

Unraveling Conflicting Narratives about the Origins of the Isubu of Bimbia

By Dibussi Tande

The Isubu (also known as Isuwu) like many other African peoples, have different and sometimes conflicting narratives about their origins. Although it is generally believed that the settlement of Bimbia was founded by *Isuwu La Monanga*, a native of Womboko, there are emerging alternative narratives which reject the Womboko connection. These alternative versions may be termed the “Duala narratives”, since they emphasize on real or imagined ancestral ties between the Duala and the Isuwu.

Duala Narratives of Isubu Origins

According to the first Duala narrative, which was available on *Wikipedia* (the largest multilingual open access encyclopedia on the internet) as of January 2006,

The predominant Isubu belief tells of a man named *Isuwu na Monanga* who led their migration to the west bank of the Wouri estuary. When a descendant of Isuwu named Mbimbi became king, the people began to refer to their territories as Bimbia.

While this narrative still has *Isuwu La Monanga* as the ancestor of the Isubu, it nonetheless refers to an Isubu migration to the West bank of River Wouri in Duala territory.

There is a second Duala narrative which states that the Isubu trace their origins to the island of Jebale on the Wouri River, and that they first settled in Duala before moving to present-day Bimbia. In this narrative, the founder of Bimbia is *Quan (Kwane) Ewonde*.

In this second narrative, the Isubu have no ancestral ties with the Kpe-Mboko of the Fako hinterland, and *Isuwu la Monanga* is merely “a descendant of forest migrants” from present-day East Africa who settled at some point in Isubu country...



Graphical Representation of Conflicting Narratives of the Origins of the Isubu

In this article, we will analyze the validity of the Duala narratives and compare them to Duala oral traditions/history and the historical records of European merchants who plied the West African coast in the pre-colonial days.

The Isubu “Migration from Douala”

Duala and Bassa-Bakoko oral traditions, along with documented evidence, indicate that present-day Douala was initially inhabited by Bassa-Bakoko cultivators who were later displaced by the Duala. Although the different recorded Duala oral traditions (13 in number) give different origins of the Duala (from fairly credible stories of origins in the Bakota region of present-day Gabon to far-fetched tales of Egyptian ancestry), all the traditions agree that the Duala moved to their present-day location from Piti on the Dibamba river. These different accounts all point out, albeit in varying degrees, that the Duala are descendants of Mbedi, son of Mbongo, who lived in Piti. Narratives from European explorers tie in with

these oral histories and seem to indicate that the migration from Piti to Douala may have taken place sometime in the 1500s (Ralph Austen, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their hinterland c.1600-c1960*).

Nowhere in the oral histories of the above mentioned peoples is there any mention of an early Isubu connection to Douala.

Quan Ewonde founder of Bimbia?

About six generations after *Ewale a Mbedi*, the ancestor of the Duala, is supposed to have migrated from Piti to Douala, the leadership of Douala was divided between Bell/ Bonanjo and Akwa/Bonambela. It should be noted that Quan Ewonde (whom the second Duala narrative claims is the founder of Bimbia) was a descendant of the Bonebele, a sub clan of the Akwa/Bonambela clan. He was the grandson of Quan (i.e., *Kwane a Njie*, ancestor of the Bonebela and Bonaku Duala sub tribes). Duala oral tradition states that Quan Ewonde was forced to Bimbia when the powerful *Priso a Doo* began a belligerent campaign against the line of Kwane a Njie between 1788-90 (Ralph Austen, p. 38).

This narrative ties in with the Bimbia version which was narrated to Edwin Ardener by the Late Chief Johannes Manga Williams (Ardener, *Coastal Bantu of the Cameroons*, 1956). According to Chief Manga Williams, Quan Ewonde married Losenge, daughter of Chief Mbimb'a Mbela, and was the father of *Bile a Kwane*. Bile fled Duala with his father and established himself, first on Mokindi Island before moving to the present site of Wonyabile ('descendants of Bile'), the third major Isubu settlement. It was Bile who was later given the title of "King William" by the British. [See Ralph Austen, P. 7, and Ardener, 19, for detailed genealogical maps of the Duala, which clearly explain the origins of the "Bimbia connection"].

The records of European vessels that plied the Cameroon coast during this period are also quite instructive. For example, in the account books of the British ship "Sarah", which visited the Wouri estuary in 1790, it is mentioned that Quan (Kwane a Njie) was the most powerful man in the area, and that he even received a major "dash" from the British for selling fifty slaves. (Austen, p. 38) In the same account books, mention is made of "Bimbi Jack" (Ngombe Mbimbi) as King of Bimbia at the time.



Bimbia in 1893 © cekora.net

Whether we rely on the Duala or Bimbia versions of Quan's flight to Bimbia in the late 18th century, it is obvious that Bimbia was already a major trading post well known to European merchants. It was a thriving commercial entity whose chiefs had already started their long tradition of treaty-making with the Europeans. For example, on May 3 1800, King Bimbi Jack, signed a treaty with Johan Pedar Wrisberg, Governor of the Royal Danish Possessions in Guinea, for a plantation on Nicholl Island off the coast of the Bimbia promontory. This treaty is available in Danish archives, and a full citation is available in Georg Norregard's *Danish Settlements in West Africa*.

The claim that Quan Ewonde founded Bimbia is therefore incorrect, and is based on an obvious confusion between the origins of the Isubu as a group, and the specific history of the Wonyabile or Bonabile lineage, which has controlled the Victoria Traditional Council for the last 100 years. So while Quan Ewonde certainly has a place in Bimbia history as the father of King Williams, he is by no means the founder of Bimbia.

Bimbia Political Genealogy

1. Mbimbi Jack (Ngombe Mbimbi) was definitely King of Bimbia between 1790 and 1802. (Two of Mbimbi's son's Ngombe and Ngolo, were the ancestors of the two present Isubu settlements of Wonyangomba and Likolo (Dikolo). These settlements preceded the arrival of Quan Ewonde.

2. Mbimbi Jack was succeeded by Nako, son of Ngombe, who was described by Allen and Trotter as "having ruled over all the country at the eastern base of the Cameroons mountain called Bakwileh". Cited in Ardener 27.

3. Chief Bile (King William), son of Quan Ewonde, is the one who succeeded Nako, and who was given the title of "King William" by the British in 1926. This is confirmed by the following passage from Captain William Allen's diary entry about his trip to Bimbia on May 20th, 1841:

‘John King explained the succession: his father was the head chief: he left three sons, Nako, John King, and Billeh: Nako assumed the chief authority; on his death, John King waived his right in favour of King Billeh. The latter had frequently declared that whichever of his sons proved to have the "best head" would succeed him. He seemed very fond of a pretty little prattling boy, about four years of age. He "liked him plenty;" said he always slept with him, and he "might be king if he had a good head." From this it would appear that the chieftainship is elective.’

Bile's death was reported by Acting British Consul Hopkins in December 1878.

4. King Williams was replaced by his son, Ngombe, also known as young King Williams. Ngombe was murdered in 1882 at Limbola by Bakweris from Soppo.

5. Ngombe was replaced by his half brother Mbimb'a Makaka, who was King when the territory became a German protectorate in 1884.

6. For the evolution of the Bimbia/Victoria politics during the German and British colonial eras, see Joseph Takougang's well-researched article, "Chief Johannes Manga Williams and the making of a native colonial autocrat among the Bakweri of the Southern Cameroons," and Mola Njoh Litumbe's equally incisive "Letter to the Contestants for the Royal Stool of Victoria (Limbe)". See reference section below for details.

Conclusion

Observers of the Bimbia political scene posit that recent attempts to give undue prominence to the history of the WonyaBile lineage (with its partial Duala roots), while downplaying or erasing the *Kpe-Mboko* origins of the other Isubu clans, is part and parcel of Bimbia power politics and internal rivalry – particularly that between the WonyaBile and the Dikolo - which necessitated the continuous intervention of the British in the 19th century, and sparked the internal unrests of the 1850s, which marked the

beginning of the end of Bimbia commercial hegemony. Thus, while the WonyaBile are maternally related to the Duala, the common origin of the Isubu is in Mboko country on the slopes of Mount Fako.

Ardener gives a most appropriate conclusion on the origins of the Isubu and their connection with the Duala in his seminal *Coast Bantu of the Cameroons* (p. 30):

It would seem best to regard the Isuwu as originally part of the Southern migration which brought the Mboko to the coast down the western side of the mountain... The Duala connection, however ... became predominant from the end of the 18th century, owing to common participation in the slave trade with Europeans, the Isuwu “kingdom” itself being partly of Duala origin.

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This article is based on the spirited discussions between the author and Prince Janjo Williams of Bimbia on the *Fakonet* Internet forum in 2001.