

Jarosław Róžański, OMI*

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (Poland)

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL GIDAR FAMILY (NORTHERN CAMEROON) ON THE BASIS OF LOCAL ORATURE

Summary: Common to all of Africa is the attitude of the family towards procreation. It can safely be said that in the Gidar understanding, the family is more a community of mother and father than of husband and wife. The father was the unquestioned authority and traditional head of the family. The decisive voice was his, and everyone owed him absolute obedience. The woman clearly felt her inferiority, which was approved by all and confirmed by dozens of everyday, traditional rules of life. Children were a great gift, and their absence was a sign of a curse. Therefore there was no occurrence of orphans, in the sense of children being left without caregivers. Orphans were never abandoned; there was always someone who would take care of them. This does not mean that their life was an easy one. The deceased ancestors were still involved in the daily events of family life, especially at times of sowing and harvesting, initiations and of marriages.

Keywords: northern Cameroon, Gidar, African orature, the traditional family.

The Gidar¹ mainly inhabit the lands of the North Cameroon plateau, covered in the shrubbery of the savanna and small, isolated mountain ranges such as Hossere² Sorawel, Hossere Faourou or Hossere Bidzar and Hossere Heri. Through its center runs the Mayo Louti (*Angry River*) – which in the dry season almost completely disappears, while in the rainy season, its powerful current gathers water from several dozen other seasonal rivers, channeling them to the Mayo Kebbi and beyond to the great Benue River. The country of the Gidar straddles the border between Cameroon and Chad, encompassing many

* Address: Prof. dr hab. Jarosław Róžański, OMI, ORCID: 0000-0002-1678-2487; e-mail: j.rozanski@uksw.edu.pl

¹ The term “Baynawa” (compatriot, tribesman, “speaker of our language” – “Makada”) may be used as an endonym for the Gidar. The name “Gidar” most likely originates from French researchers, who spelled it “Guidar”, after the name of the town “Guider”, derived from the Gidar “g’dar” – “tireless”, “restless”. Other notations and names: “Guiddar”, “Giddar”, “Gidr”; “Koudak” (“Kudak”) in Daba and Giziga; “Marbun” in Fali.

² *Hosséré* – in Fulfulde, “mountain”. “Hosséré” became part of the name of individual mountains.

kilometers of savanna in the direction of Lake Léré. Currently, their population in Cameroon is approximately 170,000, and approximately 15,000 live in the territory of Chad.

There is only a rather modest amount of literature dedicated to the Gidar. The first extensive publication on the history of the region was the work of colonial administrator Jacques Lestringant. (Lestringant, 1964) The next important publication was authored by Chantal Collard, who conducted sociological research among the Gidar from April 1970 to April 1971. (Collard, 1971, 1973, 1977, 1980)³ The most extensive study of the culture (especially religion) of the Gidar was the publication of Antoni Kurek OMI, entitled *Beliefs and rituals of the Gidar, people of North Cameroon: a historic-hermeneutic study*,) based on research of that region conducted from 1976–1977. (Kurek, 1988) Also worth of mention is the contribution of Polish missionaries to the development of literature in the Gidar language⁴. A fruit of this was the publication of a Gidar-language grammar, first published in only a dozen or so copies on a mimeograph in Figuil in 1993. (Kozioł – Manglé, 1993) That same year, a new translation was begun in Lam of the Mass readings for Sundays and feast days. The outcome of this years-long work of the Polish missionaries and their co-workers was the publication of three liturgical lectionaries and an abbreviated Roman Missal as well as translations of the New Testament (*Əmanman Meleketeni*, 2008) and the Psalter. (*Psaumes na Makada*, 2015) The first professional grammar in the Gidar language came out in 2008. Its author was the linguist Professor Zygmunt Frajzyngier of the University of Colorado, USA. (Frajzyngier, 2008)

The purpose of this article is, first of all, to show human and Christian values in the life of the traditional Gidar family. For, after all, the attitudes of family members depend on the foundations and values upon which the family is built. The task of evangelization, therefore, is to form Christian habits in the family within the specific cultural system. Many elements of the cultural system form preparation for the acceptance of the Gospel. These need to be discovered and enhanced. For it is through community, and especially through the community of the family, that values are transmitted most smoothly and permanently.

³ The fruit of her research was a doctoral dissertation submitted at the Paris X Nanterre University, entitled *Organisation sociale des Guidar ou Baynawa (Cameroun septentrional)*, [ms] Paris 1977.

⁴ The evangelization of the Gidar began in 1948. In 1970, the Polish Oblates of Mary Immaculate joined in this very actively.

The family as the basis of individual and social life

The traditional societal structure permeates all areas of life. However, its foundation is the extended family, based on blood ties. Upon meeting someone, the person is not classified by his profession or place of origin, but by kinship. The family consists of a father, a mother or mothers, and unmarried children.

Marriage is not an individual matter, a choice made by young people. It is an alliance between two (in the broad sense of the word) families. Thus, the choice of a partner is not made by the young people but by their families. This is associated with many difficulties for the young and even with resistance. The fairy tale “A Man and His Daughter” tells of this. A man has a daughter whom he decides to give in marriage to a rich man. He builds a little house for her and locks her up in it. But he is unable to find a suitable rich man for her. Meanwhile, the daughter, despite being imprisoned, finds a lover and becomes pregnant with his child. When the father finds out about this, he goes mad. It is necessary to tie him up. (Kozioł, 2001, p. 65)

The attitude of the family on procreation

Common to all of Africa is the attitude of the family towards procreation. We can boldly state here that ‘family’, in the concept of the Gidar, is more a community of father and mother than of husband and wife. Children are a great gift, and a lack of them is a sign of being cursed. Anyone dying childless was not deserving of funeral rites. Children ensured the continuation of the family and the tribe; they were protection for its future in terms of both defense and work. Consequently, there were no orphanages in this region, in the sense of children being abandoned. Orphans were never abandoned; someone was always found to look after them. For this reason also, the Gidar treat numerous offspring as something highly fortunate. The more children, the better. An only child, like any child, is exposed to illness and misfortune. It is easy to lose him, and then the house will have no children at all. This mentality has been entrenched for centuries: that the one who has many children has strength. He is also rich. The Gidar proverb applies to him: “Awrayan dara dɛf nok sa – You cannot die of hunger among your own, and also: “An dɛɖar akok bana anga kɛda ɛsɛnɛŋ na kɛwuka di – Until you have experienced great difficulties in life, you cannot appreciate the value of having children”. (Douffissa et al., 2009, p. 69–70)⁵

⁵ Their neighbors the Gisiga have similar proverbs, such as *Mangal hana dafuk da kiri – A small child can give the dog its porridge*; that is to say, that even the youngest offspring can be useful. Comp. (Róžański 2000, p. 21)

This, however, does not mean that orphans within the (broad-sense) family are not without problems. The fairy tale, “A Boy and His Sister – Orphans”, for example, tells about this. There was a man with a wife and two children, a little boy and a little girl. His wife dies. He takes another woman as a wife. She despises his children, being stingy with their food and giving them hard work to do. One day the boy says to his sister, “Let’s run away into the bush because here we are suffering very much”. And so they do this. They are forced to separate because of wild animals and lose contact with each other. The boy makes his way to a village where a group of men are talking about a wild beast which has been devouring people. “Whoever kills it will become our leader”, they decide. The boy kills the beast and becomes the chieftain of the village. He takes several wives and has many children. His sister finds him. She has been sick. He takes her in and restores her to health. (Kozioł, 2001, pp. 54–55)

The child is also necessary in order that his parents may become immortal. This is associated with an obligation of the children to carry out the prescribed funeral rites. Without these rites, the deceased is exposed to posthumous wandering, during which he may harm those living on earth, especially members of his own family. Having descendants who perform the funeral rites, the deceased can achieve ‘salvation’ – becoming an honored ancestor and retaining the strength of life. Hence, the Gidar proverb says that – *Uwa miha na əmtayi* – “to beget is to be rescued from death”. (Douffissa et al., 2009, p. 68) Children remain a part of their parents on earth, remembering them after death.

The family as the basis of the economy and solidarity

The economic foundation was also based within the extended family, for production and consumption were balanced within its bosom. As a rule, the family strove to be self-sufficient. From this arose the injunction to provide assistance and solidarity. Goods were produced collectively and designated for meeting the needs of all family members, including the weakest – the elderly and the infirm. As a result, work was greatly valued. From their earliest years, boys and girls began little by little to work under the eye of older siblings and adults. (Róžański, 2015 pp. 183–202)

Each member of the family was obligated to serve the others, and for this reason individual qualities such as strength, courage, cleverness, endurance, etc., did not have much significance if they were not used in serving others. Particularly important virtues and characteristics were those associated with the -life of the group, such as thoughtfulness, sharing and the related need for self-sacrifice and respect for the elders and for one’s older siblings.

Members of the family could not be easily harmed because if one were attacked, solidarity demanded that the others rush to his aid: “*Əlfa appan zən sa* – You cannot disown the blood of the family”. (Doufissa et al., 2009, p. 69) In the case of death, the family member must be avenged. It was undoubtedly a certain ideal. Gidar fairy tales also tell of the breaking of these principles. This happens, for example, in the tale of “The Merchant and His Wife”. There was a rich old merchant. His wife decided to poison him and seize his fortune. She got some poison from her parents. When he came home one day, he was followed by a thief. The thief snuck into the house after him. The wife was preparing the meal and murmured under her breath: “Now I will kill my husband, and then I will be rich”. The thief heard this. When the merchant sat down to his meal, he heard a voice: “Old man, don’t eat this food!” The merchant looked around, he went outside, but did not see anyone. This happened several times. In the end, the thief showed himself and told him the truth. “Tell her to taste it herself”, he advised the merchant. And that is what he did. The wife refused to taste the meal. So then he sent her back to her parents, and rewarded the thief. (Kozioł, 2001, p. 59)

Polygyny and family relationships

Polygyny is not uniform among the Gidar. Formerly, it was commonly understood that its source was essentially male profligacy. Without negating this, it must be pointed out that the existence of polygyny also resulted from prestige, tribal politics, solidarity, business or levirate law, which was also important for women, as life as a single woman was unthinkable and not accepted by society. Polygyny existed as well, resulting from infertility in a first wife. Wives in polygamous marriages did not have equal status. The first wife – not necessarily the oldest – received the status of the chief, ‘greatest’ wife. She directed the other wives in housework and other activities. She divided the duties among them and saw to it that everything was properly carried out. She also acted as an intermediary between the husband and the other wives and vice versa. The atmosphere in the compound, and the daily life of its members, depended to a large extent upon her. The first wife was most often the husband’s confidante. In addition, only she, when the husband was absent, had the right to enter his granary and take food from it for preparing meals. It was also her privilege to serve her husband his meals, even if they were prepared by others of his wives. The second wife also enjoyed some privileges and, more rarely – and this was usually in the families of the leaders – the third, as well. The rest were equal among each other. In everyday life, however, these rules were much

weakened by younger wives, often favored by the head of the family. This often led to tension, sometimes with tragic consequences. (Róžański, 2004, pp. 228–232) The fairy tale “The Orphan and Her Little Brother” is about this. There was a man with several wives. Among them, there was one whom he loved much more than all the others. The other wives were very jealous of her. They decided to get rid of her. They lured her to the river and pushed her into its depths so she would drown. Returning home, they took her baby with them and said to the master of the compound⁶: “Your wife, whom you love very much, fell into the water and drowned. Here is the child she left behind”. (Kozioł, 2001, p. 31–32)

Although polygyny was a symbol of wealth and of the aspiration of many men, and despite this accepted pattern, monogamous marriages constituted the majority, mainly for economic and demographic reasons, as taking another wife was associated with the possession of considerable capital. Most women lived and continue today to live in monogamous unions.

Contemporary changes in the African family

Despite the preservation of many values in the life of traditional, large families in villages, these families experience many difficulties and the obsolescence of traditional institutions due to socio-economic changes affecting rural communities. This problem stands out very sharply in urban family life. Through encountering a new world of western-type economy, society, and culture, the traditional family and the whole community have lost its their cohesion and position. Traditional values are fading away, without new ones blending into their lives. The disintegration of traditional social structures is well illustrated by the loss of the elders’ authority. This is accompanied by the redevelopment of the countryside and by migration, caused mainly by economic factors and new infrastructure, particularly a new road network. Not insignificant to this process of disintegration are also changes taking place due to the introduction of state structures and government administrative bodies.

In contrast with the traditional family, tendencies of narrowing down the extended family are clearly visible. The school also exerts its influence on the traditional family.

The place where traditional social structures meet up against new western type structures is, without doubt, the urban environment. Here a clash of these two types of communities, and at the same time, two styles of life takes place,

⁶ “Master of the compound” (*sare*): in other words, their husband. This title is also an illustration of the internal relationships within marriage.

with new problems such as a generation gap, religious quarrels, changes in mentality, the phenomenon of marginalization, etc. However, it is economic changes which appear to be of fundamental importance, especially the transition from the system of economic self-sufficiency to the system of production-for-sale.

Valuing fidelity in marriage

Tradition also greatly cherished marital fidelity. Extramarital relationships were greatly stigmatized. Many tales address this, usually directing attention to the infidelity of wives. In the tale of “The Woman and Her Lovers”, there is a clear condemnation of extramarital relations. The plot of this tale is simple. There is a man who goes away on a long trip. His wife sets up three dates, all of which will take place after sunset but at different times of the night. While the first one is taking place, her husband returns home unexpectedly. So the wife hides her date in the henhouse. When the other two come, she does the same thing. And in the henhouse, an angry hen pecked each of them in turn. They thought it was the bite of a snake. (Kozioł, 2001, p. 4) A similar thing happens in the tale of “The Woman and Her Two Lovers”, confirming the stereotype that a man is not able to discover the designs of his wife and that she – being a woman – cheats on him continually. As in the first tale, the man tells his wife that he is going on a long trip. But he doesn’t do this. This time, the wife has invited her two lovers to come and visit her. Although they hide, things do not go well for them. They depart with injuries. (Kozioł, 2001, p. 36)

Discrimination against women in family life

The undisputed authority and head of the traditional family was the father. His was the deciding voice, and all owed him unconditional obedience. Women clearly felt their inferiority, sanctioned as it was by all, and confirmed in dozens of everyday, traditional rules of life.

Discrimination against the position of women in the traditional family, as well as the undermining of the dignity of women in its essential dimensions, covered many areas of everyday family life, especially in the cities. The inequality of the spouses’ relationship is illustrated by numerous examples of daily life: “Do you ever have conversations, eat a meal together?” The response to such questions was amazement: “Eat together with one’s husband? Oh, no, never! Besides, we don’t eat the same food. When the husband is eating, no one

has the right to disturb him. Normally it is he who calls for someone if he wants to talk with them. You come and stand before him trembling since you never know why he has called for you”. (*Témoignage sur la famille*, 1989, p. 25) Similar relations in the traditional family are confirmed by statements of the children. “What kind of climate dominates in your home, between your parents?” – “Mamma is very different from father. She loves us. We talk to her, and we eat together. She repeats to us that women must be obedient”. (*Témoignage sur la famille*, 1989, p. 25) If the wife were performing her duties poorly, the husband would not hesitate to use physical force against her to remind her of her responsibilities. The husband’s prestige in the village depended on this domination. It often led to abuse of the husband’s authority. Beatings would take place, as well as prohibitions from leaving the compound. If the wife were to break such a prohibition, the husband could force her to sleep outside the house.

Although the position of women in the urban environment has changed somewhat, a new type of discrimination has emerged. In cities, the role of head of the family is often being taken over by women. This is happening due to the impermanence of the marriage bond in the urban environment and a weakening of the feeling of solidarity. For this reason, too many women are forced to provide a basic living for their families. They however have problems with employment. Their sphere is, therefore, one of the minor services and professions associated with marketplaces, streets, and train stations: producing souvenirs to sell, small useful items, vending, and operating food spots. An even greater number of women can be observed in this informal sector of the economy than men. (Cf. Barbier, 1985)

There are numerous cases of abuse, moreover, of women, affecting different ways of being a ‘woman’. This is manifested in the objectification of her body, sold for money, beer, or a job; undermining her dignity and vocation as mother and life-bearer through the practice of abortion, and the destruction of the moral and spiritual dimension of her life by depriving her of the role of educator within the family environment. (Cf. *Identification...*, 1994, pp. 4–11)

The Gospel as an opportunity for changing family relationships

There are certainly many values to be found in the life of a traditional Gidar family. These include, for example, strong societal bonds. Each member of the family was obligated to serve the others, and so individual qualities such as strength, courage, ability, endurance, etc., were of little significance if they were not put in service of others. Virtues of particular importance and value were

those related to community life, for example, generosity, sharing and its associated necessity of renunciation, and respect for the elders and for older siblings. The life of the traditional family revolved around the authority of the elders and around the principles of equality and solidarity, which regulated relations between members of the same age group. In a traditional family, belief in God was not disputed, nor also the presence of an invisible world of ancestors, spirits and deities. Religion was an essential foundation for family ties. Everyone knew what must be done and what was forbidden. Despite the preservation of many values in the life of traditional, large families, today they experience many difficulties, and traditional institutions are becoming obsolete due to cultural changes.

The Christian family tries to find a place for itself both in the traditional Gidar family model as well as within the process of social, economic and political changes affecting all. It would seem that local tradition is an obstacle in establishing Christian families. Contemporary changes appear to facilitate the process. Christian families are characterized by, *inter alia*, greater openness to the coming of change, slowly replacing the authority of the husband and the strict hierarchy with family dialogue, praying together, joint financial management, planning out work and expenditures, etc.

Features characteristic of the Christian family often expose it to accusations of disregarding local tradition, especially the hierarchy of the traditional family. The custom of polygyny is undoubtedly a barrier to the creation of Christian families.

The great difficulty in building a Christian family also comes from the tradition of paying a matrimony fee when getting married. Today financial practices associated with matrimony fees treat the woman more as an object to buy and sell, offending her dignity. Very often, a husband will remind his wife that “I paid a lot for you”. It also happens that girls have problems finding husbands due to excessive marriage fees; this happens especially in urban areas. (Cf. *Relations nouvelles...*, 1975, pp. 28–32; *La vie en couple*, 1995, p. 8)

The Christian concept of the family is certainly an opportunity to heal these relationships. John Paul II speaks of this in his exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, issued after the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. We read in this document that the Synod found regrettable those African customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect they deserve; it also recommended that the Church on that continent should act to protect these rights. (Cf. John Paul II, 1995, n. 121)

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Relacje w tradycyjnej rodzinie Gidarów (północny Kamerun) na podstawie lokalnej kultury oralnej

Streszczenie: Regulacja zachowań prokreacyjnych jest jedną z podstawowych funkcji rodziny, dlatego tak ważny i wspólny w całej Afryce jest stosunek rodziny do urodzeń potomstwa. Można śmiało powiedzieć, że w Gidarskim rozumieniu rodzina jest bardziej wspólnotą matki i ojca niż męża i żony. Ojciec był niekwestionowanym autorytetem i tradycyjną głową rodziny. Decydujący głos należał do niego i wszyscy byli mu winni absolutne posłuszeństwo. Kobieta wyraźnie odczuwała swoją niższość, co zostało przez wszystkich zaaprobowane i potwierdzone przez dziesiątki codziennych, tradycyjnych zasad życia. Dzieci były wspaniałym darem, a ich brak przekleństwem. Nie było więc sierot, w sensie dzieci pozostawionych bez opiekunów. Sieroty nigdy nie zostały porzucone; zawsze był ktoś, kto się nimi zaopiekował. Nie oznacza to, że ich życie było łatwe. Zmarli przodkowie nadal byli zaangażowani w codzienne wydarzenia życia rodzinnego, zwłaszcza w czasie siewu i żniw, inicjacji i małżeństw.

Słowa kluczowe: północny Kamerun, Gidar, oratura afrykańska, tradycyjna rodzina.

