

## TRICKSTER-GOD GHAMBAGEU AND SONJO RESISTANCE TO CHRISTIAN MISSION

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The Sonjo are a Bantu-speaking ethnic group of over 20,000 members in the Ngorongoro district of Northern Tanzania. They are the only notable minority group in the Maasai-dominated district.<sup>1</sup> They call themselves *Batemi* (sg. *Mtemi*), which means agriculturalists referring to their lifestyle. Sonjo is a nickname given by the Maasai, which has been taken by Germans, and eventually other foreigners, as the name of the group.<sup>2</sup>

Christian mission has been largely unsuccessful among the Sonjo in spite of almost six decades of mission and the resources dedicated to that work. In spite of some sporadic attempts, Islam has not been able to succeed even to the extent that Christianity has: the only mosque in the area has only one local worshipper, who has been hired to pray in it. This article attempts to examine factors which have contributed to the strong resistance of Sonjo traditional religion to Christian mission.

One may sketch a number of dimensions behind this resistance: weaknesses and lack of continuity in Christian missionary efforts,<sup>3</sup> ethnic and cultural tension between the Sonjo and the Maasai, power structures of the Sonjo community and the conscious tactics of Sonjo leaders to minimise the influence of foreign religions.

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<sup>1</sup> Potkanski & Adams 1998: 87; [http://ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=SOZ](http://ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=SOZ) 11.10.2004; <http://www.ambhospitals.org/pages/introa.html> 11.10.2004. The total population of the district was 129,362 in the 2002 census (<http://www.tanzania.go.tz/census/districts/ngorongoro.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> *Kutema* means to till the land (Gabriel Kimirei fd 07.11.2003). 'Sonjo' is the name of a type of beans that they grow. See Rong'ola 1976: 9; Iversen 1984: 2. The interviewed Sonjos called themselves *Batemi* and their language *Kitemi* also when speaking in Swahili. However, the name Sonjo has been established in literature, as well.

<sup>3</sup> On these, see Iversen 1984: 7–14. The inadequacies of Christian missionary efforts will not be covered in this article, but the emphasis will be laid on internal factors in the Sonjo community.

This article is based on group discussions conducted in the villages of Samunge and Digodigo 7.–8.11.2003 with some leaders and other members of the Sonjo community, both of the Christian pastors working in the area, one Lutheran and one Pentecostal. A group of students of theology from Makumira University College participated as visitors in the discussions. There were also three lecturers present, I being one of them. The visiting group put questions to the local people, who answered in a discussional manner, interrupting each other from time to time. The visitors very seldom asked anything else but clarifying questions, and in a few cases a brief but lively dialogue developed. The language of discussion was Swahili, which all parties in the discussion were able to speak fluently. I wrote notes in a field diary (fd) on the spot by hand in Swahili and Finnish as fast and as accurately as I could. In a group discussion it was not possible to return to every detail as the debate continued. I typed the field diary after the journey, adding a few things I remembered from the discussion but which I had no time to write down at the time. We held a number of sessions with the students after the group discussions to elaborate on their outcome. I visited Samunge briefly after Christmas of the same year mainly to check details, like the spelling of words and whether I had understood things correctly, and to continue having a good personal relationship with the Lutheran pastor and traditional leaders of Samunge. I had an opportunity to get information on the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the area by discussing with the priest of Loliondo parish during his visit in Arusha. That parish covers the whole of the Sonjo area.

Some of the religious traditions of the Sonjo are secret, and the discussions were partly overshadowed by fear. The Christian pastors were careful in what they said, and so were the Sonjo. The Sonjo leaders told us about their religion only when all of them were present, which ensured that none of them overstepped their boundaries. Telling outsiders the wrong things may put the 'leaker's' life in danger, so in some places I have had to withdraw the name of the source, and I will use only a specific piece of secret knowledge that is needed for the results of this article. Even in those cases I preferably refer to existing literature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A man who told some of the secrets of the community died, and his death was interpreted as a result of a curse. Even a very random-looking death of a man robbed and killed by a Somali mob was interpreted as an outcome of revealing secrets. (Robert Mallya, fd 07.11.2003.) The Lutheran pastor of Samunge, Robert Mallya, said that he had almost got killed when showing a film about Jesus in the village of Kisangiro. A man of the village, armed with a machete, attempted to attack him from behind but the other villagers stopped him. Rev. Mallya is not a Sonjo but comes from elsewhere. The Catholic priest, Pius Msuya, also emphasised that it is dangerous to live in the Sonjo area as a Christian if you disagree with Sonjo traditions (interview with Pius Msuya 05.11.2004).

## CHRISTIAN MISSION AMONG THE SONJO

Lutherans were the first to establish a regular mission among the Sonjo in 1947. Until then the Sonjo had been quite isolated behind large Maasai areas that had very few roads. The Lutheran church began to gain members at a relatively early stage, but, though the number of baptised has been increasing, the number of practicing Christians has remained very small.<sup>5</sup> For example, two of the traditional leaders of Samunge maintained that they are Lutheran Christians, but after they had left, the pastor pointed out that he has never seen them in a church service. He agreed, however, that they may have been baptised a long time previously.<sup>6</sup>

The attendance at Sunday services is very low among the Sonjo in comparison to the attendance/member ratio in other parts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT). The great majority of the few churchgoers are women and children. In particular, during the traditional rituals of the Sonjo the men do not participate in church services at all, and the number of women and children decreases considerably, as well. Young men (*batana*) who have been initiated no longer dare to go to church because of fearing a curse.<sup>7</sup> Initiation includes a blood pact in which one promises to keep the secrets<sup>8</sup> and possibly one also promises to be faithful to the traditions. Two of the few Lutheran pastors who rose from among the Sonjo died quite soon after becoming pastors, which was counted as a result of the curse.<sup>9</sup>

The second Christian denomination in official figures is the Roman Catholic Church, which arrived in 1952 with American missionaries.<sup>10</sup> The most visible part of the Roman Catholic activities is the Digodigo Hospital, which started as a dispensary.<sup>11</sup> It has the only Catholic church in the area with a lay-led active group consisting of almost only immigrants from other areas. There might be up to a thousand baptised members in the area but only three families are staunchly Christian. In addition to this, there are a number of confessing women.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See statistics in Smedjebacka 1973: 299–301; Iversen 1984: 8–9; Iversen 1981: 177, 183.

<sup>6</sup> *Wenamijie* fd 07.11.2003. *Wenamijie*, or traditional leaders of Samunge interviewed are: Daniel Sadoya, Peter Dului, Biobio Nledio, John Mengo and Ngarasayya. Three of them having 'Christian' names refers to a possible baptism at some point.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Mallya fd 07.11.2003. *Mwanamijie* Peter Dului's comment: 'We have nothing against our children coming to church' (fd 07.11.2003) may be true for the uninitiated boys.

<sup>8</sup> P2.

<sup>9</sup> Kimirei fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>10</sup> Iversen 1984: 11.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ambhospitals.org/pages/introa.html> 11.10.2004.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Pius Msuya 05.11.2004. Iversen 1981: 183 sets the number of baptised

Pentecostal pastor Paulo Belelo (Tanzania Assemblies of God) has been working in Digodigo from 1996. According to him, there are more than a hundred active members in his congregation.<sup>13</sup>

All in all, Christian influence in the Sonjo society is very small due to the insignificant number of active Christians and the fact that even the churches as organisations have little effect on the community except Digodigo Hospital.

### THE POWER STRUCTURES OF THE SONJO COMMUNITY

Most of the Sonjo live in a fertile valley surrounded by hills. The area is semi-arid, and agriculture is mostly based on irrigation through a web of furrows regulated by sluices fed by either springs or a river. The fields are watered on a rotational basis. There is plenty of fertile land, but water is scarce. Even if there were plenty of rain in a given period, the lack of roads limits the only possible market to the little town of Loliondo. The irrigation system is maintained by communal labour in which every man in the community has to participate in order to avoid a fine.

The power structures of the Sonjo community are based on the central role of water. Traditional leaders, *wenamijie*, or the sons of the village, form the governing boards of the Sonjo villages which control water and the trees. The leaders are equal among themselves.<sup>14</sup> One of the leaders equated the power of the leaders as having the power over water.<sup>15</sup> In practice, through distributing water, the leaders decide how much each farmer will harvest. The first users will be the *wenamijie* themselves, the leading men of the original families in the village, who inherit the position. Inheritance within the family depends, however, on the man's personal qualities such as wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

Another group that has the right to obtain water are the younger *wenamijie*, men of the original families that are not members of the council of *wenamijie*. They are followed by *wakiama*, who have no hereditary right to the water, but are clients of the system paying tribute, traditionally in the form of a goat, to the *wenamijie*, who sacrifice it and eat the meat.<sup>17</sup> The rest of the people depend on

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Catholics at 1000, already in the late 1970's, the number of baptised Lutherans being estimated to be double as much.

<sup>13</sup> Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Dului, Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Dului fd 07.11.2003: 'Wenamijie ni wenye maji.' See also Gray 1963: 61; Potkanski & Adams 1998: 98.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Dului, Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003; Rong'ola 1976: 40–41; Gray 1963: 58–60, 80–81; Potkanski & Adams 1998: 99.

<sup>17</sup> Gray 1963: 59–61; free discussion with *wenamijie* 07.11.2003.

the surplus water provided by the abovementioned groups, usually against remuneration.

Those who have no possibility of getting irrigation water depend on irregular rains and often miss crops. The alternative is to steal water by making a temporary hole in the earth wall of an irrigation furrow during the night. If caught, you are required to pay one goat to the *wenamijie*. In the 1950's the attitude toward stealing water seems to have been quite liberal, but today it has become stricter due to population growth and the subsequent scarcity of water.<sup>18</sup>

When there is plenty of water, the system functions well because, on the one hand, the *wenamijie* are just, as there is no temptation to deprive anyone of water. On the other hand, the *wenamijie* can control the system by efficient sanction: by denying water. When water is scarce, the functioning of the system is endangered from the core; the *wenamijie* can charge increasing fees for water, thus privatising the communal property and accumulating personal wealth. There has been an ebb and flow of this tendency in Samunge, and at the moment the *wenamijie* seem to be able to privatise water once again and charge money for it.<sup>19</sup>

## RELIGION, GOD AND GHAMBAGEU

It seems likely that the Sonjo religion was at some point similar to many other monotheistic Bantu religions. Some of the Sonjo prayers are directed to God whereas others are to Ghambageu. When asked, the *wenamijie* told us that they worship God and Ghambageu.<sup>20</sup> In practice, however, Ghambageu has become more central in the religion of the Sonjo than God.

Ghambageu<sup>21</sup> was a combination of a trickster, cultural hero and a prophet who immigrated to the Sonjo area as a poor young man. The name Ghambageu is originally of Barabaig language meaning 'a man of men'.<sup>22</sup> Most probably

<sup>18</sup> Gray 1963: 60–61; free discussion with Robert Mallya 07.11.2003; Potkanski & Adams 1998: 91, 104, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Potkanski & Adams 1998: 96–114; Rong'ola 1976: 47, 48; free discussion with P3 07.11.2003. Rong'ola 1976: 10 already refers to the commercialisation of water distribution in Samunge and Sale. Goldsmith 1984 points out that this system functions well only when the *wenamijie* act for the common good, in which he has a strong faith, having obviously never familiarised himself in any other material on the Sonjo except Gray's monograph.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Dului fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>21</sup> I use spelling Ghambageu following the pronouncing of the Sonjo and Swahili orthography. The name is also often spelt 'Khambageu' and earlier also 'Hambageu'.

<sup>22</sup> The Barabaig are an ethnic group populating the slopes of Mt. Hanang in Northern Tanzania. They have many stories of Ghambageu and how he had to flee from his brother, Saigilo, who is a more important figure in Barabaig traditions. Ghambageu, however, is a prophetic personality to the Barabaig, as well, and some of them wait for his return. Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003. The Pentecostal pastor, Paulo Belelo, comes from a Barabaig background.

Ghambageu is a historical person even though dating him is difficult. According to some Sonjo traditions he lived during the ninth age set, and at the moment they are in the 27th one.<sup>23</sup> Each age set is followed by another in roughly seventeen or eighteen years. According to this, Ghambageu would have lived about three hundred years ago. Rong'ola maintained in the 1970's that he lived 22 age-sets ago, which would date Ghambageu to the early 17th century.<sup>24</sup> The Sonjo do not mention the Barabaig community as the place of origin of Ghambageu, but, according to Robert Mallya, they have several differing views on where he came from: either from an unknown place from very far away, from among the Kamba, or from 'Mbelwa'<sup>25</sup> in Kenya. In the first recorded narrative on Ghambageu, his birth was said to have taken place without father or mother.<sup>26</sup>

When Ghambageu arrived to live among the Sonjo, he was a poor man who worked first as a watchman of a field to protect it against the birds in the village of Tinaga, that no longer exists. He got into problems there, just as he did almost anywhere he was in different Sonjo villages until he gained an unquestioned leadership. His way of escaping troubles was to trick, cheat and perform miracles.<sup>27</sup> Eventually he became a prophet figure in the whole of the Sonjo area, and he founded temples and placed priests in them.<sup>28</sup>

The position of Ghambageu in the Sonjo religion at the moment is such that he has undergone a thorough apotheosis to the extent that God and Ghambageu seem to get identified, albeit in a vague way.

### SONJO TRADITIONAL APOLOGETICS VIS-À-VIS CHRISTIANITY

It seems clear that the role of Ghambageu has increased in the Sonjo religion as a result of an encounter with Christianity. The mythical corpus around Ghambageu seems to undergo constant and at least partially conscious metamorphosis. This is partly due to the changing practical needs of society, such as the re-introduction of cattle-keeping after the danger of Maasai raids has diminished. Ghambageu is no

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<sup>23</sup> P2 fd 08.11.2003.

<sup>24</sup> Rong'ola 1976: 26–27.

<sup>25</sup> At an earlier time 'Belwa' was considered to be a village that had existed not so far from the Sonjo area, but it was also seen as existing in heaven (Gray 1963: 13), which may explain why it later became one of the competing theories on the origin of Ghambageu.

<sup>26</sup> Fosbrooke 1955: 38–42.

<sup>27</sup> Gray 1963: 100–102; Robert Mallya fd 07.11.2003; P1 & P3; Iversen 1984: 5–7.

<sup>28</sup> *Wenamijie* fd 07.11.2003. It is noteworthy that they did not tell any of the trickster-type of stories even though they have been recorded since the first Ghambageu stories were collected. Actually, the accounts of the religious activities were not accompanied with such lively narratives as were the trickster stories.

longer said to have forbidden the keeping of cows, as was the case in the 1950's.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the practical needs of modification, there is the need to adjust traditional mythology so that it can match the challenge posed by Christianity. This is done by way of presenting Ghambageu as being increasingly similar to Jesus Christ.

If the traditional understanding of the birth of Ghambageu was miraculous in the sense that he had no parents, the later versions of this story also tend to adapt Christian ideas. One of the early theories, according to which Ghambageu was born from his father's swollen leg, seems to have fallen into oblivion among the *wenamijie*. This story was no longer told in Samunge but rather that God gave birth to the sun which gave birth to Hambarisoi, and Hambarisoi to Sologoi, who was Ghambageu's father. Peter Dudui, however, gave an account that makes Ghambageu an even more direct descendant of God, and involves virgin birth like that of Jesus: When a maiden was bathing, she was hit by a ray of the sun, which made her pregnant. The pregnancy lasted for eighteen years until the child was born. The child looked just like an adult: he sat and talked. When the mother wailed about this, the child turned into a normal baby.<sup>30</sup> John Mengo emphasised that Ghambageu was born in the same way as Jesus.<sup>31</sup> Peter Dudui maintained that Ghambageu would have been born in Samunge, perhaps to increase the value of his village and its leaders.<sup>32</sup>

The nativity stories put forward Ghambageu at most as the grandchild of God (being the son of the sun), and yet the *wenamijie* emphasise that he is the son of God or even God himself. This is a direct and conscious application of Christian theology because they also maintain that Ghambageu is Christ himself.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Potkanski & Adams 1998: 91–92; Rong'ola 1976: 24; Gray 1963: 105. Gray also reports that a similar development took place regarding the traditional goatskin clothing which has now been replaced by Maasai blankets except in religious rituals.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003. A version of this story has been recorded already in the 1950's, but then it was not yet a nativity story about Ghambageu but about a child of the sun who seems to have been identified with Ghambageu only later, though the process of identifying Ghambageu and the sun (having ascended there) had already taken place at that time. Gray 1963: 107; Finch 1957: 204. However, Western scholars' eagerness in dealing with the sun and the Ghambageu connection may well have been directed by the theory of East Africans as sun worshippers. See Harjula 1969: 22–30. The nativity story presented in Rong'ola 1976: 17 much resembles that of Dudui. Later, however, Rong'ola maintains that Ghambageu's father would have been Ghambarisoi, a farmer (compare Finch 1957: 204, where he is presented as the 'Great God').

<sup>31</sup> John Mengo fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Mallya fd 07.11.2003, Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003. However, it is interesting that all of the Sonjo villages are also reported to have a myth that tells how the village, together with its irrigation system, was established by Ghambageu, see Gray 1963: 102–104.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003 in the presence of the other *wenamijie*, who accepted his interpretation.

Ghambageu has become a figure to which Sonjo leaders attach all the beliefs that they hear about Christ. This need not be an original invention of the elders themselves, but Fr. Gerry Kohler, who worked in the Sonjo area as a Catholic missionary in the 1970's, held very progressive views on the inculturation of Christianity in Sonjo culture. He had the idea that the Ghambageu tradition may be dealing with the same person as in the Christ tradition.<sup>34</sup>

When the Samunge *ghoroani* (traditional priest, one of the *wenamijie*), Biobio Nledio, was struggling to express his understanding about the nature and meaning of Ghambageu to the Sonjo, I proposed to help him. I tried to express Nicaean and Chalcedonian Christology as clearly and concisely as I could in an understandable terminology. Nledio was very happy with that and told me that that was exactly what he believed about Ghambageu. Still, in a few hours, he emphasised how surprisingly fitting my description of Ghambageu was.<sup>35</sup>

The life and work of Ghambageu is also undergoing changes in Sonjo mythology in order to make it similar to that of Jesus. The *wenamijie* avoided telling the obviously old stories, some of which had been recorded almost half a century before, featuring Ghambageu as a trickster or a troublesome person.<sup>36</sup> Instead, Ghambageu as healer and religious leader or moral teacher was lifted to the forefront.<sup>37</sup> There are some concrete stories of Ghambageu's healing ministry and activity as a religious leader whereas I have not come across any specific tradition about his moral teaching.

Any possible weaknesses of his character have been hidden. It was emphasised that he never married (like Jesus),<sup>38</sup> possibly because the story of him turning several of his sons into stones<sup>39</sup> does not fit the Jesus-image well. Furthermore, the story revealing that his wife had fled with Dorobo hunter-gatherers<sup>40</sup> is very harmful to his image as a strong (masculine) leader. Remaining single is not

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<sup>34</sup> Iversen 1984: 20. Vincent Donovan is another Catholic missionary who was involved among the Sonjo (Donovan 1982: 175). His book gives a good picture of his approach and he describes very briefly a cultural collision between Christianity and the Sonjo (p. 125).

<sup>35</sup> Discussion with Biobio Nledio at the Samunge holy spring and the house of Ghambageu (the temple) 08.11.2003.

<sup>36</sup> On Ghambageu cheating and performing miracles that can also be counted as tricks see Fosbrooke 1955: 38–43; Gray 1963: 100–102; Iversen 1984: 5–6; Robert Mallya fd 07.11.2003; P2 fd 08.11.2003. See also Simenauer's psychoanalytical view on Ghambageu's character, Simenauer 1955. Ghambageu was featured especially as a prophet and diviner in the stories of P4 (fd 08.11.2003).

<sup>37</sup> Peter Dudui & John Mengo fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003; compare Rong'ola 1976: 16, who claims that he had two wives, Kajejeje and Kadarwada.

<sup>39</sup> Gray 1963: 101.

<sup>40</sup> P3 fd 07.11.2003.



a usual option in the Sonjo community, but in this case it serves apologetical purposes.

The understanding of Ghambageu's death varies considerably. The oldest versions suggest that he died and was buried against his orders. When some of his angry followers from Samunge (Soyetu) demanded that the grave be opened, only his sandals were found. Some people maintained having seen him rise from the tomb and fly to the sun. The *wenamijie* we conversed with had, however, a relatively vague picture of what had happened to Ghambageu after his death, and in addition to this old story they said that the body might have just disappeared, too. When probing further, the elders presented another theory: Because Ghambageu and Jesus are the same person, Ghambageu, after his death, was born as Jesus in Europe, where he lives up to today. The elders seemed to have the impression that Jesus still lives in Europe. Ghambageu had told his followers that he would go to a place called Ugeni Bula, which resembles the Swahili word for Europe, *Ulaya*. Thus, according to the *wenamijie*, Ghambageu must have meant that he went to Europe.<sup>41</sup> It seems that the traditional myth about Ghambageu's death and resurrection, which closely resembles that of Jesus, has given way to a more suitable version, which accommodates a fusion of the characters of Ghambageu and Jesus in Sonjo mythology.

The Sonjo wait for Ghambageu's return because he told them that he would come back.<sup>42</sup> The *wenamijie* expect thus the return of Ghambageu-Christ from Europe. When he returns, he will take his own, whom he will recognise by a scar under the left breast.<sup>43</sup> Even if the *wenamijie* insisted that there will be no life after death,<sup>44</sup> this belief is difficult to understand without some concept of future life. The motive for denying that the Ghambageu cult contains any idea of life after death may be that the *wenamijie* emphasised that the cult is no religion but just a cultural tradition.<sup>45</sup>

It seems probable that some of the resemblances between the lives and positions of Jesus and Ghambageu are original in the sense that Christianity has not influenced them, like stories of miracles, the disappearance of the dead body of the hero, and his promise to return.<sup>46</sup> Based on these similarities the Sonjos have begun to edit the Ghambageu corpus to make it correspond with that of Jesus

<sup>41</sup> Biobio Nledio, Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003; Rong'ola 1976: 32; Gray 1963: 106–107. On Jesus as European in Sonjo thought, see also Rong'ola 1976: 2.

<sup>42</sup> Gray 1963: 108. Biobio Nledio fd 07.11.2003; Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>43</sup> Gray 1963: 108. This was also confirmed by the *wenamijie* 07.11.2003 in spite of their explanations about being a bit confused on this point.

<sup>44</sup> All five *wenamijie* present fd 07.11.2003. Compare Rong'ola 1976: 4, 8, 46.

<sup>45</sup> See Peter Dudui fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>46</sup> For a fuller list on the resemblance in the 1950's, see Gray 1966: 58–59.

since the introduction of Christianity in the area. This process seems to be at least partially conscious.<sup>47</sup>

### CHRISTIANITY AND THE POWER STRUCTURES OF THE SONJO COMMUNITY

The Sonjo community is strongly patriarchal and the visible communal decisions are made by the *wenamijie*. Women participate in rituals, but may not share all of the secrets the way initiated men do.<sup>48</sup> The *Mase* feast seems to occupy a very central position in the secret tradition. The *wenamijie* told us that they call people to *Mase*,<sup>49</sup> which is correct, but they do so by blowing a secret horn and speaking through it. The sound is supposed to be the voice of Ghambageu, who has returned in person.<sup>50</sup> The most interesting part of the feast is that of people coming for advice, especially marital advice, to Ghambageu, who speaks from within a thatched hut answering the people's questions and receiving their prayers.<sup>51</sup> Women, who do not know what takes place in the hut, are advised to be obedient to men.<sup>52</sup>

Ghambageu has become a supernatural seal of Sonjo patriarchy, around whom is woven a web of mythology that supports patriarchal structures. Women and children are not shareholders of power, and thus the Sonjo community can afford to let them participate in Christian activities. Men are bound by a blood pact and an oath to keep the secrets enforced by fear and the relative privileges of men.<sup>53</sup>

It is logical and supported by the Sonjo older mythology and even the Ghambageu mythology itself<sup>54</sup> that the irrigation system and the villages were

<sup>47</sup> See Rong'ola 1976: 56.

<sup>48</sup> See Gray 1966: 55. On gender segregation in Sonjo the religion, see Rong'ola 1976: 10, 35. Women are kept ignorant of the religious secrets (Rong'ola 1976: 13) that are used to consolidate male power in society. On the Sonjo marriage system and women's position in it, see Gray 1968.

<sup>49</sup> All five *wenamijie* present fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>50</sup> Gray 1966: 55. See also Iversen 1984: 5. Rong'ola 1976: 27, 45, 50. However, Rong'ola (p. 27) maintains that the god visiting is not Ghambageu but Egantwalu, a great male god (*mungu mkubwa wa kiume*). Also P2 fd 08.11.2003 confirms that the god of *Mase* is not Ghambageu. Gray describes how no Sonjo agreed to admit that the sound could have been produced by a human being, including the Lutherans (Gray 1963: 114). Up to today no one would express such a view in public because of a tangible fear that I could observe. Rong'ola 1976: 13 points out that the one who reveals Sonjo religious secrets may get killed. However, it seems to be a public secret that the voice is that of a horn.

<sup>51</sup> Gray 1963: 114.

<sup>52</sup> P2 fd 08.11.2003.

<sup>53</sup> P1 fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>54</sup> Without that, how could he have come to the community, and guard the fields against

there before the coming of Ghambageu. However, it is strongly asserted that Ghambageu created the springs, established the villages and created the water rules.<sup>55</sup> In this way the *wenamijie* can use the authority of Ghambageu to sanction their position in society.

The social stability provided by the *wenamijie* is highly needed to keep the community in balance with the natural resources. According to the Sonjo, not only water but also all trees, especially on the hills, belong to the *wenamijie*. The cutting of any tree, even in your garden, needs the approval of the *wenamijie*.<sup>56</sup> This underscores their position in society but serves also as a means of curbing the wanton destruction of forests, which are essential for keeping the springs functioning. In particular, the forest surrounding the springs is under special protection to the extent that one may not even collect fallen branches for firewood. Women are strictly not allowed in that forest in order not to contaminate the water with their menstrual blood.<sup>57</sup> Because women collect the firewood, the most efficient way of protecting that forest is to keep women out. The spring itself is so holy that it may not be approached except annually, when selected, ritually clean boys and elders clean it of leaves and tree branches.<sup>58</sup>

The *wenamijie* are at the top of the traditional, religious and economic hierarchy through their control over water. As such, they are the custodians of the fragile ecological balance which, once destroyed, would eliminate the possibility of agriculture and consequently the whole existence of the Sonjo as a people.

The *wenamijie* also hold a central position in the religious dimension of the culture partly because they derive their authority from Ghambageu, who is believed to have established the system, and also because the priests either belong to the *wenamijie* or are closely linked with them. If the estimated benefits of patriarchy remain sufficiently big in comparison to the inequality between men themselves, one may expect that the men's front in supporting the Ghambageu cult, with its recent modifications, remains intact. However, if population growth, scarcity of water or larger scale commercial farming<sup>59</sup> change the power relations between men, it is questionable how long the Sonjo traditional religion can remain the dominant ideology. The solidarity between men will be in danger in that case because of a lack of common interest, and Sonjo society will begin to erode,

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birds in an area where agriculture depends largely on irrigation?

<sup>55</sup> Gray 1963: 50, 102–105; Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003; Peter Dului fd 08.11.2003.

<sup>56</sup> Paulo Belelo fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Dului fd 08.11.2003.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Dului fd 07.11.2003 and 08.11.2003 (at the spring as close as one may come); Gray 1963: 50.

<sup>59</sup> This will depend largely on the transport infrastructure. A good road is being built towards the Sonjo area from Mto wa Mbu, where it connects to a major highway.

starting from the centre. This would mean a decrease in the influence of Sonjo traditions in different spheres of life, eventually leading to a weakening of Sonjo ethnic identity.<sup>60</sup>

### ETHNICITY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

The Sonjo clearly form a minority in the Ngorongoro district, and the majority, the Maasai, are the traditional enemies of the Sonjo. The visible dimension of the Sonjo culture resembles to an extent that of the Maasai, like in clothing, decoration, ear piercing, building, age set system, etc. However, when it comes to the identity of these cultures, it is clear that the Sonjo have adapted some aspects of Maasai culture in order to be able to resist it.<sup>61</sup> The self-understanding of the Maasai is that they are pastoralists, whereas the Sonjo are by definition agriculturalists. The Maasai are a Nilotic people, whereas the Sonjo belong to the predominantly agricultural Bantu peoples, who form the majority of Tanzanians.

The relationship between the Sonjo and the Maasai have always been tense, and sometimes fighting takes place between them, like in 1995 when about twenty people were killed before Tanzanian riot police arrived to calm the situation.<sup>62</sup> Even though there is much tension between these ethnic groups, it would be a mistake to understand ethnicity as a petrified situation. The *wenamijie* emphasised that the Sonjo community is open and receives and absorbs newcomers.<sup>63</sup> This has really taken place, which can be deduced from the fact that there are families which are not originally from the villages.<sup>64</sup> Respectively, the Maasai are ready to take a Sonjo in their group, if (s)he is ready to adopt their culture, especially its pastoralist life style.<sup>65</sup> In this context, ethnicity appears as a potentially shifting cultural identity that reflects the mode of production of the group.

The Sonjo obviously consider their existence threatened by the Maasai, not only on the basis of pure numbers but also in terms of influence. As a way of catching up with the greater influence of the Maasai in the district, the Sonjo decided to invest in formal education, and they opened a secondary school in Digodigo. In this way they hope to obtain government posts and thereby increase their influence.

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<sup>60</sup> See Potkanski & Adams 1998: 89.

<sup>61</sup> See Potkanski & Adams 1998: 89.

<sup>62</sup> US Department of State 1996. Generally almost any writing on the Sonjo will at least mention the enmity between these peoples.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Dului fd 07.11.2003.

<sup>64</sup> Others of them, of course, would have come from other Sonjo villages, some of which were annihilated by Maasai raids.

<sup>65</sup> The Maasai are especially keen on 'buying' Sonjo women for wives. See Gray 1968: 268.

In the eyes of the Sonjo, Christianity is a Maasai religion, because many Maasai have converted to Christianity, and the nearest Lutheran diocese, the Diocese in the Arusha Region, is strongly a Maasai-speaking diocese dominated by the Arusha 'agricultural Maasais'. Even though the Lutheran church has generally avoided appointing Maasai speaking workers among the Sonjo, it still bears a strong Maasai label. Unlike with the Sonjo, Christianity is in the process of becoming contextualised, which must increase Sonjo prejudices. In fact, it would be easier for the Sonjo to accept a totally foreign religious influence than a religion smacking of the Maasai. Thus, a man becoming a strong adherent of Christianity would mean that he would have to abandon his Sonjo identity.<sup>66</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated above, the Sonjo ethnic identity, which is interwoven with power structures, mode of production and religion,<sup>67</sup> is one of the central factors keeping Sonjo men out of Christianity. Of course, if there were a sufficient number of male Sonjo converts, they might begin to see the churches as another channel of increasing the general influence of the Sonjo. Islam has up until now not been able to exploit the ethnic tension between the Sonjo and the Maasai to attract converts, partly due to the fact that Muslim mission efforts to the Sonjo have been so sporadic.

Another dimension that has contributed to Sonjo resistance towards Christian mission efforts has clearly been the power structures of the community which would be endangered if the Ghambageu cult were abandoned. These power structures are again interwoven with the mode of production and are there partly to facilitate the survival of the community in a hostile and ecologically demanding environment. If the mode of production or social structure changes, it will have major ramifications on the lives of the Sonjo. This change can take place also from within the system, as the pressure towards market-economy-oriented water distribution shows.

The third factor that contributes to Sonjo resistance towards Christian mission is the mostly conscious strategy prepared by the *wenamijie* in the field of religion. One dimension of this strategy is to emphasise the status of Ghambageu in the Sonjo religion by letting Ghambageu usurp the role of almost any other god or person in mythology. This helps to underscore the difference between Christianity and Sonjo tradition, because both of them have God, but Ghambageu is culturally specific. Thus Ghambageu is the guarantee of Sonjo ethnic specificity

<sup>66</sup> This is, in fact, how one Pentecostal convert expressed his conversion from Sonjo culture to Christianity.

<sup>67</sup> See Rong'ola 1976: 11.

even though paradoxically it is the character through which foreign Christian religious influence is effectively absorbed in the religion. At the same time, this central position of Ghambageu supports the position of the *wenamijie* as the guarantors of the social order and Sonjo tradition.

Another dimension of the strategy is to make Christianity superfluous: Ghambageu is what Jesus is, so when Ghambageu is already there in the Sonjo religion, Christianity has nothing new to add.

The third dimension of the Sonjo religious strategy is to balance carefully between an open, ecumenical, and even syncretistic attitude, and a secretive, sometimes violent, bigotry. When the position of the Ghambageu cult is not concerned or threatened, the *wenamijie* were extremely tolerant and open. Part of this approach is the insistence that the Ghambageu cult is not a religion but simply an ethnic tradition. When the secrets or the absolutely dominant position of that cult were questioned, the response is fierce, and possibly violent.

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