

***Getting along in the Grassfields:
Aspects of village life in Misaje (North West Cameroon)***

video documentary, 37 minutes, colour, English subtitles

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Introductory text (displayed at the beginning of the film):

The following film is based on fourteen months of fieldwork (August 2000 to January 2002) conducted for my PhD-research in North West Cameroon. It introduces the fieldwork situation visually and illustrates the processes of data-gathering and theory-building around the themes of interethnic relations and identity politics in a culturally, religiously and ethnically complex setting.

I understand ethnographic film-making as an interactive and reflexive enterprise. To achieve a combination of etic and emic perspectives, I shared the video-recording taking turns with my assistant Haruna Kadiri, and presented the footage to the local population for feedback. Together with my colleague Judith Orland, I structured the film with the purpose of enticing the viewer to reflect about overlaps between politics, economy and culture. We also want to raise questions about the exchange of different understandings of film as a visual medium of communication and representation.

Themes of the film:

Culture: presented and lived

Socio-economic organisation, individual life plans and interethnic relations.

Anthropology and film: reactions, comments and participation from within the local community.

Commentary

The format of the film:

We did not attempt to make a 'classical-style' ethnographic documentary about one ethnic group, being portrayed by a 'neutral' third party. Instead, we intended to illustrate the anthropologist's endeavour dealing with the complexity and dynamics of ethnic interaction. Two considerations guided the editing process: the first relates to forms of (re)presentation in ethnographic film; the second has more to do with the experience of fieldwork itself.

Although the film contains a lot of detailed information about different ethnic and social groups, we decided not to use a narrative-style explanatory voice-over and to keep commentaries as limited as possible. With the help of the introductory text, the subtitles to the scenes, and the transcriptions of the interviews, the viewer is guided and encouraged to focus in particular ways but is also free to develop his/her own associations and interpretations.

Secondly, we would like to familiarise the viewer with the situation of the anthropologist in the field. We often witness activities and events whose meaning we come to fully understand only in the course of our research. The way we selected and edited the video-sequences represents this process of trying to make sense of the rich field data and to link it up with the research question.

What is the film about?

The overall themes of the film are interethnic relations and identity politics in a culturally, religiously and ethnically complex setting. Furthermore, the film says something about the interrelation of the anthropologist with 'the field'.

Part 1: Identity politics

The first part of the film links cultural policies of the Cameroonian government with cultural activities in village life. The current government stresses and values the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. It contributes to raising consciousness of ethnic identities and social difference by encouraging social and ethnic groups to participate in national festivals. Parades, songs and dances presented by the various groups are performances of ethnic, cultural and social identities and, at the same time, manifestations of their participation in the political economy on the local and national level. In North West Cameroon, Grassfielders constitute the population majority, while Mbororo (pastoral Fulbe) and Hausa are ethnic and religious minorities. Their participation in national festivals may thus be read as an expression of their sense of belonging and socio-political integration into the local community.

Cultural performances in national festivals draw on lived traditions, such as rituals and ceremonies. The latter are guided by norms and restrictions which, to a certain degree, also affect participation in national festivals. The Grassfields people have a rich repertoire of cultural performances, including songs, instrumental pieces, traditional dances and masquerades, which are staged publicly; for example, at death celebrations or annual dances. Conversely, the Muslim community which comprises Mbororo and Hausa is much more segregated and festivities are often limited to kin and friends. Muslim adult women find it highly problematic to perform in public; hence, their confined participation in national festivals is mainly a political statement. For youths, such events represent legitimate occasions to escape adult surveillance, to see and be seen, and to socialise.

Part 2: Local economies

Farming, herding and trading are complementary activities that correspond to the respective occupational preferences of Grassfielders, Mbororo and Hausa. Cattle and food markets are important features of Misaje village life. They are characterised by frequent interaction and communication between people of different occupational and ethnic backgrounds. Overviews of the market scenery show how various groups contribute to the village economy and how economic activities tend to be associated with ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation. Interviews with market participants further represent individuals' assessment of their economic involvement against the background of socio-cultural conceptions and economic constraints.

Cattle trade is a male domain and includes cattle rearers, middlemen and buyers. While Mbororo are the main cattle owners in this region, members of all ethnic groups are involved in the cattle business. Conversely, the marketing of food crops is in the hands of Grassfields women who are the main food producers and often responsible for family expenditures. Similarly, but to a lesser degree, Mbororo women sell milk-products and assist with family needs. Mbororo, Hausa and Grassfielders no longer rely on a single economic activity. Economic diversification manifests itself in various ways, including agro-pastoralism and the frequent engagement in trade as an alternative or complementary strategy.

The excessive consumption of maize beer by local Grassfielders is a topic of general dismay and public debate, as it regularly results in seasonal maize shortage, perceived as hunger periods.

However, the economic interrelatedness of Grassfields women selling maize beer, Mbororo households producing surplus-maize, and Hausa women trading with dry season maize is rarely taken into consideration.

Part 3: Images and reflections

The anthropologist with the video camera is observer and participant at the same time. We are aware that filming is not representing reality as such, but is a process of selective perception and interpretation. Thus, in order to capture etic and emic perspectives in the field, various collaborators took part in the filmic enterprise; for example, Haruna Kadiri with whom I shared the video-recording as well as Nfume Godfrey, Nji Ignatius and Buba Ahmadou who co-organised the Misaje Film Festival. The audiences' feedback to the video footage screened at the Misaje Film Festival forms a rich body of reactions and information which entails meta-commentaries on social life in Misaje, appraisals of film as a visual media, and local assessments of anthropological research.

The Assistant Mayor's comments on the economic life of Misaje should be read as a political statement addressed to the village population as well as to an external audience. Moreover, he appreciates the educational capacity of film-making. Muslim women, on the other hand, stress participatory aspects and express feelings of empowerment. That is, their participation in role-plays or films and the prospect of being seen in foreign countries give them the opportunity to transcend social boundaries and present themselves to the public without contravening social and religious norms. Other spectators point at the reflexive capacity of ethnographic film. Through confronting their reality of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity and plurality, they recognise the need and benefit of 'getting along' and learning from each other. Contributors also argue that viewing ethnographic video footage helped them to better understand technical aspects of filmmaking and the nature of anthropological research. This was reflected in increased enthusiasm and active participation by the local population in all aspects of my subsequent research.

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