

# Love and learning in Mankon tongue Bamenda, West CAMEROON

By Njob Clement F. L. C. C. Y.

## Introduction

Bamenda is one of the largest divisions of West Cameroon in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Formerly, it was a single division with sixteen tribes. Now it has Nkambe, Wum, Banson, Bikom and Gwofon as its sub-divisions but it continues to be the administrative head-quarters of these sub-divisions.

Bamenda is 6° North of the Equator and situated on the edge of the escarpment of the more Southern range, with varying temperatures. Its dominant feature is the high grassy plateau which extends from the North-East over the centre of the Province at an average height of 5,000 feet above sea-level.

Among the few towns around Bamenda, which is the administrative head quarters of all the sub-divisions, is Mankon. Mankon is the largest town of the Ngemba tribe with a population of approximately twenty thousand and ruled by a Fon. This town stretches from the escarpment of the Bamenda station, Southwards and South-Westwards to share its boundaries with Bali, Monemo (Metta) respectively, North-West and North-East with Bafut and Bafreng respectively.

The Mankon people are said to have originated from the Widikum stock, but it does not seem real. Bits of the traces of their culture can be traced in the Nsungli, Bamukumbit and Bamok customs. Nsungli is in Nkambe division of the North Cameroon. Bamukumbit in the Ndop plain along the former French Cameroon and Bamombu is further south but along the same line. These people have some similar traditions in common with the Mankon

people especially in language. This retraces the way followed by the Mankons to Widikum, which is a proof that they came from the North and immigrated Southwards to Widikum where they could not remain. There they were faced with many difficulties such as : forest-climate instead of savana, occupation differences, domestic animals, form of religious worship; marriage and burial ceremonies were all strange to them. These differences forced them to move Northwards again, settling in many places before arriving at their present site. They therefore, originated from the same place with the rest of the Tikari tribes. This follows same with the rest of the Ngemba villages. At their present place, they fought battles with the Germans and the neighbouring villages but resisted the attacks from both and hence continued to maintain their position.

The town is in the plain as one would look at it from Bamenda station hill, many miles West-wards, Southwards, Northwards and North-Eastwards respectively. Manda-Nkwe and the Bamenda station fall to the East of this town. The land is well watered with mild climate and it is fertile for farming. Its valleys are green with shrubs, raffia palm bushes, the hills covered with grasses and patches of cultivated farms are dotted here and there on the hills and in the valleys. The valleys along the course of the rivers provide good farm lands and those who stay in the Urban Area, where there is scarcity of farm land stream daily along these river-valleys to farm. Within the developed areas of the town the economic plants provide shades.

Apart from the fact of the nearness of Mankon to Bamenda station as a few other towns are, it singles itself out in the way it embraces other inhabitants from all parts of the country. The development of the town from 1954 up to the moment has brought a marvellous change. As I think, the people are generous, social and co-operative and hence have drawn many people from the other towns to settle side by side with them. A good number of the people are traders and some of them work in the Government Offices and private firms. The local inhabitants are mostly farmers and engage themselves in various farming activities, tapping of raffia palm wine, growing of coffee and a lot of other local food crops.

The town embraces the following Prominent Educational Institutions, two Secondary Colleges: Sacred Heart Boy's College; Our Lady of Lourdes (Girls) College; one Women Teachers' Training College; and two Commercial Colleges-Longlas and City Com-

mercial Colleges. The two Secondary Colleges are run by the Catholic Mission Authorities while the Women Teachers' Training College is the responsibility of Basel Mission Authorities. The Commercial Colleges are private undertakings but have been recognised by Government. Apart from the above higher institutions of learning, there are a fairly good number of Primary Schools in Mankon town and five of these are class VII Schools. Three are managed by the Basel Mission and two by the Catholic Mission.

Frankly speaking, this work is the effort of an infant as far as the literary world is concerned. Not ignoring the fact that mistakes are possible, I would very much appreciate constructive criticism and advice from any quarters, especially from those who are well versed in the Mankon tongue, seeing that such writings will continue. I have tried to put down the proverbs first in Mankon dialect which as you are aware of, is a language not yet developed or written; and secondly I have dared to give their near equivalents as much as possible in English.

I have tried to imitate the Catholic Mission form of transcription especially in what concerns the proverbs which are written in Mankon dialect.

In preparing this piece of literature, I have counted so much on the help of Mr. Simon A. Achu of the Federal University of Cameroon —Yaounde, to whom I am very grateful.



FON OF MANKON

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## PROVERBS IN MANKON

1. Sing-tsoh ka akvulyea nkan.
2. Atua' amüige ntu'a' anghon ka ülmok ntu-ayi anghon.
3. Büghü aseh bü tseüü bey
4. Bü banghe abey atinghan ka bü mбай akvugha.
5. Abo amoa ka akorayia niboah.
6. Mbiyi ka ndjenya ndjuma.
7. Mbang nilun ani mua.
8. Nkah ntsum anüi mutsegh mümok.
9. Nuideg üise angab asobaheyi.
10. Adiakiyi atüi tzoa anüi alum.
11. Nyam nifom üisey ashey akvo ndo adangadngä.
12. Ashitakey azonga tseha adjuma.
13. Ka bü zwüi-bümbö kognä aylea.
14. Nghon akwara uitega nghon tse nüi üzhey.
15. Mbeh wo tua nda nüi ghon iliyä wo koha zhigha atsan-za nü mbenü zhigha
16. Ko nda nüi nkon wosa lonta.
17. Ntsaha ümia akeb anyi azwita.
18. Bü ma bü-ngob ba zhinüi tseghie üiboh mbah abeyi aghongakoh.
19. Abiyi-akogho amogho atsi tseng nüibeghüi nakogho nüi tsuma.
20. Aboh aseh atsoh adanga-adanga akoghe.
21. Bü tam-mta abeyi asan-müsonga, ka by tam-mta ayla akoma atua.
22. Afvenüi akang akvura atua angöba.
23. Mulo üsheyi abonga beyi mbü-akeyi bu soagha aleghe.
24. Üikom asahaghak üibüighe la ndingha ntsoh nyoma.
25. Kowo andingha aghan tsowo müikom iliyä üibanghe ndengnü.
26. Ankegha atomadang aseh atomadang atongha ghe.
27. Azheng aghiyen atsum anüi üimegmü kwifo.
28. Ndžong dzum aseghie amüighe asinghe.
29. Nta üibiru la nigheragherü byä ndogh ndom nji yighe

## EXPLANATION IN ENGLISH

1. "A talkative bird builds no nest." "This is referred to a person who boasts, criticises other peoples' efforts and yet can do nothing himself." In English—"Empty vessels make the loudest sound."

2. "It is the dew that pays a person and never the fire." In Mankon the palm wine tappers and the fishermen leave their houses early in the morning to tap their palm wine, to search their traps and hooks for animals and fish respectively. The paths that they follow are grassy and covered with dew. Their clothes are soaked with the dew, but they will return home with palm wine, animals caught in their traps and fish from their hooks as their reward. The lazy person who sits by the fire-side the whole morning, gets nothing. In other words you can achieve something only by your efforts and not idleness. In English—"Heaven helps those who help themselves".

3. "The makers are not the eaters." In Mankon the youths always take an active part in every activity while the nobles sit down to supervise. At the end of the work the nobles always get the best and the largest share of the entertainment. The youths who worked hard would not get enough as to compensate them for what they really laboured for, but the nobles who did not labour would have the lion's share. English—"Don't rob Peter to pay Paul".

4. "It is the strong person who is hated and never the weakling." The strong person is hard working and achieves much for himself. His wealth makes dishonest people hate and envy him. But a lazy person or a weakling has nothing for which he can be hated or make other people jealous. English—"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

5. "One hand cannot tie a bundle." This proverb is the source of all social and communal work in Mankon. The people believe very much in team activity, e.g. building of houses, clearing of farm-lands and so on. Team work as matter of fact, is strongly encouraged among people of all social groups, hence the above proverbs. English—"Unity is strength."

6. "The front does not see the back." The Mankon people believe that when a person dies, he only sees the front and not

what happens behind him. After a man has made his "will" he always warns the person concerned to remember all that he has told him because the front does not see the back, that is he will not come back after his death to remind him of any point forgotten. English—"To be forewarned is to be fore armed".

7. "An old-aged walking stick is a child." Old people always have their children near them. They always ask them to bring their pipes and fire, to call someone for them, kindle the fire for them and so on. An old person who has no child takes up his walking stick, supports himself with it, and does the above things himself. The child takes the place of a walking stick to a person who has children, hence the saying in Mankon as above. English—"The child is the Pride of old age."

8. "All wood is the food of the fire." This is a common saying often used to console persons who have lost by death their close relations. No matter the selection of fire-wood, the worst and the best wood will be burnt or consumed by the fire in the same way. In reference to death, the Mankon people say all peoples are the food of death—that is, whether you are a bad person, a good person, a noble man, a child, a strong or weak person, everybody will die, hence every piece of wood is the food of fire. English—"It is an ill wind that blows nobody good, or more precisely death does not discriminate."

9. "The eye alone cannot pierce a deer." In the grassland the deer is very common and most hunters hunt it for its nice flesh and skin. Sometimes the hunters see it very far away and then they will exclaim—"There it is, but the eye alone without the gun cannot kill it because of the distance." This is also applied to everyday activities, in that, if one admires something, he should try to achieve it because the eye alone cannot convert what he sees to his. In other words one's ambitions can be achieved by active efforts only.

10. "A place of water that does not make noise is deep." This is associated with accidents of frequent drowning in stagnant deep pools. It is also referred to persons who appear to be very quiet, who are not fond of going to gatherings or discussing much, but may be very wise or very quick tempered or even dangerous. English—"Slow water runs deep".

11. "Fattish meat cannot fall on the ground and be picked up again without grains of sand sticking to it." The fat on the meat acts as a sort of gum and thus will easily pick up grains of sand from

the ground. In Mankon, the rich people with their riches are classified as fattish meat. Their fall on the ground is the mistake they may make. This mistake requires some compensation to those present on the spot. He is regarded the meat, his error, the fat, and the compensation the grains of sand.

12. "Had I known comes always behind." In Mankon the young men are always advised to belong to at least one social group in the town, because that will help them to get the assistance of the society when they are in difficulty, for example, during the time of their marriage and building houses. They will not regret by saying that had they known they should have sought the co-operation of others. **English**—"A stitch in time saves nine" because this will avoid regrets.

13. "The five fingers are not all the same." That is, all men are not the same in all respects. They are equal by creation as the fingers are, although not of the same height, are each important and play their parts effectively in their own fields of work. That is, every one should do his business according to his means and ability or every one should work at his own pace.

14. "A man can only listen and take advice from another person if he himself has some quality of advice in himself." The Mankon people believe that only those who have some good reasoning can take advice from another person and that it is useless advising a person who cannot reason for himself. **English**—"Gold should be sold to those who know its value."

15. "If you do not sleep in the house with a patient, you cannot know how severe the illness is." Most patients become very ill at night and many deaths occur at night. In Mankon when some one is ill, all his relations sorrowfully gather round him at night to watch at his condition. If it is mild, they will disperse in the morning, if not, they will continue to stay. Those who visit the patient in the morning, always ask those who stayed the night there about the patient's condition and whatever remarks made by those who slept there, it is always relied on and always accepted by the morning visitors.

16. "Do not beg a house to sleep with a long bed." The Mankon traditional form of houses is either twelve feet square or all the members of the family. In the former days, such a house might hold with beds and the forth wall of the house with all the possible house hold utensils; pots, calabashes, baskets, grinding stone,

naxtan and so on. When they are guests, that part of the house can be used to spread a mat made from raffia palm pith (kwara-kwara) for the visitor to lie on or one other member of the family, so as to allow free his bed for the stranger. But when a visitor should bring a long bed, it meant that they were going to be compelled to provide him with such a space to accommodate his bed, which was no longer their will but that of the visitor." **English**—"A beggar has no choice."

17. "A bowl of soup can get finished merely by tasting the soup time and again." It is a common practice in Mankon that when a delicious dish is being prepared, the nobles who are present are given a special first dish which is styled "tasting the salt." After these special shares of the nobles, the food can now be shared in common, with the nobles second and largest shares given first, and then the others.

18. "All good hens feed their young ones near the edge of the raffia palm bush." The palm bush has thick leaves which can provide good shade. At the approach of the hawk or the kite, the hen and its chickens can run into such a bush for safety. The adequate palm shade will hide them from their enemies.

19. "A single rotten cocoyam can spoil a whole pit of cocoyams. In Mankon the women harvest their cocoyams and store them in pits in their farms and from time to time only take the quantity they require for food or for sale. Each time they open the pit, they always examine it carefully and remove any rotten cocoyams so that they do not cause the rest to rot. If some person's behaviour in a society was not good, he was always called a "rotten cocoyam" by the others and he might be dismissed from the group for his conduct might be detrimental to others. **English**—"A rotten cocoyam spoils the rest."

20. "No hand goes to the mouth for nothing." It is strongly believed in Mankon that the hand has two reasons why it goes to the mouth, that is :

- a. When it takes food to the mouth, and secondly when it goes :
- b. To beat the lips in case of an alarm; hence when the hand is going to the mouth without food, the obvious alternative is that it is going to raise an alarm.

They say the normal reason why the hand goes to the mouth is when eating, but that when it is going to the mouth without food, it is going to raise an alarm or exclaim. When it beats the lips

for an alarm, people leave their work, their houses, etc. and rush in haste to see what is happening.

21. "The teeth shaper can easily be deceived but not the barber or hair dresser." The hair grows very often and it thus needs frequent care and dressing, so that if the hair dresser is deceived the first time, he will refuse to attend to the hair the second time. But the teeth shaper or designer does it only once for every one during his life time, and so he could be deceived because no one goes to him a second time. The teeth designer receives from every one that comes to him for help a bundle of fire wood. Many agree to bring the fire wood, but after he has designed their teeth, they no longer keep their promise since they will no more go to him a second time.

22. "Aged-group imitation eats the gizzard of a fowl." The gizzard of a chicken in Mankon is mostly eaten by the nobles and elderly people. If young people wish to rank themselves with the elder persons either in age or rank because of one reason or another, they are always warned by the usage of the above proverb. **English**—"Imitation is suicide."

23. "Palm wine is not always good because the calabash that holds it is always washed." The wine tappers have two sets of calabashes. One set of calabash is that which collects directly the dripping wine from the raffia palm in the bush. The other is the one the tapper brings in the morning to collect the wine in it home. The tappers often wash these calabashes which hold the wine over night in the bush, to avoid the old wine causing the new wine becoming fermented or sour. But bad tappers despite the frequent washing of their calabashes still produce bad wine because of their bad techniques of tapping. This also applies to persons, for it's common to hear a father tell his son that a child becomes brilliant not only because of too much repetition or washing. It is always said as the summing up after he has failed in all his attempts to get such a child improved.

24. "A dancing group from a distant place always observes the sun." Telling of time in Mankon by the average native is by observing the position of the sun. It is also customary that dancers are sometimes invited from other villages to attend special celebrations. Such distant dancers always observe the position of the sun in the sky in order to go back to their homes in time. **English**—"Make hay while the sun shines."

25. "Do not look at me as a juju looking at red bamboos." The

juju (the mask dancer) does not see clearly through the mask, and he takes a long time to observe coloured things. Any scornful look at someone according to the Mankon tradition, is described as such.

26. "A cock from another country does not crow in another country." It is the habit of chickens that a strange chicken in a place is always attacked by the home chickens. Strange cocks especially are often disturbed by those of the area from crowing whereas in their own homes they crow at will. This is also associated with the behaviour of men. That is, one's dignity and liberty is mostly felt in his own home.

27. "Every blade of grass is kwifo's ears and eyes." Kwifo's is the ruling authority in Mankon and it is composed of nearly all the nobles and quarter-heads who may not be of the Royal Family. As the members of a ruling body, these nobles and quarter-heads listen attentively but secretly to the complaints of their subjects such as the points on which they grumble, the crimes committed at night and so on. When they assemble again the following day in the palace, they take immediate resolutions on what should be done. Information is always by open announcement in the market-place. The people are often surprised at how information gets to Kwifo about crimes committed overnight. But Kwifo warns them always by telling them that every blade of grass is his ears and his eyes. That is, his informants are as many as the blades of grass in the bush, or in other words every citizen is his informant. **English**—"There is nothing hidden under the sun."

28. "A person who follows behind the others in a foot path does not carry dew on his body." Mankon is in the grassland and the foot paths are covered with grass. At night these grassy roads are covered with dew and the first person to pass through in the morning is usually well soaked by the dew from the grass on these narrow paths. Those who come later on or after the first people, are always free from the dew. **English**—"He laughs best who laughs last."

29. "At the sound of the burning bush, the praying-mantis begins to look for his way." In the dry season, the grass is usually burnt, but most of the fast running animals and insects take the risk of running of flying out of the bush only at the last minute. The praying-mantis, as a slow insect always goes out at once and by that it always saves its life for it never becomes too late for it to regret as the other animals. **English**—"Pride comes before destruction."

## Telling the time

The time of the day is determined by the position of the sun in the sky. Time is not strictly observed and the people treat it very casually. This being the case with time observance, punctuality suffers the same fate. It does not matter much to the individual native, if four o'clock in the evening is taken to do an activity which was intended to be done at two o'clock in the afternoon. The hours of the day are as follows taken approximately following the position of the sun in the sky as mentioned already above.

1. "Abvurui or Mbahmbah or Amúshig" 1. This is the period between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. The time is described as at the cloudy morning or the sun at the horizon.
2. "Asah-nyom" 2. From 6.30 a.m. to about 9 a.m. is called the sunrise.
3. "Atseti-nyom or Akoh-nyom" 3. Between the hours 9 a.m. to about 11 a.m. is described as the time the sun is a bit hot or high up in the sky.
4. "Atenni-nyom" 4. At 12.00 noon—the time is at the hardness of the sun's heat.
5. "Uidzen-nyom" 5. Between 12 noon and 3 p.m. is known as at the bending of the sun. (to the west).
6. "Abanga-nyom" 6. This is the period from 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. It is the time called—the red of the sun. At this time the sun is far down in the west and the rays are weak and they appear to be red.
7. "Akwefon or Ntso-nyom" 7. This time of the day is told both from the people's activity and the setting of the sun. The period of coming home (from

8. "Akwongha ngob andah" 8. "At the entering of chickens into the house". This is from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. Until recently, chickens sleep in the same house with the people and come in always at this time hence the name as above.

The night is divided up into periods and described according to the activities corresponding with them. For example "cooking and story telling" periods, "early and late sleeping hours", and from midnight down to 6 a.m. are equally described according to occurrences of events of the night as you will see below:

- |                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| a) "Akoh-azwiraaton" or "Amo-ambi" (7 p.m. to 10 p.m.)      | a) This period extends from 7 p.m. to about 10 p.m. The time is told thus: At the cooking, story telling or resting time.                                                                          |
| b) "Akoh akon or ntsambi fúlieche" (10 p.m. to 12 midnight) | b) At the climbing on the bed or at the first sleep. Those who went to bed early are asleep while those who were still up are getting down to sleep.                                               |
| c) "Atongha ntsambi Akegha" (1 a.m. to 2.30 a.m.)           | c) At the "First cock-crow" This is associated with the crowing of cocks getting to the next day.                                                                                                  |
| d) "Atongha úizongtú ba Akegha" (About 2.30 a.m. to 4 a.m.) | d) The time is the "crowing of the second cocks".                                                                                                                                                  |
| e) "Akowogha Kwifo" (4 a.m. to 6 a.m.)                      | e) This time is known as the "entering or going out of kwifo" Kwifo is a fearful juju, and travels out and back to his quarters about the periods of 4 to 5.30 a.m. to avoid meeting with ordinary |

people in the street. It is believed that by this hour very few people are already travelling on the roads and kwifo can travel without meeting anybody.

#### NUMERALS AND COUNTING IN MANKON FROM ONE TO TEN

The idea of imaginative estimation is vague and since many of the people cannot read or write historical dates, the dates of births and other events cannot be easily remembered or even estimated. It is even difficult for them to know their own individual ages themselves. Most events are associated with the seasons during which they occurred, but this can be remembered only for a few years after. When the period has elapsed for a fairly long time, say after such twenty seasons, from memory, it could be counted as fifteen or twenty-five such seasons.

Today, the situation is improving as educated parents now record the births of their families. The Missionaries also help in some cases to keep birth records for some families

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. Mogho    | 6. Ntoghho   |
| 2. Ba       | 7. Sam-mba   |
| 3. Tara     | 8. Nūi-nfēhn |
| 4. Kwa      | 9. Nuibvughe |
| 5. Tehn ... | 10. Nuighom  |

#### THE WEEK DAYS IN MANKON

The Mankon people observe eight days in the week instead of seven as common with most European countries. Among these eight days, two are market-days and one a traditional Religious Day. The Religious Day and one of the market-days are strictly reserved for social gatherings.

- |            |                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Nsamna  | 1. Market day and 1st day of the week. No heavy work.                                                                                             |
| 2. Mbigna  | 2. Second day of the week.                                                                                                                        |
| 3. Zunkana | 3. Religious day, no work at all. It is third day of the week. Family-Heads and most nobles attend the Fon's palace for various society meetings. |

- |             |                                                                                                                    |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4. Mammulan | 4. The 4th day of the week. Free activity.                                                                         |
| 5. Zujong   | 5. 5th day of the week and Bafut market-day.                                                                       |
| 6. Zacob    | 6. The 6th day of the week. General Communal work day throughout the whole of Mankon. No private work on this day. |
| 7. Mbigndom | 7. The 7th day of the week and Meta market-day.                                                                    |
| 8. Zunkon   | 8. 8th day of the week and a sub-market day. People may work on this day.                                          |



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