



Sons of the Moon
The Ngas of Central Nigeria
Deirdre LaPin

Sons of the Moon
The Ngas of Central Nigeria

A Study Guide to the Film
Sons of the Moon

Deirdre LaPin



A Publication of the
Institute for the Study of Human Issues
Philadelphia

Sons of the Moon

A film by Deirdre LaPin and Francis Speed

25 min. / 16mm. / color / 1984

Cinematography: Francis Speed
Writing and Research: Deirdre LaPin
Associate Producer: Bankole Bello
Post-Production: Michael Camerini
Editing: Paul Marcus
Introduction: Anthony Aveni

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities,
with additional funding from the Institute for the
Study of Human Issues, the University of Ife,
and the Benue-Plateau State of Nigeria.

Study Guide cover art: Alan Camp
Study Guide cover design: Carron Hocut

INTRODUCTION

In isolated mountain hamlets on Nigeria's Jos Plateau the Ngas have traditionally observed the movements of the moon in the night sky. The moon is a key symbol in Ngas cosmology, believed to regulate the rhythm of all life. Ngas say that lunar phases follow the course of a woman's monthly cycle and that the moon's position along the horizon marks the agricultural seasons of the year. Simple observatories that align such natural elements as mountains and rocks enable the Ngas to "meet" the moon once a year by showing the lunar direction.

Sons of the Moon traces the moon's influence on Ngas work and thought during a single growing season. The documentary tells its story from the point of view of a traditional Ngas bard. He sings of the Ngas migration to their rugged hilltop home, of their struggle to eke out a living from the rocky soil, and of their dependence on the moon. The bard describes how the Ngas live their calendar. A lunar "clock," recreated in animation, ticks off the months as the moon shifts position along the horizon. It passes from the "moon of sowing" to the "moon of transplanting" to the "moon of cultivation" to the "moon of the second ridging." The calendar governs the growth of crops; it also schedules human events and most notably agricultural festivals.

A series of harvest rituals called Mos Tar, "beer of

the moon," culminates the calendric cycle. Here the old year gives way to the new. Ancestors dressed in millet leaves return as guests for the celebration. Young boys are painted with circles, becoming "sons of the moon." At an observatory site an astronomer priest brings the festival to a climax by "shooting the moon." This is the night before the first appearance of the lunar crescent. By sending his spear with song into the sky he destroys the invisible old moon and engenders the new. The next day the old moon is ritually buried amid general celebration.

FILM HISTORY

Sons of the Moon is edited from archival footage filmed in 1974 and 1975 by cinematographer Francis Speed. Originally the intention was to create an hour-long program about the material culture of the Ngas for broadcast on the television network of Nigeria's Benue-Plateau State. At the invitation of the State Government a film research team including Mr. Speed, Deirdre LaPin, and later Bankole Bello made visits to the Jos Plateau, first in August 1974 and thereafter for extended periods until filming ended in May 1975.

Because the Ngas are poorly represented in ethnographic literature, unraveling the threads of their cul-

ture was a necessary but pleasant task. A collection of basic ethnographic data was needed to situate the architecture and artifacts that were the initial focus of the film. An Ngas Cultural Advisory Committee was formed to guide this endeavor, and it brought together civic leaders, university graduates, and traditional specialists from the Ngas area. The committee met and discussed the team's findings, approved its choice of subject matter, and later reviewed rough-cut versions of the film.

Severe shortages of gasoline, the unexpected illness of a team member, and the transport of heavy filming equipment up and down the rugged escarpment were difficulties that had to be overcome. In every district Ngas men and women cheerfully helped us meet these impediments with ingenuity and strength. One memorable sight was the image of a lone man who head-carried a Honda generator one kilometer up a near vertical rockface so that we could film the superb round-house interiors in a village on the mountaintop.

Unfortunately, this collective effort became stalled in the summer of 1975 by a change of government inside Nigeria which brought about a curtailment of funds. A rough-cut version of the film, edited by Francis Speed, Deirdre LaPin, and Bankole Bello, was produced at low cost and entitled "Today and Before Yesterday." The film was never completed or distributed and languished as an edited workprint in the tropical environment.

In 1983 a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities revived the project, and it was decided to re-edit the film from the standpoint of astronomy and cosmology, dominant themes in Ngas life. A post-production team was assembled, which included Bankole Bello, head of the Film Unit, University of Ife; documentary filmmaker Michael Camerini; editor Paul Marcus; writer Deirdre LaPin; and a number of academic consultants.

Over ten years many minds and talents contributed to this film, and among them the one to whom we owe our sincerest thanks is John A. Kwashi, who created and spoke the Ngas-language narration to *Sons of the Moon*. We hope that our translation of his words has adequately put across the clarity, sympathy, and intelligence of his thoughts about the culture he has studied throughout his lifetime.

SCRIPT TO THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTION OF THE FILM

My song says "welcome." I am greeting you. It says we Ngas came from the north, Bornu. For years we traveled before reaching these hills. We stopped first in a place

2

called Garo. And then we followed the river to a place called Chukwai. We all took the same route when we left Bornu. Then each group went its own way. Some branched off to Amper. Some branched off to Ampang. Some branched off to Kabwir. Our moons go and our moons come. The Ngas go, the Ngas come. If I die today, another's born. If another's born, I die today. The sowing rain has started to fall. If we don't plant today, we will plant tomorrow. My song says "welcome." I am greeting you.

The life of the Ngas is a hard life. I say this because if you look at our land you can see that we live among hills and rocks. Big boulders cover the ground, and valleys that could be better for farming are just too few. Even so our forefathers studied this land. They worked hard, and the rocks and stones worked, too. They built rock foundations for houses, stone walls around their compounds, and stone terraces for their farms. They planted their crops of millet and guinea corn on the backs of hills . . . but the soil is thin. And when the planting stick enters the ground, it strikes against pebbles and stones. When the rain loosens the soil, we remember our forefather's example. Just as they planted, we do the same.

In planting season we begin to watch the moon closely, just as we watch the months before giving birth to a child. Without the moon, there would be no life. Our ancestors saw that the moon's phases followed a

women's monthly cycle. They saw that its changes marked the growing seasons of the year.

As our crops grow, we watch . . . the moon of sowing passes to the moon of transplanting . . . to the moon of cultivation . . . to the moon of the second ridging. This moon is the time of the big cultivation which we do together on different farms in turns. We work in a happy spirit. From now on our work is over except to keep the birds and monkeys away from the fields.

Besides dances for cultivation, we Ngas have festivals of different kinds. The big one is the festival when we shoot the moon. We call it Mos Tar, "beer of the moon." We perform it year by year in its own month.

In this season there are many preparations to make, and so our chief, the *golong*, and his elders meet. They see that everything is in order because this is the time when the ancestors come. Our priest, the "lord of rains," is our expert in watching the sky and the moon. He tells the elders when this month's rituals should be done. Our "warlord" protects him through these ceremonies because in former days enemies would sometimes try to attack.

The elders discuss inviting people from nearby villages. They also discuss buying a ram to sacrifice to the moon. It is the *golong's* duty to buy the ram, say the elders. They remind him that in former times *golong's* did not forget these rituals, and that he should not today. The *golong* agrees.

3

After the meeting the golong sends his son to his granary for millet. His wives pound and winnow the grain to make beer. This brewing is the first of many which we do in this season. Because this is the time when we shoot and bury the moon of the old year and welcome the moon of the new. Beer is brewed for each part of our celebration. We make beer to entertain our ancestors who visit us in these days. We make beer to sacrifice at the burial of the moon.

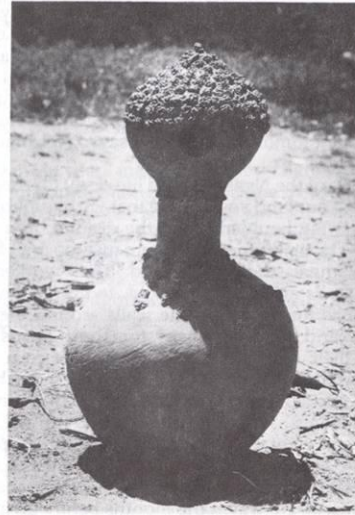
When the beer is cooked, the golong's wife leaves it to ferment. After two days the beer is ready for pouring into special pots for sacrifice [Fig. 1].

This month is very important to us. When the moon first appeared in the sky, our priest, the lord of rains, began to count the days. He will put 28 knots in his sacred counting string.

Now it is seven days before we shoot the moon. In that far village our forefather Gwenji has come, someone you women can't see. He is an ancestor we call "naked," forbidden to women's eyes. To the elders he recites the year's crimes . . . who has committed adultery . . . who has stolen grain from another farm. The person accused makes sacrifices, and sometimes he is punished. And in this way the crimes of the old year are cleansed.

When we have cleansed ourselves, we cleanse the land. We honor the earth our forefathers gave us. For two days the women have been busy clearing paths to

Figure 1. A ritual pot for sacrificial beer.



4

different compounds. Now the whole district is weeded except for this central arena. This evening, our ancestors the *wong ngang*, are coming to inspect the women's work.

The *wong ngang* come from Yergam. They are foreigners we met long ago. They come dressed in leaves, and women may see them, like us men. They greet us in their own language . . . and we answer their greetings: "Thank you, we are well."

This will be the first use of this year's harvest. The golong's wife shows the *wong ngang* that we are preparing beer to celebrate the first fruits.

The *wong ngang* are our protectors; they are the ones who spare us from attack. Once a year they come to us as guests. Now they are going to the central arena to dance.

The women take their hoes and act out the weeding for the *wong ngang* . . . and as they work they sing . . . and the *wong ngang* are happy to see the women working . . . and they begin to dance and enjoy themselves.

Three days [actually two days] have passed, and this morning the warlord calls unmarried boys to go and receive the moon. His son blows cereal on their bodies to make the moon's white light. Then he draws circles on their faces like the moon . . . he makes more circles on their chest and back . . . all on the left side . . . and then the left wrist. When they are painted the boys are called *jep tar mwa*, "sons of the moon."

Each boy is given a round calabash of water and herbs. With his spear and shield the warlord's son leads the sons of the moon to the town. From house to house they announce that the Mos Tar is coming . . . and at each house they stop to ask for a gift. Sometimes they are given grain, sometimes they are given beer, sometimes water . . . and sometimes they are given nothing. Whoever has nothing to give throws a stone and says he has nothing. The boys take their gifts and move on to the next compound and to the next . . . through the entire district.

Tomorrow night there is no moon in the sky, a time when we Ngas say only the animals in the bush can see its light. Tonight we shoot the invisible moon at the place where the thin moon is going to appear. At sundown our elders and women carrying loads go up the flat rock above the golong's house. There they will shoot the moon. The lord of the rains takes a short spear. With his apprentice and the warlord he goes to a certain rock and looks between two hills. He keeps pointing at the place where the moon will come out the next night. The moon is strong. They challenge it: "Lie on the pasture so that we can get you." Then they cry out: "Woo-wi-woo-wi-woo-wi." And their cry sends the spear to the moon.

They taunt the moon again: "Ho, where were you when we shot your brother?"

With chicken and beer the elders appeal to the an-

5

cestors: "Help us shoot the moon so that the new moon's light will appear in the sky tomorrow night." Then each shooter turns to the east, where the moon begins its trek in the sky. "Moon, moon we have shot you."

When the people below see that the shooting is over, they beat their drums and dance till daybreak.

On the day of the Mos Tar we see the moon of the new year, and we bury the moon of the old. People from the whole land of Ngas come to dance. We are thankful that we have sowed our crops and seen them through to another harvest. And we are grateful that our lives have been spared for another year. Last year some brothers came to Mos Tar who are no longer with us. We remember them as we prepare the ram to sacrifice at the burial of the moon. The elders touch the ram to the ground three times, and then go to the burying place. They slaughter the ram, and then the ground opens to receive the moon.

Our dancing goes on, and when the sun goes down, we go from house to house to sing and to watch the new moon in the sky.

After the Mos Tar season has passed, the harvesting comes. Women chop millet and guinea corn near their houses. They also go with the men to fields far away. They spread their crops on racks for drying and then carry them to granaries to store . . . every man and every woman in their personal granaries. Some grana-

ries store grain that is still unhusked; some store grain for pounding in the evening; some keep the seed until the next harvest.

Granaries remind us that we live from the land, just as our forefathers did before us. The land gives grain one season; we store it to eat and plant in the next.

One granary has always been with us. It was built for our founder, Dimlong. Since then golongs have kept it for the hungry and weak. And so we call it the "healing granary" [Fig. 2].

If you look on the walls you see blood from rams slaughtered at the death of old people. You will also see libations of beer to the ancestors.

At the base we keep pots filled with beer to make twins and their mothers strong. When a brother has no grain, he is supplied from this granary.

We honor this granary today as Ngas did before yesterday. It has seen the whole of our history, from the time we began farming this land and from the time we began watching the moon.

My song says "welcome." I am greeting you. Your film people have done well. The ancestors have come. Dressed in their leaves. When you reach home greet your people for me. Be careful going back along this path. Don't stumble on our rocks and hills. I'll have my children show you the way.

My song says "farewell" and a happy return to all of you.

6

Figure 2. A *dye bal*, or "healing granary," with elaborately moulded designs in lines and curves.



MOS TAR:
THE NGAS FESTIVAL
OF THE NEW YEAR

The most important festival in the Ngas ritual cycle is the Mos Tar, "beer of the moon." This celebration signals the moment in the Ngas calendar when the old year, symbolized by the waning moon, is replaced by the thin crescent moon of the new. Although Ngas claim that Mos Tar may be scheduled "anytime after planting,"¹ in practice it takes place during the months of harvest. Under the Mos Tar rubric a cluster of individual rites, each having a particular focus, coalesce. The fulcrum upon which the whole rests is the briefest and most understated of these; the Ngas call it Pus Tar, literally, "shooting the moon."² Here a man takes a spear or a bow, aims his weapon along a fixed pair of natural landmarks, and propels it symbolically *with song* to a distant point where the Ngas say it "shoots the moon."

The ritual of "shooting the moon" is the chief focal event in Ngas life, for the moon is a key cultural symbol. The gesture may be reduced to the following proposition: "Male actor purposefully projects a weapon toward a being foreign to his kind." Furthermore, the event draws together a set of metaphors bearing not only on the moon, but also on the hunt and on sexual congress. Each perspective suggests a reading of the ini-

7

tial proposition in a different modality: (1) warrior-hunter spears an object of prey; (2) astronomer-priest regulates lunar cycles; and (3) man impregnates woman.

In the episode of "shooting the moon" these metaphors articulate with one another in order to clarify the relationship between the moon and the human community. Here astronomy plays a critical role as the channel by which the Ngas and the moon may meet.

THE NGAS IN GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Ngas are Chadic speakers who occupy some 750 square miles along the southeastern edge and adjacent lowlands of Nigeria's Jos Plateau.³ Easily the most populous group on the highland, about 70 percent of these 150,000 souls live in tiny, isolated hamlets amid the hills and rocks.⁴ The Plateau in most directions rises to an altitude of 1200 meters above sea level, but near Pankshin, the Ngas administrative center (Fig. 3), the gradient is somewhat steeper, with peaks often reaching 1500 meters in height. To the west of Pankshin the hills form a high, solid ridge in the district known as Ampang before they plunge down the steep escarpment onto the plains below. Beyond and further west, in the plains

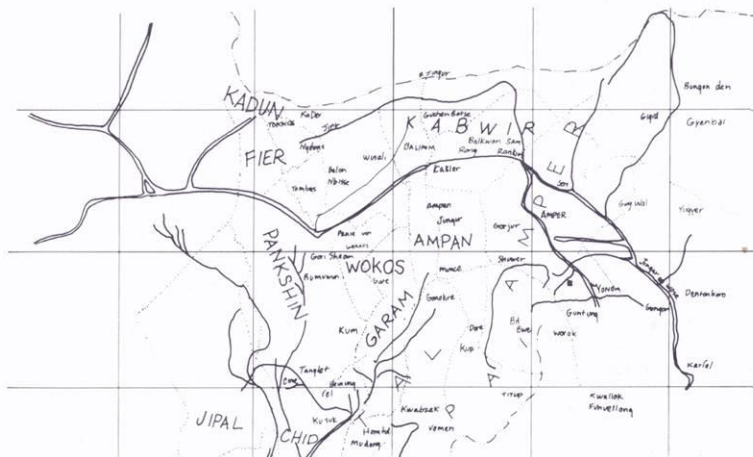
district of Amper, the land begins to roll more gently, broken by only a few isolated peaks. Granite boulders, some veined with mica, litter the thin soil, making this a land that is often terraced before it can be farmed. Terrace walls, some a meter high, snake across the hillside in regular, narrow rows, and the beds between them are planted with millet, guinea corn, maize and acha, the chief cereal grains.

Oral tradition names Borno, a region to the northeast, as the homeland from which the Ngas migrated, perhaps in the fourteenth century, under the headship of the legendary "Mamman Kyari."⁵ Variants of the migration story trace a southwesterly movement toward Yam in the Kanem area and then a succession of digressions as the founders of present-day communities split off from the main group to establish separate settlements. Chieftancy disputes are the conventional reason these accounts give for these partings, but is more likely that the Ngas settled in waves of isolated bands and then later established alliances with one another in loose confederations of village states or districts.

The Shin Nkarang: The "True Souls"

To the Ngas the test of genuine ethnic identity has been the application of the name *shin nkarang*, "the true souls," which contrasts with the words for stranger,

Figure 3. Map of Pankshin Division.



nlap, or "spleen." *Shin nkarang* connotes "good sense," whereas a person who is *nlap* is said to ignore the sick, neglect his family obligations, and refuse to greet others (Wambutda 1978:119-120). The word *ngas*, which the Hausa modified as "Angas," is derived from the noun for "cheekbone" and hence "facemark," specifically the *ngas* or crescent-shaped strokes that run down the fleshy part of the cheeks and—like the chinstrap of a helmet—join at the jaw.

Warfare: Kin and Foe

Today it is customary to distinguish between the "Hill" *Ngas* and the "Plains" *Ngas*, but this terminology seems to have arisen less from the slight cultural and linguistic differences between these two groups than from the absorption of the Plains *Ngas* in the nineteenth century into the Hausa-Fulani Emirate at Bauchi. In fact all *Ngas* in general preferred the high, boulder-strewn uplands as sites for habitation because the strategic location provided a natural defense against the incursions of more powerful enemies. Raids were a recurrent feature of their turbulent history. Tradition refers to attacks by the mysterious *Kwip* (most likely the *Jukun*) in the seventeenth century and to successive attempts at domination by the Hausa-Fulani in the nineteenth. Although Bauchi eventually gained the submission of *Amper*, the remaining *Ngas* districts clung fiercely to their inde-

pendence. In 1920 they became the last collection of polities on the Plateau to come under British colonial authority.

Migration stories, however, are often linked more intimately with the present than with the past. These accounts seem to function as "precedents" that legitimate the "seniority" of certain *Ngas* village states—*Amper* over *Ampang* or *Kabwir* over *Garram*—as well as notions *Ngas* maintain about their "kinship" with certain ethnic neighbors.⁶ Such groups as the *Jukun*, the *Saya*, or the *Fulani* are often referred to as "brothers" (but not *shin nkarang*). Yet the term is counterposed to the very real historical hostilities that from time to time welled up between them and the *Ngas*. Indeed colonial literature makes it a point to distinguish the *Ngas* as a "truculent" population, and perhaps more than any other Plateau people, they institutionalized their love of courage (Isichei 1982:206).

Retaliatory attacks, active slave-raiding, and some head-hunting were carried on between the *Ngas* and surrounding groups, and at times internally between *Ngas* districts. Small-scale raids were usually motivated by the unexplained death of a villager or by the theft of property, wives, land, or crops. On occasion captives were sold as slaves to the *Fulani* who lived on the fringes of the Plateau, but more commonly the offender and his near relatives or friends were summarily killed.⁷ Early commentators also allude to the *Ngas* practice of

10

consuming enemy flesh, a less fearsome custom than might at first appear, for the *Ngas* also observed a form of endocannibalism in which old men were eaten—and thus honored—so that their spirit would leave the world unweakened by disease. Skulls of ancestors and enemies were kept in the ceremonial roundhouse of the clan head along with ritual bows, spears, shields, and buffalo horns—all symbols of *Ngas* might (Meek 1925:55-56; Temple 1922:12). The values, obligations, and sanctions attached to taking heads are still unclear. Present-day *Ngas* speak openly and with great relish about communal hunting parties in which young men could develop and display their adult powers; the once-related activity of taking heads is mentioned only in cursory and oblique reference.⁸

Against the background of recurrent skirmishing that characterized the lives of Plateau dwellers, the *Ngas* knit alliances in customs and mythological record with these sometime adversaries. The links served as cultural and psychological bulwarks against a more hostile reality. For this reason the *Mos Tar* and other festivals are occasions when these ties are remembered in the origins of spirit actors, the foreign languages of ritual songs, and in the mock-aggressive gestures that dramatize genuine battle charges made in the past. In "shooting" the moon the image of armed combat is metaphorically recast. Armed with bows, spears, and shields the shooters are costumed in the cloth and skins

of battle dress. Their comportment toward the moon is taunting, combative, and adversarial; they act out the role of warrior-hunters spearing an object of prey. The moon is enemy; yet like *Ngas* neighbors it is also honorary "kin" and the *Ngas* its "sons."

THE MOON IN NGAS RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

How is the ambivalent nature of this symbolic enemy-kin to be understood? Certainly the moon falls outside the categories of those things the *Ngas* habitually worship. *Ngas* say that *Nen* (sometimes called *Mat*, "mother") created the earth, heavenly bodies, and all living and non-living things.⁹ *Nen* is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-seeing. For assistance in having children, good crops, and productive animals, however, men and women usually appeal directly to the *wong*, their ancestors.

Wong: The Ancestors

Wong guide and protect the living in their relations with alien ethnic groups, the forces of the environment, and the harmful spirits believed to roam the hamlets and

11

hillsides. These ancestors may appear to the living at their own volition to exact retributive justice against evildoers or at the invitation of the human community as honored guests at ritual events. Two categories of wong are distinguished by their manner of appearance; in Ngas terms they are either "naked" or "dressed." "Naked" wong are immaterial, and their presence is manifested by low, rumbling growls made by their mediums who may be anyone among the male celebrants. Women "hear" these aural masks, but they are strictly forbidden to "see" the spirit visitors. Indeed, wong are invisible to nearly everyone except priests (*golong kum*) or men endowed with visionary powers called "second sight" (*jep rit mwa*). In a very real sense, every living Ngas man carries within him a part of these naked ancestors who are the biological forefathers of all shin nkarang. Most important among these wong are the ancient ancestors who gave their names to the two Ngas moieties, Ngurna and Nkanchan. Although the first is closely associated with Amper and Gyanyang and the second with Ampang and Pankshin, descendants of both are intermingled in every district. It is sometimes said that the *golong* is always descended from Nkanchan and the *golong kum* from Ngurna. Moreover, Nkanchan is mythologically linked with the sun and Ngurna with the moon.¹⁰ Recently deceased ancestors are also wong, and their relatively modest status among forefathers is offset by their constant presence in the *lit*,

or ancestor shrine, on the edge of the *golong's* hamlet. They are always about, and their visitations are not dramatized.

Contrasted to the naked wong are ancestors said to be "dressed," whether in guinea corn leaves, costumes of knotless netting, or seed headdresses. These wong are not shin nkarang, but ancestors of those groups Ngas look upon as enemy-kin. Their place in the community to the Ngas dead is a symbolic commemoration of cultural, military, or political ties that allied the Ngas with these groups in the past. Among those recognized are wong bilta, from the Fulani; wong morigi, from the Saya; and wong ngang, from the Yergam.

Kum: The Natural Powers

Apart from wong, which have a human origin, Ngas recognize a set of natural powers known collectively as *kum*. These powers reside in botanical and mineral materials; examples are *fuwan*, rain celts especially sacred to the residents of Amper, and *tau*, represented in Kabwir in certain statuettes, custard apple plants, and various herbs. *Kum* may be placed on quivers to protect hunters and improve their marksmanship; they are hung on doorways to keep evil spirits out of the compound; they may also be housed in spirit shelters resembling miniature Ngas roundhouses which are maintained by specific lineages on behalf of the community.

THE MOON: A HEAVENLY BEING OF SPECIAL STATUS AND THE SOURCE OF ALL LIFE

The moon, being neither wong nor *kum*, enjoys a special status, and its importance is stressed again and again in comments Ngas make about it. "The moon is not a god to whom one begs directly for favors," explained the *Golong Tau* in Kabwir.¹¹ Nevertheless, epithets and allusions imply that the moon is a self-willed being having great prestige. It is a "lord" more important than a *golong* ("lord of the palace"), and yet in some ways the moon is quite chiefly.¹² It is credited with the quality of human cognition; it is able to "see and know" the preparations at Mos Tar made in its honor. At eclipses the chief's funeral drums are assembled, and the beaters climb to a rocky promontory where they cry: *De mut woh, de mut woh*, "The Lord is dead, the Lord is dead." Beating the drums vigorously, they perform a mock burial ceremony until the earth's shadow ends its passage across the face of the moon.

The moon, then, is a personified being who is at the same time the source of all life. "Without the moon," said an elder, "there is nothing. The earth would be useless. Mat Nen created the moon and gave it the power to regulate all fertility."¹³ Its movements bring *anfani*, a Hausa term that embraces notions of fructification, good

harvest, utility, and beneficence. Ngas do indeed note a correspondence between the periodicity of lunation and menstruation, but the association is a masculine secret discussed openly only among men and not divulged to women. No evidence so far suggests that Ngas women, who are wholly conscious of this synchrony, actually do menstruate to a lunar rhythm, but it is noteworthy that a symbolic association between these cosmic and reproductive cycles has been institutionalized in Ngas religion, especially in the rite of Pus Tar.¹⁴

THE MOON AS TIME-MAKER AND THE PRIEST AS ASTRONOMER

Calendrics, the Ngas system for reckoning time, is also based on the moon. "You can learn nothing from the sun," one man remarked in this connection.¹⁵ The gestation of the fetus and the development of plants are counted in lunar cycles: "When a woman stops seeing menstruation," said an elder, "we count the moons (*tar mwa*) to nine, and when millet is planted we count the moons until harvest."¹⁶ In fact the word *tar* is used routinely in several senses. Most literally, *tar* is "moon," hence "lunation" or "month," but its real dynamic equivalent is more commonly "season." In this regard the Ngas differ from their southern neighbor, the Tiv, who "make no correlations between seasons and

'moons' " (Bohannon 1953, repr. 1967:319). For the Ngas the correlation plainly exists, but in a fluid mode. They may, for example, apportion the agricultural year into phases called *tar pas*, "sowing season"; *tar wep*, "late rainy season"; *tar lun*, "high dry season"; and *tar fong tong*, "late dry season." During the growing season, however, it is necessary to define time more narrowly, and the general annual phases are replaced by shorter, lunar units: *tar pas*, "seed-time" (roughly equivalent to May); *tar kwos*, "weeding season" (June); *tar shweke*, "transplanting time" (July); *tar gwon*, "time of the second ridging" (August); and *tar swendyip*, "time of harvest" (September-October) (Wambutda 1978:124-127).¹⁷ Ngas note the onset of each lunation, moreover, by watching the place where the new moon rises along the horizon, and if they wish to indicate a specific month in the year, they do so by pointing to the correct spot on the landscape (see Fig. 4). They indicate in the same way the days of the month by marking the point of moonrise in the sky (see Fig. 5).

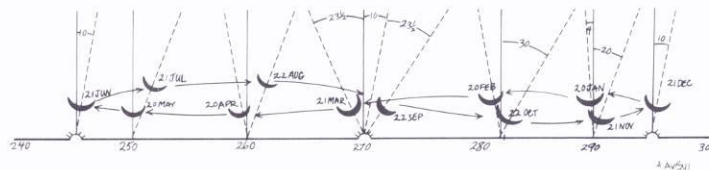
The Ngas calendar, then, is not an analytical one, divided for convenience into units of twelve months. Rather it is a pragmatic and participatory calendar through which lunar phenomena are perceived not so much as *time-keepers*, but as *time-makers*. The moon draws with its movements the flow of all natural life, and this pull is in a very real sense an experience in which each Ngas person shares.

For this reason one duty of the *golong kum* is to keep track of the moon's passage in the sky because its shifts determine the schedule of agricultural events. Most significant is the close of the old year and the start of the new. And in calculating with precision this point of ending and recommencement, the priest at Pus Tar realizes his crowning achievement as an astronomer.

THE MOON AS LIFE-GIVER AND LIFE-TAKER

In the Ngas view the lunar cycles of the heavens are replicated on earth in the life cycle of plants and the periodicity of menstruation. Birth, ripeness, death, and rebirth are figured in the waxing and waning of the lunar phases. The analogy reinforces the notion that the moon is both an active and conscious orchestrator of nature's reproductive potential and at the same time an agent of death. Life-giving and life-taking, creating and destroying, interarticulate to yield a dynamic paradox which lies at the core of the moon's symbolic sexuality. In Ngas thought life-giving is associated with womanliness and nurturing; life-taking with manliness and hunting. Man's relations with the moon may be understood in the framework of life-giving and life-taking, in other words in the relations between men and women.

Figure 4. Positions of the moon along the horizon at the latitude of 10 degrees North.



Man the Hunter

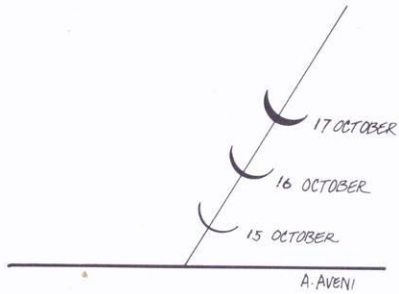
Ngas men farm, but their pride and self-definition go with the hunt. Tracking, spearing, and archery are skills they learn during male initiation. Circumcision is called *wwang*, "wash," and during this period the novice is transformed by a process described as analogous to being swallowed up and digested by the wong and then defecated as a creature newly born. At other times the novice is said to be "smelted" like iron, a technique whose practice is reserved for men. When the new men return home, their mother's brother gives each a spear and a round leather shield (Wambutda 178:97-101). The hunt also provides men's clothing; in the past and today on ceremonial occasions men wear leopard and hyena skins. Finally, men's preferred musical instrument is procured from game—a side-blown horn from the dwarf

buffalo. These images of manhood are on view in the men's meeting house where men prefer to spend daytime hours in the company of other men amid horns, skins, and beer jars.

Woman the Childbearer

Female imagery, on the other hand, fits into the category of life-giving and childbearing. A girl's passage into womanhood at initiation (*mbwa*) is expressed in botanical metaphors of fruitfulness and harvest. Her period of seclusion is devoted to gathering plants—"white head" for curing malaria, locust bean and baobab seeds, and the flesh of an orange creeper called *shannanyin*—to make the initiatory medicine *yin*. Novices carry the medicine to the farms of each compound head where it ensures the good growth of crops. The

Figure 5. The waxing moon.



kum fwan ("rain") is also associated with this rite of passage, and it is thought unusual for rain not to fall when mbwa is being observed. Finally women's dress, unlike men's, is an agricultural product; girls after puberty wore bunches of leaves called *mashal* which dangled for and aft from a waistband of fiber and beads.

Men contrast with woman because they are metaphorically stamped as being wild and undomestic, and in a certain sense a man is foreign to the home he builds for his wife. Although family residence is virilocal, Ngas

men do not own or keep their own houses; rather they build them for their wives. When men come to eat, converse, or sleep, they do so as visitors to the domestic domain.

*A Woman's House:
A Harmony of Function and Form*

The homes which Ngas women design and control are elaborate modular compositions of three to five thatched adobe roundhouses and granaries, all connected by a mud and stone wall. Their arrangement makes maximum use of external space, and at the heart of the household is an open courtyard which in the dry season provides an internal sitting area and storage for such everyday housewares as pots, ladles, and calabashes (see Figs. 6 and 7). A partial covering of sticks and grasses creates a half-shade over the courtyard and protects it from strong sunlight or rainfall. An entrance room (*nkaling*) is used for grinding grain, entertaining visitors, and sleeping; it opens onto the courtyard and gives access to other roundhouses, including a kitchen (*lu bwan*), a private storage area (*dirm*), and a sleeping room (*lu ter*) in which a woman rests with her small children, her daughters, or—if newly married—her husband.

Granaries differ depending on the sex and status of the owner, their anticipated use, their construction, and

Figure 6. A sitting place in the golong's compound. A granary stands behind the wooden bench carved without joins from a single log.

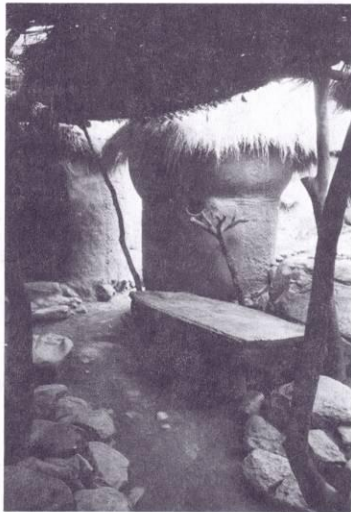
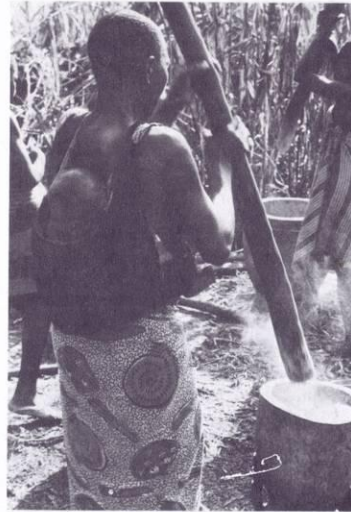


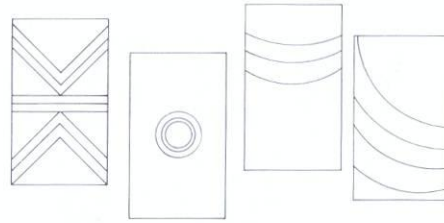
Figure 7. A woman pounds millet while her baby sleeps in a skin harness.



their content. The commonest type, owned by a man or a woman, is the *dyen les*, a reserve filled almost exclusively with threshed and winnowed grain used for ceremonial occasions, in time of famine, and—very rarely—for sale when the owner is in urgent need of ready cash. A woman is expected to feed her family from her own *dyer sun*, housing grain heads in the bottom and personal belongings in the top. The *songolong*, on the other hand, is a granary owned collectively by affines residing in close proximity. At the top are religious articles and heirlooms and in the bottom is a communal grain reserve set aside for visitors, famine, or ritual feasts.

The style and care of internal design set Ngas houses apart from other roundhouse architecture on the Plateau. In each home art and function are balanced in a number of built-in features made from clay (*wan*) and grass. Entrances to the *nkalng* and the *lu ter* are often protected by a ceiling-high windscreen (*gungun*) that projects halfway into the room. In older houses they are covered in deeply incised and moulded patterns of pure abstract design based on circles and straight lines executed in multiples of three or four (Fig. 8). Behind the screen a mud bed built into the wall shows similar moulding on its long, visible side. Near the ceiling horn-shaped forms called *shikar* project outward from the wall and curve up like fat, oversized hooks set in a row (Fig. 9). In men's meeting houses the mud horns are

Figure 8. Screen wall patterns.



often replaced by real ones taken as trophies from game. Whatever their material, the crescent-shaped *shikar* set below the rounded dome of the house are reminiscent of lunar curves. If the message is intended, it is one which the Ngas convey visually and without specifying the connection in words.

"Sons of One Father,"
"Sons of One Mother"

A house is looked upon as a woman's personal property. If she leaves her husband and moves to another village, another woman does not take up residence in the home she has abandoned. Unless she has chosen another husband, the woman usually returns to her pat-

Figure 9. Mud crescents called *shikar* project from the walls of an Ngas roundhouse.



rilinage, or *jep pup*, which may be literally translated as "sons of one father." There she may claim her share in the common property of her agnates: land to farm, seed, salt, grain, goats, horses, slaves, and kum. The *jep pup* may in turn expect to share in her bridewealth each time she marries. Ngas say, however, that the real

"owners of a child's life" are not the *jep pup* but *jep nin*, "sons of one mother." Of these cognatic relatives the mother's brothers are the most important. These are the "most cohesive of blood relationships in Ngas where maximum mutual trust in all spheres of human interaction is attained" (Wambutda 1978:65-66). In the past,

uncles were expected to avenge a nephew's death, and in the event that a member of the jep nin dies of natural causes, his cognatic relatives bury him and slaughter a cow or a goat as a grave gift.

Women and Politics

Political authority resides in the jep pup, and each patrilineage recognizes its membership in a *nyam* or exogamous clan named after its original home in the Ngas territory (Mohn 1958:458). In each hamlet the *nyam* is headed by a *gopopong*, "lord of the elders' sitting place." As a direct descendent of the clan's founding ancestor, he represents his relatives on the golong's advisory council, called the *miskam*. In each of the Nas village states the *miskam* selects the golong by assessing his wit and administrative skill. The golong is also associated by a *grikawa* (also known by the Hausa title, "Serikin Yaiki"), or "warlord," and by the golong kum, to whom the golong provides ritual objects, grain, and animals for sacrifice (Mathews 1931:38-39).

Women have few institutionalized roles in political and religious practice, and they are as a rule forbidden to enter cult houses, shrines, and meeting houses where men pass the day, nor may they view "naked" wong without running the risk of barrenness. Women are "polluting." They are blamed for such meteorological disasters as drought. Rituals performed for entreating

the return of rain require women to humble themselves publicly and cover their heads in ashes and broken calabashes to expiate their crime.

An important exception to the female exclusion from political or religious office is the female counterpart to the golong, the *maran*. A *maran* lives in the household of each golong, advises him, and performs or oversees such ritual duties as preparing *mos*, or food for sacrifice, and head-carrying loads of ritual objects to sites where wong are present. Few important decisions in the district are reached without the concurrence of the *maran* and, through her agency, the agreement of the adult women.¹⁸

Just as the *maran* enjoys some masculine powers and prerogatives, the golong is believed to be part feminine. In addition to exercising his authority as paramount ruler of the human community, he likewise influences in his feminine aspect the fertility of the natural world.¹⁹ In 1931 the anthropological officer Mathews observed:

It is of note that the Angas call their [golong] 'woman' (Mat) because he is like a woman in that just as a woman cannot have anything to do with the sacred rites or she would render them ineffective, so the [golong], if not in the right mood or if in a bad temper, will have the same effect on them. Also, in war he is not allowed to take active leadership for fear of his being wounded, and like a woman, he is protected by the men.²⁰

20

"Shooting the Moon": Taking the Moon's Life While Engendering a New One

Not only do Ngas men and women assimilate the moon to the golong, but they think about it as having an ambiguous sexuality; the moon is beneficent and protective, nurturing and feminine, but it may also show itself as hostile, aggressive, and masculine. Shooting the moon plays upon this paradox, for the golong kum addresses his object as a man would another, foreign man and at the same time as a man would his sexual opposite, a woman. For the symbolism of the ritual suggests that man is at once a life-taker, who sacrifices the old moon carrying last year's evil, and a life-giver, who fertilizes the life-giving moon as that grain so that children will be plentiful in the year to come.

ASTRONOMY: A TECHNIQUE FOR "MEETING" THE MOON

In Amper the Pus Tar takes place at harvest, the moment in the lunar calendar when the old year gives way to the new. According to oral tradition this ritual and the ceremonies that accompany it confirm the ancient relationships the Ngas established with the peoples they met and mixed with during their migration from Borno. Be-

cause proving these relationships seems to be the chief purpose of these traditions, they compete somewhat with the schedule of the ceremony itself; for they claim that six districts in order of seniority shoot the moon in turn from about July to December. The first district is Fur in faraway Borno, then Nyaklim in the Kanem area, and then Gwak in nearby Bauchi. These three Pus Tar, which no living Ngas has observed, are followed by Pus Tar rituals in the Ngas region. Amper is followed in order of settlement by Kabwir and Ampang concurrently, and last by the more distant district of Garram.²¹ Each moon shot, Ngas say, is performed in succession as the starting point for calculating the time of the next.²²

Timing is the key to ensuring the success of the ritual. The golong kum must schedule the Pus Tar for the evening immediately preceding the first sighting of the new moon.²³ The method of calculation was explained this way: On the first day following the Pus Tar event in the previous district, the golong kum ties a knot in a string for each of 28 days.²⁴ Then, as one man put it, "for about two days thereafter, the golong kum collects herbs in the bush. The temporal ambiguity of the response compensates for the irregularity of the interval separating the possible sightings of the new moon. Each lunar synodic period is 29½ days long, meaning that the interval between first sightings is likely to be 30 days, but may on some occasions be 29.

The moment at which the new moon can be sighted

21

| Event | Date | Moonset | Sunset | Twilight Ends |
|-----------------------|------------|---------|--------|---------------|
| New Moon | October 15 | 17:41 | 17:42 | 18:52 |
| Pus Tar | October 16 | 18:32 | 17:42 | 18:52 |
| Sighting (Mos Tar) | October 17 | 19:23 | 17:42 | 18:52 |

depends in some measure on the clarity of the atmosphere and on the age—and hence the thickness—of the lunar crescent. In all instances, however, a key precondition is darkness. Has the moon set before or after sunset? The new moon rises and sets at approximately the same time as the sun and, like it, appears to rise in the east and set in the west. Moreover, the moon rises and sets, on the average, 50 minutes later each day. On the Plateau, which is located at a latitude of about 10 degrees North, moonset on the first two days of the lunar synodic period occurs either earlier than sunset or at approximately the same time. In addition the brightness of twilight glow can limit the moon's visibility for as much as 60 minutes after sunset.

The chart above shows how these phenomena account for the scheduling of the 1974 Pus Tar in Amper. The ritual took place on October 16, the evening before the first sighting of the new lunar crescent. Times above are local times.

The golong kum must not only be able to predict the

time when the new moon may first be observed, but he must also be able to keep the event in step with the harvest. Because the solar, or agricultural, year is $365\frac{1}{4}$ days long, it cannot accommodate an exact number of whole lunar months. Twelve synodic periods, for example, total 354 days and fall short of the solar year, while thirteen synodic periods total $383\frac{1}{2}$ days and exceed the year. To keep his festival calendar synchronous with the seasons, the golong kum must intercalate. In 1972 Amper would have scheduled its Pus Tar for October 8, in 1973 for September 27, and in 1975 for October 6. All calculations made in scheduling these events are highly secret, especially to women.

Mos Tar as Observed in Amper

Pus Tar's symbolic significance is poorly matched by a poverty of pageantry and display. Shooting the moon, though the pivotal event in the Mos Tar festival, is a brief, semi-private, and desultory moment that comes at

22

the close of the Mos Tar season. Among the Ngas districts in which Mos Tar is observed, the precise content and order of events vary in minor ways, and the description below follows the observance as it takes place in the district of Amper.

Mos Tar is a week-long celebration in which rituals having different, but related, foci coalesce. In this period between old and new years men and women give thanks to the ancestors for the fruits of the harvest and prepare for renewal in the coming year. Both the human community and the natural world are cleansed of impurity. The festival week opens with the arrival of the "naked" Wong Ngwenji, the ancestral arbiter of misdeeds committed in the past year. He and the initiated men gather in the ancestral hamlet of the Ngwenji patrilineage and there elders "raise his voice" and expose evidence of witchcraft, greed, laziness, theft, miserliness, and adultery among residents of the district. Minor offenses are usually expiated by contrition and sacrifice, but serious crimes such as adultery may be met with ostracism or death. For three days Wong Ngwenji remains in the vicinity. Meanwhile preparations begin for cleansing the land.

Land-clearing is called *nawut*. The name means "placing custard apple leaves" (*wut*) on the ground to cool the earth's energy spent in the growing season. More specifically the term refers to a ritual that takes place after the clearing is complete. A herbal mixture is

poured into a small hole made in the ground; *wut* leaves are pressed on top with a stone, and then the whole doused with mos and sometimes animal blood. The act is done quickly and aggressively, and the actors—usually a sacrificer and a woman bearer—rush silently and hurriedly through the district to perform the rite at each *popong*, or sitting area, belonging to each clan. Clearing itself is done by the women. Houses, paths, roads, and farms are cleaned of refuse and stubble which is burnt and the ashes piled into tall, conical shapes called *nzo*. In part the purpose is to refertilize the ground with the waste product of the past season. At each crossroad, *popong*, and village area (*nefur*) the *nzo* announce the Mos Tar season. A broom thrust into the pointed top of each seems to prefigure the image of a spear "shooting" the moon.

Throughout the clearing (October 10-12) the maran has been brewing mos *nawut* to celebrate the end of the work. On the fourth day (October 13) the beer is ready, and the only area left unweeded is the very large *nefur* kept by the golong. Because the *nawut* is said to have been brought to the Ngas by forefathers from Nazam, women from any household in the district of Nazam ancestry are called in late afternoon to weed the *nefur* (Ames 1932:141). They weed with the same casual chattering and confusion observable on any farm. When the work is done, they make a small circle of stones in the *nefur* and place three hoes over it so that they radiate at

23

120-degree angles. Again the iconography of the circle and straight line is repeated. Now the women wait for the arrival of ancestors from Yergam, the wong ngang.

With the appearance of the ancestral visitors, the air grows electric. Three large conical figures dressed in guinea corn (*kas*) leaves are led up the rocky path to the golong's hamlet. They are preceded by the golong kum (called golong fwan, "lord of rains," in Amper) and the grikawa, or warlord. The wong ngang are benevolent advocates who protect the Ngas from wild animals or hostile enemies. Their presence at the Mos Tar preparations ensures the strict observance of custom and the consequent blessings for the coming year. The wong ngang enter the maran's compound and greet a gathering of elders in *ngang*, the Yergam tongue. An interpreter conveys their polite queries uttered in a low growl, and the grikawa replies with assurances that there has been no illness or crop failure in the year since their last visit.

In the presence of the ancestors routine acts are projected into a ritualized and self-consciously esthetic frame. The maran re-enacts the beer-making for the wong ngang. Taking a small quantity of first fruits, she mimes the brewing, pounding, then threshing, then soaking the grain. Satisfied with the preparation of their "beer," the ancestors enter the nefur to inspect the women's wedding. The women return to the arena and form ranks in which they dance and sing to a hoeing song,

and to show their pleasure the ancestors tap and sway to the music.

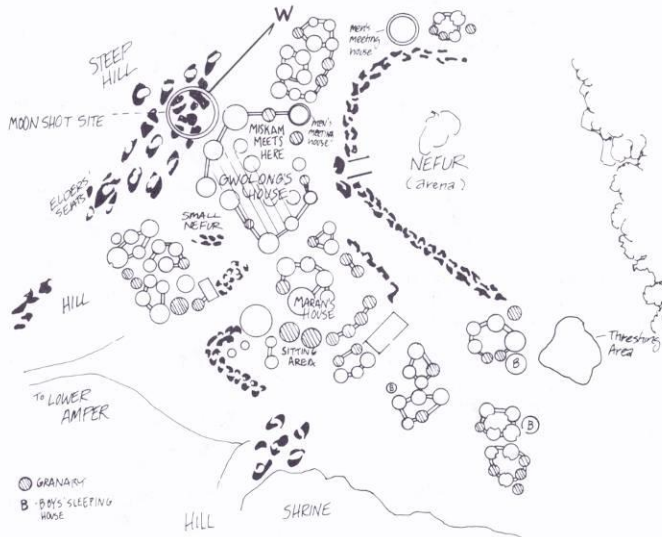
Immediately before their departure, the wong ngang engage in a mock battle with the golong fwan for possession of an arrow which he has handed them. The arrow is "strong," and as the wong make menacing gestures toward the golong fwan, he hastily retreats, uttering a cry of fright. The arrow grants the wong ngang the authority to inspect the countryside and confirm that it is cleared. It is also a "sign" that the Pus Tar is near.

The Pus Tar Ritual

Specific preparations for the Pus Tar begin on the morning of the rise of the new, but still invisible, moon (October 15). Unmarried boys from the ages of 8 to 15 are called by the grikawa to the moon observation site on the promontory above the golong's hamlet (see Fig. 10). There they "receive" (*la*) the moon. White cereal, either *acha* or rice flour, is blown on their face, left chest, left back, and left wrist. The left side is the ritual side of the body. White stands for the moon's light, and it is next delimited with circles of paint made from red oxide clay (*mbop*). A straight line running vertically down each forehead from the hairline to the tip of the nose prefigures the spear that will "shoot" the moon. Again the iconography of circles and straight lines appears.

Once painted the boys are called *jep tar mwa*, "sons

Figure 10. Observation site in the golong's hamlet, Amper.



of the moon," offspring of the moon's fruitfulness (Fig. 11). Each boy carries a half-hemispherical calabash, a millet stalk, and a switch. The gear is a childish forerunner of the shields, spears, and bows used by grown warriors and hunters. Indeed, rooted in the Ngas tradition is the notion that the *jep tar mwa* were once real head-hunters.²⁵ Today they undertake a mock raiding expedition resembling trick-or-treat and tour the village hamlets to ask for beer and to gather sheaves of millet and guinea corn on behalf of the *golong* who brews beer for the Mos Tar guests. "A long time ago," observed a man in Amper, "this tour would mean beating people and going away with them, but in present days this practice has been discarded."

Pus Tar is fixed for the time just after sunset on the next day (October 16). Although the moon is still invisible to human eyes, it is said "the animals in the bush" can see its light. The *jep tar mwa*, the *golong*, and the *miskam* (elders) gather round the moon observation site. Male participants carry calabashes filled with herbal medicine, pots of mos, two small drums (*kudi*), a shield, a long spear, and a baby chick. Behind them a woman carries a rolled mat containing a short ritual spear.

Taking the short spear, the *golong fwan* crouches behind a granite boulder and faces the western sky. Chest to back behind him crouches Pati, an apprentice priest, and last the *grikawa*. Clutching the spear close to his

Figure 11. *Jep tar mwa*, "sons of the moon," being painted for the Mos Tar.



26

chest, the *golong fwan* rests the shaft on the boulder and points toward the place where the moon will appear the next evening. The three men sing to the moon using a cult language which modern Ngas compare to the Jukun tongue. Because the moon is both prey and mate to man, the songs are at once taunting and entreating. The shot destroys the old moon and in the same moment engenders a new one. "Lie quiet," they appeal to the moon, "so that we can get you." The warn criminals in the past year, whose crimes are now ritually borne by the old moon: "All you who have some evil to bring, Ho! Where were you when we caught your brother (the moon)?" Songs also express thanksgiving: "Thanks to Nen for bringing us into this time. Now that we have plenty of corn, he who wants to drink, let him drink; he who wants to eat, let him eat." Then, crying "woo-wi-woo-wi-woo-wi," the ideophone figuratively propels (*pus*) the spear to its mark. After sacrifices of chicken and beer are made to the ancestors, the three shooters close the ceremony in a theatrical re-enactment of the shooting event. Each dons a hyena skin, takes a long spear and a round leather shield, and thrusts the spear into the sky. Their cries announce to the village below that the shooting is over. The residents take out their drums and buffalo horns and dance throughout the night.

On the following evening (October 17) a funeral feast is held called Pidur Tar, "burial of the moon." Men

and women come from all the Ngas districts to observe the event. As the *wong ngang* and *jep tar mwa* police the celebration, the mood is joyful. However, from time to time a celebrant breaks into a lament for a relative or friend who, like the old year, has passed away. This memorial is for the human community as well as the moon. A goat is touched to the ground three times and then removed to a shrine where it is slaughtered, and as the ground opens to receive the moon, the new moon appears in the sky (see Temple 1922:13-14).

Sites for Observing the Moon

Ngas are philosophical about the cycle of life and death. They refer to it continually in such formulaic statements as: "You have me here today, tomorrow it will be someone else," or "If I die today, another's born," and "If another's born, I die today." Mos Tar is the moment of the year in which people identify closely with the lunar cycle. Shooting the moon is an acknowledgment of the moon's protective and beneficial powers, and the rite, if properly performed, demonstrates that the human community understands the movements of the cosmic entity on which all life depends. If the shot is miscalculated (*pus lar*, "shot wrongly") and the moon fails to appear the next day, the error is man's, and when the harmonious accord between man and the

27

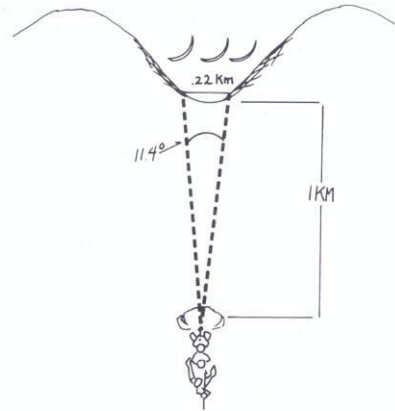
moon is ruptured, first the shooters and then others in the village become afflicted by cough and disease.

If the moon is prey and mate for man, then astronomy teaches about its movements and puts man on its track. Moon observation sites are the theatrical sets in which the symbolic drama between man and the moon unfolds. In Amper the three shooters crouch behind a rectangular granite boulder and aim 1 km. to the west at a valley between the Mbumber and Ngwenji Hills. The face of the boulder behind which the shooters line up is roughly perpendicular to the line of sight, and it is possible that the observatory was not found but created. In Amper people say only that the site was a place chosen by the forefathers and inherited from them.

In Kabwir, the site is a lowland spot to the southern edge of the golong's hamlet, and although it lacks any identifiable marker, the shooters are able to identify it immediately. Here the actors assume a triangular formation and raise bows and millet stalks to Cikwai Hill, about .5 km. away. In Dugung, located like Kabwir in the Ampang district, the golong kum and grikawa stand side by side behind a stone marker in which a deep groove has been cut. The apex of the groove aligns with Ampang Hill, about 2 km. away. One shooter holds a bow and arrow and the other a spear and shield.

A lunar observatory that aligns grassy spots with mountaintops or stones with valleys or points would seem rudimentary. But in one sense the inherent im-

Figure 12. Observatory in Amper showing the effect of the regression of the nodes.



cision of these natural sites is an advantage, for it accommodates the natural and regular fluctuations of the moon's path around the earth. This phenomenon known as the regression of the nodes produces an 11.4 percent variation in the moon's position in the sky at the meridian through an 18- or 19-year period (see Fig. 12).

28

In Amper these variations place the moon at a variable position within .2 km. or more—in other words, more than the length of two football fields. One might also consider another variation that occurs when the two or three shooters are viewing the moon along different lines of sight. Precision, it seems, is not only impossible under these circumstances, but not even sought after.

Symbolically, however, these observatories grant man the power to ensure that the moon remains a positive, beneficent force. Occasionally, however, astronomical phenomena go wrong. Eclipses, Ngas say, take place when the moon shows its "corner" rather than its "face." No data are available on the Ngas ability to predict eclipses, but human agency is required to bring the moon back. Mounting the rocky promontory at which the Pus Tar is annually held, they beat all of the chief's funeral drums, crying, "The Lord is dead," until it reappears as it does after the Pidur Tar burial.

Ngas also observe other heavenly bodies and claim to "read" human events in the stars. Shooting stars foretell a new marriage; falling stars mark the installation of a new chief. Seasons are noted by the position of the stars, and animals, who have "second sight," begin

to stir before dawn as soon as they see *melm bit*, the "morning star," Venus.

Iconographic reminders of the symbolic bond between mankind and the moon run through much of Ngas culture. They consist in variations of the pure circle and right-angled straight line, forms which depict the spear and the moon. In Mos Tar the iconography is clearly manifest in the conical ash heap and the straight broom, in the circle of straight-handled hoes, and especially in the gear of the "sons of the moon," who carry stalks, switches, and round calabashes. In the nurturing domestic domain screen walls (*gungun*) are decorated in mud relief patterns with variations on the theme of straight lines and curves (see Temple 1922:11-12). Meanwhile, crescents are suggested by the horn-shaped terracotta pegs (*shikar*) that ring the upper part of the wall in certain roundhouses. So, too, the Ngas facemask—the *ngas*—that runs down and curves across the fleshy part of the cheek is a reminder of the crescent. In the ngas a bit of moon is stamped permanently on man, "son of the moon."

29

NOTES

1. Personal communication, Gompil Gida, April 8, 1982, in Amper.
2. Ngas speakers gloss the word *pus* variously as "dig," "pierce," "project," or "penetrate." It connotes a vigorous thrusting action which results in the displacement of matter in the object that receives the action. For example, to "pour" a stream of liquid rapidly into a bowl is to *pus*.
3. The Ngas language is still viewed by many linguists as a marginal member of the Chadic language family. Jungraithmayr (1963) notes that Ngas exhibits features similar to Ibibio, a Benue-Congo language. Greenberg (1963) concludes that, while Ngas lacks four of his seven criteria for Chadic languages, a sufficient number of lexical correspondences warrant its consideration as a member of the family. Burquest (1973:v) states unequivocally: "Angas is a member of the Plateau Cluster of the Plateau-Sahel Group of the Chadic language family."
4. This figure is an estimate extrapolated from 115,000 Ngas reported in the most recent official Nigerian census of 1963.
5. Meek (1925), Ames (1932), and Mathews (1931) concludes from these traditions that the Ngas were forced out of Borno by pressures from the Bolewa around 1100 A.D. or possibly the Kanuri in about 1350. So far these interpretations are inconclusive and have been questioned by recent historians. Morrison dates the present settlement of the Plateau at the early part of the seventeenth century (Isichei 1982:15, after Morrison 1976). He notes "multi-

directional migrations of peoples . . . in recent historical times as well as a tendency by some of the first arrivals, for example the Angas and the Birom, to expand over considerable territory" (Morrison 1976:50).

6. The cultural distinctions between the Chip, Tal, Pai, and Kofyar are often blurred. Colonial observers, often reporting direct information from local commentators, note that the Tal and Pai "both appear to belong to the Ngas group of tribes, but how exactly they fit into it is still uncertain" (Ames 1932:147). Similarly, the Fier to the north are said to be "sometimes regarded as culturally related to the Angas" (Gunn 1952:118). Meanwhile the Goemai (Ankwe), south of the Chip, were said to "trace their origins to a certain Lekni, the son of the chief of Garram" (Middleton 1932:28, in Agi 1982:99). Linguistic evidence, however, often fails to square with claims of blood relationship, for Chadic and Benue-Congo speakers often co-exist side by side. For example, the Ngas place little historical weight on their close linguistic ties with Chadic speakers such as the Mwahavul (Sura), although Ames concluded independently that "their language is a dialect of Angas" and "their stock is ultimately Angas" (1932:126-127). H.B. James, Acting Secretary of the Northern Provinces, observed in his annual report of 1931 that the "Sura or Maghavul tribe is . . . an offshoot of the Angas" (James 1931:364). The Ngas, however, remark continually on their common parentage with Benue-Congo speakers such as the Yergam, who—according to one Ngas observer—are "so mixed up with the Ngas from earliest times that it would be most difficult to differ-

- entiate one from the other" (Wambutda 1978:11; also Banfa 1982:93). Even more important is a supposed common origin with the powerful Jukun, another Benue-Congo group, whom Ngas traditions associate with their historical enemies, the Kwip, from the seventeenth century empire of Kwararafa. Although these traditions refer to the Ngas and Jukun as "brothers," modern Ngas reject any blood connection (Wambutda 1978:23; personal communication from John A. Kwashi, Pankshin, April 13, 1982).
7. According to Ngas oral tradition, the slave trade is said to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century when a locust plague caused great hardship and famine (Isichei 1982:33). In general only women and girls were voluntarily sold, and the vendor was often a close relative who needed money quickly for a bride payment or other urgent purpose. Ngas males who became slaves were usually captured as small children in raids. The most common points of sale were in the regions of Tafawa Balewa, Boi, or Lere, all on the edge of the Plateau (Morrison 1982:193-194).
 8. In a study of armed conflict among the Kofyar, Netting concluded that head-hunting and warfare usually resulted from "a violation of reciprocal obligations linking groups of agnates or affines." Heads were taken only from non-kin and not from "brothers." Thus "if trouble broke out between villages in the same alliance, men might be killed but heads were not taken" (Netting 1974:150).
 9. The designation "Mat" is not common to all Ngas, al-

though Eriwwo (1977) claims that the term is found throughout the Pankshin Division, which embraces the greatest part of the Ngas region. Wambutda (1978:141) considers the usage peculiar to the dialect of Amper, adding "the usage is not universally recognized even in Per." A number of Ngas from hamlets outside Amper confirmed this observation.

10. Personal communication, Daniel N. Wambutda, April 1975, in Ile-Ife.
11. Golong Tau, April 1982, in Kabwir.
12. The connection between kingship and the moon occurs in cultures throughout Africa (Irstam 1944). Thomas alludes to it in his discussion of Benin astronomy (1919:180). The Jukun, whom the Ngas call "brothers" in oral tradition, view the king as an emanation of the moon. As Meek observes: "A number of titles are applied to the Jukun king which suggest the equation 'the king = the moon.' Thus he is called 'Wa-sú,' a phrase which apparently means 'He of the Moon.' If a Jukun wishes to say that the king had looked on him, or had given him an audience, he uses any one of the following expressions: 'Asó mbu za mi di,' 'Ambu só sam ki di,' or 'Asó ku mbu zuayou.' The first two mean 'The light of the full moon smote my body,' and the last means 'The full moon lighted the place.'" (Meek 1931b:123).
13. Personal communication, John A. Kwashi, April 8, 1982, in Pankshin.
14. The connection between the moon and menstruation was revealed to me with the following caution: "I am telling you a secret which I did not tell you before. They [the

- priests] will not tell you because you are a woman. If you were an Ngas woman, I would not tell you." For a discussion of the link between menstruation and the moon elsewhere in Africa, see Meek on the Jukun (1931b:125-126, 143) and Ten Raa on the Sandawe (1969:25).
15. Gompil Gida, April 8, 1982, in Amper.
 16. John A. Kwashi, April 8, 1982, in Pankshin.
 17. Evans-Pritchard similarly noted for the Nuer an "ecological" lunar calendar which is divided into longer or shorter temporal units according to variations in the "pulse of life." He says, "There are, so to speak, fewer points on the dry-season clock than on the wet-season clock so that the hands appear to move more slowly. . ." (Evans-Pritchard 1939:204).
 18. Mathews calls the institution of the maran a "matrilineal, Jukunesque, survival" (1931:38).
 19. The most striking symbol of the golong's personal influence on agricultural production is a hairlock worn especially by golongs in Chip and Garram. Inside the hairlock are stones that stand for the various crops cultivated in the region.
 20. Mathews goes on to say: "The above notes do not apply to the Hill Angas, who as stated above, founded their villages without any religious sanctions." Meek similarly emphasizes the bisexual status of the Jukun king, who "among all grown-up males is not subject to the pollution entailed by contact with a menstuous woman" (Meek 1931b:125).
 21. Meek recorded lunar rituals in several cultures throughout Nigeria's Middle Belt. Southeast of the Ngas, the

- Kam observed a ritual called "Detirra" at each new moon. Beer is brewed for the event so that it matures with the moon's "rising," and when the moon appears, libations of the brew are made along with prayers for the fruitfulness of wives and a successful hunt (1931a:542). The Zumu cult of Dagire involves a monthly ritual of libations and prayers against illness or sorcery. The observance takes place each month on which the new moon is first sighted (1931a:72-73). Meek also recorded an account from the Kuma of the Mambila Plateau. Each month at the appearance of the new moon a priest puts on a masquerade costume and performs a sacrifice asking the moon's favor against sickness and witchcraft. He dances in great leaps that reflect the strength of the growing moon. On the waning of the moon, the ritual is performed again as an inverse of itself; this time the dance is sluggish and lethargic, a mime of the moon's death.
22. In 1932, Cecil Ames noted that the "Tsafin Tar" (Mos Tar) celebrates the beginning of the new year and that the ritual rotated through the Ngas districts in the following order: Gyangyan in August, Amper in September, Kawir in October, and Garram in November (1932:139). He further alludes to a Mos Tar observance by the Jara and Seya in Bauchi province: "The Jarawa do theirs first and the angas and Seyawa then do theirs simultaneously" (p. 140). Gunn confirms this last observation (1953:104-104).
 23. The Yergam, who have a joking relationship with Ngas, josh them about the possibility that the moon will fail to appear. The good-natured ribbing points up the importance the Ngas attach to the accuracy of their astronomi-

- cal calculations and the beneficial influence the new moon will bring.
24. The string is made from the fiber of the runner bean *Vigna unguiculata*.
 25. The notion that the jep tar mwa were once full-grown

men is reinforced by the use of the word *jep*, which in common usage refers to adults aged 17 to 45. In Amper people claim that in Kabwir the jep tar mwa are in fact men, not boys. In Kabwir this claim was vigorously denied.

REFERENCES

- Agi, John Ola
 1982 The Goemai and their Neighbors: an Historical Analysis. In *Studies in the History of Plateau State, Nigeria*, Elizabeth Isichei, ed. London: Macmillan, pp. 98-107.
- Ames, Cecil Gerant
 1932 *Gazetteer of the Plateau Province*, compiled in 1932 by C.G. Ames. Recently abridged and revised by H. Hale Middleton. Jos: Jos Native Administration 1934. Repr. *Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*, John Ralph Willis, ed. Vol. IV: *The Highland Chieftancies*. London: Frank Cass, 1972.
- Banfa, Stephen
 1982 Towards a Yergam History: Some Explorations. In *Studies in the History of the Plateau State, Nigeria*, Elizabeth Isichei, ed. London: Macmillan, pp. 90-97.
- Bohannan, Paul
 1953 Concepts of Time Among the Tiv of Nigeria. *The Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 9(3):251-262. Repr. *Myth and Cosmos*, John Middleton, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1921, pp. 314-329.
- Burquest, Donald Arden
 1973 A Grammar of Angas. Unpublished dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Erivwo, S.U.
 1977 Nuer Zeitschrift für Missionssenskraft. Separat-Abdruck, CH-6405 Imensee, 33.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E.
 1939 Nuer Time-Reckoning. *Africa* 12:189-216
- Greenberg, Joseph H.
 1963 The Languages of Africa. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Part II, 29(1).
- Gunn, Harold D.
 1953 *Peoples of the Plateau Area of Northern Nigeria*. Ethnographic Survey of Africa (West Africa, Part VII). London: International African Institute.
- Isichei, Elizabeth, ed.
 1982 Introduction. *Studies in the History of Plateau State, Nigeria*. London: Macmillan, pp. 1-57.
- Irstam, Tor
 1944 *The King of Ganda: Studies in the Institutions of Sacred Kingship in Africa*. . . . Lund: Hakanohlssons Boktryckeri, for the Ethnographic Museum of Sweden Publications Series, Stockholm: N.S. 8.
- James, H.B.
 1931 NAI CSO 2/2/12601/Vol. IX. Plateau Province: Annual Report 1931.
- Jungraithmayr, H.
 1963 On the Ambiguous Position of Angas. *Journal of African Languages* 2(3):272-278.
- Mathews, A.B.
 1934 NAI CSO 26/2/29668. Report on the Angas and Kindred People of the Pankshin Division.
- Meek, Charles Kingsley
 1927 *Northern Tribes of Nigeria*, 2 vols. London: Oxford University Press.
 1931a *Tribal Studies of Northern Nigeria*, 2 vols. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.
 1931b *A Sudanese Kingdom: An Ethnographic Study of the Jukun-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.
- Mohr, Richard
 1958 Zur sozialen Organisation des Angas in Nord-Nigeria. *Anthropos* 53:457-471.

- Morrison, J. H.
 1976 Jos Plateau Societies: Internal Change and External Influences 1800-1935. Unpublished dissertation, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
 1982 Plateau Societies' Resistance to Jihadist Penetration. In *Studies in the History of Plateau State, Nigeria*, Elizabeth Isichei, ed. London: Macmillan, pp. 136-150.
- Netting, Robert Mc.
 1974 Kofyar Armed Conflict: Social Causes and Consequences. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 30(3):139-163.
- Temple, Olive
 1922 *Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*; Compiled from Official Reports, C.L. Temple, ed. Lagos, Nigeria: CMS Bookshops.
- Ten Raa, Eric
 1969 The Moon as a Symbol of Life and Fertility in Sandawe Thought. *Africa* 39(1):24-53.
- Thomas, N.W.
 1919 Nigerian Notes: Astronomy. *Man* 92:179-183.
- Wambutda, Daniel Nimcir
 1978 A Study of Conversion Among the Angas of Plateau State of Nigeria with Emphasis on Christianity. Unpublished dissertation, University of Ife, Nigeria.
 1982 Ngas Response to Christianity. In *Studies in the History of Plateau State, Nigeria*, Elizabeth Isichei, ed. London: Macmillan, pp. 242-253.
- Also of Interest*
- Foulkes, H.D.
 1907 NAK SNP 17/K3328, Some Preliminary Notes on the Angas.
 1915 *Angas Manual*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.

- Gonyok, Charles
 1971 Colonial Administration in Ngas, 1906-1937. Senior Essay, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
- Hogben, Sidney John, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene.
 1966 *Emirates of Northern Nigeria: A Preliminary Survey of Their Historical Traditions*.
- Jungraithmayr, H.
 1962a Film: Construction of a Zither. Marburg. 14½ min. Encyclopaedia Cinematographica E. 589.
 1962b Film: Dances and Rites After the Death of a Tribal Chief. Marburg. 12 min. Encyclopaedia Cinematographica E. 590.
 1964-1965 Texte und Sprichwörter im Angas auf Kabwir (Nordnigerien) [Angas Texts and Proverbs from Kabwir]. *Afrika und Uebersee* 48(1):17-35 and 48(2):114-126.
 1965 Materialien zur Kenntnis des Chip, Montol, Gerka, und Burrum (Sud-plateau, Nordnigerien). *Afrika und Uebersee* 48(3):161-182.
- Lynch, B.M., and L.H. Robbins
 1978 Namoratunga: The First Archaeo-Astronomical Evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Science* 200(4343):766-768.
- Netting, Robert McN.
 1964 Beer as a Locus of Value Among the West African Kofyar. *American Anthropologist* 66(3):375-384.
 1965 Household Organization and Intensive Agriculture: The Kofyar Case. *Africa* 35(4):422-429.
 1968 *Hill Farmers of Nigeria: Cultural Ecology of the Kofyar of the Jos Plateau*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
 1969 Kofyar Women's Weapons: The Politics of Domesticity Among the Kofyar. *American Anthropologist* 71:1037-1046.
 1972 *Kofyar of Nigeria*, 2 vols. New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files.

Ormsby, George
1914 The Angas Language. *The Journal of the African Society*.

Salacuse, Jeswald
1965 Angas Family Law. In *A Selective Survey of Nigerian Family Law*, pp. 19-28.

