

Drinking Indigenous Beverages in Africa: The Case of the /Bili-bili/ of the Lele People of North Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Every human society produces beverages but the raw materials and procedures of production may differ from one society to the next. Some societies especially in Africa use maize, others use millet while others use guinea corn for their production. There are certain beliefs surrounding the manufacture and use of each beverage. The /bili-bili/ of the Lele people of north Cameroon is a good example of local beer produced from millet, red millet and sorghum. This local liquor is produced mostly by the female folk and its production goes through a number of processes. The drink like any aspect of culture fulfils a specific function in the Lele community. It used to be manufactured from millet, red millet and sorghum alone but with time, there are women who produce it with red millet and maize. The main research question of the article is: what are the functions of the /bili-bili/ to the Lele man in particular and the community in general? The secondary research questions are: what is the cultural significances of the /bili-bili/ to the Lele people? and what are the factors that have caused changes in the production consumption of this indigenous liquor? The objectives of this article is to examine the place of *bili-bili* in the lives of the people and in the society as a whole. The paper also seeks to find out the symbolism of this drink and the reasons behind the changes in the production and utility of the *bili-bili*. The authors of this paper used the qualitative method to collect data. This data was analyse soon after collection was over and interpreted using the theories of cultural ecology (to demonstrate how millet and sorghum, all natural products are employed to produce a cultural drink, *bili-bili*), functionalism (employed to show the roles of the locally brewed drink in the lives of the Lele people and the Lele community) and symbolic anthropology (used to illustrate the cultural significance of the *bili-bili* to the Lele people. *Bili-bili* symbolises a bond as many youths like adults meet and share from a single calabash or bucket. This drink is not only a source of livelihood to many households, it portrays the belief system of the Lele people in particular and that of the northerners in general. The indigenous drink /bili-bili/ is a drink which portrays the cultural identity of the people. If valorised, it will continue to be a major source of livelihood to many families.

Key Words: bili-bili, Cameroon, cultural heritage, indigenous beverages, Lele people

INTRODUCTION

People in all parts of the world produce liquors. These drinks are manufactured differently and fulfil different functions. Those produced in Africa is a form of cultural heritage to the societies which produce them. Pelegrini (2008) notes that cultural heritage is the legacy that we receive from the past, experience in the present, and transmit to future generations.

Locally made beverages are intended for individual as well as collective consumption. Their production in

general and the fermented ones in particular constitute one type of indigenous food in the savannah of Central Africa (Cerdan et al; 2004). These traditionally brewed beers are produced from cereals and Sawadogo (2010) notes that they are the most popularly fermented drinks in Africa. This local liquor, if it is manufactured with cereals such as sorghum and maize, it is known as ‘bili-bili’ (Touwang et al., 2021). The name ‘bili-bili’ is known more in the northern part of Cameroon including the Lele in Boundjoui and Chad. Boundjoui is a village in the North Region, of Cameroon. She is found in the Ngong Rural Council in Tchéboa Sub Division, Bénoué Division. Boundjoui is 21 kilometres from Ngong town, the capital of the aforementioned Council.

Boundjoui is a savannah like the rest of the northern region. Rainfall in this area ranges from 800 to 1300 millimetres. There are two seasons: six months of rainy season and six months of dry season. Millet which is the principle raw material in the production of *bili-bili* is planted either in the month of June or July depending on the period when the rains return. This crop is cultivated by both man and female. Besides millet, other crops such as maize and groundnuts do very well in this area.

Oral history has it that like the other ethnic groups in the Boundjoui area, the Lélé community is a migrant ethnic group that came to settle in this area because of its fertile soil. The people are led by a chief known as “Kurmbalo”. The political system here is based on hereditary traditional authority and access to power is often determined by direct descent. On the political strata of these chiefdoms therefore, the *kurmbalo* is on top followed by notables and quarter-heads. At the head of each family is the father. He has power over all the other members of the family.

The religion of the Lele people is largely African, that is, they believe in ancestral veneration. They know that their ancestors watch, guide and protect them on a day to day basis. On their part, they have to show their loyalty to these ancestor through sacrifices and other religious rituals. If they neglect the ancestor, they might be punished by the latter.

In the Lele society, there are people who follow Islam or Christianity. The word Islam means voluntary “Submission” or “Surrender” to the will of God (Allah). Those who practice this religion are called Muslims. They believe that God sent prophets to teach mankind how to worship Him, and the last of the messengers was Muhammad (peace be upon them all). (<http://www.whyislam.org/submission/prophethood-in-islam/prophet-muhammad-pbuh/>). Those who are Muslim do not drink the *bili-bili* because they claim that it does not conform to their religious beliefs.

Christianity is the belief in the Almighty God. Those who practice it are called Christians. They believe that God is the creator of the world and everything therein. By so doing, they have to give praises to Him. Christianity is propagated by many Christian bodies such as the Catholics and the Presbyterians. Some Christians do not consume *bili-bili* for reasons that it is alcoholic. Drinking it therefore means going against scriptural doctrine.

The major economic activity of the Lele people is agriculture. They are engaged in crops productions and animal husbandry. The main crops grown by both the male and female include millet, maize, sorghum, groundnuts and cotton. The cultivation of maize, millet and groundnuts is done sometimes between May and July, that is depending on the arrival of the rainy season meanwhile sorghum is cultivated most times in the dry season when there is little or no rainfall. Crops harvested are sold in retail and in bags. Millet for instance is sold in small dishes and the prices varies according to seasons. During harvesting season, the price of a dish that can hold about a kilogram of millet costs from 150francs CFA to 200francs CFA. During the planting period, the price of the same dish rises, ranging from 250francs CFA to 300francs CFA. This cereal is sold on a daily basis at different junctions in the quarters, in the local market (which comes up once every week) and in neighbouring markets. The Lele people also keep sheep and cows. These animals are often used for religious as well as economic purposes.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The methods that the researchers used in the research study was done under the following aspects: selection of research participants, data collection, data collection tools and procedure and data analysis.

Selection of research participants

We used the snowball sampling method to select participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where new participants are recruited by other participants to take part in a research study. It begins with one or more study participants and then continues on the basis of references from these participants. The process continues until the researcher reaches the desired sample of a saturation point. The snowball sampling technique was to ensure that a wide range of the study topic was covered.

Data collection

Data for the study was collected using participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The researchers participated in the collection or harvesting of millet, sorghum and maize which are used for the production of *bili-bili* to understand how the harvesting is done and the quantities that the commercial agents measurement millet, sorghum and maize. The researchers equally observed the different objects used in the production and consumption of *bili-bili*. This technique was used to comprehend the functions, the symbolism and changes that have taking place in the production and consumption of the *bili-bili*. In-depth interviews were conducted with cultivators as well commercial agents of millet, maize and sorghum. The researchers equally conducted interviews with producers and consumers of this local drink, *bili-bili*. These were face to face interviews with the use of open-ended unstructured questions. 8 producers of maize, millet and sorghum were interviewed meanwhile 4 interviews were conducted with sellers of these corps. 6 producers of *bili-bili* and 10 consumers of this drink were interviewed. This technique was employed to understand the procedures of the production, functions as well as the cultural significances of *bili-bili*.

Data collection tools and procedure

The researchers used the observation guides and interview guides respectively to collect data for the study. Among the questions that featured on the guides were the periods of harvesting of millet, sorghum and maize; measurements and prices of the crops used in the production of *bili-bili*; the procedures in *bili-bili* manufacture; the elements used in *bili-bili* fermentation and its duration; the functions and symbolism of this local drink and the changes in the *bili-bili* production and consumption.

In the course of the observations and interviews, the researchers took detail notes in their exercise books. The researchers followed the cultivators of the crops to the farms during the day meanwhile most of these interviews these cultivators were conducted in the evenings from 5 pm when many of them had returned home from their farms. Interviews were conducted with the sellers and consumers of *bili-bili*. With the sellers it was done in the day, that is, a few hours before they went to the market to sell and with the consumers these interviews were conducted in the evenings at the period of consumption. Many of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed soon after data collection was over. Data which was audio-taped using a digital voice recorder was replayed many times and then transcribed verbatim. After the transcription, the voice recorder was replayed over and over to verify the quality and reliability of the transcription. This transcription was done into Microsoft word. It was analysed using content analysis. The data was read, coded, clustered and then sub-themes and themes were developed. The contents of the pictures were

interpreted iconographically.

Presentation of findings and Discussion

Bili-bili as discussed earlier is a locally brewed beer made from millet, sorghum, and sometimes mixed maize. This drink produced by the female folks has a huge cultural significance. This part of the article handles the description of the local drink *bili-bili*, its origin, raw materials and procedures of production, its functions and symbolism, as well as the dynamics in its production and consumption.

Description of Bili-bili

Bili-bili is a traditional drink produced from sorghum (Touwang et al; 2018). It is a drink manufactured from millet known in Lele (and in the languages of most parts of the Northern Region as baïyeri) and red millet called *maigay*. Sometimes this drink is produced with both maize and millet. In Africa (East, Centre, North and West), this drink has several taxonomies depending on the area and the raw material or cereals used in its production. It is known as Mtama in Tanzania, Dolo in Burkina-Faso, Burukutu in Nigeria, Bili-bili in Chad (Odufa and Adeyele, 1985; Tisewa, 1989; Maoura, 2005; Kayode et al; 2005). The development of this production sector in Cameroon is motivated by its income-generating and value-adding nature to a sorghum variety that is less consumed as solid food and in form of loaves (Touwang et al.; 2018).

Bili-bili is a traditional alcoholic beverage consumed in several black African countries, including Cameroon. Like most indigenous African beers made from millet or sorghum, *bili-bili* is considered both a food and drink and is sometimes referred to as ‘eating and drinking’ by some consumers (Maoura et al; 2006). *Bili-bili* is also a significant source of income for the women who produce it and to the producers of sorghum and millet. An interlocutor, an elderly Lele man said:

This drink (*bili-bili*) is part of the cultural heritage of the non-Islamic populations of the Central African savannah including the Lele. It was regarded by colonial administrators in the 1930s as a natural refuge of “bad boys” or “mauvais garçons” (in the French language). Referring to the *bili-bili* as bad boys was because these colonial masters thought that when young boys consumed it, its alcoholic content rendered them drunk and consequently misbehaved (15/05/2023).

Origin of ‘Bili-bili’ Among the Lele of Boundjoui

Research has been done on the origin of this traditionally brewed beer “*bili-bili*”. Almost all existing research has been limited to the description of the procedures of production, marketing, and perception of the drink, and producing communities (Bougouma, 1981; Sefa-Dedeh, 1991, Yao et al; 1995; Sefa-Dedeh et al; 1999; Mandjeka, 2002; Traoré et al; 2004; Dewar et al; 1997; Galzy et Moulin, 1991; Sawadogo, 2010). Of all these studies, the origin of the drink was hardly perceived in the different cultures studied. Some interlocutors note that the traditionally brewed beer ‘*bili-bili*’ among the Lele has a dreamlike origin. According to the oral tradition of the Lele people, the origin of ‘*bili-bili*’ comes from the fact that the ancestors did not have any (alcoholic) drink to make sacrifices to the gods, hence, during sleep, a guardian of the Lele tradition had a revelation in a dream which instructed him to put in place or introduce a liquor which can be used in sacrifices. This locally brewed liquor was first produced for ritual purposes but it was later used in other areas of human life.

Procedures and Production of the Bili-bili

Bili-bili like all local beverages go through a series of processes. The production of the *bili-bili* starts from the collection of millet and ends with fermentation. The paragraphs below concentrate on the production of *bili-bili*.

The production of *bili-bili* starts with the collection and selection of millet in general and the red type in particular. The raw materials used in the production of the local drink come from nature. The Lele people therefore use natural products (such as millet and sorghum and sometimes maize) to produce culture – the *bili-bili*, employing the theory of cultural ecology of Steward (1972). Cultural ecology is a look at cultural features in relation to specific environmental circumstances, with unique behavioral patterns that are related to cultural adjustments to distinctive environmental concerns. To produce *bili-bili*, a producer uses either only the millet, red millet or sorghum, if she possesses each in large quantity. But if the quantity of each (millet, red millet or sorghum) is small, she can combine millet, red millet and sorghum to produce the quantity of drink which she desires. A producer of *bili-bili* had this to say about the quantity and type of millet used in her production.

The quantity of millet I need to produce drink for commercial purpose is more than that used for the production of bili-bili for a small event. But if I do not have enough red millet the main raw material for the production of this drink, I mix the quantity of millet I have with maize. (12/06/2023).

This means that the quantity of drink needed determines the quantity of millet required for production and the main raw materials used are millet (Baiyeri), red millet (Djigaari), sorghum and sometimes mixed with maize.

After the collection and selection of millet, the production proper begins. The manufacturing method is purely traditional and includes the following steps:

– The first stage after the collection and selection of millet, the selected millet is soaked in basins in water for a whole day or night, depending on the producer's free time. This shows that the millet has to spend twelve hours in water.

– In the next step, the soaked millet is washed in a nylon bag to remove its odour and bitter taste as portrayed in figure 1 below. That is, water is poured in the bag containing the soaked millet several times. Another *bili-bili* producer said that:

When millet is soaked, it has a funny odour and taste and to have good quality drink, I must wash it very diligently. To do this, I pour the soaked millet in a nylon bag and pour water in it several times. Each time I pour water, I use my fingers to stir the millet before pour another quantity of water. This permits the odour and bitter taste to be extracted through the holes on the bag (10/05/2023).

Figure 1: Millet being washed in a bag



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

When the millet is properly washed, in stage 3, it is put under germination in a package set made of polyethylene and plastic bags (as demonstrated in the figure 2 below) for a period of three (03) to four (04) days. Polyethylene and plastic

Bags are required to produce heat for the millet to germination. An interlocutor, a producer of *bili-bili* said:

This is a very delicate stage in bili-bili production because if the packaging is not properly conducted, the millet will not germinate very well and this will not give a good drink. For proper packaging, I first of all spread a nylon bag on the floor, and then I place a polyethylene bag on it. When this is done, I spread the soaked millet on the polyethylene bag. When I spread the millet, I carefully fold the polyethylene and nylon bags to cover the millet properly and I place some heavy pieces of wood on the bags to prevent air from penetrating into the covered millet. If the millet germinates well, the bili-bili will have a very nice flavour and taste (14/05/2023).

Figure 2: Millet put under germination



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

– in the next stage which is the 4th the germinated millet is removed from the polyethylene and plastic bags and then dried properly in the sun (see figure 3 below). The germinated millet is spread on large bags or plastic papers for the grains to dry faster. This stage is equally highlighted by Sefa-Dedeh (1991), Yao et al.; (1995) and Traoré et al.; (2004).

Figure 3: Germinated millet exposed to sunlight to get dry



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

This procedure which is called malting, is a process used for the conversion of cereal malts into alcoholic beverages (Sawadogo, 2010). Dewar et al. (1997) demonstrated the purpose of malting as follows:

The production of hydrolytic enzymes which are principally amylases, maltases, dextrinases, glycanases, proteases and peptidases; the production of fermentable sugars from carbohydrate polymers which is contained in the grain; the solubilisation of metabolic substances (amino acids, peptides, sugars, vitamins...) and the embrittlement of the endosperm of the cells and the development of organoleptic characteristics of the malt.

According to (Sawadogo, 2010) after germination, the organoleptic characteristics of the germinated millet include colour, aroma, sweetness and brittleness. These transformations are achieved through soaking and germination of the grains, and continue until drying. The drying stops certain enzymatic activities and stabilises the germinated grains (Galzy and Moulin, 1991).

– As already mentioned above, the germinated millet is allowed to dry properly. When this done, in step 5, it is then ground in the mill to obtain flour or powder. This flour is soaked in water in a large clay pot (depending on the quantity of the powder) for one hour (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Ground millet mixed in cold water in a large clay pot



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

In step 6, the soaked powdered millet is boiled for the first time overnight to obtain juice the following day. The next day, the boiled millet is squeezed in a polyethylene bag and transferred into a number of clay pots if the millet is much. This is just one of the methods of extracting juice from the boiled millet. The next method is pouring the boiled millet in a pot whose base has been perforated as demonstrated in figure 5 below. This second method is performed in a purely indigenous manner. An elderly woman, a producer of *bili-bili* told the researchers that:

After boiling my soaked millet, I poured it in a large pot which has holes at the base. I place this pot on two dried sticks. The holes permit the juice of the millet to ooze through and enter in a basin which collects it. I then squeeze the chaffs which are remaining properly to extract all the juice which is left (09/07/2023).

Figure 5: The draining of soaked millet



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

The next stage comprise the second boiling as portrayed in figures 6 and this last for the entire day. An interlocutor, a producer of *bili-bili* said that: *As my pot or pots of bili-bili are boiling on the fire, I stir it from time to time with a long stick or wooden spoon and remove the unwanted particles (foam). I continue until all the foam has been removed (12/06/2023).*

Figure 6: The boiling of bili-bili in large clay pots



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

After the boiling process is completed, the cooked *bili-bili* or juice obtained is transferred into other clay containers and allowed to cool down overnight (for 12 hours) or for 6 hours (half a night) depending on the time the drink will be consumed (see figure 7 below). Once this stage is completed, the producer proceeds to the fermentation phase, which marks the end of the “bili-bili” production process.

Figure 7: Clay pots containing boiled bili-bili which is allowed to cool down



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

Fermentation of Bili-bili among the Lele

Fermentation is a metabolic process in which an organism converts a carbohydrate such as starch or sugar

Fermentation of the bili-bili is done as follows: a fermentation substance called “Subu“, (a chemical yeast of the drinks) is added to it. The subu is put at the start of the fermentation stage and when this is done, a long stick is used to stir the drink.

During fermentation, many producers use the bark of a wild plant (common in the savannah region) known in the Lele language as *siladi*. To render the drink have a slightly bitter taste. Some *bili-bili* producers prefer the fresh bark meanwhile others use that which is dry. A producer of *bili-bili* said:

During fermentation, I use the fresh bark of a plant known as *siladi*, one of the many tree backs used change the taste of the drink. I prefer this one because the ingredients in it will come out fast and well when boiled (14/07/2023).

To ferment, the producer mixes the juice obtained from the boiled bark of *siladi* with the sweet millet juice. The resulting solution (a mixture of the boiled *siladi* and the sweet millet juice) is kept for a few minutes or hours to cool down properly. When this is done, it is then good or ready for consumption.

Fermentation plays five roles in the food industry, as demonstrated by authors such as Steinkraus (1995/2002), Simango (1997), and Holzapfel (2002). It improves human nutrition through the development of food flavours and textures. It facilitates the preservation or transformation of foodstuffs and improves their safety through the beneficial effects of lactic and alcoholic fermentation. It also promotes the biological enrichment of foodstuffs in vitamins, proteins, essential amino acids and essential fatty acids. It improves the nutritional quality and detoxification of foodstuffs by reducing anti-nutritional factors and degrading or inactivating natural toxins (Padmaja et al.; 1993; Kimaryo et al.; 2000). It also helps to reduce the cooking time of foodstuffs and, consequently, the energy required (Holzapfel, 1997).

Lactic acid fermentation is widely used in tropical regions as the most economical method of processing and preserving foodstuffs (Cooke et al.; 1987; Nout & Motarjemi, 1997). Lactic acid fermentation reduces the content of non-digestible polysaccharides, promotes amino acid synthesis and improves the availability of B group vitamins (Holzapfel, 2002). Odunfa & Adeyele (1987), for example, showed that sorghum fermentation reduced the concentration of flatulent sugars such as raffinose and strachyose, which cause indigestion and diarrhoea in humans.

Commenting on beverages production, Gardi (1973) points out that in some parts of north Cameroon, the walls of beer brewery are decorated with multiple symbols. These decorations are not to ward off evil but actually to lure good spirits. Here, they may be dealing with fertility magic intended to ensure that the beer turns out especially well.

Functions and Symbolism of the Bili-bili to the Lele People

Every culture defines the appropriate substances to drink, when to drink and with whom, and the meanings of the beverages and drinking occasions. The *bili-bili*, a local drink of the Lele people like all other cultural elements has an important role to play in the lives of the Lele people. This portion of the article is interpreted with the use of the theories of functionalism and symbolic anthropology. We made use of the theory of functionalism of Radcliff-Brown and Malinowski, which represents two strands in the theory: structural functionalism, which stresses the pre-eminence of society and its structure over the individuals, and how the various elements of the social structure function to maintain social order and equilibrium; and psychological functionalism, which stresses individual needs to be met by society. The researchers in this article shows the roles of the *bili-bili* in the lives of the Lele people in particular and the community in general. And with symbolic anthropology of Geertz, the authors demonstrated the deeper meanings or symbolism of the *bili-bili* to in the Lele community. Geertz championed symbolic anthropology in the 1930s and 1940s. This theory focuses on the symbolic rather than material aspect of culture. It is the study of

culture through the interpretation of the meaning of symbols, values and beliefs in society. The paragraphs below examine the symbolism and functions of the *bili-bili* which fall under social, economic, nutritional, as well as religious.

Social Functions of the Bili-bili

The production and consumption of the *bili-bili* is very old among the Lele. It is a cultural heritage, a drink which has been produced and drunk for generations and the knowledge of its production is undeniably transmitted from generation to generation. This drink therefore, can be taken daily or on special occasions (during happy or unhappy events) or even at times of work. An elderly man in the Lele village told the researchers that:

I buy a few litres of bili-bili on a daily basis. I drink it myself and whenever I have visitors, I share with them. This drink provides pleasure at the moment of relaxation to me like to many people in this society (10/06/2023).

The *bili-bili* is consumed during happy events as mentioned above. One of such happy ceremonies is during traditional weddings. During such a ceremony, the host provides much of this drink which is used to entertain those who are invited for the occasion. Accepting to honour an invitation for such a cultural event is a demonstration the peaceful coexistence which exist between the families which make up the Lele community. As the people commune in the ceremony eating and drinking their locally brewed beer, they ask for the ancestors and gods of the land to bless the couple with many children as they are united by marriage. When the gods give them a child or children, they also come together to celebrate once more. A couple who were celebrating their traditional wedding had this to say:

Among the people of Lele, whenever we have a traditional wedding, we invite many people from all over the village. In this occasion like in many others, the bili-bili is provided by the host family. As the people drink and rejoice, they presents their wishes to the ancestors and gods of Lele. The wishes sometimes depend on the nature of the ceremony. In an occasion like this our traditional wedding, the people will request for good health, prosperity and many children (14/07/2023).

This drink is highly consumed during birth celebrations. Child birth is very important among the Lele, it brings peace and lots of joy to the couple in particular and the families of the husband and wife in general. A couple who get married and do not bear a child or children do not earn any respect in the community. More so, the birth of a child leads to continuity of the family name. Child birth therefore, calls for plenty of merry making. When a child or children are born in a family, the parents of the child or children buy this drink (the *bili-bili*) every day and keep at home to entertain visitors who may come to visit the new born baby or babies.

I usually buy a good quantity of *bili-bili* each time my wife puts to birth. I buy this drink every day for about a month. For the first one month when someone puts to birth here, people visit her to 'see' the child. I use the drink I buy to entertain the people who come around to visit the baby. Sometimes, many of the persons who come to 'see' the baby or babies come along with some *bili-bili* which I use to serve to them and food which my wife prepares (the father of a new born baby, 17/07/2023).

Child birth and the consumption of *bibi-bili* crates a new social relationship among the people. This is so because when someone visits a family to 'see' or carry the baby, when there is an occasion in this visitors compound or family, the parents of the child will equally go there to pay back that visit. The people therefore, regard a visit which a fellow kinsman pays to another during a happy or sad event as a social debt which must be paid back.

The *bili-bili* is a drink which is used to settle quarrels in the family. There are families where siblings are at logger heads such that they do not talk to one another and do not want to have anything to do in common. When this happens, the parents have the obligation to bring peace in their family. To do this, a calabash or bucket of *bili-bili* is usually brought where all the members of the family have to share. As they drink from the vessel, they ask for forgiveness from one another. The act of sharing the same calabash or bucket is symbolic because it shows that these off-springs have decided to put their problems aside for the unity of the family. If the parents are no longer living, it is the responsibility of the uncles or aunts to conduct this ritual.

Two families could be divided because of squabbles caused by marriage between their children. To address the problem, both families gather around a bucket of *bili-bili* to ask for forgiveness, and to reconcile the families. An elderly Lele man told the researchers that:

Two families may have a problem caused by their children who are married. I say two families because when a man gets married to a woman, their union brings their two families together. When such couple have a problem and the woman goes back to her parents, to resolve their differences, the two families most come together to seek for a solution for their problem. This sitting is usually done while consuming the native drink bili-bili. As they drink, the two heads of the families educate the couple about the sacredly of marriage (18/05/2013).

The *bili-bili* is a drink which unites people. Many young persons in the Lele community consume it once every week, especially on Sundays. In some parts of this society, people both male and female spend the whole week working and on Sundays when they do not go to work, they meet and may drink for the entire day where they sit in small groups and share calabashes of *bili-bili* as demonstrated in figure 8 below. Drinking the *bili-bili* is therefore, an opportunity for reunions of friends, age groups or families who get together around a bucket or a calabash of *bili-bili* to relax, and exchange ideas. To speak as Jocelyne (2004), drinking the ‘*bili-bili*’ on a Sunday follows a very old tradition marking the festive space and time of this day.

Figure 8: The Lele people of Boundjoumi sharing *bili-bili*



Source: Tikere’s archives (14/05/2023)

An interlocutor, a young boy told the researchers in an interview that:

When you see us here today, Sunday, it is because we work in different places and do not usually meet within the week because of the much work we are engaged in. We can meet only on a day like this when all of us are off work. When we meet, we have to share some calabashes of bili-bili and this gives each of us the opportunity to see one another and also find out how each of us is faring (14/05/2023).

During the week therefore, the consumption of 'bili-bili' is rarely part of reunions among youths. This can be explained by daily constraints due to work in the fields, the distance between friends or the lack of financial means. During the week from Monday to Saturday, most youths work hard to raise money to spend some on Sunday or the weekly market day. These are the right days to use some of the money generated throughout the week to buy a calabash or bucket of *bili-bili* to drink, relax and discuss without worrying about the tasks to be carried out the following week.

This drink is not only sold in calabashes, it is also in plastic buckets. The drink is sold in buckets, and then served and drunk in small calabashes. During drinking, there is no special individual who is responsible for the sharing, each and every one present serves himself but before this is done, the drink in the bucket is stirred as portrayed in figure 9 below. It is important to note that there are two types of calabashes which are used here, a small one which is used to stir and serve the *bili-bili* and another bigger one which is actually the drinking vessel (see figure 10). In effect, figure 9 is a demonstration of how the drink is stirred with the small calabash while figure 10 shows how it is served in the drinking calabash.

Figures 9 and 10: People in the market stirring and serving *bili-bili* in calabashes



Source: Tikere's archives (14/05/2023)

The drinking can go on for several hours and when there is a pause in drinking, the drinking calabashes are kept on the ground. The calabash will be picked up only when an individual wants to continue to drink. Gathering around a single bucket of *bili-bili* and sharing from it symbolises the unity which exist between these people who have a common origin and heritage.

Concerning buying of the drink, most times many people love to drink in groups. In a group therefore, no specific individual must buy but all those who are present contribute money and buy. According to an interlocutor:

When we meet, all of us who are present contribute money. The sum that an individual contributes may range from five hundred (500) francs CFA to one thousand (1000) francs CFA. The amount realised from the contributions is used to buy the quantity of drink which corresponds to it. A bucket of 2 litres costs one thousand (1000) francs CFA. But there are some individuals who may opt to offer 2 or 4 litres to his or her friends or his brothers. When we meet, we sit in groups (14/05/2023).

In the course of dinking, some people choose to add some other liquors like ‘king Authur’ (sachets whisky) or substances such as Nescafé to the bucket of *bili-bili*. When such substances are added, the contain is stirred severally or very well to obtain a smooth mixture as portrayed in figure 11 below. Those who add whisky to the local drink note that the hot drink is to reinforce the alcoholic content meanwhile those who add Nescafé say that the Nescafé is to send away fatigue.

Figure 11: The mixing of *bili-bili* after adding sachet whisky to it



Source: Tikere's archives (14/05/2023)

Economic Functions of *Bili-bili*

The production of *bili-bili* as highlighted above is an activity which generates income to many households. These include cultivator of millet, maize and sorghum used in *bili-bili* production, those who supply firewood for cooking the drink and the actual producers of the drink. As regards the cultivation and sell of

millet as discussed in the introduction, millet is sold in small dishes and the prices varies according to seasons. During the harvesting season, the price of a dish that can hold about a kilogram of millet cost from 150francs CFA to 200francs CFA. During the planting period, the price of the same dish ranges from 250francs CFA to 300francs CFA. The millet as discussed earlier is sold in the quarters, in the local market (which comes up once every week) and in neighbouring markets. Some of the cultivators of millet, supply their produce directly on order to the women who prepare *bili-bili*.

Producers of *bili-bili* are a good source of revenue to those who are engaged in the fetching and selling of firewood. The firewood is a very essential part of *bili-bili* production because without it, the drink cannot be produced. Firewood is scarce in the rainy season because of the rains. In the dry season when there is no rainfall, the women who produce *bili-bili* buy firewood in large quantity and stock for use in rainy days. This producer of *bili-bili* had this to say:

I usually have problems in my bili-bili business in the rainy season because I do not have regular supply of firewood. During this period which rain is falling, those supplying me firewood do not provide it regularly or they will raise the price with the pretext that there is rain. To avoid this therefore, I most times buy much firewood during the dry season and store in a small building constructed specifically for this (15/05/2023).

As concerns the selling of the *bili-bili*, many producers of this drink sell it on Sundays and on the local market days. Apart from these two days, some women sell their *bili-bili* every day at several drinking spots in the quarters. These producers actually have some commercial tricks which they use to attract customers. When a customer arrives, the seller serves him or her *bili-bili* in a small calabash to taste. This calabash is smaller than the two types mentioned above. Providing the drink to the client to taste, is a way to welcome as well as entice him or her. This gesture alone makes many clients to always return to such a welcoming producer for a drink.

Once in the market, the seller, sells the *bili-bili* in buckets depending on the amount of money that customers bring. Many sellers do not sold in calabashes or in containers of less than 2 litres. If a customer brings one thousand (1000) francs CFA, for instance, he or she is served *bili-bili* in a 2 litres bucket as demonstrated in figure 12 below. Although most producers of *bili-bili* prefer to sell in containers of 2 litres and above, others sell in small quantities of one hundred (100) francs CFA, two hundred (200) francs CFA and so on, depending on the amount that individual clients offer. The drink is put in many plastic containers ranging from 20 litres to 100 litres. If she sells 2 litres of *bili-bili* for one thousand (1000) francs CFA, it means that 20 litres will be sold for ten thousand (10.000) francs CFA.

Figure 12: A *bili-bili* producer selling her local beer in the market



Source: Tikere's archives (14/05/2023)

The *bili-bili* business is very indispensable because it curbs unemployment in a society where jobs are difficult to find. Some of the producers of *bili-bili* who are widows and young girls support themselves and their households with the proceeds they make from this traditional beer. Some of the benefits obtained from the business is reinvested in the business itself. Some of the gain is used to start other income-generating activities such as animal husbandry, meanwhile some is used in running of the household or in the up keep of the home. An elderly *bili-bili* manufacturer said:

Some of the extra money I make from my bili-bili business, is used to buy foodstuffs and ingredients to cook, contribute to the payment of school fees for school going children, take care of their medication and much more. Family members equally reap the benefits of the business as some of them are taken care of in one way or the other (17/05/2023).

***Bili-bili* as Nutritional Drink**

Bili-bili has nutritional value as it could help to combat famine. Fournier (1995) discusses that the 'nutritional values and restorative functions of fermented beverages is essential for hard work. Gillet (1985) states that "a large proportion of them (beverages) are considered to be foods in their own right". Therefore, by 'drinking *bili-bili*', one restores oneself as if one was 'eating food'. Man does not only drinks the *bili-bili* to satisfy his biological needs. He does so in order to live, he needs to integrate nutrients from the drink into his organism.

Bili-bili is a malt beverage and some of its nutritive values according to (<https://infinitabiotech.com/blog/author>) are that it is a rich source of B vitamins, malt extract may increase the vitamin B content of the beverages it is used in – including thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, folate, and vitamin B-6. The amount may vary depending on the malt beverage you are drinking, however. B vitamins are necessary for metabolising the carbohydrates, protein, and fat in food into energy. They also help regulate appetite, promote good vision and keep your skin healthy.

Malt extract is a source of essential amino acids, which the body needs to make proteins. Although some malt extract beverages are not a significant source of protein, they may help provide a small amount of these essential nutrients, boosting someone's intake.

Good nutrition is important for bone health. Some malt extract beverages may not be a significant source of the nutrients the bones need for good health, but they can help boost someone's intake. In addition to calcium, these drinks may also contain phosphorus and magnesium, also important minerals that help keep the bones healthy and strong. All three minerals make up the primary structure of the bones, while magnesium is also needed to regulate the hormones responsible for mineral metabolism.

Religious Functions of *Bili-bili*

The *bili-bili* plays a religious function. It is used in several religious settings including the church.

If a Christian organises a ceremony like holy baptism or Holy Communion in church for example, he or she usually invites friends and other members of the family. The family concern often prepares food and this local drink (or places an order from producers) which it carries to the church premises. If there are many families involved, they may invite the entire church to join them in the celebration, a veritable manner to communion with the people. At the church, the occasion is supervised by the host pastor (of some Christian churches) or priest. When the feast is over at the church premises, the Christians move to the houses of all the newly baptised members or the new communicants to leave them in their homes and in each home where they stop, some food and the locally brewed beer is brought and served to the people. This gesture

strengthens the bond that exists between the Lele people.

The *bili-bili* is very popular during the end of year festivals (especially in December and early January). At the end of December particularly on the 25th December, Christians celebrate the birth of Christ and on the 1st of January, they celebrate the first day of a new year. During these festivals, *bili-bili* is among the drinks which are highly consumed. During an interview, an interlocutor said:

At the end of each year the Lele people irrespective of the sex especially non-Christians, non-Muslims and Christians of some churches may decide to contribute millet and prepare bili-bili for the entire community. But it can equally happen that women decide to do the production and share with the whole community. This drink during this period act first as a time to bring the entire community together to discuss and share ideas over the drink which has been provided. It is important to note that at the end of the year the people meet to take an account of the year and then project for the next year which begins in January (15/05/2023).

Bili-bili is also consumed during funerals. When a member of the Lele society is bereaved, his relations, neighbours and well-wishers pay him or her a condolence visit. As they come, they carry at least an item and one of such is the *bili-bili*. This drink they bring is used by the family to entertain those who are present. This shows the communal way of life of these people, the people have to stand at each other's side in times of misfortune or fortune. The gift which are brought have to be repaid when the time comes. The gesture of carrying *bili-bili* to a ceremony has to be repaid the day that the visitor has an event. The people in this cultural universe practice the gift and counter gift of Marcel Mauss. Mauss (1923) comments that because gifts are inalienable they must be returned: the act of giving creates a gift-debt that has to be repaid. He argues that gifts are never "free." Rather, he noted that human history is full of examples that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange. To him, gift entails three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Each gift is "part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged" and failing to return means losing the competition for honour."

The sharing of this drink during a funeral is a religious act because as they drink, they relate with the departed, a way to say goodbye and also to channel the problems of the living to the ancestors. This is so because the Lele people belief system holds that when a man is 'going' or 'travelling' to the world beyond, he must be given a proper farewell. If this is not done, it is believed that the people will be neglected when they will be in need of the ancestors. The people need much harvest, many children and good health. This can only happen if they venerate the departed in their religious acts.

As the people in the community gather and are consuming *bili-bili*, serious and urgent issues could be discussed. This is to ensure social control and put everyone in that community at the same level. Commenting on *bili-bili* consumption as a community, a notable inn the Lele community said:

Drinking 'bili-bili' is not just a physiological act. It is used to associate the living with divinities. During the end of the year especially during every initiations ceremony, the bili-bili is always present. At the start of the event, the chief priest pours some of the drink to the ancestors and gods and uses the occasion to thank the latter for keeping them, that is, thanking them for protection and provision. In his concluding prayer, he usually supplicates the divinities to continue to watch over them, protect and provide for them and give them more fertility in agriculture and children.

D) Dynamics in the production and consumption of *bili-bili*

The *bili-bili* which is a cultural identity and heritage of the Lele people is stable but yet changing. The researchers have demonstrated above how this drink is stable. The paragraphs which follow concentrate on the changes in the production and consumption of the *bili-bili*. Concerning change in *bili-bili* production, the article examines two main aspects; the raw materials used for its production and the containers in which

the drink is stored. In the past, this drink was produced only with the millet known as Baiyeri, red millet (Djigaari) or sorghum. Today, due to increase in population, the demand in the supply of *bili-bili*, (produced with the aforementioned cereals) is short in supply. One of the many women who produce *bili-bili* note that:

As the population increases, I find it difficult to meet the demands of this ever increasing population. To continue to stay in the business, I have to spend more in the purchase of cereals that I used in our production (16/05/2023).

Apart from the increase in population, climate change is another factor that contributes to the change in the production of the *bili-bili*. The yields of millet in general, sorghum and maize have dropped due to irregular rainfalls. When rain does not fall as required, crops in general and cereals in particular do not do well. Two other factors which affect the production of raw materials used in the production of *bili-bili* are the destruction caused by birds on cereals and farmers-grazers conflicts. Birds eat up millet, sorghum and maize meanwhile there are frequent farmers-grazers problems. Commenting on these two factors, an interlocutor, a farmer said:

Birds cause a lot of damage on millet, sorghum and maize. A piece of farmland which produced two bags of millet for example, because of the damage caused by the birds, I may end up harvesting only one and a quarter or one bag of millet. Concerning farmers-grazers conflicts, sometimes the cattle of headsmen break into the farms eat and smash the crops. When the farmers do not have high yields, they turn to increase the prix of these cereals to cover their expenses or the amount they spent on the farm (20/04/2023).

The women who produce *bili-bili* say that when the farmers are affected, they too are affected because they depend on their crops to produce the drink. The shortage of millet has forced the producers of this drink to use an adaptive strategy which is combining millet and maize to produce *bili-bili* (see figure 13 below). This mixture affects the quality of the drink.

Figure 13: A mixture of germinated millet and white maize



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

The local drink produced with a mixture of millet and maize does not have the same quality like that produced with red millet or sorghum. Many consumers of this drink comment that *bili-bili* produced with a mixture of millet and maize does not taste nice and does not have the flavour desired from the drink. A consumer of *bili-bili* told the researchers that:

I have been drinking bili-bili for long now. I must say that when I drink that made only of millet, red millet or sorghum, I feel so satisfied because, first the drink has its natural brownish colour. Secondly, it tastes so good that I may want to drink without stopping and thirdly, bili-bili produced with red millet has a special flavour. On the contrary, today, when I drink this same drink manufactured from the mixture of millet and

maize, I do not feel satisfied, I drink just because I want to quench my taste, or I might be with friends or maybe in an occasion (16/06/2023).

In the days of old, after production, this drink was preserved in clay pots. These are natural objects, containers (clay pots) which the people know their origins and producers, objects which they identified themselves with. Containers which many if not all testified that enhanced the quality of their drink if stored inside. Today, such natural equipment are gradually being abandoned (due to their scarcity) in favour of plastic and aluminium containers. Today, ground millet is soaked in plastic bowls as demonstrated in figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Ground millet soaked or mixed with water in a large plastic bowl



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

Many producers of this local drink do not boiled it today in the clay pots as was the case before. They boiled in aluminium pots (see figure 15 below) and many of those who use this pot today note that they prefer the aluminium pot because they cannot get bad easily. To them, a clay pot is natural but difficult to manage because it breaks easily if not handled with care.

Figure 15: *Bili-bili* boiled in an aluminium pot



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

Figure 16 below is a demonstration of boiled juice in plastic bowls. This juice as can be seen is poured in these containers after boiling to get cool down. The clay pot was employed in the past for this exercise (see figure 9 above). Producers of *bili-bili* note that the plastic nature of containers spoil the quality and taste of their drink but they do not have any choice as the plastic objects are more resistant than the clay type.

Figure 16: boiled juice poured in plastic bowls to cool down



Source: Ami's archives (10/04/2023)

As has been mentioned above, there are some changes which have been noticed in the consumption of the *bili-bili*. This is at the level of the drinking vessel used. In the past, this drink was served and drunk absolutely from the small calabashes but today they are drunk from plastic cups. A seller of the drink said that:

I never used to use plastic cups to serve this drink neither did I provide them to the customers to drink from. At first or in the past, my customers drink only from calabashes, I usually served the drink with the small calabash. Today I use these plastic objects because the natural ones (calabashes) are very scarce. It is like its cultivation has dropped. I do not find them in the markets as was the case before. Even if I see them, they are becoming more expensive. One other thing about the calabashes is that they are difficult to manage, they break easily, difficult to wash and more (14/05/2023).

CONCLUSION

Bili-bili is a traditionally brewed drink of the people in the northern regions in general and the Lele community in particular. Its production is done mainly by the female folks. They succeed in this business is thanks to the raw materials (millet, sorghum) and firewood. Although it is not a drink consumed by some Christians and Muslims in this area, the benefits are reaped by all. *Bili-bili* therefore has many roles which include social, economic, nutritional, religious among others. The local *bili-bili* industry is gradually witnessing some changes like all domains of culture. These changes are noticed in its production and consumption. Increase in population has resulted to high demand for the drink, and producers of this drink have resorted to the use of millet and maize in their production unlike before when only the millet, red millet or sorghum was used. Today, this drink is consumed from plastic cups unlike the calabash which was used in the days of old. Despite these changes, *Bili-bili* is a drink which is a cultural identity and heritage of the Lele people. Its consumption is governed by the community and it is cultural that the community determines their meaning and function. Although drinking a calabash of 'bili-bili' alone to calm one's hunger is not bad, doing it together with someone or with friends, colleagues is more valued, as it marks a considerable communion and even a form of enculturation. This article on the production, functions, cultural value and consumption of *bili-bili* covers only an aspect on the study of *bili-bili*. Further research could equally be carried out in the valorisation of this locally made drink at the international level and even included it among the UNESCO cultural heritage.

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