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SLOW GOING: THE MORTUARY, MODERNITY AND THE HOMETOWN ASSOCIATION IN BALI-NYONGA, CAMEROON

Ben Page

From the centre of the small town of Bali-Nyonga it is a short walk down the newly tarred highway to the junction with the earth road that leads to the government hospital. Behind the freshly painted hospital buildings is the new mortuary, a wide, single-storey white structure in good condition. It is made up of three sections: an office, the building containing the 'fridge' and a covered area that can be used by vehicles or people when they come to deliver or collect a corpse. Benches have been provided where people can sit and wait. The 'fridge' has the capacity to store forty-five corpses in fifteen chambers and is the largest in the Northwest Province. For an extra payment a corpse can receive a superior level of care in the mortuary: this guarantees that there will be no doubling up of corpses within the chamber and allows the relatives of the corpse to keep the key (enabling access at times of their own choosing). There is a back-up generator to ensure continuous electricity supply. The basic cost of keeping a corpse in the mortuary in 2007 was 5,000 CFA francs a day (around five pounds) though there are also reduced rates for members of BANDECA, the hometown association that equipped the mortuary. Since opening, the mortuary has been well used; over 800 corpses are registered as having been stored. The vast majority of these corpses are of individuals who died in Bali-Nyonga and who will be buried there too, but corpses are also brought here from elsewhere; very occasionally, they arrive from overseas before burial in family compounds in Bali-Nyonga. There are no restrictions on who can be stored here and around two dozen corpses have been brought here from neighbouring sub-divisions before burial outside Bali. On the front wall in the centre of the building there is an immaculately engraved white plaque, which reads 'On Friday, 15th August 2003, H.E. Koumpa Issa, Governor of the Northwest Province, in the presence of H.M. Dr Ganyonga III, Fon of Bali, inaugurated this mortuary complex, installed by the Bali-Nyonga Development and Cultural Association (BANDECA), Dr Ndifontah B. Nyamndi being the President-General'.

On several occasions during fieldwork in 2005 this building was described to us as 'the most modern mortuary in Cameroon'. But it is not just the building itself which is modern; rather, it is a symbol of an explicit process of modernizing in which BANDECA is attempting self-consciously to intervene.

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BANDECA needs to help traditional people in the village become more modern. They are poor and they ... live a hard life, so BANDECA needs to work hard to improve lifestyles in Bali. ... They need the same amenities that people have in towns. ... They spend a lot of time on death celebrations because they are not occupied by jobs. Also they are doing things which are from the colonial times – they are too colonial [i.e. from that era] – they keep corpses for too long. A cry-die – they should do it and forget. The person should be buried. But in the village, they bury the person, then after a month they have the next death celebrations, then after a year they come back and do it again. You know, I am a businessman, I have a business to run. It should be limited. . .¹

Such opinions are not new. The arguments between those in Bali-Nyonga who wish to contain the scale of death celebrations and those who are content to see them expand are longstanding. Furthermore, as Jindra (2005) has shown, burial practices have changed radically in the Cameroon Grassfields since the end of the nineteenth century and continue to change.² However, the mortuary is a site that has brought new elements to this old debate.

The mortuary is a place where the new experiences of contemporary migration, intercontinental capital transfers and transnational families intersect with universal and historic emotions of belonging and loss. It is a new site in which ideas about what is sensible and up-to-date intersect with ideas about what is the appropriate way to treat the dead. Because the mortuary is so closely linked with BANDECA it provides the association with new leverage in a realm that historically has been regulated primarily by palace authorities. But discussions about burial are not simply organized around the difference between traditionalists resident in the village and elite modernizers who have migrated to the city. The web of conflicting interests and positions is more complex than this and needs to be carefully unravelled. The mortuary, which is a product of migrant prosperity, is not the sole cause of a fresh round of arguments over burial practices and death celebrations, but it has had some material effects that have changed both the practicalities of burial and the normative debate about burial.

The mortuary also illustrates how hometown associations are involved in the production of what Nyamnjoh *et al.* call 'local modernities' (2002: 99). They use this concept to describe the process of accommodating change and embracing innovation in a particular place; in so doing they echo the call made by others (Ferguson 1999; Piot 1999; Robinson 2006) to contest the assumption that there is a single, hegemonic, globalized version of the modern which emerges from the West, diffuses

¹ Interview with Bali-Nyonga elite, Mutengene, 26 February 2005.

² Jindra (2005) describes how the arrival of Christian ideas 'democratized' burial. Before Christianity it was assumed that only the notable individuals would have an afterlife and become ancestors, so there were only a few formal burials. Other corpses were disposed of in the bush. After Christian ideas were widely accepted it was assumed that all individuals had an afterlife, so there was a proliferation of ancestors and of formal burials.

outwards and is merely derivative elsewhere. Rather, the claim to be considered is that the art of being modern has many different schools.

This article has four central questions. First, how have burial practices and death celebrations in Bali-Nyonga changed as a result of the provision of the local mortuary by the hometown association? Second, how is the hometown association trying to steer a series of other changes (or planned changes) to modernize burial practices among the broader Bali-Nyonga community? Third, what does the Bali-Nyonga mortuary project reveal about the conflicting loyalties faced by those who are active in the hometown association? In particular what does it reveal about the relationship between the hometown association and the state? Finally, how do migrant remittances and the projects that they concretize relate to questions of ethnic territoriality and the 'politics of belonging' (Jua 2005, Ndjio 2006) in contemporary Cameroon? Before turning to these questions the article will introduce Bali-Nyonga and outline the history and character of BANDECA.

BALI-NYONGA AND THE HISTORY OF BANDECA

Bali sub-division (a government administrative area) has a population of 63,800,³ and is located 23 kilometres south-west of Bamenda, the provincial headquarters of the North-West Province of Cameroon. The sub-division comprises a small town (which is home to perhaps one third of the population) surrounded by smaller villages. For those migrants who have left Bali it is common to refer to the whole sub-division as 'The Village', implying that this is an area where rural values dominate, even though it is centred on a town. Equally, the academic literature will talk about the migrants' 'hometown' when most of the population of the sub-division actually live in villages outside the town itself. Apart from being confusing, this terminology illustrates from the outset the limited value of relying on essentialized definitions of urban and rural in this context.

The Bali sub-division contains the historic fondom of Bali-Nyonga,⁴ a hierarchical political structure, at whose centre is the palace and at the pinnacle of which is the Fon (Chilver and Kaberry 1961). Bali-Nyonga is a patrilineal, virilocal society built on polygamous marriage, which remains fairly common.⁵ Any particular patriline in Bali-Nyonga includes the living, the dead and unborn as members, and the well-being of the family depends, in part, on maintaining a good relationship

³ Divisional Medical Office records, 1 February 2005.

⁴ Throughout the article the term Bali is used to refer to the sub-division and the term Bali-Nyonga is used to refer to both the ethnic group and to the fondom. The Fon himself prefers to be referred to as the Fon of Bali. The term Bali-Nyonga is used in order to distinguish this place from other Chamba societies.

⁵ The Bali-Nyonga are part of a wider group of Chamba societies dispersed across Cameroon and Nigeria. There are other Chamba towns elsewhere in Cameroon, such as Bali-Kumbat. For more on Chamba anthropology see Fardon (1991).

between the living and the dead (Fardon 1991). The Bali-Nyonga dominate the sub-division, but the boundaries of the fondom and the sub-division do not coincide perfectly, so there are also two non-Bali-Nyonga communities (the villages of Bossa and Bawock) and groups of semi-nomadic Mbororo cattle herders who call the Bali sub-division their home (Chilver 1964).

The Bali-Nyonga have always been mobile. They migrated from further north and settled in their current location in about 1855 (Fokwang 2003) having subjugated the existing occupants. Though Bali-Nyonga historians are often quick to assert their martial past and their differences from their neighbours (for example in terms of language), over the last century and a half, they have in fact produced a dynamic hybrid culture that has absorbed many of the terms and practices of those people whose land they occupied (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996).⁶ In 1889 the Fon of Bali-Nyonga entered into a blood pact with the German explorer Zintgraff, and this early contact with German colonists resulted not only in the early arrival of Christian missionaries, but also in Bali-Nyonga occupying an important position within the colonial plantation economy (Chilver 1967; Chilver and Röschenthaler 2002).⁷ The Bali-Nyonga were given suzerainty over neighbouring ethnic groups and (until around 1908) became the principal conduit of forced labour migrants who travelled from the inland areas down to the coast. Migration is not new in Bali-Nyonga. Data from a survey carried out as part of this research suggest that 79 per cent of contemporary Bali-Nyonga residents had lived and worked elsewhere in Cameroon at some point in their lives, whilst 11 per cent of the total sample had lived and worked outside Cameroon, mostly in Nigeria.⁸

Though the palace still occupies a prominent place in the life of Bali-Nyonga, the Government of Cameroon is also important. There is a divisional officer, a sub-divisional hospital, agricultural extension offices, government schools, a gendarmerie brigade and a post office. The national governing party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), has an office and an active presence as well. The local government, which is run by an elected mayor, is controlled by an opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which also holds the parliamentary seat. Though local party politics are polarized, there is an active (though not necessarily successful) effort to set them aside

⁶ Bali-Nyonga's distinct social structures and cultural life, as well as its political and economic history, have made it a place that has fascinated historians and anthropologists (from inside and outside the community). As a result there is a particularly rich published literature about Bali-Nyonga, from both colonial officials and anthropologists (Hunt 1925; Jeffreys 1957, 1962) as well as from subsequent anthropologists and historians (Chilver 1970; Bejeng 1985; Nyamdi 1988; Titanji *et al.* 1988; Fardon 1996; Fokwang, 2003).

⁷ It was also early contact with the Germans that led to Bali-Nyonga's position as a very early Basel mission station, which was responsible for the long history of school-based Western education in the town.

⁸ A total of 307 randomly selected residents in Bali-Nyonga were asked, 'Have you previously lived or worked elsewhere in Cameroon? If so, where?' The survey was administered in English or Pidgin by Cameroonian research assistants.

in the name of local social and economic progress – epitomized by the frequently repeated claim that ‘development has no political colour’.

BANDECA is a constitutionally established, legally registered association made up of both people living in the Bali-Nyonga fendom and people with an affinity to Bali-Nyonga who are living outside the town elsewhere in Cameroon (the ‘domestic diaspora’). It is an example of what is usually described in the literature as a ‘hometown association’ (Barkan *et al.* 1991; Woods 1994; Honey and Okafor 1998; Trager 2001). It aims, first, to organize migrants so that they can support each other when they are away from home; and, second, to foster development back in the ‘hometown’. It is part of civil society – that sector of public life upon which such a burden of expectation has been placed in recent years.

BANDECA was launched in 1999; there is, however, a long history of similar associations in Bali-Nyonga, which have expanded and contracted under a series of names and constitutions. In 1941, very soon after he became Fon, Galega II established the Bali Development Committee, which was primarily concerned with road construction. The Bali Improvement Union was formed around the same time but with an educational focus. It launched a scholarship scheme, which funded a number of students to go from Bali-Nyonga to the US and Europe for their higher education. Some sources suggest that the Union was founded in 1943 inside Bali-Nyonga by Fon Galega II (Ndangam 1988: 43–66); others suggest that it was formed outside by Bali-Nyonga migrants (especially those in the police force).⁹ The template for the Union is likely to have come from similar associations established by Nigerians working in the Cameroonian plantations. Such improvement unions were common throughout West Africa and were seen partly as a reaction to colonial neglect and partly as quasi-political nationalist bodies (van den Bersselaar 2005). The Bali Improvement Union subsequently evolved into the Bali Youth and Elders Association,¹⁰ which faltered in the 1950s because of problems over financial accountability.¹¹ The Bali Elements Workers Union, founded in the 1960s, represented Bali professionals (for example school teachers) working elsewhere in Cameroon.¹² There was also a formal (and unsuccessful) political party dedicated to furthering Bali-Nyonga interests called the Bali Aspirant Party, which existed briefly around the same time and which paid for a representative to travel to the USA to help ‘project’ Bali-Nyonga on a wider stage.¹³

⁹ Interview with a member of the Bali-Nyonga elite (hereafter ‘Bali-Nyonga elite’), Bamenda, 23 January 2005.

¹⁰ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 13 April 2005.

¹¹ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bamenda, 12 April 2005.

¹² Bali-Nyonga elite, Buea, 19 April 2005.

¹³ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 23 April 2005.

The main hometown association was relaunched sometime in the late 1960s under the name the Bali Social and Cultural Development Association (BASCUDA).¹⁴ This had three branches around Cameroon: one in Fako (which covered both the plantation area and Buea, the one-time capital of the federal state of West Cameroon), one in Yaoundé (the national capital) and one in Mezam (the nearby city of Bamenda and surroundings). Each branch operated under a different name and acted largely independently. Later there was also a home branch in Bali-Nyonga itself, called the Bali Central Cultural Development Association (BACCUDA).¹⁵ During the 1970s and early 1980s each branch of BASCUDA undertook to finance separate development initiatives, most of which were concerned with improvements to the palace, such as the construction of a grandstand, repairs to the fence, the levelling of the ground used for the annual Lela dance and the purchase of a car for the use of the Fon. It was through this organization that members of the Bali-Nyonga diaspora in the USA first contributed to their hometown, too. All these groups sent money to the home branch (BACCUDA), which then disbursed the funds. Testimonies about the collapse of BACCUDA and BASCUDA are hazy; however, there appear to have been leadership tussles at some time in the 1980s, following a loss of trust between those individuals outside (the 'external elites') and those running the organization at home.¹⁶ In particular there were suspicions about whether the money collected by those outside was being spent in the way that they intended. There followed a period during which the hometown association was dormant, before the current Fon of Bali, with the encouragement of the Divisional Officer, re-established it in the mid-1990s under the name BANDECA – a single organization, which would work on coordinated rather than independent projects.¹⁷ According to the new constitution BANDECA is explicitly non-political and is concerned with promoting the cultural heritage of Bali-Nyonga, assisting government's development efforts and contributing to the education of the Bali-Nyonga people. For the first few years BANDECA was largely inactive. However, by removing the association's office from the palace and by transferring the key leadership roles away from local elites and towards those living outside Bali-Nyonga, trust with the wider domestic diaspora was re-established. Elections for the key national and divisional roles within BANDECA were held in 1999, after which the organization began to collect levies for development.

Since 1999 BANDECA has raised tens of thousands of pounds (mostly from migrants within Cameroon) and has undertaken a number of projects. It has renovated a building in Bali-Nyonga for its own headquarters and it has also renovated the office of the government's principal official in town (the Divisional Officer) and equipped the

¹⁴ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 7 March 2005.

¹⁵ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 8 April 2005.

¹⁶ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 7 March 2005.

¹⁷ H.M. Dr Ganyonga III, Fon of Bali, 30 December 2004.

offices of the new gendarmerie brigade. This illustrates the close public relationship between BANDECA and the Government of Cameroon. BANDECA has provided bail for five Bali-Nyonga residents who were arrested after a violent land dispute with people from a neighbouring sub-division. It has opened a public library with books provided by the Bali-Nyonga diaspora in the USA,¹⁸ and it has organized a cancer-screening exercise. However its two largest projects were the reconstruction of the water supply and the equipping of the mortuary. The mortuary cost around 19.5 million CFA francs (around £ 20,000), which was raised through general development levies collected from the BANDECA membership and some substantial loans and donations¹⁹ from the BANDECA leaders – the President-General, for example, loaned BANDECA more than 1 million CFA francs to purchase the generator.

BANDECA is run by successful individual ‘sons and daughters of the town’. They include some powerful national figures as well as individuals with a wide range of professional and commercial experience. The President-General at the time of the research, for example, was Dr Nyamndi Ndifontah, a Minister-Plenipotentiary, who presides over Cameroon’s convention centre, the Palais de Congrès in Yaoundé. However, not all of the leadership are sympathetic to the current Cameroonian government, so the association has to manage these internal political differences.

BANDECA works closely with the palace and its associated institutions; it is always careful to observe the correct protocol and deference. Yet it is also distinct from the palace, a position supported by many interviewees who suggested that the palace lacked financial accountability. This suspicion must not be overstated though; for almost all Bali-Nyonga migrants the palace remains an important symbol and a key element of ‘home’. Furthermore the Fon of Bali, who is a well-known figure in Yaoundé, can be a great asset for the hometown association when lobbying for funds. The BANDECA leadership has had to steer a careful path which avoids personal and political enmities between its members and the palace.

The claim is sometimes made that everyone from Bali-Nyonga is a member of BANDECA; the reality, however, is not so straightforward. First, the communities in Bossa and Bawock have their own hometown associations, as do the Mbororo (Hickey 2004; Duni *et al.* 2005). These groups have shown little inclination to participate in BANDECA, though the leadership insist that they are welcome to do so. Second, membership is closely related to a Bali-Nyonga institution called *nda kums*, which are village- or quarter-level meeting groups. When Bali-Nyonga migrants went to the coast during the colonial period they

¹⁸ Unfortunately I was never able to see the library, which was kept locked.

¹⁹ The Bali women’s association, Nkumu Fed Fed, which is formally independent of BANDECA, made a donation of 1.5 million CFA francs. President Nkumu Fed Fed, Yaoundé, 19 March 2005.

organized themselves into *nda kums* on the plantations in order to socialize and support each other.²⁰ There are now 53 *nda kums* outside Bali that provide social and welfare services to Bali-Nyonga migrants. BANDECA used the network of *nda kums* to create a membership. Not only are *nda kums* expected to register as ‘corporate’ members (for a fee of 10,000 CFA francs),²¹ but they also collect an ‘annual development levy’ (1,000 CFA francs for men and 500 CFA francs for women) from individuals. So whilst BANDECA claims that its membership includes all those who are active in *nda kums* across Cameroon it cannot be assumed that these individuals have actively opted in to the association. Third, though BANDECA claims to be an ‘umbrella organization’ for all Bali-Nyonga associations, not all groups are that enthusiastic about being brought under its cover. The most obvious example here is the women’s group (Nkumu Fed Fed), which, though it happily cooperates with BANDECA, is also keen to preserve its independence. Fourth, the international diaspora meeting groups are not formally members of BANDECA, since they have their own separate associations – such as the Bali Cultural Association in the USA. Finally, there are also many individuals in the domestic diaspora who choose not to join either an *nda kum* or BANDECA. Sometimes this is because membership carries financial obligations that they would rather avoid; sometimes it is because they disapprove of these ‘traditional’ structures; and sometimes it is because they use their spare time in other groups (such as church groups). As a young Bali-Nyonga woman in Douala put it:

I do care about development in the village, if there is a project and I can see what they are doing then I contribute... I just don’t have time or the inclination of the *nda kums*. Sacrifice and jujus, I don’t have time for them. Other people go because they are worried about a family member dying, but if one hundred people come to a death celebration, only twenty of them really care, the others just want to eat and drink...²²

So, though the BANDECA leadership aspires to include everyone who is a part of Bali-Nyonga in their association, in reality mobilizing the membership remains a challenge.

Hometown associations in Cameroon are often described as ‘elite’ associations in the literature (Nkwi 1997; Rowlands and Nyamnjoh 1998) but there is no consistent definition of who counts as an elite. Instead, a combination of family history, professional achievements and economic assets produce a highly subjective and contextual label. Not all elites are migrants and not all migrants are elites. Some migrants are treated as elites by Bali-Nyonga residents if such flattery can be used to extract benefits for residents. Many elites will have a home in Bali-Nyonga, but may only stay there occasionally. Not all elites are wealthy,

²⁰ Much of this financial support was related either to rotating savings and credit associations (Ardener and Burman 1996) or ‘trouble funds’ used for medical bills and the costs associated with burial.

²¹ President, Bali Divisional Council of BANDECA, Bali, 8 March 2005.

²² Anonymous interviewee, Douala, 27 April 2005.

especially those who are resident in Bali-Nyonga and who are treated as elite because of their position within the palace or prominent Bali-Nyonga families. In addition many of those who are highly respected may be retired civil servants on relatively low incomes. For many of the Bali-Nyonga residents who are unambiguously not elite there is a perception that BANDECA is an association for migrants and elites. They are not hostile to its activities or ungrateful for its efforts, but do not perceive it to be their concern.

THE EFFECT OF THE NEW MORTUARY ON BURIAL PRACTICES

Formerly people died and were buried immediately. But now, because so many are out in the diaspora, we need to keep the corpse so that the family can assemble... So that was the reason we decided to build our own mortuary – to honour our parents and relatives who die... BANDECA is among the first to build a mortuary because the government authorities are not able to provide funding.²³

There is a substantial history of anthropological work on changes in the rituals around death (Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Kaufman and Morgan 2005), but what is distinctive in this case is the role of Bali-Nyonga in the diaspora, who can participate more actively in the burial of those who die at home as a result of the construction of the mortuary. In the recent past burial was often a hurried, low-key affair because of the inability to preserve the corpse beyond two or three days, and the larger, more important death celebrations came over subsequent months and years. The correct completion of this sequence of ceremonies ensured that the risk for the living from the interventions of the dead was reduced. Nowadays the burial itself has often become a larger-scale event because the corpse can be preserved in the mortuary (six weeks is not unusual) and can be buried at a time that is convenient to the living.

The manipulation of the timing of burial has enabled the domestic and international diaspora (who are often footing the bill) to participate in person. For those in employment there are practicalities that must be undertaken prior to leaving for Bali-Nyonga. It will be necessary to arrange leave from work and to mobilize funds to help with the expenses around death – both of which take time. Raising money, for example, may involve waiting for the appropriate meeting of the *nda kum* or *njangi*²⁴ in order to access savings or ask for a loan. In the international diaspora it may mean making claims on formal financial products, such as insurance policies.²⁵ The ability to preserve the corpse

²³ Bali-Nyonga elite, Limbe, 23 February 2005.

²⁴ *Njangi* are rotating savings and credit associations (Ardener and Burman 1996).

²⁵ The Bali Cultural Association in the USA decided 'to negotiate a good life insurance policy for its members to respond to our cultural need of burying the dead at home' (Jua 2005: 330).

in the mortuary and the opportunities provided by employment away from Bali-Nyonga are integral to the increasing scale of burials.

Whilst there is no consensus about where the original idea to equip the mortuary came from, it is clear that there was little felt need for it amongst those living in Bali-Nyonga. Whilst Bali-Nyonga residents gave enthusiastically to the community water supply project, they did not donate so willingly to the mortuary project. The idea clearly came from outside the town. Some interviews in Cameroon suggested that elites in America were the driving force behind the idea of constructing the mortuary,²⁶ whilst others claimed the credit for the idea themselves.²⁷ The BANDECA National Executive Committee did not unanimously support the mortuary at the outset. The initial scepticism reflected an anxiety within the leadership to have a project that was popular at home in order to win support for BANDECA, and it was epitomized by the repeated suggestion that it was more important to do something for the living than the dead. However, those arguing in favour of the mortuary project won by using the argument that the mortuary would raise income for BANDECA and would enable diaspora members to return home to pay their last respects. In retrospect the project was judged a success.

Mortuaries are not new in Cameroon and it has been possible to keep corpses in the nearby city of Bamenda for many years, but the construction of a mortuary in Bali-Nyonga itself has meant that they are used on more occasions. Primarily this is because of issues of cost and convenience. Formerly, if a family member died in Bali-Nyonga and the family wanted to use the government mortuary in Bamenda it was necessary to transport the corpse to the city and back again for burial. Not only was this costly but if, as often happened, the Bamenda mortuary was full, then the corpse might have to be transported even further to find mortuary space. Until recently the road between Bali-Nyonga and Bamenda was very poor; not only was the corpse's last journey potentially very undignified but there was a risk that it could be delayed in Bamenda while guests were waiting for the burial.

Though the mortuary has been well used, not all corpses in Bali-Nyonga are stored before burial. This may be a consequence of economics or of choice. Even though the daily fees of keeping the corpse are reduced from 5,000 CFA francs a day to 3,000 CFA francs a day for women or 3,500 CFA francs a day for men on production of a valid BANDECA membership card, the charge can still be substantial. Because of the reduced fees for BANDECA members some people appear to join the association after death: 'You see, if you owe BANDECA development levy when you die, you have to pay it all before you can use the mortuary.'²⁸ Those families in Bali-Nyonga who

²⁶ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bamenda, 12 April 2005; Bali-Nyonga elite, Limbe, 22 February 2005.

²⁷ Bali-Nyonga elite, Douala, 17 March 2005; Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 11 February 2005; Bali-Nyonga elite, Buea, 26 February 2005.

²⁸ District Medical Officer, Bali, 8 February 2005.

lack the money continue with the established practice of a very quick burial soon after death. Equally, those without family living away from Bali-Nyonga feel less need to use the mortuary. 'If you have money and children outside you go to the mortuary and wait for the children to come. But those without monies or children outside, there is no need to keep the corpse, you just bury as soon as possible.'²⁹ There is also a feeling, particularly amongst the older generation in Bali-Nyonga, that it is not proper to store the corpse in the mortuary and that it entails spiritual risks. For example, there are discussions about whether those who committed suicide should be allowed in the mortuary because of the perceived risks to the other corpses. Also the 'water' from corpses can be used in various forms of malevolent witchcraft.³⁰ For these reasons of propriety, the mortuary has not been used by palace notables or by Muslims. Several interviewees expressed the desire not to be left in the mortuary but to be buried quickly – even if this meant that their children did not have time to return to Bali-Nyonga for the burial. Nevertheless, as a generalization, it is true that more families in Bali-Nyonga now use a mortuary than ever before, and this has meant that burials are being delayed.

BANDECA AND THE MODERNIZATION OF BURIAL

When you travel your scope widens and your view of society changes. Those who are only in Bali are more conservative in their view of development. Us outside try to instil some sense of change in them.³¹

A set of changes has been identified that flows directly from the construction of the mortuary itself, but this construction is part of a wider process of modernizing burial that includes ending certain practices and trying to rationalize expenditure on death celebrations.

The Fon of Bali, his traditional council and the external elites in BANDECA have for some years sought to change some of the practices at burials that they see as 'backward'. For example, it was a common practice for a widow to spend the night before the burial with the corpse of her husband. This practice has been banned by the Fon's traditional council on the grounds that it is a health risk. Whilst the self-described 'modernizers' may be members of the external elite who lead the hometown association, the new regulations are enforced through the structures of the traditional ruler and his council in the village, who endorse this process of modernization.

Currently there is also an attempt to curtail the practices associated with widowhood because they are considered 'inhumane'.³² Widows

²⁹ Anonymous interviewee, Bali, March 2005.

³⁰ Traditional healer, Bali, 15 March 2005.

³¹ President-General, BANDECA, Bali, 9 April 2005.

³² Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 8 March 2005.

were expected to eat alone, to sit on the floor, not chairs, and to sleep on plantain leaves. If the plantain leaves were torn in the morning (which is very easily done) it was taken as a sign that the widow was unfaithful to her husband and social sanctions were applied. Widows were expected to walk with one arm across their chest, and not to touch people when they greeted them. These rules were to be adhered to over a period of months or even years. It has now been proposed that the obligations of widowhood should be reduced to a token period of three days. This proposal was put to the traditional council, who gave their opinion to the Fon, who then passed the decree that widowhood should be reduced to three days. However, despite the decree, some women persist with the obligations of widowhood for much longer.

We have been trying to suppress it, but ... the old women in Bali are resisting it, because they too have gone through that process... But now we are modernizing it. Once the man is buried, in three days they should do all the cleansing and then the woman can be free in society.³³

The apparent refusal of widows to embrace this change fuels the elite opinion that people in the village can be unwilling to adopt measures that are for their own good. The fear of these widows, however, is that failure to undertake these practices in the proper way may cause difficulties between the living and the dead.

Some individuals within BANDECA also want to control the expenditure on death celebrations in the name of economic rationality. Burials in Bali-Nyonga are spectacular. There are elaborate programmes of dances, ceremonies, speeches, gun-firing, Christian services, feasting and drinking. Sometimes several hundred people will be entertained. They can involve hiring seating, marquees, video makers, generators, lighting and sound systems, as well as buying food and drinks. It is a common complaint from the BANDECA leadership that, whilst it is hard to raise money from within the diaspora to pay for the medical costs of the living or to get a donation for development projects, it is easy to raise large sums of money to fund a death celebration. Such expenditure is increasingly portrayed as a wasteful indulgence as opposed to the more utilitarian investment in public goods.

Death celebrations are used to flaunt the economic success of the living whilst also lauding the dead.³⁴ It is the very success of migrants (whether nationally or internationally) which fuels these expanded death celebrations. Bali-Nyonga is near enough to Douala and Yaoundé to make a weekend visit practical, and death celebrations are the main opportunity for conspicuous consumption within the village setting. Status (in Bali-Nyonga as elsewhere) is an immensely powerful lever. There is a contradiction here between the elites' desire to show off and their simultaneous ability to blame people in the village for this

³³ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 11 February 2005.

³⁴ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 13 February 2005.

extravagance. Some elites are conscious of the antinomy. ‘When there is a death, the more people attend your death celebration – this is very important for us. We elites condemn spending so much money on cry-dies, but when it is our turn, we all do it!’³⁵ What is much less clear is how the ordinary people of Bali-Nyonga feel about the pressure to restrict death celebrations. Logically such a change would produce resentment, not only because these are enjoyable social occasions but also because they are important in the local economy – driving demand for palm wine and food, which is supplied by local producers and retailers.

One practical response to reduce expenditure has been to relocate the death celebrations (not the burials) away from Bali-Nyonga to the main centres of the diaspora population on the plantations and in the cities. This has the advantage that it reduces transport costs for those attending and it also means that the occasions have a more clearly defined start and finish, because the families involved have had to hire a venue rather than use the family compound. It also rather starkly reveals that the claim that the inflation of death celebrations is driven by the desires of those living in Bali-Nyonga itself is disingenuous. Another rationalizing response is for different families in the diaspora to club together and have one big death celebration simultaneously for several people. Combining occasions in this way maximizes the scale and achieves cost benefits because they only have to hire equipment once. For some groups, such as those in Douala and Limbe, this process has been formalized, so that all the death celebrations from within the *nda kum* are combined on one day every year. As the head of the Bali people in Douala argues, ‘It is cheaper and more efficient this way.’³⁶

WHO OWNS THE MORTUARY – THE GOVERNMENT OR BANDECA?

We make sure the relationship between BANDECA and the government is good. But it is apolitical... BANDECA is about development in Bali. If BANDECA was hostile to government there will be no development. Development is carried out by us – we do fundraising.³⁷

The Bali-Nyonga mortuary project also reveals some of the tensions between hometown associations and the state. The formula of Bali-Nyonga ‘assisting’ the government with development has become very strained, because though BANDECA set out to complement the national government’s development efforts they have ended up in a dispute over the ownership of the mortuary. The mortuary is a lucrative commercial asset and BANDECA has taken all the profits that it makes. It has produced an income of around 5 million CFA francs

³⁵ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bamenda, 12 April 2005.

³⁶ Bali-Nyonga elite, Douala, 17 March 2005.

³⁷ Bali-Nyonga elite, Yaoundé, 21 April 2005.

per year³⁸ and BANDECA was able to use 2 million CFA francs in the community water project. Some members of BANDECA claim to own the mortuary (on the grounds that they paid for the equipment using money they raised), but the administration disputes this, arguing that BANDECA 'met' the building already there and merely equipped it. Hospital officials argue that 'BANDECA is making money out of the mortuary on the government's back' and would like to see the profits added to the hospital's income.³⁹ The Governor of the North-West Province also disputes BANDECA's right to own the mortuary, arguing that whilst the government is grateful for the contribution made by BANDECA it is not possible for it to claim ownership of a public service within a public institution.

The government owns the mortuary. It is for Bali people – the users – and they are part of the state. The problem is that they did the project in partnership: the building was already there. You cannot bring equipment to my office and say you own the whole place.⁴⁰

This dispute was originally provoked by a piece in a local newspaper and the Governor emphasizes that he is not seeking to take the mortuary away from BANDECA, but to work with it.⁴¹ Despite this reassurance, there is now a fear in Bali-Nyonga that the government intends to take over the mortuary. This raises a series of problems for the BANDECA leadership. First, the dispute enables those in opposition political parties to cause embarrassment to BANDECA by portraying it as powerless to retain the mortuary, and to argue that the government will discourage community development by appropriating the assets that Bali-Nyonga people paid for. Second, for all the public talk of partnership, privately BANDECA is resentful of the government's attempt to intervene because it will lose revenue and kudos. It points out that it is BANDECA's generator that supplies the whole hospital when the electricity fails and that, as the inaugural plaque shows, the Governor was willing to come to the inauguration of the mortuary and implicitly endorse the arrangement of BANDECA operating it. The view is that it is only now that the mortuary has proven to be profitable that the government is interested. Since the mortuary helped the current BANDECA leadership to gain the trust of the wider Bali-Nyonga community, it does not wish to be seen to lose control of it. Local people like the Bali-Nyonga mortuary precisely because it does not belong to the government; part of the attraction of the Bali-Nyonga mortuary is that it reduces entanglements with the state. As elsewhere in Cameroon (Argenti 2002), there is a strong sense of sub-national nationalism in Bali-Nyonga; many people talk about Bali-Nyonga as

³⁸ Bali-Nyonga elite, Bali, 11 February 2005.

³⁹ District Medical Officer, Bali, 8 February 2005.

⁴⁰ H.E. the Governor of the North-West Province, Bamenda, 7 April 2005.

⁴¹ Governor's speech, socio-economic tour, Bali, 15 March 2005.

if it were a nation, so this explains part of the determination to retain ownership of the mortuary. Third, several of the key Bali-Nyonga elites in BANDECA are in very senior positions within the government and governing party. Whilst their personal position nationally depends on their continuing public support for the government's position, their status locally depends on delivering projects that benefit Bali-Nyonga.

The outcome of this dispute is still unknown. However, since both the parties move in the same political circles, it is likely that a compromise that involves some kind of profit-sharing agreement will be found. Handing over ownership would be very unpopular in a town where a majority of the voters support the opposition party, so BANDECA will resist it. Equally, the Governor, as the President's representative, cannot brook the implications of impotence or the long-term complications that flow from the ambiguities of the current situation. In the meantime, in order to paper over these political tensions a developmental language is employed: if a project can be understood as development, then individual political differences can be conveniently submerged.

BURIAL AT HOME AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

It is important to bring a corpse back home because we have the land. There is no land in town. We don't want to suffocate them there, but to bring them back so that they rest in peace. People living in town meet with others or even say in association meetings that they want to be brought back when they die; even if they don't, it's the custom to do so. Even if they are abroad, people want to be brought back to the village.⁴²

In a national context where ethnicity has become closely associated with long-term territorial belonging, burial in the family compound is becoming more important, not less. Nantang Jua (2005) has presented compelling evidence of how politicized the home burials of celebrities have become in Cameroon. The wider literature on the politics of belonging argues that the remobilization of ethnic elites has been a key strategy for maintaining existing power structures despite the liberalization of politics in the early 1990s (Nkwi 1997; Eyoh 1998; Rowlands and Nyamnjoh 1998; Nyamnjoh 1999; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000, 2001; Ndjio 2006). In this sense, there is an evolution from an earlier phase of the politics of regional balance (Bayart 1979), with a new emphasis being placed on the different rights and responsibilities of autochthones and allogenes. Not only is it the right of indigenes to enjoy some authority over what happens in their home, but it is their responsibility to develop it. Burial is a key sign of where these rights are enjoyed most securely. Since the introduction of the 1996 constitution, identity papers in Cameroon have bureaucratically reasserted the importance of ethnicity. In addition to Cameroonian

⁴² Anonymous interviewee, Bali, 4 March 2005.

citizenship, legal identity also includes an ethnic label. This is governed not by the place where you were born but by the 'native origins' of your father (Jua 2005: 327–8). By constructing the mortuary and by facilitating burial at home, BANDECA has played an unwitting role in this process of increasing ethnic territoriality in Cameroon.⁴³

The contemporary frequency of burial at home in Bali-Nyonga means that it is easy to forget that this was not always common. In the past, not all families transported corpses back to the village for burial. On the plantations in the late nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, the repatriation of corpses was the exception rather than the rule. Both costs and poor transport made it very difficult. It was not practically possible to get corpses from the coast to Bali-Nyonga fast enough; instead, people were buried in the compounds where they lived during their working lives, and for many decades this was accepted as the norm. Indeed, it was considered preferable to be buried outside Bali-Nyonga, because then your children could tend your grave. Even today the costs of repatriating corpses are too high for many urban households. But, increasingly, individuals are worried about leaving their corpse on someone else's land because they are not sure what might happen there in the future. The data from the mortuary suggest that nearly 90 per cent of those who are stored there died in Bali-Nyonga. What this disguises is that it is common practice for the terminally ill to return to the village from elsewhere in Cameroon in the last months of their life, because it is easier and cheaper to move the ill than the dead.

The expectation is that most individuals wish to be buried beside the house in their family compound in their hometown because that is where they belong. Dickson Eyoh, for example, gives the following quotation from a Cameroonian politician:

Well allogenes cannot contribute to the development of our town because it is not their home. You claim . . . they are born here, make their living here and are even married to our women. If you want to know where their home is, wait till they die and see where they would be buried. They will not be buried here. They will be taken to their real homes, where most of them prefer to pay their taxes. We cannot rely on them to develop this town, because it is not theirs. (Eyoh 1999: 295–6)

Our own research in Cameroon found many similar attitudes, though never so bluntly expressed, but it also found many individuals whose actions contradict this simple narrative of the reassertion of ethnic territoriality. On the one hand, it is common to find people explaining their determination to be buried in their hometown (despite never

⁴³ There are other ways in which it is possible to argue that BANDECA is complicit in the politics of belonging, too. For example, its work to help proletarianized migrants on the plantations to learn about Bali-Nyonga culture (language, music, dance, secret societies) in order to participate in Bali-Nyonga events is part of a wider process of reproducing and valorizing ethnic identities.

having lived there) in terms of fears over future land ownership (in the place where they do live). But, on the other hand, it is also common to find individuals who engage extensively with development in the town where they live but in which they are not (in constitutional terms) 'native'. Understanding the different dynamics of individuals' attitudes often involves unpicking the specific interests in particular places. For example, there are sound economic reasons for maintaining a strong distinction between indigenes and so-called strangers that flow from the current community forestry law, which permits only indigenous groups to benefit from the revenue from forest products. Allowing an outsider to assist with local development would undermine the justice, logic and clarity of such distinctions.

CONCLUSIONS

The mortuary has changed the practice of burial by extending the period available for family members to prepare for the occasion. Whereas in the past most burials followed very soon after death, there can now be a period of several months to allow the diasporic family members to return in order to take part. The burial process has for many Bali-Nyonga families become increasingly attenuated and a network of mortuaries is vital to that process. In terms of development, BANDECA considers the mortuary an important economic asset and local service. The construction of the mortuary was 'development' because it provided local people with a convenient service and saved them money. The mortuary is modern because it opens up new opportunities for reorganizing mourning in a way that better suits the contemporary desires of Cameroonian families, including transnational families. External members of the Bali-Nyonga community were the driving force behind equipping and funding the new mortuary. However, the key figures in delivering this project were in Cameroon and were not members of the international diaspora. BANDECA used its most elite members to raise the funds in order to deliver the project and boost trust in the association and its leadership.

The mortuary is also part of a larger process in which the Bali-Nyonga elite claim that they are trying to develop and modernize the community. This extends beyond the storage of corpses to the practices before, during and after burial. Non-elite residents of the hometown are caricatured as 'primitive' by the elite because their practices are considered 'unhygienic' (in the case of wake keeping), discriminatory (in the case of widowhood) or economically irrational (in the case of expensive extravagant death celebrations). In conjunction with the traditional council and the Fon there is an active attempt to change the rules around burial in Bali-Nyonga. There is also an economically driven trend to hold death celebrations not in Bali-Nyonga itself but in the urban centres of Cameroon, so that those attending (who are also often those paying) can reduce their liabilities. Finally, again for economic reasons, there is a trend for families to combine the death

celebrations of several people into one occasion, sometimes under the auspices of BANDECA.

The BANDECA mortuary reveals some of the conflicting loyalties faced by those who are active in the hometown association. The process of modernizing burial was sometimes portrayed by our interviewees as a simple conflict between elites and villagers. 'There is hatred and envy among the natives against the elites, which impedes development in Bali. In the village there is envy... Part of the elites' job is to change the mentality of the people. But the elite are timid and afraid of being criticized.'⁴⁴ Such a simplifying narrative serves the function of covering up a variety of other tensions within the Bali-Nyonga community – tensions, for example, within the elite between those who are prospering and those who are not (such as many middle-ranking civil servants or families without international connections), and tensions between those who draw their authority from their position within traditional structures and those who build their authority from their wealth. The economic power of the migrants and their association is potentially a threat to established social relations. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that those in the village do not have some leverage over those who are outside – threats of witchcraft emanating from the village can be very potent, for example (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1999; Nyamnjoh 2005). But in many ways what this story reveals is the sense in which this distinction between those inside and those outside Bali-Nyonga is a false dichotomy; it is ideological in the sense that it is a partial truth that helps to paper over other tensions within the elite.

The capacities of BANDECA to straddle these tensions are demonstrated not only because the mortuary project was effectively delivered but also because it was through the association that they were able to negotiate with the politicized bureaucracy and get permission to equip the building. The BANDECA constitution claims that it aims to work for 'the development of Bali-Nyonga in areas and aspects where local initiative can complement government action' (BANDECA 1999). The mortuary appears to illustrate this complementary role perfectly, because the building in which the mortuary is housed was constructed by the Government of Cameroon but the equipment that transformed the empty building into the mortuary was largely paid for by the hometown association, which also currently operates the mortuary even though it is inside the government-run hospital. However, the dispute over the ownership of the mortuary brings to light the competitive aspects of hometown association development projects from the perspective of the state. On the one hand, BANDECA is willing to demonstrate its loyalty to the state (even to the extent that it will contribute to the construction of the gendarmerie post) but, on the other, it maintains a distance from the state in order to retain its popularity and support amongst the Bali-Nyonga community. BANDECA is trusted in Bali-Nyonga because it relies on the capacity of the people to help themselves and because it

⁴⁴ Bali-Nyonga elite, Yaoundé, 21 April 2005.

is different from the government. In its accommodation of these new and particular political circumstances, BANDECA is demonstrating its local modernity (Nyamnjoh *et al.* 2002).

In the context of an increasingly rigid ethnic politics in Cameroon, it is becoming more important, not less, to be buried in Bali-Nyonga itself and the construction of the mortuary and remittances are helping to make this possible. In so doing, BANDECA is contributing to the process in which ethnically defined sub-national spaces become the key 'moral territorial unit' (Jua 2005: 325). Burial at home provides perpetual security for ancestors and asserts perpetual ownership of land. The desire of the external elite to be buried in Bali-Nyonga speaks of their increasing loyalty to their homeplace. This has the potential to exacerbate the dangers posed by a continued manipulation of ethnic identities from the political centre of Cameroon, though it is crucial to say that this was not a current concern of anyone we interviewed. For all the different interest groups and social strata that can be identified in Bali-Nyonga, there is also a remarkable solidarity within the community and a consistent view that 'the village' matters. The village was described as somewhere that is, in some ways, a superior place, and crude attempts to modernize Bali-Nyonga risk undermining this difference.

Burial practices often change and, like all rites that are invested with great significance, such changes are often controversial. Even though particular burial practices may have a relatively short history in a particular place, they are often perceived to be timeless and inviolate. The frequent and large-scale death celebrations that are such a ubiquitous feature of the contemporary landscape of north-west Cameroon are a relatively recent feature (Jindra 2005; Gufler 2000). So the argument in this article is not that a long-established burial practice is being altered for the first time. However it is claimed that technological change and social changes (such as new migration patterns and new patterns of accumulation) can have just as much impact on mourning as fundamental changes in the belief system, such as the introduction of Christianity. Tools and infrastructures (like the mortuary) can shape taken-for-granted conventions, routines and practices. The argument expressed here is also associated with those accounts of the transformation of burial rites that place economic causes at the centre (Arhin 1994), but this is not intended to be a mechanistic invocation of political-economic explanations for change so much as an ambition to reincorporate these elements into the contemporary debates about burial practices.

In the case of Bali-Nyonga it is often the individuals who have left the homeplace who are those most obviously involved in conscious processes of place making. It is important not to overstate the distinction between those who move and those who do not, since very few people in Bali-Nyonga are immobile, and what is crucial is not the difference between the two groups, but the relationship between the place and its diaspora. As AbdouMaliq Simone puts it, 'movement reflects a growing inability of individuals to remain in place. Yet, the very sustenance of specific places themselves requires movement' (2003: 13). As the

first quotation in the article suggested, it is widely perceived that opportunities for employment in Bali-Nyonga are limited, so people tend to leave – but by their active process of keeping links, remitting money and engaging in debates (such as the debates about burial), it is these people who are currently having the most significant impact on their hometown.

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ABSTRACT

The article describes a new mortuary in Cameroon, which has been constructed in a government hospital by the Bali-Nyonga Development and Cultural Association (BANDECA). The history and character of this hometown association is analysed and the article then argues that the mortuary has changed the temporality of death celebrations, and that this change is largely driven by the needs of national and international migrants. It claims that the association and the traditional authorities are attempting to steer recent changes within a longer historical process of 'modernizing' burial. The construction of the mortuary reveals some of the tensions within the community and the challenges these present to the association's leadership. In particular it illustrates the potential conflicts of interest between the hometown association and the national government that result from this form of self-help development project. Finally, the article shows that, despite the increased mobility of the Bali-Nyonga population, it is becoming more important, not less, to be buried at 'home', and that the mortuary and remittances are contributing to this process. Since the mortuary enables burials to take place at home, BANDECA is unwittingly reinscribing ethnic territoriality and thereby contributing to a political process of deepening the sense of ethnic belonging in Cameroon.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article décrit une nouvelle morgue au Cameroun, construite dans un hôpital public par l'association BANDECA (Bali-Nyonga Development and Cultural Association). Après une analyse de l'histoire et du caractère de cette association, l'article soutient que la morgue a modifié la temporalité des célébrations de la mort et que ce changement est essentiellement déterminé par les besoins des migrants nationaux et internationaux. Il affirme que l'association et les autorités

traditionnelles tentent d'orienter les changements récents dans le cadre d'un processus historique plus ancien de "modernisation" de l'enterrement. La construction de la morgue révèle certaines des tensions qui existent au sein de la communauté et les difficultés que celles-ci présentent aux dirigeants de l'association. En particulier, il illustre les conflits d'intérêts potentiels entre l'association et le gouvernement national qui résultent de cette forme de projet de développement d'entraide. Enfin, l'article montre qu'en dépit de la mobilité accrue de la population de Bali-Nyonga, il devient plus important, et non moins, d'être enterré dans sa ville natale et que la morgue et les sommes versées contribuent à ce processus. Puisque la morgue permet aux enterrements d'avoir lieu dans la ville natale, BANDECA réinscrit involontairement la territorialité ethnique et contribue par là-même à un processus politique de renforcement du sens d'appartenance ethnique au Cameroun.