in 1974 and now only their stumps remain.

Ndji-Ndwândji, Ndji-Ngwe and Ndji-Ngulu are the personal names of three other trees located outside the palace. By itself, the term Ndji is an honorific title used to address princes. In relation to plants (ngê'), it is a prefix meaning “standing tree of the type . . .”, so distinguishing living trees from other plant forms that do not have trunks; but it can only be used as a prefix. To designate a tree of unspecified type, one would say ndji-ngê”13. It is unlikely that the two usages are coincidental as the Tikar make an explicit identification between trees and authority which manifests itself in various ways. An example is provided by the custom of announcing the death of an important person by throwing a length of dead wood on the ground in front of the chief.

The village is dominated by the tree, Ndji-Ndwândji (Map 3: 10), which has a height of about 65 metres. It holds great significance for the Tikar. It is said to have been planted by Msindji-Djwâ when he came from Mbuma-engishi to establish his village at its present location. Seven maidens (mêshwâo) are supposed to have been buried alive beneath its roots on that occasion. The tree itself symbolises the line of chiefs of Ngambe and, should a large branch fall from it, the event is classed as ndwô, a portent of impending disaster, in this case a sign that the chief of Ngambe, or perhaps the chief of another Tikar chieftain, will shortly die14.

This tree, whose species I have yet to ascertain, is certainly most unusual in that it sheds its leaves during the rainy season and bears them throughout the dry season, thereby providing shade when it is most needed. Furthermore, it often appears to emit a delicate and refreshing spray: this curious phenomenon is popularly attributed to the myriad caterpillars which feed on its leaves. The relative coolness felt beneath its branches is explicitly likened to the peace and tranquillity to be had under the aegis of the chief of Ngambe. It is the site of many public events. It is where the small Saturday market is held and where the final parts

12 Mbe is sassafras. The ordeal called Mbe-nshu involves attempting to pass through two interlocking bunches of savanna grass (nshu; Imperata cylindrica).
13 I am extremely grateful to Ellen Jackson for having corroborated these usages on my behalf.
14 The meaning of the personal name of the tree, Ndwândji, would appear to be “a portent of impending disaster from a prince”. Princes are the archetypal enemies of the chief (see later).
of the ceremonies publically bestowing certain important titles are enacted. It also provides a
general meeting place to which people repair when they have nothing better to do. They sit
on this tree’s roots, enjoying the shade, chatting and watching the world go by, and they can
play a Tikar game called *daw* on a board carved in one of its roots. When the maize begins to
ripen, the tree is “dressed” by hanging an entire maize plant from its lower branches in order
to indicate that it is harvest-time, or, as the Tikar put it, “the time of the maize-wine has
arrived” (*kwâ nkâ benē*).

*Ndji-Ndwindji* marks the western end of a large, cleared area in the main thoroughfare of
the village; the other end is a smaller tree called *Ndji-Ngwo* (Map 3: 9), which is associated
with the senior war captain, *Mbutumb*a. Though an established landmark, less importance is
attached to this tree, which represents the executive branch of the chief of Ngambe’s govern-
ment, and it only comes into prominence in the ceremonies for the installation of war cap-
tains.

In the space between these two trees, large groups of people congregate and dance on
festival occasions of a light-hearted or secular nature. Here, too, are held the formal displays
presented by schoolchildren and the district administration to celebrate such national events
as 20th May and Christmas Day.

The third important tree, *Ndji-Ngahu* (Map 3: 8) fell in 1973. Its trunk still remains, but
at its death it ceased to be venerated and it is gradually being used up as firewood. It is said
to have been planted by the chief of *Tā* when he moved with his people to Ngambe. His
descendants now comprise one of the largest patriclans in Ngambe and it is named *Tā*.

### III. The Palace Precinct

The term *sâ-nu* can be used in three senses. Firstly, it is used to designate the building in
front of which the chief gives audience to his people and where the public parts of palace
ceremonies are performed (Map 4: 1). This is the building to which I usually refer by the
term palace. Secondly, it can mean the palace and the chief’s wives’ houses (Map 3: 2; all the
buildings on Map 4). Thirdly, it is used to refer to the entire palace precinct which is at the
south-east end of the village, the highest point on the gradual incline on which Ngambe is
located. Its limits are marked on Map 3.

*Sâ-nu* means literally “within the sâ”, and this recalls the practice of fencing the palace
grounds with a particular form of matting the use of which is strictly reserved for fencing in
and around the palace precinct. When *Mgbaruma* Felix succeeded to the chiefship in August
1974, it was after an interregnum of several months, during which time the palace fencing
had fallen into disrepair. By 1977, it had not been replaced, there being more important pro-
jects at hand — the essential palace buildings, the new state school (Map 3: 18) and various
jobs for the new district administration — nevertheless, the boundaries of the palace precinct
remained obvious to local inhabitants and they were fully respected.

On the succession of *Mgbaruma* Felix, apart from the house at the royal cemetery (Map 3: 1),
all the palace buildings of his predecessor were razed to the ground. New buildings (Map 3: 2;
Map 4) were constructed at some distance from the previous site (Map 3: 3). According to
local informants, this is a standard procedure which is followed at the succession of each
chief. To help make clear the Tikar rationalization of why this should be, it is necessary to
outline how succession is regulated at Ngambe.
bank with a drop of about two metres

bank with a drop of about four metres

mbi sā-nu, footpath to the palace

mbi menangwo, footpath of the chief's wives

The chief is regarded as the "father" (tshji') of all the other members of the royal patrilineage, Gba, who are known collectively as bwâmbwâ (s. mwâmbwâ; lit. "child of the chief"). I refer to the latter as "princes" and "princesses"; when necessary, the Tikar specify their gender by the addition of a suitable suffix. Tikar rules of succession are: for a prince to succeed to the chiefship, he must belong to the category of princes known collectively as bwângâ' (s. mwângâ'; lit. "little tree", "branch" or "twig"). They can be defined as those sons of chiefs who were born during their fathers' reigns, and after if they died in office; or, as the Tikar put it, who were born at the palace.

It is the chief who chooses his successor — from amongst the princes in this category — but, it is said, the name of this man should be kept secret so that, firstly, the other potential heirs should have no cause to kill him and, secondly, he does not seek to hasten his succession by killing the chief.

The sons of princesses are classificatory, if not real, sisters' sons of the chief. They are known collectively as mëkëymbwâ (s. kyëmbwâ), but this term can equally refer to the six amongst them who have been chosen by the chief to act as his councillors. Sometimes the Fulani loan-word, wadjiri, is used to designate the latter. Three of their titles, Fhwa Mblâmbâ, Tusa and Fhwa Ngwâme, are senior and those holding them have invariably spent a number of years as one of the chief's junior councillors, Dïswâ, Fhwa Mbwosé' and Fhwa'wâ. The latter generally have more servile roles in rituals concerning the cult of the royal ancestors and much less of a say in political matters.

The chief's councillors play a major part in the government of the chiefdom. Formally, their role is advisory: they meet with the chief to discuss policy, but they have no constitutional right to overrule him. However, his councillors are responsible for installing his successor and it is to them alone that he entrusts the name of his chosen heir. The fear that they might install another from amongst his potential successors acts upon the chief as a powerful inducement to accept the council's advice should they present a concerted opposition to his proposals at council meetings. This is a fear which the chief readily acknowledges.

My informants, including Mgbaruma Felix, explained why a chief has his palace buildings constructed on a site adjacent to his predecessor's in terms like the following. The individual with most to gain by the death of the chief is the man who will succeed him. The possibility always exists that a councillor might develop a grudge against the chief, and he could inform the heir that he has been chosen. From a Tikar point of view, the latter then will almost inevitably seek ways to bring about the chief's end. Accordingly, amongst the protective medicines a chief buries in his dwellings are some which are aimed specifically at the man he wants to succeed him. It is because these medicines remain active after the chief's death that his successor must construct his dwellings on a new site. The first site can be returned to by a subsequent chief.

Tension between a person and his or her possible heirs manifests itself at all levels of Tikar society, and explicitly so with regard to the chiefship. The custom described above is just one spatial expression of the structural opposition of the chief to his potential successors. Traditionally, when princes living at the palace reached puberty, they were sent to live at a place called Gba (the name of the royal patrilineage) which is outside the village boundary, on the side of the village diametrically opposed to the palace (Map 3: 12). There, they were cared for by princesses and the families of married princes until they took their own wives. It is no coincidence that this location is believed to be the place where sorcerers (mëtindâ, s. tindâ) hold their nocturnal meetings. Only one person in the entire chiefdom will openly
admit to being a sorcerer, and he is the chief. People explain that he must be a sorcerer in order to be able to "see" and to combat the sorcerers threatening the chieftdom. Perforce, the potential successors to the chieftship must learn this craft before succeeding and most people assume that these princes are sorcerers.

Nowadays, princes must still leave the palace precinct at puberty, but they take up residence in the household of a married princess within the village. When they marry they will generally construct their houses next to those of the princesses who cared for them. Antipathy, both real and feigned, is displayed between the chief and the princes, and this is extended to all the princes, not just the bwange'. Avoidance is assiduously practised between the chief and the princes. Should a prince accidentally meet the chief, they behave hostilely towards each other.

The princes are denied any role in the government of the chieftdom. There is a hierarchical system of seven titles which can be held by those classed as bwange', but they have little functional significance beyond the princes' internal affairs. The head of the royal patrilineage is the chief, but with regard to the princes, he does not perform the functions which are expected of a normal clan-head. Instead they devolve upon a non-royal personage entitled Simaemgbe, whose primary role is that of high priest of the cult Ngwâ (see later).

Conversely, the princesses actively support the chieftship. They visit the chief regularly when they bring him news of what has been happening in the village. They play a major part in the various ceremonies held within the palace and they supply foodstuffs on these occasions. There is a system of titles open to those classed as bwange'. On receiving a title, a princess is said to be a man (tidwi') and she gains certain rights which are in accord with her fictional male status. They include the right to hold land and to be a family head (tidwâ). At her death, the cult of Ngwombe performs for three days. Informants state that, at the turn of the century, titled princesses even donned men's clothing.

i. Nyê-mêdwi'—The House of the Men

The present nyê-mêdwi', the "house of the men", is a long, rectangular building, which faces out across the village from just within the palace grounds (Map 3: 4). Like all the palace buildings, its walls are constructed from mud plastered onto vertical stakes to which cross-members of split stems of raffia palm ribs have been bound with bark rope, and it is roofed with raffia palm leaf mats supported by a ridge-pole.

This house comprises four rooms in a row, but this arrangement is not traditional; it was in fact built by the people of Ngambe in 1974 to serve as the offices of the administration. When the first Chef de District took up his post in December of that year, he decided to situate all buildings associated with the administration outside the village.15

I have no information on the structure of previous houses of the men but, the present one is considered to be positionally correct. I was told that formerly, it would have been rather like a gatehouse at, or forming, the main entrance to the palace in the surrounding fencing. The present house of the men is just to the left of the beginning of the path for everyone

15 Temporary offices and accommodation (Map 3: 17) were built to meet the needs of the administration while permanent buildings were being constructed from modern materials on the site of the old Catholic Mission on the other side of the village (Map 3: 15) from mud-blocks and an aluminium roof provided by the missionaries based at Ngoro.
without special rights of access to the palace, which runs through the palace grounds to the chief’s court. The great war drum, Gbɔsɔ, is kept in this house, but its principal function is as the meeting house for the cults of Ngwɔ and Ngwɔmɓe, which are only open to men.

Simwɔmɓe is the high priest of the cult, Ngwɔ. He is aided by seven titled officiants and the eight together are known as Lã-mbo (lit. “the people of the capital”). All Tikar males are initiated into this cult at the time of their circumcision, generally between the ages of 8–10 years. Simwɔmɓe and his men conduct the circumcision rites. They are held outside the village in small beehive shaped huts especially constructed for this purpose.

Ngwɔ is conceived as an animal (nyã) which lives in the bush (mbɔ’ ) as opposed to the village (nɔ). Its powers exceed those of all the other sentient beings therein. Simwɔmɓe “invites” (ls) Ngwɔ into the village for cult meetings which are generally held as part of the naming ceremonies conferring the more important titles in the political hierarchy of the chieftain. The meetings start at dusk on the third night of the candidate’s period of seclusion (the seventh in the chief’s case), and cult members feast, drink and perform music until dawn. At intervals, Simwɔmɓe lectures the youngest members on sexual and moral matters. Three times in the night, the members leave the house of the men in order to take Ngwɔ to meet the candidate whose spokesman, a princess called Fhulu Mɛmɔmɓa, is hidden with him or her in a small hut made of plantain leaves at Dvɔshili (Map 3: 5). Ngwɔ is believed to be able to voice its approval of the candidate through the medium of a friction drum manipulated by Simwɔmɓe and his men. If Ngwɔ fails to “roar” (fhwɔ) its approval at the appropriate moments, a new candidate must be sought.

Ngwɔmɓe, sometimes known as Ngwɔmɓa, is conceived as a “spirit” (mpɔɔ) which falls from the sky at cult meetings and enters the bodies of the people dancing. It is said that should a non-member witness a cult gathering, Ngwɔmɓe will enter his stomach causing it to swell, and he will die within three days. It is not the only possession cult at Ngambe, but it is the only one which, like Ngwɔ, involves all Tikar men. Each Tikar male is formally initiated into this cult around the time of his puberty and this marks a change in his social status from “child” (nɔvɔsɔ) to “young man” (bɔba). Thereafter, he is legally responsible for his actions, whereas, previously, his father was responsible for his misdemeanours.

As mentioned above, Wemɔmɓa is responsible for organizing the cult meetings which he does at the chief’s command and with the help of two junior retainers, Djɔsɔ’ and Ndudjwɔ. Meetings are usually held to mark the death of an adult within the community. The music peculiar to this cult can be heard throughout the night and intermittently in the day over a three day period for a man’s death, four for a woman’s. When the music begins, men make their way stealthily to the house of the men and women and children lock themselves indoors. In the case of the chief’s death, it is his councillors who order the meetings and they continue for seven days. It is believed that, if the person who caused the death is present, Ngwɔmɓe, or those possessed by this spirit, will kill him; so there is a constraint upon individual members to attend at least once during the period of mourning in order to avoid being suspected of murder. Indeed, attendance is regarded as proof of innocence. It is also believed that the meetings provide the chief with an opportunity to have his enemies secretly executed by the cult members.

16 This name is a homonym of the word used for the substance of which the spinal column is composed.
ii. The Palace

Map 4 shows the palace, built in 1974, in relation to the houses of the chief's wives. The interior was drawn from memory and should not be regarded as entirely accurate. Most of the rooms are used as bedrooms by the chief's adolescent sons who are old enough to sleep away from their mothers. They spend a lot of their time out of school in the company of their father; they listen attentively to his conversations with important people and they perform small tasks for him.

One room in the palace is used as an armoury (Map 4: 3). An old, crippled retainer of the chief, who acts as the palace guardian (tingbɔ) sleeps there. He never leaves the palace; he receives visitors and keeps an eye on the chief's wives during the chief's absence. The bag containing the chief's ceremonial chinstrap is hidden somewhere in the palace, but most of his insignia are kept at the royal cemetery, Shimwã (see later).

The chief takes his meals in the largest room (Map 4: 4); sometimes he invites visiting chiefs to eat and to drink with him there. When he wishes to meet secretly with his councillors or his retainers, it is to this room that he summons them.

One room in the palace, mbushili (Map 4: 5), is of special interest because of its unusual indoor position. It is the private room in which the chief urinates. Informants recall that in previous palaces, contrary to normal practice, a hole was dug in a room to serve as the chief's latrine. This room was always called mbushili; a guard was kept on its door and a drum was played whenever the chief entered.

A long veranda, pæ-ntwɔ (lit. "the veranda of the chief"; Map 4: 6), runs along the front of the palace and faces a steep bank of about two metres in height. The term pæ-ntwɔ is usually used more loosely to refer to both this veranda and the ground between it and the bank. This area serves as a court and it is the only part of the palace precinct that most members of the population are allowed to enter. Even then, they should have a valid reason for appearing before the chief. However, when dances are held here, those not involved are allowed to watch from the top of the bank.

The chief's wives and retainers serve maize-wine or palm-wine to all who attend court, having tasted it first. When there are large formal gatherings, they give a quantity of wine and kola to a representative of each of the social groupings present, who then shares it in a specific order amongst his or her people.

Everyone must cover his eyes while the chief drinks. When he has ceased, all respond by saying mu, a term only used to express gratitude to the chief. If the chief should then pass his calabash of wine to someone, that person is obliged to finish it. Though he must drink it eagerly in acknowledgement of the honour, for most people this is a frightening experience because it is thought that this is the way in which the chief administers poisons or other medicines to his enemies.

The court is reached by the footpath which starts to the right of the house of the men, then skirts the site of the previous palace (Map 4: 7). Shoes must be left at the top of the bank before descending. The chief sits on a chair towards the south side of the veranda. When people arrive, they sit on the ground in front of the chief and cough gently. Once the chief's attention has been attracted, they perform greetings which vary according to the individual's particular social rank. They then arrange themselves on either side of his chair. Men sit to the chief's left; women and Pygmies, to his right; and the proximity of an indivi-
dual to the chief indicates his status relative to the others present. Chairs are brought from the palace for chiefs from other Tikar chiefdoms and non-Tikar dignitaries.

The chief holds court every Friday morning and this is heralded by the sound of his musicians playing as they make their way through the village to the palace. The princesses arrive in procession, led by Mwambwâ Plhwâ. The chief’s councillors and the heads of patriclans (yaAngo) are expected to make an appearance when they give the chief their news and listen to his proclamations.

During the period of mourning which follows death, Simwengbe, the high priest of Ngwâ, visits the relations of the deceased in order to learn their attitudes and to try to ascertain the cause of death. Three days after the death of a man or four days after the death of a woman, he and the other Lâmb’â lead these people with other representatives of the patriclans involved for a rite called mêyê-jhwi. He sits with his men in front of the chief and explains the circumstances of the death as he sees them. He also reports what accusations have been made and he suggests what action, if any, should be taken to render the death “cool” (filsa). Wine and kola are then shared by all present, apart from the chief to show that they accept Simwengbe’s conclusions. The chief then counsels his people to accept the death and to refrain from further accusations.

The only time that princes make a formal appearance at court is for this rite when it involves a member of the royal patrilineage. The antipathy between them and the chief surfaces even on these occasions. The princes do not remove their shoes, nor do they greet the chief on their arrival, and they sit apart from everyone else with their backs to the bank directly opposite him. While others maintain expressions of grief, the princes murmur and smile amongst themselves.

If someone should happen to kill one of the royal animals — leopard, lion, eagle or python — he must take it immediately to Simwengbe. Simwengbe and his men carry it on a pole to the chief and perform a propitiatory rite which is also called mêyê-jhwi. Simwengbe enacts the killing of the animal and claims that it was he who did it. Apart from the whiskers in the case of the leopard, the head is given to Simwengbe; the rest of the meat is cooked by particular chief’s wives and a morsel is sent to each member of the royal patrilineage.

After his umbilical cord has dropped, the son of a prince or a princess is taken by the princesses to the chief to receive his name. The chief either gives his own name or that of a previous chief. At the end of the rite, the princesses dance with the baby. A similar ceremony, again conducted by the princesses, is held for the naming of any twins born in the village.

The pregnancy of a chief’s wife entails a series of ceremonies and dances, known collectively as b‘ê kwâzi ngaszi (“they bring out the pregnant chief’s wife”), which endure for seven days. The principal participants are the pregnant wife, the princesses and the Pygmies, who come to live at the palace in the chief’s wives’ houses for the duration. After the child has been born, the Pygmies are called to the palace again for another week-long series of ceremonies, this time referred to as b‘ê kwâzi nwangê’.

A special relationship exists between the Pygmies and the royal patrilineage which is worthy of attention. Within the chiefdom of Ngambe, there are two small settlements of Pygmies (Médzâ, s. Médzâ): one in the proximity of Ngandie, the other, 3–4 km south-west of the capital (Map 2)17. Most Tikar regard the Pygmies with a mixture of fear and contempt.

17 In the 1976 National Census, 42 Pygmies were counted at the settlement near the village of Ngambe and 38 in the one near Ngandie (quoted in Barbier 1978: 1). For further information on the Médzâ Pygmies, see Barbier 1978.
though they admire certain of the extraordinary abilities they attribute to them. They are
said to be the best dancers, singers and hunters. The Tikar credit them with the power to
make themselves invisible and to have outstanding knowledge of the flora and fauna of the
bush. However, non-royal Tikar tend to avoid them and they do not invite them into their
houses. A derogatory phrase often heard when they make an appearance in a Tikar village is
Mèdzâ bi nyè, “the Pygmies are animals”; and it is supposed that, like animals, they commit
incest, they are all sorcerers, they make love on all fours and they do not live in villages.

With regard to the palace, the Pygmies play a supportive role. The ceremonies referred to
above are concerned primarily with the fecundity of the chiefly line (the Pygmies are also
summoned to dance for the chief when his wives have been failing to conceive). Much of
the symbolism of these ceremonies stresses an interdependence between royals and Pygmies
which is echoed in two myths shared by both these groups. They refer to the period when
the founder of the Ngambe dynasty arrived in this country which was then inhabited solely
by Pygmies. One relates how the Tikar offered “culture” in the form of plantain cooked in
oil: those who accepted it were the ancestors of the Pygmies of today, whereas those who
refused it took to the trees and became chimpanzees. The other explains how it was the
Pygmies who taught the Tikar how to impregnate their women.

The Pygmies provide other services for the chief. They are expected to visit his pregnant
wife once a month in order to monitor her progress and to take remedial action if necessary.
They are rewarded by the chief and the princesses with palm-oil, salt, pepper and plantain.
They are responsible for instructing the chief’s sons to dance — the Tikar consider it to be
important that their chiefs are the best dancers amongst the Tikar. Another of the Pygmies
duties is to inform the chief when they discover that he is under attack and to use their
powers to help him. With respect to this, they are known as ndë:ntwë, “the sorcery of the
chief”.

The avoidance one observes between Pygmies and non-royal Tikar is in marked contrast
to the behaviour exhibited between Pygmies and members of the royal patrilineage. In the
latter case, they joke together, share their pipes and drinks, and join each other’s dances. At
court, the Pygmies do not display the deference normally due to the chief and the elderly
Pygmy women mock and tease him openly. Further, the Pygmies can freely pass beyond the
court and mingle with the chief’s wives.

iii. Mènyè-mènëngwo — The Houses of the Chief’s Wives

Behind the main palace buildings lie fruit trees and small kitchen gardens cultivated by
the chief’s wives. They and the living area of the chief’s wives are strictly forbidden to all
who live outside the palace precinct, apart from the princesses, the chief’s retainers and the
Pygmies.

18 For the Tikar, the conceptual opposition between “bush” (mbë) and “village” (nsë) is of great struc-
tural importance as it divides the perceived horizontal world of objects and actions into two orders
which may be glossed as the “natural” and the “cultural”. The Tikar do not term a Pygmy settle-
ment nsë, but mbë, and they consider it to be part of the bush. The Tikar regard the Pygmies to be above
all part of the “natural”, as opposed to the “cultural” world and this receives ample expression in the
myths and rituals concerning them. The term mbë is a homonym of the name of a spirit of the sky
which manifests itself as forked lightning and the claps of thunder that accompany it. Sheet lightning
and distant thunder are attributed to the spirit that causes rain.
The chief does not sleep within the palace, but in the house directly behind it. His bedroom is called mbo (Map 4: 8), a term whose normal meaning is “animal’s lair”. It is one of the many words and phrases which distinguish objects and actions relating to the person of the chief from those of other mortals. Some of the terms in this royal lexicon appear to have no other meanings, but of those that do, many make analogies between the chief and animals, most commonly the leopard (mbo’).

In the main room of this building (Map 4: 9) lives the most important of the chief’s wives, Fhv’ Mkkpr. She directs the others. She informs the wives who are to sleep with the chief and to cook for him. These tasks are generally done for two days in a row, though not simultaneously and never during menstruation.

The other wives live two to a room in the houses flanking the palace (Map 4: 2). Each young wife is paired with an old wife. She calls her “mother” (mbs) and this idiom is extended to her children who will call her “grandmother” (gb). The chief’s wives houses are peculiar in that they have no back doors. This is so that their movements can be more easily observed. The chief’s wives are considered to have more freedom now than they would have had in years gone by, but to work harder. Informants remark that retainers and slaves used to live at the palace. They did the arduous jobs and it was obligatory for one of them to accompany a chief’s wife on the rare occasions, usually to attend family funerals, when she was permitted to leave the palace grounds. Nowadays, the chief’s wives are allowed to spend short periods outside the palace when they can mix with villagers. But they are carefully watched and, when they go to work in their fields or to their own source of water, they must use a private path (Map 4: 10) in order to avoid meeting the general public.

These changes have occurred within living memory, i.e. 60–80 years. In the same interval, the penalty for adultery with a chief’s wife has been reduced from the beheading of both guilty parties to a fine for the man of 6,000 francs CFA. This still exceeds the penalty for adultery with other women which is 3,000 francs CFA.

If the chief’s mother should be living when he succeeds, she is given the title Mbs-mb’ë (“Mother of the capital”). If she is dead, then this title goes to a matrilineal relative of her. The present incumbent lives in a village on the other side of the River Kim in order to be with her husband, but traditionally she was expected to live close to the palace precinct. She has the right to criticise the chief and it is her duty to advise a new chief about palace protocol.

The senior chief’s wives are given titles, thirteen of which I have recorded; the number may well be variable. Several of the titles entail duties to be performed at the royal cemetery; these are only awarded to wives the chief has inherited from his predecessor.

iv. Shimwà – The Royal Cemetery

The royal cemetery, Shimwà, is a grove of tangled secondary forest which begins several metres behind the southernmost of the houses of the chief’s wives and stretches to the innermost defensive trench. It is strictly forbidden to all but a few to enter this sacred ground. The chiefs of Ngambe are buried in a small house (mbo-Shimwà; Map 3: 1), built in a clearing, and a fire should be kept burning within at all times. This house is surrounded by a circular
barrier of polls and those passing within it must first urinate and remove their shoes and upper garments, though they do retain their hats.

A man entitled Mandye lives in this house. He is the guardian of the royal cemetery, but his particular duties suggest that his position could equally well be described as the priest of the cult of the royal ancestors. His mark of office is a necklace of the same sort of beads that are used to fashion the chief’s chinstrap. He has potentially great influence over the chief: he is thought to be able to divine the opinions of past chiefs and make them known to the chief. In recognition of his role as the representative of the royal ancestors to the chief, the latter calls him “grandfather” (mba); moreover, when they meet, contrary to normal protocol, it is the chief who salutes him, rather than the reverse.

The present Mandye has lost his wife so he is permitted to have a man living with him for company: this man is both a leper and a simpleton. The chief’s wives provide them with food. Formerly, Mandye had six titled retainers, known as La-Shimwâ. They and their families lived with him at Shimwâ where they formed a small, self-contained community in virtual isolation from the rest of the village. Currently, only one of these titles, the hereditary of Fhvu Mbwoss, is held\(^\text{19}\). He chooses not to live at Shimwâ though he does participate in the rituals held there.

Traditionally, Fhvu Mbwoss was buried with the chief. He entered the grave and the body of the chief was placed on his lap in a sitting position. I was told that, at this point, Tusa, one of the chief’s councillors, would swiftly kill him to spare him from being buried alive. The custom has lapsed, but the chief is still placed in a sitting position with his head above ground level and some personal objects around him. A pot is placed over his head and after some time the skull is removed.

In 1976, I observed fifteen skulls which are kept in bags hung from a rail on the southern wall of the grave house. Thirteen of these skulls belonged to former chiefs of Ngambe; two to chiefs of Ga. Most of the ground space was occupied by the graves of the seven chiefs who had died since the present village of Ngambe was established. They provide confirmation that MANDINGI-DJWA was the first chief of this line to occupy this site.

The grave house is crammed with many ritual objects. The instruments of Ngvombe are kept there and, when cult meetings take place, Mandye carries them to the edge of the royal cemetery where they are collected by WAMBLE and his subordinates. There are various insignia of the chief which are brought out at the time of his installation, and also the musical instruments — two double gongs, two sanzas (one male and one female) and a double-membrane drum called Dä — which are used in certain palace ceremonies.

Fhvu Mbwoss and, in an honorary capacity, Mandye’s companion can go into the royal cemetery whenever Mandye is there to “open the path” to them. The others who are permitted to enter do so only when they are required to participate in ceremonies. They are the chief’s councillors, certain of the chief’s wives as mentioned above and the chief’s retainer, Mwibôndî, whose particular duty is to play the drum, Dä. The chief enters the royal cemetery just once in his lifetime: when he is installed. He is led there by his councillors and he steps over his predecessor’s grave seven times.

The major annual ceremonies conducted at the royal cemetery are called YISI-NKÄ and NKÀ-JÀ. The former is held at the time of the maize harvest (July–August); the latter, regarded

\(^{19}\) This title is tonally distinct from the similar title of one of the chief’s councillors, which here I have transcribed identically.
as more important, at what would be the time of the millet harvest if this crop were still grown (December). For both these occasions, maize-wine (nkë) is brewed with strict ritual precautions by Gyeus's, one of the chief's wives associated with Shintwa. When it is ready, they carry it there led by the councillors. At the ceremonies, which are supervised by Mändye, the councillors make offerings of wine and kola upon the graves and before the skulls. In addition, the three junior councillors take three pots of the wine to make libations at Mbunwé, the old site of the capital. The pots are actually carried by princesses' daughters who travel in procession with them.

Bibliography

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Price, D.: "Who are the Tikar now?", Paidewa 25, 1979, pp. 89–98.
(N.b. There is a typographical error in Fig. 2, p. 92. The unbroken line directly above the name NSHA'RE and that above the name INDIE should both extend leftwards to meet the broken vertical line connecting TINKI and BANKIM.)