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Anthropological Research among the Kapsiki and Higi of Northern Cameroon and North-East Nigeria

with photographs

In a rapidly changing world, anthropological research in those areas least affected by change grows more urgent day by day. In Africa, North Cameroon is one such region where change has been slower than elsewhere. The 'autochthonous' populations have shown considerable resistance to any encroachment upon their ways of life. One influence of long standing is Islam, with the Fulani culture as its vehicle. In both the annually flooded riverine flatlands of the Chari and Logone borders and in the rugged Mandara mountains, Muslim Fulani culture has never really gained a hold. Moreover, the Mandara area on the Nigerian border saw its first European penetration only thirty years ago.

Living on both sides of the Nigeria-Cameroon border, the Kapsiki and Higi form one of the largest tribes in this mountain range. They are called Higi in Nigeria and Kapsiki in Cameroon but should be classified together as one ethnic unit. The reason for different tribal names resides in the division of the group over two different former colonies. This division is facilitated by the fact that demarcation of tribes and tribal boundaries is extremely difficult in these areas. Kapsiki villages differ markedly among themselves, making tribal identification very difficult.

The Kapsiki and Higi together number over 150,000. Population density varies from 40/km² in Cameroon to 90/km² in some parts of the Higi territory in Nigeria.

After an exploratory trip in January/February 1971 to Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria, fieldwork was carried out from February 1972 to August 1973. It focused on the study of one Kapsiki village (Mogodé), but extensive data on other villages have also been obtained. For the entire period, the investigator lived in Mogodé accompanied for part of the time by his family. Research was carried out in the Kapsiki language with a French speaking Kapsiki employed as an assistant. Participant observation and interviews as well as ethnological methods of investigation were used. Though the research covered broad areas of Kapsiki culture, the core of the study was the relation between social and religious organisation.

The climate of the Kapsiki region is semi-arid. Vegetation is scarce, consisting of low, thorny shrubs and trees in a fascinating mountain landscape much admired by tourists. The seasonal variation is marked: the rainy season lasts from May till September, and a much longer dry season from October to April. In the subsistence economy, sorghum and millet form the staple crops. Ground nuts are grown as a cash crop, while maize, sweet potatoes and sesame give some variety to the diet.

Kapsiki society is composed of highly autonomous local units. Each village has its own set of patrilineal clans limited to one village only, and more or less localized in wards by the rule of virilocal residence. In most villages, clans are grouped loosely in two phratries, opposing each other in internal war. The village chief has important religious functions,

but his authority never transcends the strictly personal respect his fellow Kapsiki have for him. He holds no law court and has no economic privileges. Chiefs are chosen from a certain local clan and can be replaced when the village elders consider his performance inadequate. Given the demands coming from the 'préfecture' in Mokolo, younger chiefs tend to be chosen.

An important feature of Kapsiki social organization is its caste structure. Of the two castes (blacksmiths and non-smiths), the blacksmiths form the lower stratum. They make up about 6% of the total population. Blacksmiths (of which a small minority actually forge iron) form a category of specialists, who perform any kind of endeavour calling for specialization: they melt and forge iron and cast bronze; they are the undertakers, musicians, diviners and medicinemen. Their wives make pottery and have their own medical specialities. They are feared by the common Kapsiki for their magical prowess, but at the same time despised for their polluting contacts with the dead. They keep mostly to themselves and heed strictly to the rule of endogamy, having a distinct set of marriage preferences. As a group they resist more than the other Kapsiki the curiosity of the outside observer and they jealously guard the economic advantages of their underprivileged social position. They live scattered throughout the village, a few smith families per ward, though they belong to the patri-clans of the village. Anyone who needs the services of a blacksmith can find in his immediate vicinity a smith compound to serve him. The blacksmiths function as mediators between this world and the realm of the supernatural. They perform sacrifices on behalf of non-smiths if so requested. Divination can be one of their main sources of cash income and they are also much in demand for their medicines.

A sense of privacy prevails in Kapsiki society. A compound consists of a number of huts, surrounded by a high stone wall. For a Kapsiki his home really is his castle. A household is an economic, social and religious unit in itself, autonomous and private. Any infringement is strongly resented, and a general code of non-interference prevails. The virilocal, polygynous family is the normal production unit, but even inside the compound privacy is dominant. Women have their own cash and food resources, most of which are not under the control of their husbands.

The household also forms the religious unit *par excellence*. The sacrifices performed by an individual household serve as the model for rituals at clan, ward or village level. The rituals in the Kapsiki religion vary between the poles of private – public, and secret – non-secret. Sacrifices and offerings form the core of the religion, and are intensely private. Only those directly concerned can be present at the rite; even the presence of other people, whether Kapsiki or not, would spoil the offering.

Ceremonial and ritual life is highly cyclical. Initiation and marriage rites are cyclical rites for the village though they are 'rites de passage' for the individuals concerned. Initiation coincides with the rainy season, and so do the ceremonies and feasts accompanying the first marriage of girls. The latter are elaborated in big, semi-private festivals, all of which are held in the same month, following the rainy season. Just before harvest,

the village festivals are held in which initiation and primary marriages are concluded. Even burials are part of the seasonal cycle, i.e. the second burial. One month in the dry season is set aside for the concluding rites of all burials that have occurred during the year, so that mourning is over when cultivation starts, and the dead are confirmed as ancestors when the initiated boys and newly wed girls enter the village society as full-fledged members.

Medico-magical knowledge forms the least shared part of Kapsiki culture. Highly profitable as a scarce and frequently solicited knowledge, it is seldom divulged to strangers or non-kin. Though the smiths dominate this field of action and knowledge, non-smiths may excel in it as well. Research in this domain had to be confined to a few informants, as this type of knowledge is scarce and field relations must be exceptionally good. Comparative research could not be carried out systematically. Investigation in this field was stimulated by the co-operation of Dr. A. Leeuwenberg of the *Laboratorium voor Plantensystematiek en Plantengeografie* of the *Landbouwhogeschool* at Wageningen. Thanks to his help some 650 plant specimens important to a wide range of activities have been collected and classified. Using methods of linguistic anthropology the cognitive organization of Kapsiki ethnobotany has been explored.

One of the most common sources of tension in Kapsiki society is marriage instability. After the elaborate marriage transactions the bridegroom will inevitably lose his wife to another man. Average marriage-expectancy is about 4 years. Wives simply leave their husbands and go to live with someone else in another village. Residence with a man is considered a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for a valid marriage, so divorce and remarriage take place at the same time. Women are continually moving from man to man and from village to village. They do so for a number of reasons: bad treatment, barrenness, or the insistence of a father who can expect more revenue from a new husband, especially when there are children with the former husband. Men constantly worry about the eventual absence of their wives and have to keep on marrying in order to avoid 'celibacy'. Tensions between husband and wife, hostility between men who have been married to the same wife and numerous disputes about the reimbursement of dowries result from this system. Government measures to curtail women's mobility have little influence. The presence of an international border makes it easy for the native custom to contravene administrative measures.

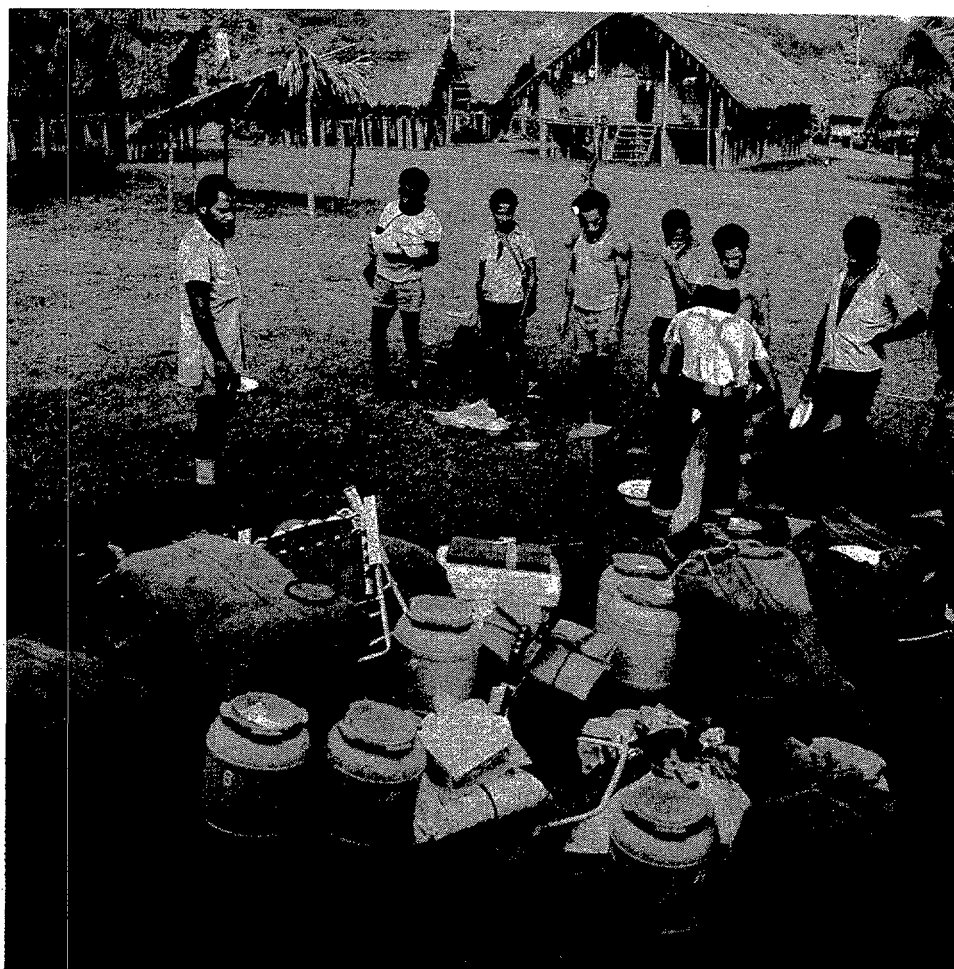
The mobility of the women creates tensions in a local community but does not seriously disrupt it. Children stay with their father as soon as they are weaned, and after menopause women often go to stay with one of their sons. The autonomous villages of the Higi/Kapsiki conglomerate are thus bound to each other in an unstable pattern of alliances. While patrilineal kinship never transcends the village limit, maternal or affinitive kinship nearly always does. The villages which formerly went to war against each other, often on account of a 'stolen' woman, are tied together by these same alliances. Maternal kinship is a safeguard throughout the territory and is organized in non-corporate ego-oriented groups, important in burial customs, travel, trade and warfare. Thus the Kapsiki social

structure comprises a system of local sets of patri-clans in which the forces of conjunction do not reside in bride-giving and taking, but in the matrilateral kinship ties resulting from alliances initiated by stray daughters. The Kapsiki definition of exogamy is a statement that specifies from what type of man one can or cannot 'steal' a wife.

In the past, warfare, as well as marriage, was important in inter-village relationships. The Kapsiki had a graded system of fighting, ranging from fist and club fighting between clan members, the use of knives and spears in fights with members of the other phratry inside the village to fighting with poisoned arrows in wars with other villages. Actual reasons for conflict were often trivial: hunting on foreign territory, insulting someone on the road, and – of course – disputes over women. Husbands went to the village their wives had run to and risked being tortured or beaten, which in turn provoked war. Yet inter-village conflicts did also have a unifying function for the whole conglomerate of local units as rules of warfare were adhered to, and strict inter-village reciprocity maintained.

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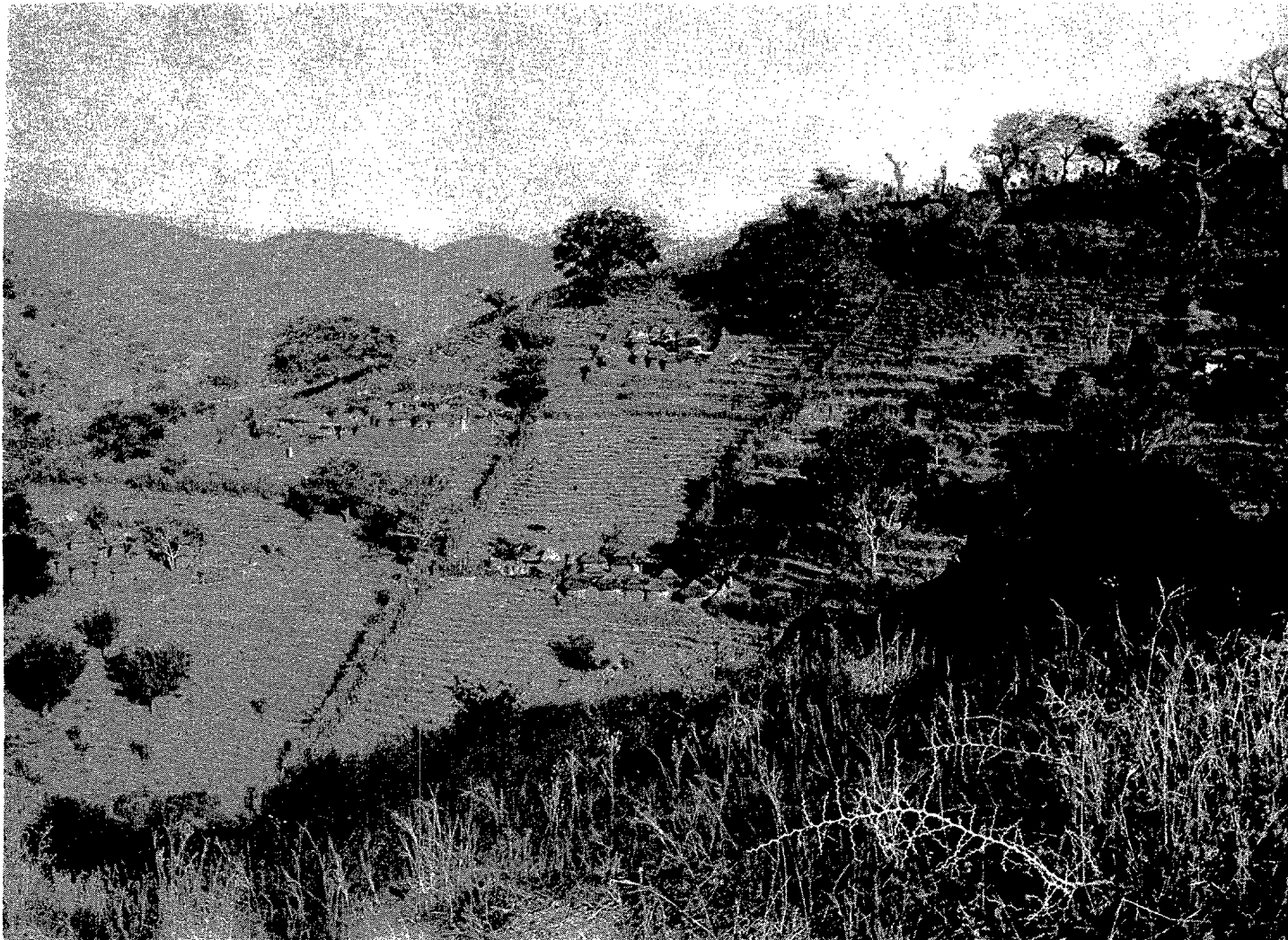


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When part of the fieldwork has been completed, the spare foodstuff is given to the carriers. In the foreground, the plastic drums for fruit collecting, and sacks containing the plant material for subsequent drying

Plant collecting on Mount Bosavi, Papua New Guinea. In order as far as possible to avoid the 'flutes', the thick ribs in the lower part of the trunk, the men have quickly set up a ramshackle scaffold of poles tied together with rattan, on which they balance while cutting down the tree. A severed liana stem can be seen on a level with their heads ▷

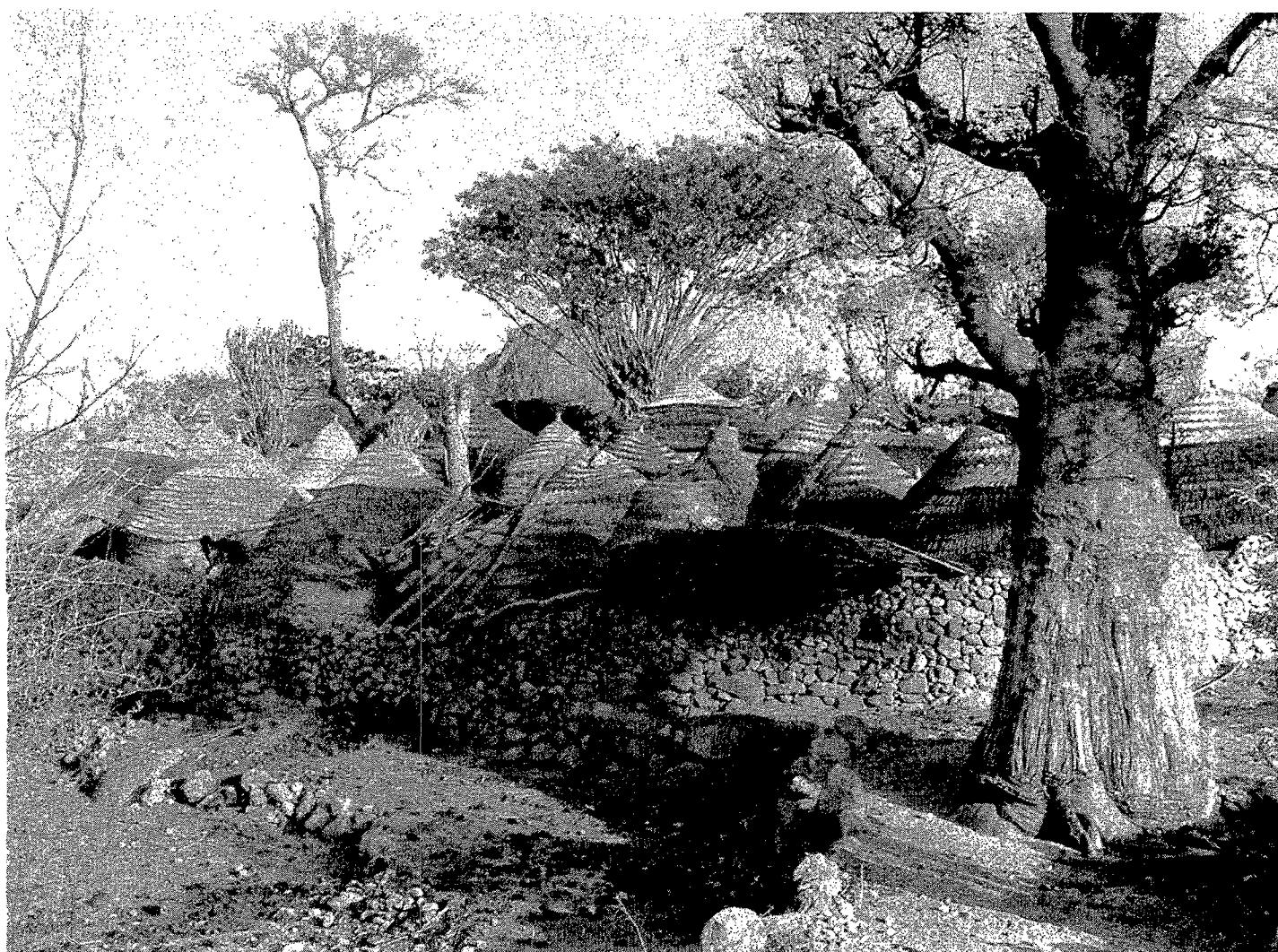
A big infructescence (compare it with the legs in the background) of a pandan or screw-palm in the Bosavi area, Papua New Guinea ▷



Terraces and compounds in a Higi village



The blacksmith chief performing a libation in a second burial



A Kapsiki compound