

1 The ethnographic background

The Dowayos are a pagan, montagnard people numbering some fifteen thousand and living in the Poli region of north Cameroon, West Africa, close to the Nigerian border (see fig. 1). Hitherto, they have been largely grouped together with other pagans of that area – such tribes as the Koma, Bata, Pape (Dupa) and Ninga – under the general term *Kirdi* or the highly pejorative *Namchi*. Even the French colonial administration was unable to fix on a firm division of these peoples between Poli and the Nigerian frontier, and many of the works purportedly dealing with the Dowayos deal instead with the Koma or the Pape, or cannot be definitely assigned to the ethnography of any one single group.²

The area is dominated by the Fulani. Sedentary Fulani run the cities and major towns throughout the north, while nomadic Fulani claim rights of passage in the dry season when they come down in search of grazing. Poli is regarded by Dowayos as a blatant Fulani incursion into their territory. The various groups define themselves, above all, in opposition to the Islamic Fulani, who regarded the whole area as a hunting reserve for domestic slaves and levied various forms of tribute until recent times.

The Dowayos themselves have a very firm notion of who they are and disclaim all kinship with surrounding peoples. They divide themselves into two groups, mountain Dowayos (*Téehreh*) and plains Dowayos (*Markeh*). These terms are self-explanatory to a certain degree but there exists the feeling that mountain Dowayos are more traditional and hold to the old ways better, that they are more truly Dowayo. With the mountain Dowayos, it is sometimes important to distinguish between those of the eastern Mango and those of the western Godet ranges. While the rainchiefs live in the east, the principal 'Masters of the Earth', whose job it is to maintain the fertility of the fields, centre on Daksidongo in the west. These distinctions will become clearer in the course of the analysis. It may be mentioned here that there is no justification whatever for Lembezat's assertions that the 'Master of the Earth' is of Bata origin and that the rainchief is a Pape (Lembezat 1961: 175). Possibly confusion has crept in from the use of Bata and Pape (Dupa) songs and ritual artefacts in Dowayo

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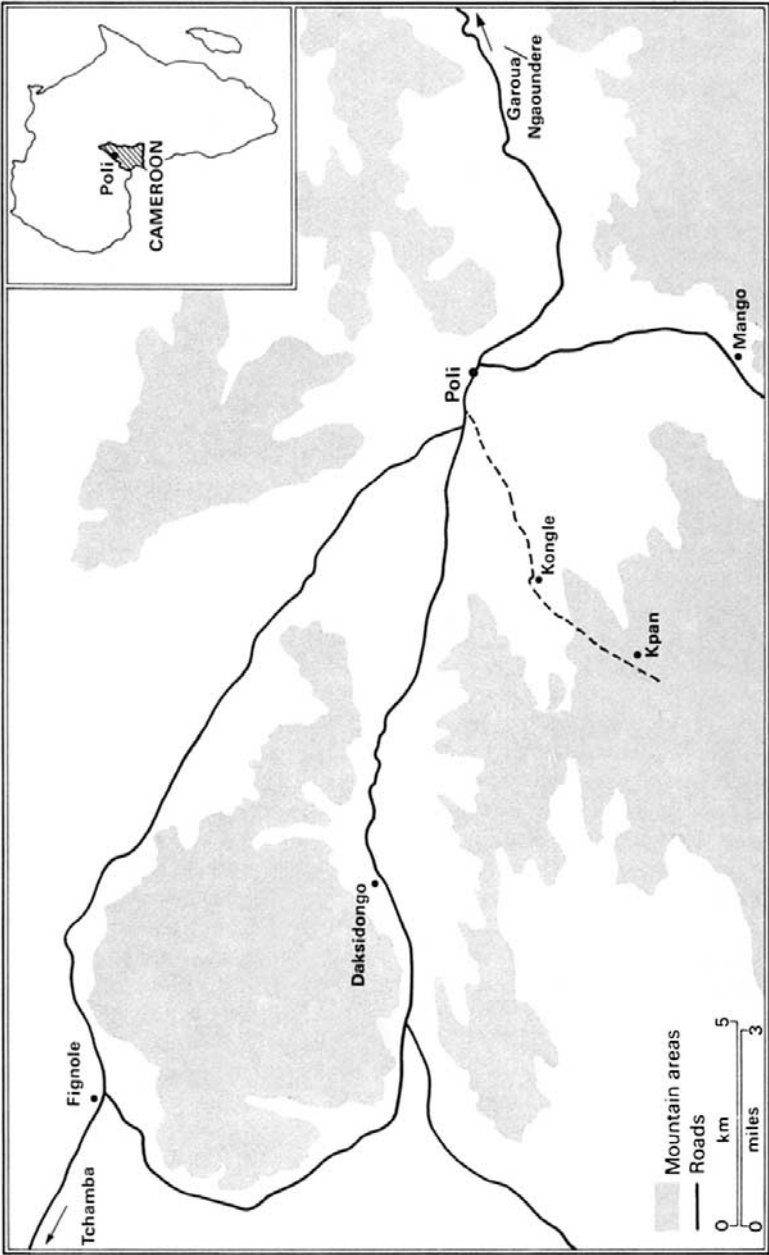


Figure 1 Sketch map of Poli region

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ceremonial. I made a special point of checking that they both hold themselves to be, and are considered by others as, true Dowayos.

The Dowayos have no clear tradition of origin. When questioned on the subject, in typical Dowayo fashion they merely reply that they are where they have always been, where they belong. Efforts by previous scholars to assign a northeastern origin to the Dowayos derive either from the conviction that all current conditions are to be explained by the Fulani expansion of the nineteenth century or simply from the belief that all Kirdi must have a common origin. Given the impossibility of clearly identifying the tribes mentioned by early travellers, it is unclear to what period one should assign the occupation of the mountains by the Dowayos. It seems likely that it is not to be entirely dissociated from the occupation of the area by the Fulani in the course of the nineteenth century, Fulani cavalry being useless in the granite outcrops of the highlands. This must have led to at least a concentration of Dowayos in the mountains. French administrative policy, on the other hand, sought to reverse this process by encouraging the Dowayos to descend from the arid Godet range and settle in the surrounding plains. This has resulted in many plains-dwelling Dowayos having traditional links of kinship and skull-house affiliation with mountain Dowayos. Thus, some Dowayos, though long resident in the plains, still maintain that they are mountain Dowayos and may retain the name of their highland village so that there are two Dowayo villages with the same name. Like many other Dowayo categories, that of mountain Dowayo is prescriptive, rather than a descriptive term.

Dowayos are acephalous, although chiefs were introduced by the French. These, however, are totally lacking in power and authority, being scorned by traditional Dowayos who resent their interference, and largely ignored by modernistic youth who regard them as an anachronism in the world of national politics.

The term *waaryo* 'chief' denotes a much more fundamental Dowayo distinction between a rich man (who owns cattle) and a poor one (who does not). This distinction constantly recurs in Dowayo life. Only rich men can organise the major festivals at which cattle must be killed. Only rich men can help with marriage payments. In theory this should allow the development of all forms of patronage and clientship. Land is abundant and it is only shortage of labour that limits a man's production of millet. In fact, patronage is embryonic, being reserved almost exclusively for the blacksmith. Nowadays, poor men seek cash labour in the cities to raise money to begin a herd. Previously, I was told, the only alternative was to act as herdsman for a rich man. After a certain number of years, the man would be rewarded with a female calf.

Normally, residence is patrilocal. A mature man will have his own hut and granary within a circular, enclosing palisade that also contains the

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compounds of his wives. Polygyny is frequent amongst rich men, three wives being about average, though men of special wealth such as cantonment chiefs or rainmakers may have twelve or thirteen. A typical compound is illustrated in fig. 2. Compounds are not aligned in any particular geographical direction but according to local exigencies. Highland Dowayo villages are arranged to form 'streets' with roofs of huts in different compounds almost touching. Approach paths are deliberately made circuitous and difficult for reasons of security. Entry is either via a stile or through a low hut that must be wriggled through on one's belly.

Generally, a man will dwell with close patrilineal kinsmen whose compounds will be those adjacent to his own and clustered around the cattle-park where the communally owned cattle are kept at night. Physical distance correlates approximately with kinship distance, collateral kinsmen being at some small remove while herding in common. Always apart is the blacksmith, with his women, the potters, preferably divided from the rest of the village by a stretch of uncleared bush or a road. Once again, spatial distance is here a measure of social distance. Blacksmiths, as we shall see later, are endogamous, endophagous and require a separate water supply.

While patrilineal links tie together co-residents, the major functioning social unit is the skull-house group. This is called into play for the organisation of festivals and the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Communality of herding and skull-house membership are far from being conterminous. Several herding arrangements are normally associated with a single skull-house and clear kinship links between all members of the same skull-house will not often be traceable. Moreover, members of several skull-houses will occasionally decide, for reasons of mutual convenience, to herd together. Nevertheless, it is the case that skull-house membership passes from father to children of both sexes. A woman retains membership of her father's skull-house throughout marriage. The role of these groupings in organising rituals will be treated later.

Despite the emphasis on patrilineal kinship, terminology is basically ego-centred and cognatic (see fig. 3). Outside the nuclear family, it is striking for the degree to which it carries through the principle of reciprocity. If A employs a given term for B, then B uses the same for A. This seems to be the fundamental structural principle of the terminology. Marriage with any named relative is not permitted. Young people are expected to be sexually active from about the age of eight years and a mother will readily permit a boy to spend the night with her daughter in the girl's hut in her compound. When the mother sleeps with her husband this normally occurs in the husband's sleeping hut, according to a rigorously enforced rota agreed between co-wives. Should a boy wish to take a girl as wife, negotiations concerning brideprice must be opened by an intermediary. The price must include cattle, preferably a breeding pair,

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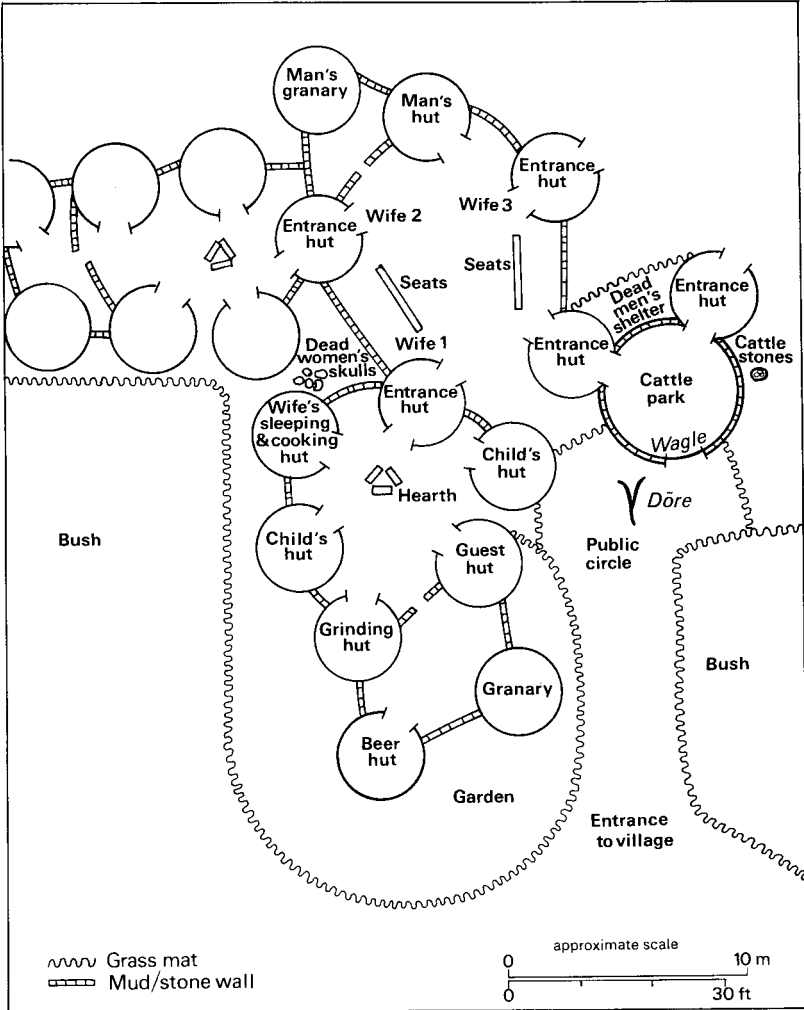


Figure 2 Map of typical Dowayo compound

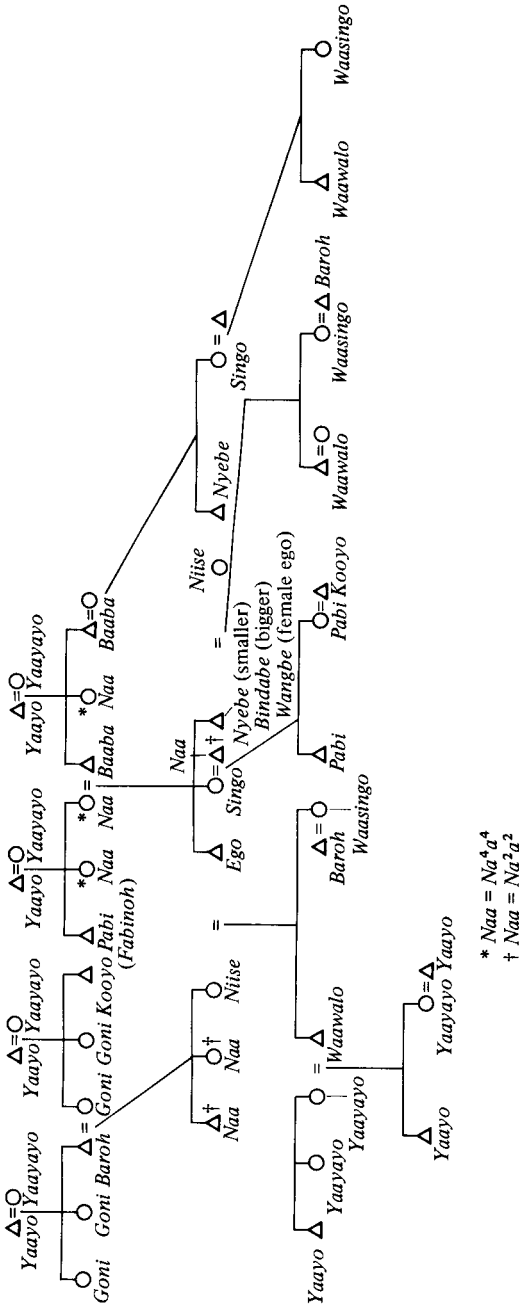


Figure 3

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and the balance will be made up with lesser livestock (sheep and goats), robes, and the thick cotton cloth the Dowayos weave to wrap their dead in. There is no marriage ceremony. The couple are considered wed when the woman moves to the man's village, as opposed to his coming to spend the night with her. Children of either sex belong to the husband's group. Divorce is frequent, it being rare to meet a Dowayo of any age who does not have at least one terminated marriage to her credit. Normally, the wife simply runs away from her husband or he will inform his wife's father that he no longer requires her as wife. In theory, the brideprice is then refunded, but all Dowayos know that the chances of a complete reimbursement are small and have already hedged their bets by delaying full payment as long as possible. Thus marriage is a somewhat fluid arrangement, with many on their way into it or out of it at any one time. Any one woman will simultaneously occupy several different places in the system.

Should the bride die in the first year of marriage, a man will try to oblige his wife's kin to make another woman available, though they will resist this and seek to invoke the *caveat emptor* principle that obtains in the wider sphere of trade relations. On a man's death, his wives may be inherited by his brothers or adult sons, by mutual consent. A son may not, of course, inherit his true mother. Alternatively, a widow may return to her native village with some part of the brideprice refunded. If she is an old woman this may be waived. Even this is a cause of much litigation. It cannot be overstressed that brideprice disputes are the chief source of social disruption in Dowayo village life.

Dowayos engage in subsistence agriculture, the basic crop being millet. Various yams, peanuts, gombo, taro, beans, melons and peppers are also grown in smaller quantities. The only cash crop is cotton, grown under strong government pressure; and some rice is produced under the direction of missionaries. In the Godet range, there are numerous borassus palms, not found in any number elsewhere in Dowayoland. In the Mango range, plentiful year-round water from the high mountains permits irrigation in the dry season that extends from about October to April. Men and women engage in agriculture equally. A man may cultivate jointly with his wife but more often they will have separate fields and always separate granaries. Men who specialise in agriculture – 'true cultivators' (*baakyaayo*) – constitute a special class. Sowing occurs about the beginning of April, when the first small rains have fallen. From about June, Dowayos take up semi-permanent residence in small woven huts in their fields; and a series of hoeing parties is held, beer being given in exchange for labour. The harvest occurs in late November, just after the establishment of the dry season. Except in the small area where irrigation is practised, no cultivation occurs between November and April. The women make baskets, fish with poison

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and dams, and go on visits to relatives. The men hunt, fish with line and spear and hold various of the lesser festivals. Increasingly, there is a tendency for young men to leave after the harvest to seek wage labour in the cities of Garoua and Ngaoundere. Most return next year in time for planting.

Cattle are the major value in Dowayo life and the principal obstacle to successful agriculture. They are allowed to wander promiscuously across the fields and inflict great damage on the crops. In theory, at night they should be returned to the central cattle park but this is often allowed to lapse. During the growing season, Dowayos may often be encountered, crouched weeping in the ruins of their fields, comforting themselves with the knowledge that their cattle have committed similar acts in the fields of their neighbours. In former times, boys were required to look after the cattle and guard the fields. Nowadays compulsory school removes them from these tasks and children are, moreover, treated with a generous indulgence that frees them from almost all parental discipline. They devote themselves to the unfettered play of their imaginations and all manner of mischief, and are hardly ever punished by their doting parents. Cattle are rarely sold. Traditionally, they were killed only for the dead during funerals and skull-festivals and most meat is still acquired according to rules of distribution to kin on such occasions.

Specialist offices such as circumciser, sorcerer, clown and healer exist but political decisions are made at the hamlet level by the meeting of all mature men. Elders speak with special authority, but there is no way of enforcing a decision in the face of dissent. Very often lawsuits will simply die on their feet after lengthy litigation since the parties cannot be obliged to appear or because no mutually acceptable compromise can be reached. Dowayos behave with an unquestioned disdain for external involvement in their affairs and avoid sending cases to the local court in Poli. They fear the agents of the central government and use magical remedies to keep them away, regarding them as simply another form of misfortune. This attitude has won them a reputation in the outside world as stubborn and uncooperative.

Dowayoland is still very much a closed area. Communications are appalling, bridges are frequently washed down and roads are impassable. The Dowayos have very little to do with the wider commercial world dominated by their traditional enemies, the Fulani. They dislike buying and selling, though the younger men and women covet radios, bicycles and Western clothes. They disapprove strongly of the poll-tax which obliges them to use money. 'If it was not for taxation,' I was told, 'you would not see money among the Dowayos.' The payment of brideprice in money is thus totally unacceptable. Fathers know that money disappears among fellow kinsmen whereas cattle multiply. It seems that in former times,

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burial cloth, cattle and hoe-blades were the media of exchange, with various restrictions on the direction of these commodities between affines. The precise articulation of this system can now only be guessed at.

Of fundamental importance in Dowayo life are a number of rites of passage. Whereas birth and marriage are not matters of great ceremonial, circumcision of boys and death are the subject of great ritual elaboration. After death, a man's skull and a woman's water-jar are the objects of further ceremonies which will be the subject of later analysis. I describe these in detail in the appendix.

Also to be noted is the pervasive Dowayo attitude to the Fulani, their traditional masters and – as noted – enemies. Old men, especially, react to the mention of Fulani with powerful emotions of hatred and scorn. This, however, is tinged with grudging admiration. The Fulani, after all, are rich and powerful. They have even displaced the White Man, a process that baffles Dowayos. The French clearly encouraged the Dowayos to Fulanise themselves.³ Whereas the young often opt for Christian modernism as a way of bettering their lot, older Dowayos deck themselves with the trappings of Fulani chieftains as a claim to status. Rich men wear Fulani robes and swords, carry red umbrellas, etc. All this, as will be shown, goes with the notion that most of the attributes of culture are importations from surrounding peoples, especially from the Fulani who gave them the most vital attribute of their civilisation – circumcision.

2 Symbolism and the punctuation of culture

The word ‘symbolism’ has come to be used in such a variety of senses that it no longer constitutes a well-defined category. It has been used as an etic category of the observer, an emic category used by the observed, a discrete class of behaviour, and an aspect of all behaviour. The simplest and most pervasive viewpoint in anthropology can be summed up as: ‘This looks crazy. It must be symbolism.’

Such a tendency is to be found in Sperber’s (1974: 4) criterion of symbolicity, once it has been stripped of elegant expression. Thus, he writes: ‘I note then as symbolic all activity where the means put into play [*sic*] seem to me to be clearly disproportionate to the explicit or implicit end, whether this end be knowledge, communication or production – that is to say all activity whose rationale escapes me.’ The tradition is one sanctioned by generations of anthropological practice. The decision to interpret behaviour as ‘symbolic’ is often the product of the failure of the anthropologist to comprehend something, plus a dogmatic commitment to the rationality of primitive man. The result is as uneasy as the literary critic who blandly regards poetry as merely deviant language. The normal becomes thereby firmly cut off from symbolic analysis. As Sperber remarks concerning Dorze food: ‘When a Dorze eats a normally buttered dish, no symbolism need be postulated . . . In other words, an element takes on its symbolic value to the extent that it departs from a norm’ (1974: 61).

In this way, two categories disappear from ethnographic accounts. The first is that of ‘nonsense’ since primitive man is always sensible (in functional analysis) or at least rational (though this term defies clear analysis).⁴ The second casualty is that of the cultural classifications that define normality within a given culture. Thus, in the case of food classifications alluded to above, the normal structure of Dorze ethnocuisine is resubmerged in the morass of ‘ethnographic background’ as if Levi-Strauss (1964), Leach (1964), Tambiah (1969) and Douglas (1975) had never written. By now, many well-documented cases have been examined, going back at least to Needham (1962), showing how aspects of culture that