

Eldridge Mohammadou (1934-2004). Vestiges Biographical Sketch Series Sketch 2

Hamadou Adama with Thierno Mouctar Bah and Christian Seignobos

Biography

Eldridge Mohammadou (surname Eldridge, first name Mohammadou) was born on the 15th January 1934 in Garoua to an English father named George William Eldridge (1909-1979), accountant and employee of John Holt & Co of Liverpool, (ancestor of the R. W. King known as "Kampani" in North Cameroon, itself from the Royal Niger Company). His mother, Mairama, was a Peul Yillaga woman from the Bindir branch, related to the Lamido of Mayo Loué. When Eldridge Mohammadou was about four years old, his parents separated and his father took his son with him on his various trips to the French colonies in equatorial Africa.

In 1940, his father George William Eldridge joined Colonel Leclerc's column. At the age of seven, his father enrolled him in a school in Fort Lamy and Eldridge took the opportunity to learn the basics of the variety of Arabic language spoken in the Chad basin. As a British citizen, his father continued in the war and served as a link with the British expeditionary force from Montgomery to Tripoli. He was also a convoy leader. In 1943, George William Eldridge left Fort-Lamy and moved to Fort-Archambault, where he became an accountant for Coton-Franc. Eldridge Mohammadou took advantage of his stay in the southern part of Chad to learn Sango, which was then the *lingua franca* of Ubangi-Chari. In 1944, he and his father went down the Oubangui river by paddle boat to Brazzaville. George William Eldridge later became a logger in Ouesso and floated timber to Brazzaville before setting up his own company (the "Congo Lighting Company") in partnership with a Yugoslav in Congo-Leopoldville. In Brazzaville Eldridge Mohammadou was sent for Catholic education and schooling. The fathers with whom he studied were the first to recognize in him the signs of an extraordinary intellect. He became friends with his mentors, including Father Lassiati, whom he would later meet again in Cameroon.

The Fathers sent him to France as a boarder to do his fourth year at the Collège Stanislas in Cannes, with the Marianists. After Cannes, he was admitted to a secular school, *Lycée Fustel de Coulanges*, in Strasbourg. In 1954, Eldridge Mohammadou obtained a bachelor's degree in literature (Latin, English, Greek). The following year, he enrolled in law school in Bordeaux and met Cameroonians from other regions such as Paul Nkwi. He became passionate about French political life, learned, among other things, how to read *Le Canard Enchaîné* and became familiar with the ideas of the French left.

In 1959, after the promulgation of the 1958 framework law to prepare for the independence of the former French colonies, Eldridge Mohammadou abandoned law and went back to Paris to enrol at the *Institut des Hautes Études d'Outre-Mer* (IHEOM, the former ENFOM which trained colonial administrators). In Paris he met Cameroonian radical students, such as Mongo Béti, Nzié Tam, Ngouo Woungly Massaga. He was a member of FEAN (Federation of Black African Students). With other students from the Maghreb and Vietnam, they were quickly taken in hand by intellectuals from the PCF (French Communist Party) and Third World countries such as Maurice Duverger, Jacques Vergès, Merle, Jean Suret-Canale, Roger Garaudy, René Dumont, Moussa, etc. and were indoctrinated to prepare for the psychological war in Cameroon. He actively participated in the popularization of UPC-ist ideas through the *Revue Camerounaise* alongside Mongo Béti, Abel Eyinga, François Frédéric Kodock, François Sengat Kuo, Michel Doo Kingué, William Eteki Mboumoua, Vroumsia Tchinye.

His political career was brief (1959-1964) with a notable stint as Chief of Staff to John Ngu Foncha (1962-1963), who was then Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. An iconoclast, Eldridge Mohammadou was not very comfortable with social life and the of requirements formal protocol. He resigned from the central administration in 1964 to devote himself exclusively to his passion for collecting the oral traditions of the peoples of Cameroon.

After 1964 he became one of the main leaders of academic research in Cameroon: he served at the Federal Linguistic and Cultural Centre from 1964 to 1972, at the Research Department of the Ministry of Education and Culture from 1972 to 1975, at the National Office for Scientific and Technical Research from 1975 to 1980, then from 1980 to 1991, at the Institute of Human Sciences (ISH), where he flourished, running the Garoua branch covering the whole of North Cameroon.

Move to Maiduguri and recognition

When the Institute of Human Sciences closed in 1991, Eldridge found himself unemployed and he experienced this period as a real trauma. The universities of Yaoundé and Ngaoundéré refused to recruit him on the grounds that he did not hold a doctorate. Eldridge then became an "exile" in Maiduguri, Nigeria, where he was recruited as first as a Visiting Professor before becoming a full professor at the Centre for Transsaharan Studies at Maiduguri University. In 1994, with Lisbet Holtedahl, Martin Zachary Njeuma, Thierno Mouctar Bah and Jean Boutrais he founded the cooperation programme between the University of Ngaoundéré (Cameroon) and the University of Tromsø (Norway) called Ngaoundéré-Anthropos with funding from NORAD and NUFU, two Norwegian government agencies. The programme is intended to promote social science research in the northern part of the country and in

the Chad basin in general. Many Cameroonian and Norwegian doctoral students and teachers have benefited from the support of this programme in the finalization of their research. An international symposium was organized in 1993 in Ngaoundéré on the peoples and cultures of Adamaoua and the first issue of the journal *Ngaoundéré-Anthropos* was published in 1996. Eldridge also succeeded in organizing the Mega-Chad Association conference in 2003 in Maiduguri.

Mohammadou Eldridge died on February 18, 2004 in Maiduguri, Nigeria. His body was repatriated to be buried in the French cemetery in Garoua, his native town in Cameroon.

Scope of his work

Eldridge Mohammadou's research territory covers North Cameroon, which covers the entire geographical area, from the Adamawa Plateau to the shores of Lake Chad. The expansion of its historical perspective will lead Eldridge to go far beyond this initial framework, to include central Cameroon and the Grassfields regions. He gave a prominent place to Fulani societies, organized into lamidates and governed according to theocratic principles. The temporal dimension of his study covers the period from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

Since 1967, as a consultant working for UNESCO to standardize the alphabets of West African languages and in collaboration with the Regional Documentation Centre for Oral Tradition (CRDTO) in Niamey, Eldridge Mohammadou travelled to the most remote regions of Cameroon's northern and central savannas. Three decades of activity enabled him to carry out remarkable work in archiving oral traditions, which have been transcribed phonetically and translated into French.

A great merit of Eldridge Mohammadou's work is that it is the result of a fruitful collaboration between him and his informants, who were holders of ancestral traditions as well as with scholars literate in Arabic. His work has gained in density and precision, thanks to the judicious use of European written sources, particularly German, handwritten sources in Arabic and Ajami texts and the oral traditions of the Cameroonian savannah populations.

Eldridge Mohammadou also made great efforts in translating into French the sources and works of German explorers, which for a long time had been inaccessible to many researchers in Cameroon.

Major themes and theses

His familiarity with oral tradition and taking an anthropological perspective enabled Eldridge Mohammadou to renew the themes of historical research.

Of the themes covered that of origins, migration and the settlement process is, by far, the most abundantly treated. In this respect, it can be said that Eldridge Mohammadou's work is above all a contribution to the study of the mechanisms and configurations of the settlement of North Cameroon.

By establishing a typology of the ethnic configurations of North Cameroon as well as an index of the different groups, Eldridge Mohammadou also looked at their political management. The themes of social and political structure and modes of governance were carefully investigated. Research focusing mainly on Fulani theocracies also sheds light on the interaction between sacredness and power in Mbum, Vute and Tikar societies.

Eldridge Mohammadou was also aware that the period inaugurated by the jihad of Ousman dan Fodio in the 19th century largely overshadowed previous periods. He therefore strove to exhume an almost erased past and to reconstruct an important piece of history before the jihad. In this quest, two entities emerged in Eldridge Mohammadou's work and constitute a factor in the renewal of the historiography of northern and central Cameroon: the Kororafa and the Bâare-Tchamba.

He also made a considerable effort to establish date series and test periodizations, thus demonstrating his concern to be anchored in a secure chronology. In the absence of dates, Eldridge Mohammadou established a chronological framework in line with the internal dynamics of the Fulani society of North Cameroon, which also took into account external factors that have influenced the historical process. He also tried to establish a chronology of the Mbum from oral sources, from the dynastic lists of the Belaka'a (rulers) and especially from the landmarks of particular customary phenomena. The need for a periodization of Cameroon's ancient history thus found a starting point in the work of Eldridge Mohammadou, who had the merit of identifying internal benchmarks to anchor a relatively reliable dating.

Selected publications

Books

L'Histoire de Tibati : chefferie foubé du Cameroun, Éditions Abbia et Éditions Cle, Yaoundé, 1965

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- Peuples et Etats du Fombina et de l'Adamaoua : traduction d'études par K. Strümpell et von Briesen*, 1983, Yaoundé, ISH

Articles

- « Pour servir à l'histoire du Cameroun : la chronique de Bouba Njidda Rey », *Abbia*, 1963, 4.
- « Histoire des [Lamidats](#) peul de Chamba et Tibati », *Abbia*, 1964, 6.
- « Un manuscrit peul sur l'histoire de Garoua », par Mal Hammadou Bassoro, *Abbia*, 1965, 8.
- « Compte-rendu : *Histoire du Cameroun* par Engelbert Mveng, Paris, Présence africaine, 1963 », *Abbia*, 1965, 8.
- « Pour une histoire du Cameroun central : les traditions historiques des Vouté ou "Sapouté" », *Abbia*, 1967, 16.
- « Yeerwa, une épopée des Peul Yillaga de l'Adamawa », *Camelang*, 1, 1969.
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Notes and references

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- [Claude-Hélène Perrot](#) et Thierno Bah, « Eldridge Mohammadou », in *Cahiers d'études africaines*, n° 176, 2004, p. 741-744 (nécrologie), [[lire en ligne](#) [archive]]
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