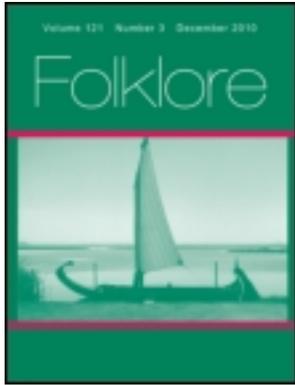


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Religious Poetry as a Vehicle for Social Control in Africa: The Case of Bakossi Incantatory Poetry

*Sone Enongene Mirabeau*

## *Abstract*

Religious poetry is generally considered the fruit of a people's long reflection on their relationship with their gods, with the ancestors, and with the partly seen and unseen universe. It is used to celebrate events in the life of the individual and the community, to express fellowship, and as a powerful means of communication. Thus, religious poetry is an integral element of a people's heritage. In this paper, I intend to present some forms of religious poetry, which are found among the Bakossi people of Cameroon, in order to show how magically-oriented formulaic expressions are used in order to maintain adherence to the normative order of society. The point I intend to make is that the incantatory form of religious poetry, was, and still is, used among the Bakossi people of Cameroon, as well as in other parts of rural Africa in terms of individual and communal education.

## *Introduction*

Religious poetry as found among the Bakossi of Cameroon is concerned mainly with the Bakossi people's relationship with God, with their fellow men, and with nature. Through this poetry they seek to study the mystery of their environment. They try to understand the power of nature with a view to dominating it. They also attempt to anthropomorphise the various supernatural forces mentioned in the poetry in the belief that they can align them to their own level of understanding. Ritual poetry is chanted around shrines by a male member of Bakossi society in order to solve various life crises. For instance, when there is drought, warfare, or an epidemic, he uses religious poetry to mollify the forces of nature in the belief that they will then help to alleviate the difficult situation. Religious poetry is also chanted for the purposes of healing or, conversely, in order to destroy people, and it is also used to maintain social equilibrium. The Bakossi people of Cameroon, whose poetry is the focus of this paper, are, like people everywhere, inseparable from their culture. Thus it is the totality of the thoughts, concepts, ideas, values and beliefs constituting their culture that characterises their society. These cultural elements are manifested in their oral poetry, which is still profoundly influenced by their environment.

My choice of oral poetry as the subject of this paper is based on the conviction that poetry in general is the most popular genre of African oral literature. The Cameroon dramatist Bole Butake is quoted by Kashim Tala as saying that:

The song or poem is the most basic and profuse form of emotive expression in Africa. The African manifests his feelings through an outburst of song or poem when he loves and when he hates, when he works and when he plays, when he is at peace and when he fights, when a child is born and when death takes its toll. The poem then is the lifeline of the African; and he learns the art of poetry because he is born and bred in a society which recognises that the poetic form is, emotionally, most expressive of the human predicament (Tala 1999, 44).

Thus songs play an important role in the cultural fabric of African societies, in that they articulate the feelings of the African people. Most traditional African societies lack schools of music, but there are folk composers and skilled musical leaders who sing on occasions of joy and sorrow. The song enhances their people's lives and is, in itself, an important educational tool. Therefore, through the performances of Bakossi oral poetry, the ideas and beliefs of the Bakossi people are expressed and shared together. Sone Enongene goes further and says that:

Oral poetry communicates to us the nature of our identity and it appeals to us in two ways. Firstly, it touches us emotionally so that we feel either pleasure or pain, and it stirs our mind so deeply that we are obliged to reflect on some fundamental concepts of life (Sone 2000, 16).

From the above extract, we can say that oral poetry, like other genres of oral literature, broadens and deepens our knowledge of human affairs, thereby making life more intelligible for us. It uplifts our minds by showing us how to live fuller and more meaningful lives. If we take the content and form of this poetry into consideration, we can classify it into two types: religious and secular. Religious poetry covers ritual incantations, prayers, hymns, and (to an extent) dirges that are used on more serious and solemn occasions, while secular poetry, which includes lyrics, panegyrics, lullabies, folk songs, and so on, is used in less solemn circumstances.

Incantation, or the use of magical formulae, is the most significant form of Bakossi religious poetry. Its exalted position *vis-à-vis* other forms of religious poetry is due to the fact that, in Bakossi society, "incantations are used to solve the social, economic, political, spiritual and psychological problems confronting man" (Sone 2000, 17). Generally speaking, as stated above, incantations are magically-oriented formulaic expressions, combining reference to mystical powers with images that are highly mythopoetic. They are used to ward off evil from oneself, to invoke evil on enemies, to curse offenders, and to boost one's personality. Seen in this light, they constitute a "vital force" for survival in Bakossi society. However, it is worthy of note that incantations as a means of social control are not limited to the Bakossi alone, or indeed to Africa. Numerous studies have been carried out on the role of incantations as a means of social control in different cultures of the world. Nol Alembong (2007), Fonkou Kuitche (1988), Fitzgerald Dale (1975), Richard Bauman (1971), Bronislaw Malinowski (1935), Stephen Jikong (1979), Orrin Klapp (1954), and many others, have demonstrated the way in which genres of folklore have been used in different cultures and traditions as an effective means of social control. In this paper, I am concentrating on incantations of the Bakossi people, which constitute one form of their religious poetry, in order to examine their aesthetic perceptions and responses to events in their daily lives, especially in terms of their individual upbringing and communal education.

The Bakossi people, like other people in Africa, believe in the magical power of words. For them, words are so powerful that they can be used to bless, curse, avert

evil, cause confusion in the enemy, or to manipulate invisible forces so that they may serve society. Since incantations are based on the power of words, they are used in conjunction with charms and other magical trappings. They are also usually pronounced in public as they are intended to be heard by offenders in orders to intensify their feeling of guilt and also to plant fear in them. The fear that harm may befall themselves as a result of their actions usually acts as a deterrent to any further malign behaviour on their part.

### *Brief Background about the Bakossi Ethnic Group*

To understand and appreciate Bakossi incantatory poetry, it is essential to know the background of the Bakossi people. According to Kashim Tala, "literary judgement should rely on the knowledge and acceptance of the cultural reference system from which the literature emanates" (Tala 1989, 9). Thus my analysis of Bakossi religious poetry in this article will take place against the geographical, historical, social and cultural milieu of the Bakossi people.

The Bakossi ethnic group is found in Kupe Muanenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon in the central African subregion (see Figure 1). The historian S. N. Ejedepang Koge situates Bakossi "between latitudes 4°36 and 5°28 north of the equator and between longitudes 9°28 and 9°51 east of Greenwich Meridian," with an area of "2,083 square kilometres" (Ejedepang Koge 1986, 1). The 1987 census put the Bakossi population at about one hundred thousand inhabitants. The Bakossi tribe, therefore, is one of the largest in the South West Region of Cameroon. Akoose (the language spoken by the Bakossi people) is one of the two hundred and seventy-nine languages spoken in Cameroon, with linguistic differences depending on geographical location. Like many African languages, Akoose is tonal and musical in nature. It is classified among the big Bantu language group known as the Northern Bantu Languages.

The Bakossi people are mostly farmers and hunters. The two main cash crops that are extensively grown and on which they depend for a living and to educate their children, are Robusta coffee and Cocoa. A poor harvest as far as these crops are concerned can thus be disastrous, and in order to try to avoid this, fertilisers are increasingly used by those who can afford them. Above all, the matter of successful crop production is brought to the attention of the ancestors during ritual incantation events. Apart from the cash crops mentioned above, the main food crops are generally cultivated by women, and include cocoyams, sweet potatoes, plantains, colocasia, bananas, beans, maize, and a variety of vegetables. Hunting is carried out by the men of the group in the forest areas in which wild animals, such as porcupines, deer, monkeys, antelopes, buffaloes and hares, abound. A hunting expedition often calls for a special kind of traditional preparation, involving ritual incantations, to forestall any mishap, especially as some people are thought capable of transforming themselves into animals such as monkeys, elephants, snakes, gorillas, and so on, to wreak havoc with the hunting trip. During ritual incantation events, a practice such as this is strongly castigated. Also, when forest animals are perceived to have become scarce, especially when a hunter returns home empty-handed from a trip, the belief is that the animals in question are being withheld by the ancestors. During ritual incantations, therefore, the ancestors are called upon to release the forest animals to the hunters.

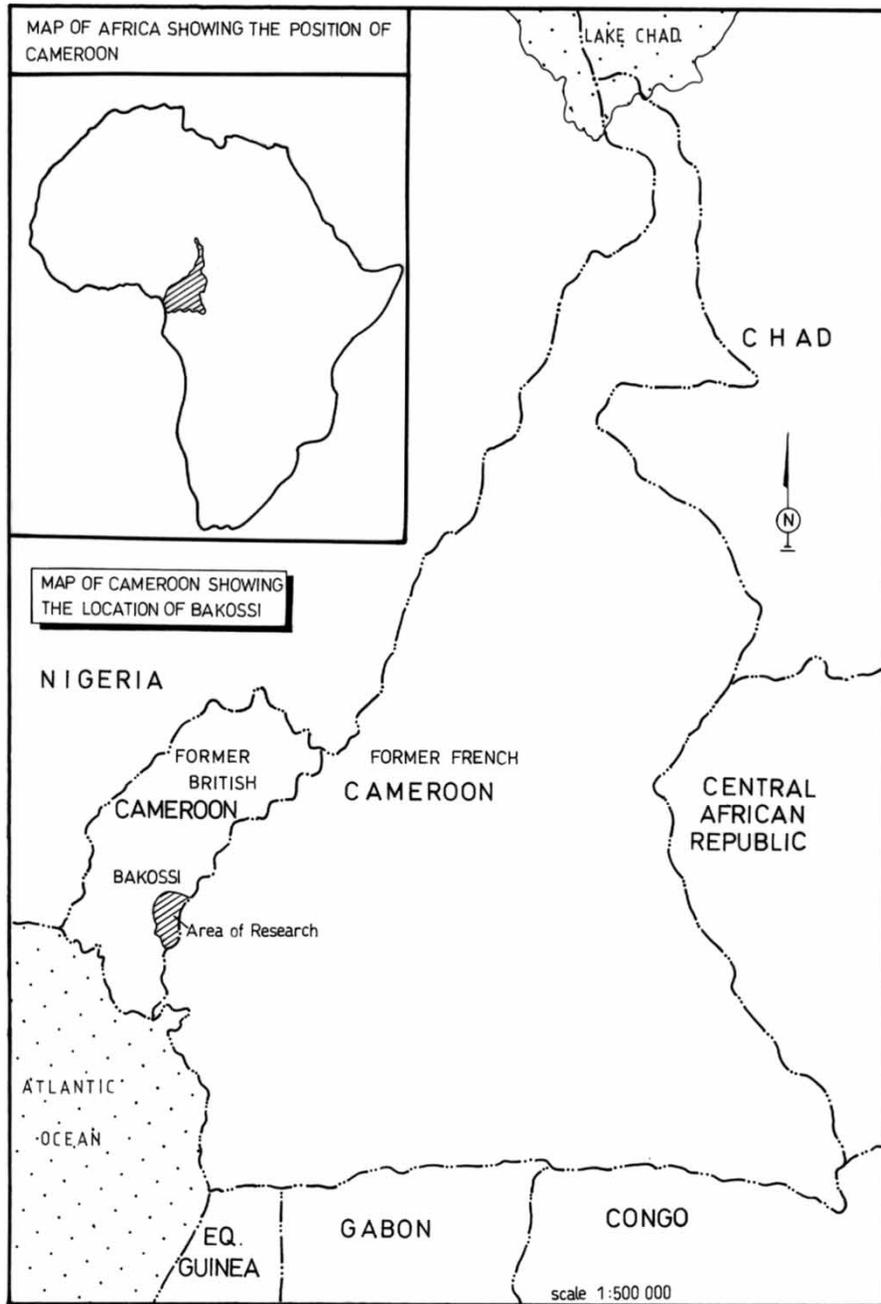


Figure 1. Map showing the position of Cameroon in Africa and the location of Bakossi in Cameroon (Sone Enongene Mirabeau)

### *Cosmology and Belief System*

African religion, in general, is composed of beliefs concerning the interaction between the spiritual nature of man and the supernatural forces of nature. The Bakossi belief system is manifested in how the Bakossi people perceive the world around them and how they relate to, and interact with it. To better understand the nature of ritual incantations among the Bakossi, an insight into the Bakossi people's worldview (*Weltanschauung*) is therefore necessary. The Bakossi belief system can be deduced from certain traditional practices and from the use of sacred or incantatory language. The Bakossi conceive of the world as a cohesive force arranged in a specific order, with each part performing its duties within its orbit. This implies that each part is conscious of its responsibilities within the cohesive whole of creation. According to Bakossi belief, the universe can be divided into three worlds—the world of the living, the spirit world, and the inanimate and animate world. Bakossi cosmology indicates that gods abound and that they are linked to the various natural phenomena, such as shrines, water, forests, mountains, animals, and so on. In some cases, certain voices are said to be heard from invisible forces and are widely believed to be produced by spirits. Apart from these “environmental” gods, there is also a belief in a Superior Being (God) who controls the entire universe. Despite the infiltration of imported Christian religion that prompts some converts to take a certain line of action, behaviour and belief, most of the Bakossi people are deeply traditional at heart. They are followers of the so-called sacred traditional societies and use ritual incantations as a means of solving daily problems that affect them.

### *Solidarity*

The Bakossi are imbued with a strong sense of solidarity. Life is seen in terms of maintaining good relationships with both the living and what Tata Mbuy refers to as “the spirit world of the ancestors and God” (Mbuy 1992, 93). The *ndie* [1] (a yearly ritual celebration) is partly explained by the desire, according to Heinrich Balz, to “extend family solidarity even to the departed” (Balz 1984, 91). Few people would dare to have what would be considered the unviable honour of living in isolation from the ancestors and God.

### *Respect for Tradition*

Tradition that has been handed down from one generation to another is considered sacrosanct among the Bakossi. This is evident in their attitudes and approaches to many aspects of life. Thus, various traditional methods are used in order to predict the future, ward off calamities, send messages of any kind, confer blessings on people, maintain existing social order, and enforce tribal decisions, to mention but a few situations calling for the application of customary knowledge and usage. Unfortunately, traditional practices among the Bakossi suffered a setback under missionary influence. This is evident from the 1932 assessment report [2] of O. R. Arthur, the then acting British Divisional Officer during colonial administration, which mentioned that “the lack of increase in population [...] is attributed by the old men to the abandonment of the *ndie* ritual by Christians” (Arthur 1932, 2).

### *The Concept of the Human Being*

It is believed among the Bakossi that a human being is both physical and spiritual. He is thought to be endowed with both physical and metaphysical powers that he can use for both good and evil. However, only a select few can exercise influence at the spiritual level, and these are referred to as people with a double nature.

The practice of witchcraft, for instance, which is prevalent among the Bakossi, is thought to be possible only through the use of spiritual powers by means of which it is believed that others can be harmed. Thus sudden deaths or unfortunate events have been attributed to witchcraft practices. Furthermore, the spirits of certain persons are thought capable of inhabiting various animals, similar to werewolves, in order to destroy the crops of fellow tribesmen, or to strip them of their wealth (Carr 1922, 8). T. S. Atabe points out that "if such an animal is shot or wounded, the person also becomes ill, and if the animal dies, he dies soon after" (Atabe 1979, 12). However, there is also the possibility, according to Bakossi belief, that such people may not die, since they are thought to have a double nature. Other persons, such as traditional healers, with their perceived dual nature, contribute positively to the community by performing traditional cures. People who possess benevolent powers are said to attend a mystical market, "*Ekom*," supposedly situated in a mystical place known as "Mount Kupe" where they discuss vital matters and choose parcels of fortune or misfortune. [3] Persons who are thought to use spiritual powers for evil purposes are regarded as constituting a major threat to communal solidarity and are dealt with severely. For example, when witchdoctors (*Ndonge*) [4] are of the opinion that a person is using witchcraft to deter other people's progress or to draw the fertility of other people's crops to themselves in order to have a good harvest, such an evil act is condemned and the person is either ostracised by, or exiled from, the community. The reality of witchcraft among the Bakossi is evidenced in the belief that witches and wizards are thought to be responsible for all kinds of misfortunes like diseases, paralysis, barrenness, impotence, failure in life, and even death. Illness is said to appear when the witches devour the spiritual body and suck its blood spiritually. This causes the mortal frame to weaken and pains and paralysis to occur; when the heart is reached, the victim dies (Sone 2000, 28).

### *The Ancestral World*

It is believed among the Bakossi that the dead are not really dead, in that they are regarded as being still alive in the ancestral world in a form that has inspired the appellation, the "living dead," and they are classified into two groups. Those who were wicked while alive are believed to become evil spirits and to haunt the living. On the other hand, those who lived good and commendable lives constitute the family of the "*onyame*" or "*benyame*," meaning "ancestors." These are regarded as benign ancestors and they play a very important and central in the life of Bakossi people, who regard themselves as being controlled by a series of forces—God the creator, the ancestors, human beings, and other supernatural and spiritual agencies. God is thought to create, sustain and dispense all realities of life. He is assisted by the ancestors who act as mediators between God and man. The Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, [5] is quoted by Tata H. Mbuy as saying

that the ancestors "... are near the Great one and have great power after death over earthly problems. They are able to fight evil spirits which send evil spells on the living" (Mbuy 1992, 10). They are believed to communicate with the living in various ways, including in dreams in which they may, in the words of Ejedepang Koge, "transmit messages, advice [and] instructions to the living" (Ejedepang Koge 1986, 177). Even though they are not physically present, they constitute an integral part of the living society or community that often invokes them in order to seek their assistance in the face of difficult problems, or to express gratitude for requests answered. As the ancestors are believed to be the intermediaries, on account of their supposedly good lives, between the Bakossis and the supreme God, thus one's life is controlled by the relationship one has with his ancestors and God. This relationship is so important that no one would want to ruin it deliberately. No serious celebration can be carried out without first consulting the ancestors. After all, "they have been on earth with the living members of the community, so they know their problems. Now that they are with God [...] they can intercede. Certainly, no sane person would want to annoy his intercessor" (Mbuy 1992, 18). The Bakossis perpetuate belief in the existence of their ancestors by instituting, for example, shrines, where sacrifices are offered to appease them.

### *The Supreme Being*

The Bakossis are aware of the existence of a Supreme Being known as "*Sang diob*," "God the father." He is believed to have created everything and to be the most powerful being in the universe. In the distant past, one of the names attributed to Him was "*Muanyame*," which is the Bakossi word for ancestors. The said "*Muanyame*" "is believed by the Bakossis to be greater than Sango Ngoe, the great ancestor of the Bakossis" (Balz 1991, 170). This explains why ritual sacrifices are offered to Him, through the ancestors, by any Bakossi person who is in difficulty. This attitude is shared by other Africans, as observed by Tatah Mbuy, who states: "in the face of any difficulty, the spontaneous and highest reaction of a true African is to offer sacrifices to the moulder" (Mbuy 1992, 12). One of the purposes of organising ritual ceremonies is primarily to pray to God through the ancestors. But this may ring hollow to some Christians, especially missionaries, who believe that the dead, whether or not given the status of ancestor, should be considered dead and buried. That notwithstanding, what matters to the Bakossis according to testimony gathered by Heinrich Balz is that "once the village people had done their ancestral feast, there were births in the families, rich harvest in farms and money came from what was sold" (Balz 1991, vi). Furthermore, Balz quotes Johannes Ittmann as stating that "besides on their spirit place, the old Bakossi did not think of the spirit alone but with God" (Balz 1991, 257). With this background knowledge of Bakossi society in mind, I believe that the reader is now in a better position to understand the reasons why the Bakossis have recourse to ritual incantations.

### *Incantations as a Vehicle for Social Control*

In traditional Bakossi, as elsewhere in Africa, incantations serve as an instrument for an examination and an expression of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society. Thus, incantations were, and still are, used in several

parts of rural Bakossi in order “to comment on how the individual adheres to or deviates from the community’s norms of behaviour” (Sone and Djockoua 2007, 84). Hence a person in traditional Bakossi society was, and is, less autonomous than in the western sense of that word, as he identifies with the social and cultural outlook of the community of which he forms part, and as he is expected to acquiesce in its beliefs and customs. In other words, the individual is the personification of society’s values. But, as Emmanuel Obiechina has warned:

... it would be wrong to interpret the concentration of common goals and the primacy of the common interest as a matter of suppression of the personality from the authority. Social conformity and the discouragement of deviation from the common norms of behaviour are not the same as the repressive curbing of individual freedom (Obiechina 1975, 202).

Thus, in order to survive and to progress in society, the individual is expected to show respect for the social institutions that promote the common good. These institutions encourage the individual to pursue the positive values of industry, courage, integrity and filial piety. While making some allowances for social deviance, the institutions effectively deplore such negative traits as cowardice, greed, selfishness and grasping individualism.

In traditional Bakossi society, then, environment was what built a person’s character. That is, the individual was what society had made of him (Sone 2009, 159). But society itself was basically competitive and acquisitive. Therefore, it had to rely substantially on its systems of social controls to ensure internal order. It is for this purpose that Bakossi society is stratified on the basis of age. A child becomes a new member of his community on the day on which he is born. He acquires a personality of his own on the day on which he passes through his naming ceremony, and becomes a social adult on the day on which he is initiated into “*Mwankum*.” [6] Finally, he acquires the responsibility of a family head when he marries and begins his own nuclear family. Each of these stages through which the Bakossi male passes from birth to old age has behavioural expectations attached to it. One of these expectations is respect for age. This is emphasised in the proverb “a child may have as many clothes as possible but he can never have rags as an adult.” In other words, each Bakossi is expected to know his place in society and what is expected of him, and to behave accordingly. Once the individual is seen to regard himself as being superior to the status conferred on him by society, pressure is immediately brought to bear on him by the group to conform. Indiscipline among youths, for example, is seen as a threat to the social order, and the elders use the powers of the curse as an effective instrument of social control to ensure social conformity. The following curse, collected by the author of this paper on 24 February 1999 at Muabi village in Bakossi, is uttered by an elderly woman who has been slighted by her son.

*Akoose version (source language)*

1.  
We e e e e e  
Wo wo wo wo  
*Nzobo pide min ee*  
*Nzobo pide min ee*  
*Boh a tum me abed ee*  
*Nze me a tumeh abede ee*

*English version (target language)*

We e e e e e  
Wo wo wo wo  
Nzobo is mad  
Nzobo is mad  
Then you slap me  
If it is me you have slapped

*Me aweh mpimeh moh ngon abug ee*  
*Nsedan moh ekud ngon abug eee*  
*Njienged moh ekud ngon abug ee*  
*Nze me a tum' abed ee*  
*Me ave njiah moh ee*  
*Enondu ne Dielle Mpah boh pwi ase ee*

I who have carried you for nine months  
 Descended hills with you for nine months  
 Ascended hills with you for nine months  
 If it is me you have slapped  
 I who gave birth to you,  
 Enondu and Dielle Mpah should wake up alive.

2.

*Nze bad boh kag asu ee*  
*weh kag a mbeng ee*  
*Ne a mbeng ee*  
*Ne a Mbeng ee*  
*Akan bwam k'ahog eh pag ne weh ee*  
*Ehaentan n'ehaentan eee*  
*Onyin bab ee*  
*Onyin bab ee*  
*Weh mpag'e nan ee*  
*Sh sh sh*  
*Sh sh sh*

If people are going up  
 You should go down instead  
 And down  
 And down  
 Nothing good should come your way  
 Darkness and darkness  
 May you see people  
 May you see people  
 It is you I am sending off like this  
 Sh sh sh  
 Sh sh sh. [7]

The subject matter of the text is a curse on Nzobo for slapping his mother. The text is divided into two parts (1 and 2). In the first, the reciter (Nzobo's mother) describes the act carried out by her son. She also highlights the suffering she undertook as she carried him in her womb for nine months. The act of slapping his mother is nothing short of madness, according to the narrative. That is why the mother takes him to be mad. The second part is the curse proper. Since Nzobo is a mature adult, his mother is not in a position to punish him. She therefore complains about her situation to her dead father and mother (Enondu and Dielle Mpah), probably because she did not commit such a crime against them. She then enumerates a series of misfortunes to befall her son.

Nzobo's mother justifies her anger by enumerating her rights over her son. It would, of course, be proper for the son to ask his mother to pardon him, but it is necessary that the person who is cursed should feel guilty because of the belief that superior forces punish disobedient people. This is not only the case in Bakossi society, but in many other African communities also. As John Mbiti has stated: "formal curses are feared much in African societies, and this fear, like that of witchcraft, helps to check bad relationships, especially in family circles" (1977, 121). In Bakossi society, all elderly people are regarded as being endowed with cursing capabilities. The curse of a father or mother on their child is considered to be especially powerful and to have far-reaching effects. This belief helps to maintain discipline among children and enables them to comply with the existing norms of their society. Nzobo's mother feels hurt because of the son's action. That is why she invokes the wrath of the ancestors on him. The word "people" in the text is used to refer to spirits. Kashim Tala holds that "it is a common belief among many African tribes that headstrong persons who deviate from accepted norms of behaviour or subvert the common will are punished" (1999, 53). Among the Bakossi, one of the punishments that can result from bad behaviour is that they will see malevolent spirits. Since it is not normal for ordinary people to see spirits,

anybody who is unfortunate enough to do so has to undergo long and expensive cleansing rituals. The prospect of meeting with a malevolent spirit is therefore one of the most dreaded and most effective sanctions in Bakossi traditional society.

For stylistic effect, the woman opens her lament with an ululation, which is onomatopoeic in nature. But the ululation may also be an indication that she has yet to come to terms with her pathetic situation. The repetition of the words “*Nzobo a pide min ee*” [“Nzobo is mad”] in lines three and four, as well as “*Ne a mbeng ee*” [“And down and down”] in lines fifteen and sixteen, are indicative of the powerful nature of the curse. The “down and down” movement implies that Nzobo should not follow the usual pattern of life like other normal human beings. The added “*Ehaentan n’ehaentan ee*” [“Darkness and darkness”] takes on a symbolic dimension as it symbolises misfortune. The reciter also makes a juxtaposition of ideas at the level of Nzobo as a baby and as a mature human being. As a child in the womb, and immediately after birth, Nzobo was a symbol of purity, ignorance, and immaturity. But as he is a grown man, with reasoning, intelligence and maturity, one would have expected him to reason and behave in an adult fashion. But instead, Nzobo is an incarnation of disrespect, impulsiveness and rashness.

In the second example, collected by E. M. Njume, [8] the reciter feels threatened by an unknown person in his village and makes the following utterances:

*Nze mod a bele ngim*  
*Ngim ewu moh meka*  
*Nze mod bele njum ekuk*  
*Njum ekuk a wuh moh meka*  
*Epipi ejeh jiah mbuuh*  
*A jieh ne awi yiel*  
*Nze bebad ke bebejum*  
*Boh hede ebiped*  
*Ebiped ji ekag ne boh bim* (Njume 1975, 38).

When the dyer prepares the dye,  
 Her hands first get dyed.  
 When the owner prepares camwood  
 The camwood first addresses her hand.  
 “Epipi” that invited rain,  
 It invites it on its own head.  
 Whether it is men or women  
 who think evil against me,  
 Let the evil fall on them.

The intention of the reciter here is to reverse the whole process of being threatened so that the enemies themselves should first suffer the consequences of their acts. The pattern of operation in the first four lines of the poem is worked out through the principle of analogy. Both the dye and the camwood usually stain the hands of the user before they stain the target object. Consequently, the reciter is inferring that the evil planned for him should actually fall on the proposers. The “boomerang motif” is emphasised by the use of the bird “*Epipi*,” a bird noted among the Bakossi for calling rain, but which is eventually soaked by the rain, since it has nothing with which to protect itself when the rain falls (lines 5 and 6). In other words, the reciter is calling on his guardian spirits to remove the protective cover from his enemies so that they should be the first to experience the evil indicated in the poem (lines 7–9). Ogunjimi and N’Allah confirm the above observation when they point out that “one particular issue emanating from [this type] of incantation is that there is confidence in safety instilled in the poet-user” (2005, 151).

Among the Bakossi, a man who regularly fails his examinations, or does not prosper in his job, or who is unable to keep it, is often led to the conclusion that

either he has displeased his ancestors or that he has broken a taboo. In such a situation, the man is asked to prepare food and palm wine [9] for his displeased ancestors, and to gather the family together so that they can bless him. A big calabash of palm wine is brought and placed between the legs of the oldest man in the family, who then proceeds to recite the names of the family ancestors. He keeps moving the leaf stopper or cork in and out of the calabash as he recites the names. After exhausting the long list of ancestors, he reveals to them the purpose of the gathering, which is “to give you food and remind you that you have not been forgotten,” and to ask for their blessings on the family. He then raises the leaf stopper and shouts vehemently “*A haa a-a yu*”—which is the closing formula of the invocation and can be loosely translated as: “Is this not what we have said?” The audience responds with an equally vehement “*ya*,” meaning “yes.”

After palm wine has been poured on the ground for the ancestors by the oldest man in the family, a kola nut is then given to an elder, who splits it and arranges the lobes in his right palm, addresses them (and through them the ancestors), and then throws the kola nut lobes on the ground. The performance is over only after he obtains the “*Nzo abi*” or the clear lobe. [10] The following utterance, collected by the author on 22 February 1999, in Nkikoh village in Bakossi, accompanies the throwing of the kola nut:

1.

*We abi*  
*Se hiye a wie haen*  
*Se hi ne aji ne aweseh mwan*  
*Awe pine esaad*  
*A moh enyineh nzii*  
*Anide pide a meku o be menyame*

You kola nut,  
 We have not come here to laugh,  
 We have come to cry with our son  
 Who has met us here with a cry.  
 He says he does not see the road.  
 And has come to fall at the feet of his ancestors,

2.

*Bin boh deh haen*  
*Menyameh o b' Ewanzoh be siin*  
*Nye bi ngan eh mwan nen a dii awese*  
*Moh de aleh a de mbia njongede*  
*Nzeh ahi a mwe ape a pina nzu*  
*Nze a kode eku a nyu alaeh*  
*Alaeh di a saleh ati*  
*Nze mod a none moh ne ebiped meg*  
*Meg o bwe mod awi*  
*Mwan a beh kod ejeh padeh suwoh mbii*  
*Boh a nyantede mbia*  
*S' ejangeh nyeh*  
*Menyameh bah nye n aped moh nzii*  
*A nyin nzii a bel nson nkaleh*  
*Nze boh hude noh nson jii*  
*A kug nlu jan*  
*Abi kag a ndob se dieh we*

Who themselves are here with us.  
 The entire Ewanzoh ancestors,  
 You know what this child is to us?  
 He is the rock on which this family leans.  
 May he bring home an elephant next time  
 If he hits his toe against a rock,  
 May that stone break.  
 If somebody looks at him with bad eyes,  
 Let that person lose his eyesight.  
 Let him be the squirrel harvesting ripe nuts,  
 Throwing them down to the family.  
 We are begging you,  
 The ancestors, to make his path smooth.  
 Let him have light in doing the white man's work.  
 If he loses a job today,  
 Let him get another tomorrow.  
 Kola nut, go down, let's eat you.

The “*Mwessi*” (a small calabash or drinking gourd) is filled with the “head wine” [11] and is given, together with the “*Nzo abi*” [clear lobe], to the man for whom the offering is being made to the ancestors. He receives it facing in the direction in

which the sun rises. [12] He then raises up the “*Mwessi*” and “*Nzo abi*,” saying “*nye he hen*” [“put them here”], and the assembly utters the sound “*sh sh sh*” as a symbol of blessing from both the ancestors and the assembly. Special oil, prepared with the leaves of a particular plant, is mixed with palm oil and rubbed, by the oldest woman of the community, on the chest of the man concerned. This is supposed to bring good luck to the person in question.

The above text is in the form of a prayer. But since incantations and prayers as forms of religious poetry overlap because of their fluid nature, I have decided to consider the text as a form of incantatory poetry. The subject matter is a complaint made to the ancestors about the misfortune that has befallen the victim. The text is in two parts (1 and 2). The incantation opens with an address to the kola nut, even though it is not the main addressee; it is the material means by which communication is made with the ancestors. It is therefore acting symbolically as an intermediary between the people and the ancestors. The victim’s petition is a serious one, and only his ancestors can help him. His progress is thought to have been thwarted by evil spirits; that is why he has come with an appeal to his ancestors. The Bakossi people, like many other African societies, see ancestors as the heroes and heroines of the various tribes. According to T. N. Quarcoopome, the ancestors:

are the unforeseen presidents of family or tribal meetings and perform the duties of guardians and policemen of public morality. They may punish those who disobey the norms of society with diseases, ill-luck, crop failure etc. At the same time they reward those who conform to the moral and social order (Quarcoopome 1987, 43).

From the above observation, it is to be noted that a Bakossi person’s life should be led in accordance with society’s norms, as otherwise he will be in conflict with the ancestors.

In the second part of the incantation, the reciter/performer emphasises the importance of the victim. He is the pillar of the family on whom everybody depends. He is also advised by the reciter to learn to satisfy his living descendants and the ancestors. The importance of the victim as well as his duty to the family is emphasised in the following lines:

May he bring home an elephant next time . . .  
Let him be the squirrel harvesting the ripe nuts,  
Throwing them down to the family (lines 11, 16 and 17).

The image of the “squirrel” and “ripe palm nuts” is very poignant because it takes us deep into Bakossi farmland where squirrels eat and destroy ripe palm nuts. The reciter is calling on the ancestors to bless our victim so that he can provide good things for his family, unlike the squirrel who collects and hoards for himself. To achieve this mission, all obstacles must be cleared and his path made smooth. That is why the reciter in the following lines emphasises that,

If he hits his toe against a stone  
May that stone break.  
If someone looks at him with bad eyes  
May that person lose his eyesight (lines 12–15).

The stone here is a symbol of a mishap or of an obstacle that the victim is likely to encounter. Also, the “*Nzo abi*” of the kola nut symbolises the acceptance of all that has been said by the reciter and agreed on by the ancestors. The victim is therefore blessed with “*Nzo abi*,” “*nle mem*” [head wine] and by rubbing special oil, prepared with special leaves, on his chest. This symbolises power, strength and good luck.

As stated earlier, the persons who will receive the clear lobe of the kola nut and “head wine” are selected on the basis of some hurdles they may be facing in life, or because they may have a strong, but unfulfilled desire to be successful. This was the case with a woman who had difficulty in conceiving children and who was present during the occasion mentioned above. The reciter, who is supposed to be a member of the woman’s family, is expected to know her problems in advance, and, taking advantage of her presence, and, makes a successful intercessional prayer on her behalf, as follows:

1.

*A Nkikoh haen jii*  
*Boh kube ne she alim*  
*M’ njieh anen mwan*  
*Ngan e njieh awi njum*  
*Nze alim a dia boh*  
*Nze bad boh diag boh alim*

In Nkikoh today  
 We are those accused of witchcraft.  
 I fathered this child,  
 As I did the husband, too.  
 If they are bewitched,  
 I stand accused.

2.

*Ji njuweh moh aseh haen*  
*Nze m’ njiah mod nlub*  
*Mod awi ahod mekaa ahid*  
*A mbwog s’ amid*  
*Haen*  
*Menyameh boh wuog moh ngol*  
*Boh paented moh meg*  
*Boh senked moh a ndited ti*  
*Abu nan boh kuwoh*  
*Menyameh o’ huked mo nzii*  
*Nze sango a lume kongeh pod*  
*Se a hung etetum?*  
*A mbwog s’ amid*  
*Haen [13]*

Today, I am vomiting her in front of you.  
 If I invited somebody,  
 Let his hands be off them.  
 Assembly, is this not so?  
 [Audience] Yes.  
 The ancestors should have pity on her.  
 They should wipe her tears.  
 They should urinate on her crops  
 So that they would grow.  
 They should also clear her road.  
 If sango sends one cartridge  
 Let it hit the target.  
 Assembly, is this not so?  
 [Audience] Yes.

Since the recipient is a woman, the giver, who must be a man, picks up and raises aloft one “*nzo abi*” and also the filled drinking gourd with dedicated wine, before saying “*nye he haen*” [“put them here”], and the assembly answers by making a hissing sound “*sh sh sh*,” while the woman raises her hands from the giver’s feet, moving upward to the hands holding the blessed wine and “*nzo abi*.” She takes the wine, drinks some, and hands the rest to her husband. As mentioned above, this text is an intercessional speech. In giving “head wine” or blessings, the performer pleads with the ancestors to bless the recipient, who is a woman without a child. His plea is couched in figurative language, for he does not simply tell the ancestors to bless the woman with a child. He says the ancestors should “urinate on her crops so that they would grow.” The message is veiled because it is conveyed

metaphorically. The performer implores the ancestors to clear any obstacle so that when further efforts are made by the couple, they will be blessed with a child. He uses the image of a "cartridge," which when used by the husband should "hit the target." The word "cartridge" and the expression "hitting the target" are used to describe love-making. This metaphorical language helps to forestall any embarrassment that the phrases "making love" and "being pregnant" might cause, when used on an occasion such as at a ritual event, when people of all ages are present. The performer urges everybody, including himself, who may be causing the couple's problems, to desist from the activity. After this reproach, he ends the performance by inviting the audience to stand up and join him in giving blessings and in wishing good luck to the woman concerned.

### *Ritual Incantations and the Healing of Illnesses in Bakossi*

Bakossi society recognises two types of illnesses. The first type refers to an illness that is due to natural causes. For instance, a man could become ill because of hard work or because he has eaten bad food or drunk bad water. This type of illness attracts little or no attention. It usually does not cause much anxiety, especially if it is not serious. The other type of illness is that which is thought to have been caused by supernatural agencies such as witches and ancestral spirits (*Benyame*). This type of illness is regarded as being serious, and remarks such as "that is not an ordinary illness," "that is not for nothing," or "there must be something in it" are common. A sorcerer or an oracle is consulted with regard to this type of illness, and he directly or indirectly attributes the cause to ancestral spirits or to living persons, such as witches or wizards.

In circumstances in which the illness is believed to have been caused by ancestral spirits, special rites and sacrifices have to be performed. This could be the case, for example, where a person has fallen seriously ill, or has grown rapidly pale, or has collapsed on a sacred spot [14] (where it is unlawful to do so, according to traditional belief) and has thereby "lost his soul." It could also result from the person going around a sacred stone without making sacrifices to the ancestral spirits. In order to counteract this kind of illness, sacrifices have to be made immediately in order to appease the ancestors so that the soul can return to its owner. The procedure is as follows. The sick person is carried to the spot where he had fallen down, and a black ram and a black fowl are also brought there. A black piece of cloth, called "*Ndibel*," is tied to the man's waist. He is made to sit on a special stone and he is washed with water containing special herbs. The ram and fowl are killed and the blood is spilled on the spot. The meat is cooked and the sick person may be given some of the meat to eat. Noticeable signs of recovery are said to be evident a few days after these rites and ceremonies have been performed, and the sick person is expected to regain his health.

Illness might also be caused by means of witchcraft. It is difficult to say exactly how this is thought to be carried out, but the sick person is said to get well almost immediately after the special rites and ceremonies have been performed on his behalf. In Nyan village in Bakossi, a woman was seriously ill. She was thought to have been bewitched by a certain paternal uncle who had not been given his share of her bride price. In order not to embarrass the uncle, the entire paternal family of the woman was accused of causing the illness. This was done by handing them a

special symbol called “*Essieh-ngang*” (the sorcerer’s brush)—which was actually the sick person’s toothbrush, or any stick she had chewed. Each member of the family was required to come and openly declare his discontent, or his innocence, and his willingness to let the sick person regain her health. A date was fixed for “putting spit on the stick;” that is, offering blessings for recovery.

On the appointed day, the families concerned assembled. The sick woman was required to sit out-of-doors, as the ceremony is always carried out in the open air. One of the elders of the woman’s family stood up and greeted the assembly, and then continued:

*Nze bad boh deh haen jii*  
*Neh bad bo diag mwan mmwad*  
*Nen alim*  
*Se ne bim be deh belim*  
*Se ne temeh puu nyam eje*  
*Nze bo kubeh a melam a diag yiel?*  
*Se neh ewu are se ne mwan*  
*Ayiol ngab e?*  
*Mod awe wo bad*  
*A tumeh mod awe woh ngab*  
*Mesah a nkeg ndab*  
*Boh padeh ngob*  
*Se neh beh awe se mwan yiol a mbid*

If you have been asked to assemble here today,  
 It is because one of our daughters  
 Has been bewitched,  
 And we ourselves are the wizards.  
 Shall we become the wild cat  
 That eats itself when caught in a trap?  
 Shall we kill our daughter?  
 Our fathers always said,  
 That a man who always has people  
 Is greater than a man who has wealth.  
 Plums near the house  
 Are never harvested using a fork stick.  
 We should give our daughter her health.

After this, a delegated elder of the woman’s family came forward. [15] He was given special herbs, and “*Mbunge*” (a species of alligator pepper), which he chewed and spat out on the herbs in his hands. He then spoke as he tapped the sick person with special herbs:

*Boh kube m’alin*  
*Ayiol’nkule mme awim mwan*  
*Ekub kub ewueh*  
*Mwan e kub.*  
*Nze m’ndiag awim mwan alin*  
*Njin’emoh butede epune jii*  
*Mod awe hiyeh me moh a jine me mwan*  
*Mwan a tiba a min*  
*A tud esug a kag a hinte jan.*

I have been held responsible  
 For this, my daughter’s illness.  
 But the leg of the mother fowl  
 Never kills the young one.  
 If I am the one responsible for her condition,  
 As from today I have left her;  
 Let whoever was helping me also leave her;  
 Let her stand up immediately after this.  
 Let her take her basket tomorrow and go to the farm.

He then held her right hand and raised it, and at the words “*nyeh heh hean*” [“put blessings here”], the assembly made the sound “*sh-sh-sh.*” This was done three times. She was then expected to walk back to the farm by herself although she might have only been just brought out. A goat was butchered and the heart and blood were reserved for the sick person. She was expected to feel completely well after this ritual, and it appears that soon afterward she actually did.

### Conclusion

In this paper, incantatory poetry has been analysed and it has been demonstrated that incantations dig into the spiritual and magico-mythical depths of human

existence. Metaphysics is visible in the composition, rendition and performance of incantatory poetry. It is one of the ways in which the Bakossis seek solutions to the spiritual, socio-cultural, political and economic problems that confront them. Thus, incantatory poetry is an institution among the Bakossi that has stood the test of time. The words recited during ritual-incantation events reflect the norms, values, aspirations, worldview and fears of the Bakossi community. It is also evident that incantations play an important role in the lives of the Bakossi people because of their firm belief in their efficaciousness, in terms of, for example: fertility, prosperity in life, protection against witchcraft, and the general well-being of the individual and the community as a whole. Incantations can therefore be used as an effective instrument of social control to ensure social conformity with regard to individual upbringing and communal education. This paper has also demonstrated the ways in which the Bakossi people perceive the world or the universe, the ways in which they relate to it, and in which their worldview influences their beliefs about the causes of certain illnesses and misfortunes. It has also been shown that religious poetry, especially ritual incantations, is employed in order to remove illnesses and misfortunes, through appeasing the ancestors and relying on their power to do good and to undo harm. Thus, incantations are an important genre of traditional Bakossi creative thought.

### Notes

- [1] *Ndie* is an institution and a popular cultural and religious event during which the living are believed to commune with the “living dead,” and it also offers an appropriate context for the articulation of oral literature.
- [2] Following the defeat of Germany (former colonial master of Cameroon) during the First World War, Britain and France took over as colonial masters and divided Cameroon into two unequal parts. The Bakossi ethnic group, which was under the British Cameroon, was an administrative appendage of Nigeria. During that time, British administrators who were in charge of the different territories submitted intelligence, assessment, reassessment, annual and biannual reports to the Resident Administrator in the Cameroons, who was answerable to the Chief Colonial Administrator at Enugu in the Eastern region of Nigeria. These reports described the people’s beliefs, origins, culture and socio-political organisation. The British Government needed these reports in order to facilitate their policy of Indirect Rule. See Ejedepang Koge (1986, 87).
- [3] The Kupe Mountain in Tombel-Bakossi is believed to be the greatest sacred meeting place among the Bakossi and neighbouring tribes. The supernatural reputation of this mountain has made it a meeting point where people with supernatural powers from many places are said to attend a spiritual and mystical assembly or market known as “Ekom” permanently in session on the summit of Mount Kupe. This great assembly is believed to include both the living and the dead. However, before their arrival, parcels are said to be tied in bundles representing fortune and misfortune and are placed in a courtyard so that no one can identify their contents. If one of the delegates picks up one of these bundles, he then supernaturally leaves for home. If the contents of the parcel are pleasing, crops, animals and human beings are fertile and there are many births, wealth, easy and profitable trade, business transactions, and so on. On the other hand, if a parcel of misfortune was chosen, this usually spelled disaster, and there were epidemics, rampant deaths, miscarriages, accidents, bad harvests, and so on. According to interviews conducted by the author, and myths that he has collected, modern pandemics like HIV/AIDS and meningitis are believed by the Bakossi to have originated from Mount Kupe.

For more on the mystery of Mount Kupe, see Ejedepang Koge (1986, 178–83), Balz (1984, 325–35), Geschiere (1997; 2001) and Harris (2005).

- [4] A witchdoctor literally means one who has power over witches and wizards. However, in traditional Bakossi, a witchdoctor is a traditional medicine man/woman (traditional healer) with fore-eyes/sight believed to be sent by the ancestors to fight against evil spirits and to treat ailments (using traditional methods of healing such as invocation and divination) caused by witchcraft. In contemporary Bakossi, most of them are considered to have lost their healing prowess because of their materialistic inclinations. This explains why witch doctoring has become a popular business that is lucrative. Most Bakossi villages like Nyan, Nkikoh, Nkack, Muabi, Bangem, Ekangté, Nninong, Mile 20, Mile 18 and many others have been flooded by witchdoctors who now go under the banner of *tradi* practitioners. But nonetheless, there are still some who are true to their vocation (Sone 2000, 29).
- [5] Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, the Zambian prelate, was excommunicated by the Vatican in September 2001 when he installed four married men as bishops in Washington, D.C. The men were affiliated with the breakaway Synod of Old Catholic Churches. Even before his excommunication, Milingo had had a troubled relationship with the Vatican. In early 2001, he was married to a South Korean acupuncturist chosen for him by the Revd Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church in a group wedding ceremony in New York. Upon appeal from the late Pope John Paul II a few months later, he renounced that union. See Fox News USA headline “Vatican Excommunicates Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo,” 26 September 2006. Available from [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com); INTERNET.
- [6] Mwankum is a men’s sacred society, open only to free born indigenous Bakossi. Mwankum is believed to be a supernatural being with extraordinary powers, and is invisible especially to the uninitiated. According to informants, the society came into existence as a result of difficulties in implementing decisions and judgments taken by the council of elders. This led to the development of something mysteriously strong to deal with social non-conformity. The author of this paper is a member of the Mwankum sacred society, which, as in the past, is still very influential in the contemporary Bakossi community. The constraints of Mwankum are such that only limited details of its workings may be revealed to the outside world. For more on Mwankum, see Ejedepang Koge (1986, 236–9).
- [7] The “*sh sh sh*” sound at the end of the text takes a negative tone and symbolises misfortune. It means that nothing good should come Nzobo’s way.
- [8] A somewhat similar version of the same incantation was also collected by Bayo Ogunjimi and Abdul-Rasheed N’Allah among the Yorubas of Nigeria (Ogunjimi and N’Allah 2005, 152).
- [9] This refers to the type of wine extracted from the oil palm and raffia palms, respectively.
- [10] This is the only lobe of the kola nut that faces upward or downward when thrown on the ground. It symbolises the acceptance of all what has been said by the performer and agreed by the ancestors. If there is no acceptance, the language is modified and the process repeated until what is required is obtained.
- [11] This is the top or head wine from each jug of palm wine.
- [12] Bakossi people believe that the direction in which the sun rises in the morning is a symbol of good luck, success and prosperity.
- [13] The text was collected by the author of this paper on 19 April 1999 in his home village of Nkikoh in Bakossi.
- [14] There are sacred spots in Bakossi, on roads and other places, where it is forbidden to fall down. If a person was so unlucky as to fall down on one of these spots, he had to declare it quickly to the elders so that steps could be taken to perform the necessary sacrifices. Otherwise the person continued to grow pale until he died.
- [15] Whether he was guilty or not, he had to do what was required of him.

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