

LELA IN BALI

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Lela in Bali

History through Ceremony in Cameroon

Richard Fardon

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RICHARD FARDON



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Preface

A cutting of Chamba ethnography surprised me by taking root and growing into this book. It had started on its lengthy pre-publication career as a draft chapter in a monograph on Chamba religion. That book, I decided finally, worked best as a comparison between two Chamba communities (with some broadening when dealing with the impact of world religions); however, earlier drafts had contained comparative chapters, including discussion of resemblances between ceremonies in the Bali kingdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields (North West Province of Cameroon) – of which Bali Nyonga is one – and the Chamba communities hundreds of miles to the north, straddling the Cameroon–Nigeria border, from which the Bali royal families nowadays claim descent. One ceremony in particular caught my attention: Lela, a hugely popular street performance taking place once or twice annually in the Grassfields, takes its name from bamboo flutes that Chamba living around the Cameroon–Nigeria border would call *lera*. The flutes are not the only elements of this ceremonial complex with clear Chamba precedents; however Lela also contains much that lacks Chamba parallels. Where had it all come from?

It is fortunate that my earlier attempts to confront this problem did not find their way into print: my analysis relied upon a rather static comparison between Bali and Chamba ceremonials with an underdeveloped account of the historical relation between them. Only as my appreciation of the available historical sources improved, especially those authored by Basel missionaries, was I able to work towards what I think is a more satisfactory and nuanced account that pivots about the particularly detailed testimony we have on the circumstances of Lela for the year 1908. Reassembling the photographic and textual record from that period proved an intriguing challenge, with all the thrills and spills to which investigation is prone. The story of who witnessed Lela, and how and why they did so, itself transpired to be part of the history of the ceremony's change. European presence at Lela has now been routine for well over a century and, albeit more so at some times than at others, has been an important consideration in the modified reproduction of the ceremony. In consequence, there is a good deal of direct testimony about Lela from the last decade of the nineteenth century onwards. Before this, at least a further century of Lela's history – from the late eighteenth century – can be reconstructed more or less conjecturally on the basis of comparisons between communities. My analysis tries to demonstrate the stages by which a ceremony similar to Lela first developed among Chamba before their diaspora and then changed as the future founders of the Bali kingdoms accumulated people and practices on their migration southwards. Bali Nyonga especially – as the most ethnically diverse of Bali kingdoms – continued

strategically to incorporate people, artefacts and performances (and sanctioned exegeses of all three) as state policy. The characteristic inventiveness of material ornamentation and display – that makes the Grassfields home to one of Africa’s great sculptural traditions in wood – typifies Grassfield performative culture generally and the Bali parvenus’ take on Grassfield mores particularly.

Contrasting Grassfield aesthetic preferences with those at the eastern end of the Middle Belt (from where Chamba and their early allies set off) throws into relief the baroque style of the former by comparison with the latter’s comparative austerity. Eastern middle-belt stylistic preferences pare material objects to simple forms, fusing their parts, and making references outside the objects themselves difficult to detect and impossible to stabilise. Masks and statues alike are deceptively simple forms freighted with ambiguities in their handling of such constitutive categories as male/female, living/dead, domesticated/wild, and their correlates: for instance, human head/hair/skull/scarification and animal head/horns/skull/colouring (Fardon & Stelzig 2005; Fardon 2006: in press). Most middle-belt statues and masks are esoteric objects, seen under conditions of secrecy, or by some people and not others, or seen obliquely and momentarily. Consistent with their role in cultic societies, these elements of material culture were meant to produce an evocative surplus, an intimation of undisclosed meanings and occulted powers, rather than referential closure. In comparison to these, Grassfield forms strike one as more straightforwardly referential: the symbolism they employ is elaborate but it is overtly and publicly figurative. If an ancestral figure holds a decapitated head or a horn filled with palm wine, or if masks evoke the aggression of wild carnivores or the brute cunning force of the buffalo, if a throne is decorated with leopards, spiders or chameleons, it is because these are specific and lisible symbols about capacities to those who see them (Knöpfli 1999). The public material culture of the Grassfields is predominantly about the display of power. Even the exceptions prove the rule: masks of the regulatory societies sent out to chastise malefactors – masks that one should not or would not wish to see – lose this ready lisibility. The Lela ceremony – aside from its inception rite – is public, participatory and accumulative.

Thus a series of reflections prompted by a Chamba ethnographic offcut has led me into a comparative analysis encompassing a substantial part of the eastern Middle Belt and Cameroon Grassfields. My initial intention was ethnographic, and my argument still relies heavily on the material evidence about history that has been reproduced – though not entirely unchangingly – over the years into present performances; however, as presentation of my provisional analysis brought me into contact with specialists in regional art history, museum collections, photographic archives and so on, I became increasingly drawn to the variety of evidence derived from encounters (more or less ethnographic in purpose) previous to my own. In interpreting these sources I draw upon my familiarity with at least part of the region as an ethnographer, but this book cannot lay claim to being ethnography – in the sense of a written account of eye-witnessing and participation. An extensive list of acknowledgements gives the reader some idea what kind of research it is based upon.

Acknowledgements

Local research in Nigeria and Cameroon, amounting to about three years, was carried out from 1976 to 1978, and in 1984, 1985 to 1986, 1987 and 1990. Within this, my experience of Cameroon's North West Province amounted to less than three months at the end of 1984 that was supplemented by three weeks during the 2004 Christmas vacation. My earliest, and longest, period of research in Nigeria was supported financially by the Social Science Research Council and the Central Research Fund of the University of London; the second, and second longest, period in Cameroon by the former's later incarnation, the Economic and Social Science Research Council. Later and briefer African researches were made possible by the Hayter Parry and Staff Travel Funds of the University of St Andrews, the Carnegie Foundation for the Universities of Scotland, and the British Academy. I am grateful to all these bodies and to the many individuals and institutions – acknowledged previously – who variously made things feasible and bearable, enjoyable and memorable, or both.

An unrecognisable formulation of this analysis of Lela was presented in the early years of Dick Werbner's Satterthwaite Colloquium on Religion and Ritual and again at the LSE departmental seminar. A revised version was given to the African History Seminar at SOAS as long ago as 1991, after which I decided, helpful advice notwithstanding, to consign it to a drawer indefinitely. In 1993 the situation changed when Christraud Geary and I planned to author an account jointly. Work schedules did not allow this, but my references to her work make clear how far my approach has been inspired by Christraud's use of early photographic sources (particularly in her Bamum reconstructions, Geary 1988b, 1990c, 1995). In 1998 I was able to combine an invitation (and generous hospitality) from Carola Lentz and Karl-Heinz Kohl to deliver a seminar paper in Frankfurt with brief research in the Frobenius-Institut; my interest was predominantly in masquerades, but I also saw Frobenius's photographs from Koncha, one of which is included here. In 1999 a British Academy grant allowed me to undertake research for a week in the Basel Mission Archive; Paul Jenkins was both inspirational guide through the sources and considerate host; I had the good fortune to meet Hans Knöpfli and benefit from his years of experience of Bali Nyonga; Michael Chollet, doing his national service in the Basel Archive at the time, made most of the arrangements for me to copy texts and photographs. In late summer 2000, again predominantly in search of masks, I enjoyed a triangular tour of German museums in Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig. At the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Hans-Joachim Koloss guided me through the Grassfields

collection and his own knowledge of Oku and Bali Nyonga; Marie Gaida facilitated my access to the archives. I would describe Christine Stelzig's intellectual generosity to me as extraordinary had I not learned better what she considers normal. Many of the photographs reproduced here are from the Berlin collection. Another research trip took me to the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, where I benefited both from Hermann Forkl's custodianship of the Africa collection and photographs, and from his wide knowledge as a scholar of northern Cameroon and Nigeria. The materials from Basel, Berlin and Stuttgart formed the basis of a seminar delivered at the University of St Andrews in late 2000. The invitation to teach a two-day seminar at the University of Basel in association with the Basel Mission Archive during May 2001 was invaluable since it gave me the chance to rehearse a version of the account offered here before a well-informed audience (I must particularly thank Paul Jenkins and Hans Knöpfli, again, as well as Barbara Müller for her organisational skills, Ulrike Sill for an uncanny facility with handwritten sources shared selflessly, and Hans-Peter Straumann, Andres Wanner, and Ernst Elsenhans – among too many participants to thank individually – for their illustrative materials, some of which appeared in Fardon 2005). Paul Jenkins's retirement in 2004 was the occasion of an inspiring gathering in Basel, papers from which were published later that year as *Getting Pictures Right: Context and Interpretation* under the editorship of Michael Albrecht, Veit Arlt, Barbara Müller and Jürg Schneider (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag). A revised version of my contribution to that volume (Fardon 2004), which benefited particularly from comments by Veit Arlt, Elizabeth Edwards and Adam Jones, appears with permission as Chapter 2 of the present work. Paul's successor, Guy Thomas, has splendidly upheld the Basel tradition of intellectual generosity. Andreas Merz's 1997 Lizentiatsarbeit at the University of Basel, from which I have profited greatly, deserves particular mention and wider circulation.

As someone marginal to the charmed circle of Grassfield specialists, it has been a comfort never to have embarked on Bali materials without E.M. (Sally) Chilver's advice; this account is no exception. Jean-Pierre Warnier, Mike Rowlands and Nic Argenti have all been good enough to answer queries. Shirley Ardener's encouragement and Ian Fowler's detailed comments as a Grassfield specialist have added to the pleasure of publishing this account in Marion Berghahn's 'Cameroon Studies' series, itself a brave initiative for a publisher faced by the realities of the smallness of such niches in the book market.

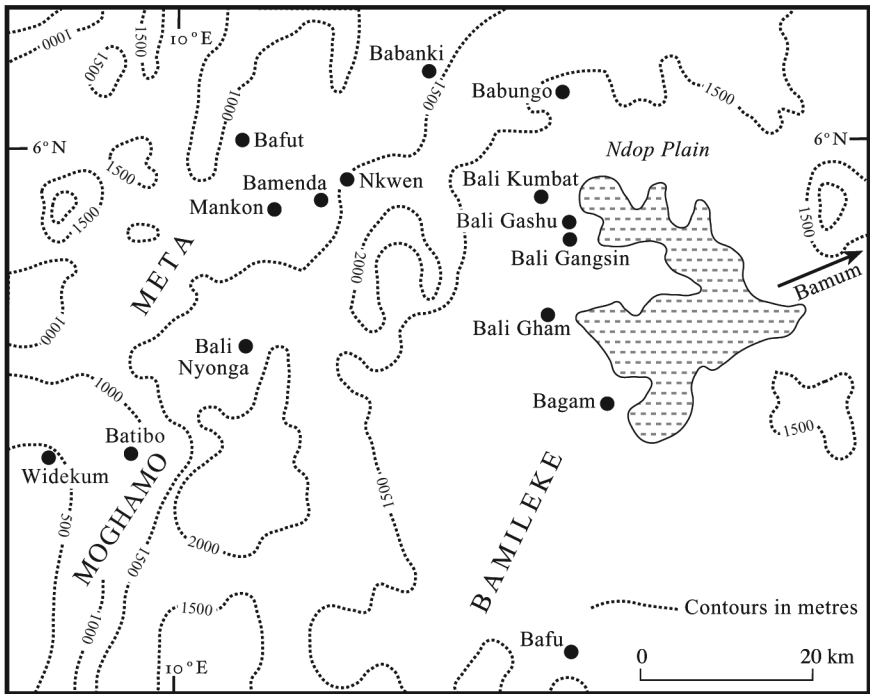
My debts to the School of Oriental and African Studies are numerous. Glenn Ratcliffe, SOAS's photographer, has helped cheerfully with photographs that arrived at a dribble in different formats over a period of years. SOAS research committee supported some of my research trips to Germany and Switzerland, and also made grants towards illustrative materials. My departmental colleagues rallied round when the Leverhulme Trust awarded me a Research Fellowship of nine months during the 2000–2001 academic year. Without both these estimable bodies I would probably never have brought this overlengthy saga to a conclusion. I thank my son Tom for his company during the brief visit we made to Bali Nyonga in the 2004 Christmas vacation with the almost-completed manuscript and

illustrations. Our trip was facilitated and made memorable by – among numerous others – His Majesty Dr Ganyonga III and his palace officials, Professor Emmanuel Chia, Dr Mathew and Mrs Helen Gwanfogbe, Drs Elias Nwana, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Ben Page, Mayor Christopher Nyansenkwen, and retired Sergeant Gaso Fonyonga.

Richard Fardon
London, November 2005

For Sally

caretaker of the Bali road and its travellers in both directions



Map. The eastern end of west Africa's Middle Belt between the Benue-Farou river confluences and the western Grassfields

CHAPTER 1

Lela: Past Present, Present Past

Lela in the Early Post-Colony

Bali Town, the capital and largest part of the Kingdom of Bali Nyonga, sits on top of a commanding hill in the rolling Grassfields of Cameroon's North West Province. The kingdom is accustomed to outside interest: host, tool, beneficiary and intermediary of early German imperialism and Protestant evangelisation, Bali's fate has long depended on astutely squaring international links with local politics. Twenty-odd years ago, Bali was again made to play a representative role outside Africa when it became the subject of a lively illustrated book for British students in the middle years of their secondary school education (Green 1982).

One of a series sharing the title 'Through the year', *Through the Year in West Africa* was devoted to the yearly round of events in Bali where its author had spent some of the years between 1977 and 1981 as headmaster of the Self Reliance Comprehensive College. By 1980, Bali people's own renewal of interest in their past was a couple of decades old; the past had been put into some semblance of good order for present purposes, and Malcolm Green was well placed to absorb the importance of the Lela ceremony to this local renaissance. In deference to Bali ideas, Green's account of the West African year starts not in January but with the completion of Lela during December.

The Lela festival is a time when all Bali people live their tradition. The four-day festival is the climax of the Bali year. The old year dies and the new comes with an eruption of colour and music.

Bali people arrive from far and wide to their homes and relatives in the village, some walking from their farms, others arriving by plane or taxi. The night before, all houses are swollen with people and at midnight a sacrifice is made by a secret society on a small stone pyramid in the palace of the Fon (chief) of Bali. Meanwhile, oblivious of the nocturnal happenings, children scramble for one of their father's traditional dancing gowns, which they iron in preparation for the 'big day'. [...] The present Fon, Galega II, seldom appears in public and, when he does, it is as an almost mystical father-figure. [...]

During Lela the Fon is supreme. On the first day, he leads his people on horseback to a stream on the boundary of Bali, kicking up a haze of red dust from the parched, dry-season ground. At the stream he is surrounded by his noblemen. The priests (*nwanas*) enter the water to consult with Nyikob (God) through the Fon's ancestors, and a white cock is offered to them as a sacrifice. People stand around and watch in silence as the

officiating priest cuts its throat and allows the blood to drip before releasing the animal. The headless chicken leaps and bounds across the ground. The way it dies and its position at death tell the people whether their relationship with the ancestors has been good or not. If the sacrifice is rejected, the people believe that there will be much hardship and suffering over the course of the following year. If it is accepted, the women ululate, guns fire and everyone returns happy, running or galloping their horses. They watch the children engage in mock battle, throwing long, dry elephant grass stalks at each other and singing 'hilo halo' as they throw.

On the second day of the festival, there is not a man without a gun. The wealthy have modern shot guns; the majority have their locally made flint-lock dane-guns, which they fire as they re-enact wars of conquest with a vigour that is something more than pure theatre.

On the third and fourth days, people come in their most magnificent robes of all colours. Dark blue, embroidered with red and yellow, is traditional, but anything goes, and people play music, dance, sing and drink until they are tired. (Green 1982: 9–10)

The ceremony evoked by Malcolm Green is immediately recognisable as that described by Basel missionaries between 1905 and 1913, and by the German artillery lieutenant Franz Hutter in 1891. The procession to a stream where the priests enter the water, the flapping of the white cockerel they sacrifice, the firing of guns and dancing in choicest clothes ... all these were established features of Lela a hundred years earlier. Before then we lack written records, but inferences drawn from the distribution of ceremonies resembling Lela in one way or another allow recuperation of a probable past stretching back a further century to the end of the eighteenth century. In greater or lesser detail, then, we can trace a history of Lela through two hundred years, an unusually long period for a ceremony in a middling-scale inland West African society. Over that time, both the ceremony and the people who carry it out have done a lot of identity work; yet who the Bali are, and what Lela means, have remained intimately tied concerns. Lela has always been an occasion to suture past and present and, in this sense, has been remarkably unchanging; however, what past, what present, and what relations there should be between the two have been subject to ongoing revision. These triangulations of ceremony, history and identity have needed renewing, in large measure, for other people's eyes: new allies, Grassfield neighbours, German colonialists, Swiss missionaries, expatriate teachers, aid workers, Cameroonian officialdom, ethnographic researchers, tourists, visiting members of the Bali diaspora community, and so on.

My account means to look at reflections around Lela in two senses. In a straightforward sense, Lela has been a barometer of the state of play in Bali politics: a ceremony that has adjusted to reflect the changing composition and external relations of the community. But Lela has also been a thoughtful performance, an active musing about those relations, conjoined with subsequent reflections that their experience of the ceremony has prompted in both observers and participants (categories between which no clear line can be drawn). Malcolm Green's description already indicates something of Lela's cellular construction: in late twentieth-century, canonical form its opening rite is succeeded by four days, each with its own distinctive types of practice, paraphernalia and nomenclature. Each of these elements in its turn also has an interpretable past. There is no evidence for reluctance to graft on more elements as the opportunity arose. Lela

has an additive, baroque aesthetic. This may be characteristic of Grassfields performative culture more generally where, contrary to the ‘less is more’ dictate shared by many elements of classicism and high modernism, in style terms more – almost always – really is more.

We shall return to the late twentieth century only in closing, but knowing the recent past differently is the purpose of an account that, for reasons of method, will consist of a set of recursive transections of the historic past. Malcolm Green’s evocation of Lela has given the reader sufficient idea of what Lela is to get us started. The reader will also need an introductory thumbnail history of the people known as Bali, which I provide shortly. The next part of my account concentrates on a particular period of Lela performance, centred around the year 1908 which is more extensively documented (in words and pictures and sound) than any other. It is practically impossible to dissociate what the various accounts tell us about their authors from what they say about the ceremony they are documenting. To do so would be undesirable anyway, not just because of the generally conceded argument that all description is invested with a range of more or less self-conscious interests, but more urgently in this instance because Lela was intended to make an impression on observers (both African and European). That observers and participants should be elated or cowed, impressed or threatened, revealed as ally or enemy ... was and is no secondary or accidental feature of Lela.

Having described Lela in 1908, and in less detail during the years immediately before and after, my account employs a reverse chronology – working backwards from the first decade of the twentieth century – to analyse the contexts sedimented into Lela ceremonies: German–Bali alliance, the kingship complexes of the Grassfields, the heritages that Bali Nyonga shares with the other Bali chiefdoms of the Grassfields, and those the Bali chiefdoms share with Chamba in diaspora, and finally – thus earliest – the features of Lela which may well have come from the Adamawan homelands of the Bali founders. A conclusion reruns this chronology forwards and past 1908 to the late twentieth century to summarise how and why Lela developed in the ways it has.

Bali Nyonga: A Thumbnail History

Most probably it was during the early years of the nineteenth century that the last parties of Chamba warriors – mounted, armed apparently with bows and arrows, spears and swords and buffalo hide shields, and accompanied by their dependants – abandoned a homeland just east of present-day Chambaland close by the current border between Cameroon and Nigeria (see **Map** p. xiii). Although we may never know the immediate cause of their leaving, we can infer a mixture of motives: that they quit their homeland definitively suggests they went under some duress; but apparently they left in good fighting order, so in all likelihood they were not physically expelled, at least not routed. The effectiveness of these marauding Chamba bands as fighting forces makes it likely that they were not new to the business of raiding; and the impression of pillaging as a not wholly innovative means of livelihood for them is reinforced both by the bands being quite numerous, and

by evidence that these Chamba-led bands may have been following paths pioneered by others. Putting together a couple of the not very many things we know about the area around the confluence of the Rivers Faro and Deo in the late eighteenth century, perhaps our best guess is that Chambaland suffered with the rest of the Middle Belt from the recurrent drought-induced famines of the middle and last quarter of the eighteenth century (Sargent 1999: 18–20, 71). This duress coincided with the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade and the shift of its most important supply chains eastwards along the West African coast, so that European traders increasingly took slaves from ports that would have been supplied from the upper Benue River hinterland. Small local raids and kidnappings, judicial procedures leading to expulsion from the community, and pawning of kin for food, may have shaded by degrees into a dependence on raiding for livelihood and a growing affection for the sorts of treasure purchases (such as gowns and imported horses) that were affordable only to those who participated in the slave trade.

The onset of the Fulbe jihad at the very beginning of the nineteenth century was the catalyst that accelerated transition to a marauding way of life. The historical testimony given to early European visitors – whether to the missionary Keller, the cartographer Moisel, the trader Esser, or the soldier Hutter (discussed in detail later) – by a generation of Bali informants who could well have been grandchildren of those involved, consistently gave avoidance of the Fulbe or Hausa wars of the jihad as the main reason for their migration. Before they reached the Grassfields, direct evidence for the passage of these raiders southwards is scanty, but we do know that when they ascended the Grassfields their bands contained contingents of people who would – in twentieth-century terms – have been drawn not just from Chamba, but from Bata, Pere, Mbum, Buti and Tikari as well (Chilver & Kaberry 1968: 16). Contingents of BaTi, from around Bamum, had also joined up before the main Chamba-led war party arrived on the Bamenda Plateau during the 1820s and, thanks to their unprecedented means of warfare and startling ruthlessness, swept through the less centralised Grassfield communities with devastating speed. Operating out of warcamps that they moved periodically, they eventually reached the edge of the Grassfields where their progress was arrested by larger scale, and probably better organised, Bamileke forces near Bafu Fondong in a battle usually dated around 1835. The technology of warfare may have played a role here too: Bali horses were suffering from proximity to the forest with its tsetse fly, while Bamileke may have received supplies of firearms from the coast. Defeated, the leader of their alliance killed, the Bali split into five, six or seven groups which went on to found the communities Bali informants know are related to them. Backreckoning has been built into these recollections so as to allow all the Bali identities of current importance to trace their origin from this dispersal of Gawolbe's alliance. Events were in all likelihood less neat. But, to follow for now the conventional account, those who were later to found Bali Nyonga, with today's Bali town at its centre, made their way north-eastwards under the leader Nyongpasi who would give his name to the later kingdom. Nyongpasi's Bali were expelled after sojourning (as had Gawolbe) on the borders of the powerful and expanding Bamum kingdom, but not before they incorporated a