Bisíwéérí: songs of a Muslim Chamba woman (Gongola State, Nigeria)
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Cette version comporte une mise à jour de la traduction mot à mot des énoncés tchamba ainsi que des traductions anglaises correspondantes. En outre, quelques corrections et précisions ont été effectuées afin d’améliorer la lisibilité du texte.
Introduction

The songs presented here came into our hands in an unusual fashion. Bìsíwé́rì, their composer, was a Muslim Chamba woman from the northern Shebshi mountain area of Chambaland (now in the north of Ganye Local Government Area, hereafter LGA); she died in March 1989 aged about eighty. Neither of us met Bìsíwé́rì, but we know two of her sons: Alhaji Saajo Aliyu (one time Secretary for Education in Ganye LGA), and Jibrillah Aliyu (presently a senior official in the Ministry of Education in Gongola State, Yola). During her lifetime, Bìsíwé́rì gained local fame as a composer of songs that featured in public dances; the more popular of these remained in local repertoires for several years. In her old age, her son Alhaji Saajo Aliyu, persuaded Bìsíwé́rì to make a cassette recording of some of her favourite songs. In a few cases, she added some words of explanation for her younger listeners, but generally she must have thought the songs would be understood by members of her family, who had heard them before and knew how they related to events in her life. We have taken the opportunity to ask her sons for help in interpreting the songs; but we did not talk to Bìsíwé́rì before her death nor have we heard the songs in other performances. For this reason, our indications of the dynamics of performance are necessarily minimal. Our source is unusual in these respects, but it may become less so, given the impact of the audiocassette in African villages.

The language of the songs, Chamba, called Sámá múm by its speakers, is known to specialists as Chamba Daka, to distinguish it from the neighbouring Chamba Leko. No modern linguistic studies of this language have been published, and there is no standard orthography. This is the first publication to use an accurate transcription of Chamba1. It is, therefore, necessary for us to append an extended note explaining the conventions we use to write Chamba. We hope that this will be of particular interest to Chamba readers, and that local reaction will enable us speedily to settle on a practical orthography that may depart in some respects from that used here.

Background

Bìsíwé́rì's life spanned two World Wars and three periods of government: born towards the end of German colonialism in Kamerun, she lived throughout the entire period of British mandate (and later trusteeship) of the Cameroons, and for almost three decades following Nigerian independence and her husband's death. The clan into which Bìsíwé́rì married had been the most powerful of the Chamba patriclans of the northern Shebshi area just prior to colonisation (see figure 1 for a genealogy and figure 2 for a map of the area). Her husband, the most important figure in the songs apart from herself, had successfully managed the family fortunes during British colonialism and secured administrative appointment as a court assessor. His position was the springboard to relative success and prosperity for Bìsíwé́rì and her children: four of Bìsíwé́rì's children have made the haj, and two of her sons have occupied high offices in the administration of education in Gongola State and Ganye LGA. Bìsíwé́rì's life with her husband, as she recounts it in her songs, offers a vignette of the transition he oversaw from membership of a prestigious patriclan, to local eminence as a Muslim and member of the colonial
According to local tradition, the patriclan into which Bisiwécri was born was of Bata origin. Her grandfather left Dems (now in Numun LGA) and reached the Mbulo region at the head of a Bata hunting party. He is assumed to have been a prince, since Bata hunting parties are reputedly led by high-ranking men. Arriving at Mbulo, he decided to establish a settlement, which became known as Mbulo Koombal (apparently from the Fulfulde for 'boat'). His son, Kambé, married Gāāru, a Chamba woman from the nearby, original settlement of Mbulo. Bisiwécri was their daughter. Later, she became the second wife of Aliyu Umaru (he had taken the name of his father Umaru, just as his own sons were later to take his name Aliyu).

Aliyu Umaru belonged to one of the cluster of patriclans all known by the name Yáám (with various distinguishing modifiers). During the nineteenth century, different sections of Yáám had swept into the northernmost area of Chambaland, establishing one large and numerous smaller chiefdoms (for details see Fardon 1988: 89-101). Stories relating how the most celebrated of the Yáám conquerors, 'Damashi' (Dāmāsī), met Moodibbo Adama (first Emir of Fombina) have been collected in numerous versions from the early colonial period onwards. Chamba raiders and Fulani state-builders commonly entered arrangements to their mutual advantage, and these were often cemented (at least in recollection) by the transference of a flag (as in the Donga/Bauchi alliance, and possibly in the Bali chiefdoms) or, as in Damashi's case, by the receipt of an Islamic text (ngitiiru) in return for a bow (op. cit. 96). A text purported to be that given by Moodibbo Adama to Damashi survived in the possession of the District Head of Tola in 1977 (and presumably does so still). Thanks to their chiefdom-building activities, the Yáám buū (Chamba plural of Yáám), along with other chiefdom founders (like the Bata of Mbulo from whom Bisiwécri was descended), were the dominant people in northern Shebshi communities on the eve of colonisation. Yáám and their close allies (Vere, Bata, Jangan) virtually monopolised the chiefships and other important offices of the chiefdoms, and they recognised a clear distinction between themselves and the Chamba-speaking people whom they considered indigenous to the area into which they had migrated (op.cit. 248-52). Although they took 'indigenous' women as wives, they preferred to marry their own daughters to allies whom they considered to be their equals. Bisiwécri's marriage conforms to this pattern (since she was of Bata origin and her husband a Yáám). By the end of the nineteenth century, the chiefdoms of the northern Shebshi Mountains were loosely stratified, and (in local perception) ethnically plural units, albeit dialects of Chamba Daka were spoken by all the inhabitants. Colonisation intervened as the autonomy of these northern Chamba chiefdoms was coming under threat with increasing Fulani migration into the plains and an attempt by the Fulani to tighten the administration of the Adamawa Emirate. The "free Chamba", as early travellers described them, were largely confined to the hills.

German administration hardly became established in this remote part of Kamerun, before the colony was lost during World War I. The demarcation of the Anglo-German border had cut through the Adamawa Emirate and, in the area of concern here, had also divided the Yáám clansmen. On the British or Nigerian side, the significant Yáám chiefdom of Binyeri/Tola fell within an arc drawn around the Adamawa capital of Yola; on the German side of the frontier, where the Yáám chiefdoms around Pola had been separated from the Emirate capital, the Germans elevated the chief of the Fulani centre at Nassarawo to become the most important administrator of the northern Shebshi Mountains. Both British and German policy relied upon the co-operation of ruling families that could demonstrate some "traditional" claim to preeminence (however tortuously), and both promoted Fulani to administer non-Fulani, who were considered incapable of administering themselves. Within this broad conception, the outcome of colonial policy was highly pragmatic.
The British acquired part of the ex-German colony initially as occupied territory, and then under a League of Nations Mandate in 1922, and later a United Nations Trusteeship. At the outset, they were required to preserve existing administrative boundaries. This meant that the Yáám chiefdom at Binyeri/Tola remained subject to Yola, and the Yáám-büü around Pola continued to form part of Nassarawo District. When the District Head of Nassarawo became Emir of Yola in 1924, the opportunity was taken to place the Chamba districts under Yola. The Yáám chiefdoms were thus reunited within the Yola Emirate, although they remained in separate districts. The details of subsequent local colonial administration changed too often to enumerate fully here (see Fardon 1988, chapter 11); however, they are important to our present story because they left a residue of competing claims to preeminence based on appeals to various previous situations: to relations between Chamba and Fulani prior to colonisation, to the German settlement, and to any one of a number of British arrangements of indirect rule. This is the background against which Aliyu Umaru pursued his career.

Many of Bìsiwééri's songs refer to the official position occupied by her husband. During the British colonial period, a professional body of salaried administrators was taking shape. In the earlier years, these men were drawn solely from the Fulani. Two major initiatives were made to redress the balance: a reorganisation in 1938 created a Chamba Subordinate Native Authority. As an administrative measure, this amounted to little more than an exercise on paper. Because British officers virtually ceased touring during World War II, the Fulani District Head of Nassarawo remained for practical purposes the chief of the Chamba. However, the reform did lead to the introduction of a two-tier court system in Chambaland with a separate 'Alkaali's' court at Jada. Early reports on implementation suggest that cases concerning marriage, divorce or inheritance that involved either solely Muslims, or Muslims and 'pagans', were automatically referred to this court. Two positions as "mufti", or assessor, were created for the Alkaali's court: one assessor was chosen to represent Leko-speaking Chamba living around Kojoli, and another was to represent Daka-speaking Chamba from the Pola region. Aliyu Umaru was entrusted with the latter position, which he held until his death in 1961. Part of the mufti's role was to advise on the proper verdict in court cases after listening to interrogation of the plaintiff, accused, and witnesses by the presiding magistrate. He was particularly charged with interpreting local custom in cases where only one of the parties was Muslim. Additionally, he was responsible for tithing the rich to create a treasury (baytal in Fulfulde) to provide charity for the poor.

A second attempt at administrative reform occupied the entire decade of the 1950s and was in large part a reaction to increasing Chamba agitation against Fulani dominance. After numerous reports and enquiries (Fardon 1988:276-81; Fardon 1991:198-203), Nassarawo District was dismembered and its parts incorporated into a new Division with headquarters at Ganye. Jada became the headquarters of Jada District retaining a Fulani District Head. In fact, Fulani are numerous in Jada District, and the reports of the 1950s did not anticipate appointment of a Chamba to its headship. Nonetheless, members of the Yáám clans have continued to feel aggrieved that they are not recognised as paramounts in an area over which they believe they can claim rights of chiefship predating the colonial period.

Bìsiwééri's use of the title "mufti" for her husband is thus freighted with political implications for her listeners — whether during the colonial period or now. Not all the songs in which the title appears were necessarily composed after Aliyu Umaru's appointment as court assessor in Jada. Apparently, his prominent role in the local Muslim community had already earned him this honorific title, and he was often approached for advice.

Two other general features of the colonial period are reflected in the songs. Relative peacefulness (compared with the turbulence of the nineteenth century) allowed more people to travel securely in search of work or trade. Because Aliyu Umaru was often away from home, in pursuit of his regular employment at Jada or occasionally on trips to more distant markets,
Bìsìwéří was frequently left behind in the family compound at Faren. Apart from the imposition of a Pax Britannica, the period also witnessed widespread changes in religious affiliations. Most Chamba (including Muslims) insist that genuine conversion to world religions hardly occurred before the colonial period. There is another political consideration here, since the legitimacy of Fulani rule in Adamawa is closely identified with the nature of jihad, and with the number of conversions to Islam that occurred during the nineteenth century (see Fardon 1991, Chapter 9). Chamba tend to distinguish the outward signs adopted during the nineteenth century by their leaders who otherwise continued to practise Chamba religion, from genuine conversion involving renunciation of local religion, which they claim is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Aliyu Umaru was able to gain the office of assessor because he had embraced Islam, enjoyed local esteem and was to some (perhaps limited) extent literate. Bìsìwéří's songs repeatedly draw attention to the prestige she gained by marriage into a family at the forefront of change: from her husband's chiefly pedigree, the office he occupied and the increased wealth and range of contacts he enjoyed as a result. However, from another perspective (for instance, that of elements of the Chamba Christian population), Aliyu Umaru's position could be seen as part of the attempt to foist a Muslim, Fulani regime on Chamba who insisted (in the context of local administrative reform) that they had not been conquered during the jihad. A Chamba Muslim, working for the colonial administration, was bound to find himself caught between conflicting judgements.

Many of Bìsìwéří's songs focus on family life, particularly the marital relationship and the situation of co-wife, or the enduring quality of women's attachment to their parents and children rather than to their husbands. In nineteenth century Chambaland, and in some areas to this day, the strength of attachment to the matriclans and patriclans into which Chamba are born tended to pull against the marital bond. Women's first marriages were especially marked and involved negotiation between the future affinal relations. Many women entered into only one marriage but, if the first marriage did not last, subsequent marriages, which were marked by scant ceremony, might be very fragile. Women who married more than once might marry very often (see Fardon 1988 and 1993 for evidence). Relations with clanspeople represented a more permanent anchorage in life than marriage, and it is indicative that, among traditionalist Chamba, women are buried in the graveyards of their natal patriclans and not at the place to which they move on marriage. Women's permanent identifications with their natal clans weighed against their attachment to their husbands. The polygynous household also was the scene of conflicting loyalties and ambitions; although friendship and solidarity among co-wives occur frequently, they are tempered by rivalry between women for their husband's attentions to themselves and their children. The bond between mothers and their children is represented as the closest of Chamba relations, and a poignancy is added to this relation by women's realisation that they would be expected to leave children old enough to manage apart from them with their husbands in the event of divorce.

The influence of world religions has tended to change this picture in some respects. Marriages seem to have become more stable during the second half of the twentieth century. The conjugal household has gained importance relative to the larger descent units. Traditional organisations like women's and men's cults (usually in the nominal ownership of clans) have generally receded in importance. An earlier system of partible inheritance is everywhere being replaced by rules that channel properties within the conjugal family. Wives of well-to-do Muslim men have become more secluded. (Bìsìwéří converted to Islam after her marriage; a woman in her position today would be unable to take the same part in communal dances.) Bìsìwéří's songs have to be set against this background of the changes in Chamba norms, many of which were already in potential conflict, and in the context of her marriage into a family at the leading edge of change in Chambaland from the nineteenth century onwards.

To appreciate Bìsìwéří's songs, we need to know not only such general circumstances
of time and place as those we have already described, and the relevant facts about her family situation, but also some facts about particular events. Sometimes she refers to these events in her own recorded comments; in other cases, Alhaji Saajo Aliyu has been able to clarify his mother's concerns. But in some cases, the circumstances which prompted the composition are unknown to us. In this, our position is very like that of local listeners, who will also need on occasions to infer the meanings of songs without knowing the circumstances which provoked them. In doing this, they will be guided by local conventions governing song composition: what singers may be expected to want to express and how they may use their language to do so. A listener thus interprets a song within a musical tradition with which he or she is familiar. The most popular songs may be suggestive of a common type of experience within the society, enabling the speaker to appropriate a particular message and, as an active participant in the transmission of his or her culture's musical tradition, to give it renewed expression on subsequent occasions.

Interpretation is an open-ended business, which can be carried to different lengths depending on the listener's knowledge of, and relation to, the singer on a given occasion. We would also argue for a purposive indeterminacy in the meaning of songs. Composers intend them to admit a variety of interpretations (or levels of interpretation), which they may themselves enlarge or restrict in the course of successive performances. We have therefore chosen to organise our presentation of these songs, not in terms of any one of their possible interpretations, but simply in terms of their primary expressive content, or theme: the main themes might be itemised as "regret at husband's absence" (most of songs 1 to 6) and "marital conflict" (7 to 12). The latter theme may be associated with ideas of women's solidarity with respect to men (8) or greater attachment to parents and children than to husband (11, 12). As we have noted above, Chamba norms describe a field of conflicting pressures operating between close kin and affines. Identities forged from ethnicity, religious affiliation, clanship, education, modernity and so forth are complex and often tense assemblages. Is a wife's intimation of regret at her husband's absence to be taken at face value or is it (also?/rather?) an implicit expression of pride at her marriage to a busy and important man? "Themes", as we refer to them here, are statements of explicit content, not of feelings or intentions. What a song "says" may not be what it "means" - either to the singer or to an audience who may interpret the explicit content allusively, metaphorically, ironically or otherwise. On occasions a song may "mean" the opposite of what it "says", and on different occasions and for different listeners it may mean different things.

The songs

The first consequence of the appointment of Bísíwé'irí's husband as mufti to the court in Jada, apart from increased prestige and income, was a change of residence. Rather than submitting his wife to travel and temporary accommodation, Aliyu Umaru preferred to leave her in charge of their old compound while he went to establish the family's new residence. This song dates from the period when she was left alone.

Song 1

1 dààdà Dïija làà jé
   mother Dïija stay just

   ñ wük më suûn vérèn só
   I feel me husband happiness not

   ñ gâäm ì suûn më só
I talk with husband my not

2 míi sóká /wé jé gá
child junior small just top.

m mà lään wūū tärwā
I fut. stay+inf. in_house entry_hut+q.

m mà gîrên î nyá/ârî
I fut. abstain+inf. loc. what+asp.

1 Diija's mother leads an empty life.
I get no happiness from husband.
I do not converse with my husband.

2 Being just a young child,
must I sleep in the reception hut?
how will I spend my time of taboo?

Notes (numbers refer to verses)

1 Dààdà: the Fulfulde term for mother is preferred; on this occasion, perhaps for its alliterative quality. However, Bisiwęęrı consistently chooses Fulfulde alternatives to Chamba words, probably because the language of the Fulani connotes relative sophistication and an Islamic identity.

Dînjá is her daughter's name.

wúk: verbs with mid tone in negative sentences (those ending in só) express current status. Verbs with high tone, as here, express definitiveness or habitual status.

2 m mà bûrên '(what) will I become?' or '(what) will become of me?' replaces m mà gîrên in some repetitions of this verse. It is nevertheless interesting that b/g correspondences are found in some words for different dialects.

The two verses of the song are complementary. The first line of each verse announces the human subject of the song: but in verse 1 stress is put on Bisiwęęrı's status as mother and wife; verse 2 emphasises her youth. The particle jé occurs in the first line of verse 1 with the sense of 'empty, pointless or useless', establishing the mood of the song. The same particle in the opening line of verse 2 means simply 'only'. Being so young, she worries about her ability to assume such responsibility; as a woman, Bisiwęęrı feels deprived of the pleasure and conversation her husband brought to her. The verb lâà also occurs in both verses, first with the broader sense of existing under particular circumstances or in a particular place; then, in verse 2, with the more specific sense of lying (down to sleep). Even in verse 1, this verb may evoke for Chamba listeners both a state of being (alone, pointless, uselessly) and the idea of sleeping (alone). As a young woman, it is anomalous that Bisiwęęrı should contemplate sleeping in the entrance and reception hut, the space preeminently associated with the male head of the compound. (In some traditional compounds, men might not have sleeping huts of their own; thus, sleeping huts tend to be associated with women.) The play on the idea of sleeping in the entrance hut might simply refer to her husband's absence. But there might also be a deeper play: women sleep in the entrance hut for three nights during the 'death crying' for a man. The consequences of absence may be seen
analogously with those of death; and songs similar to this one are sung during wakes by mourning women.

The reference to abstention (giit, inf. giřen) in the final line of verse 2 could be interpreted in different ways. Abstentions of different types (dietary or sexual) apply at various times: sexual abstention is required during menstruation, for the postpartum period, and before men take part in activities like hunting or participating in cult rituals. Sexual abstention is also obligatory at the death of a husband before certain rituals have been performed. This supports the idea that Bìsiwèèrí is using the genre of the 'cry death' song to bemoan her husband's absence.

In a related song, Bìsiwèèrí worries whether her husband has been successful in his new post. Since she knows he has relatively little formal schooling, necessary for a properly "enlightened" court, she wonders whether he will be capable of meeting the challenge, and warns him against acting in "darkness".

Song 2

1. Úmárù míi nyënën é jámá
   Umaru child go_in mod. well+q.

2. én, fāādā pōk nā vīrkā /sō, bāābā Dīijā wōō
   say court sit in darkness not, father Diija euph.

   fāādā tūū pōk i vīrkā /sō, bāābā Sāájō wōō
   court owner sit with darkness not, father Saajo euph.

1. Did Umaru's son begin well?

2. Everyone knows a court cannot sit in darkness, Diija's father.
The officials of the court cannot be in darkness, Saajo's father.

Notes

1. Nyàá-Sää-Múù (= Nyàá-Sää-Nvwuù), a generic name given to wives of Yáám clansmen, sometimes replaces the name of Aliyu's father, Umaru.
   The Fulfulde, jäm, is preferred to its Chamba synonym.

2. fāādā: the Hausa term (borrowed into Fulfulde) for a king's court is used to refer to the Koranic court at Jada.
   The Fulfulde term for 'father' is preferred to the Chamba term.

Bìsiwèèrí's preference for Fulfulde terms is apparent in this song also; she may have felt that such show of sophistication was commensurate with her husband's position as a functionary of a Muslim and Fulani court. If all goes well with this job, she knows her husband's financial standing will be considerably improved. In another song, she asks for a gift as a sign that she also will benefit from his new standing.

Song 3

1. Úmárù míi gāān līi bāyṭāl é wāā gā
Umaru child get eat treasury mod. with since

2  kú nyáá âdíîkô dójógûwá têç sá, m fâki
   he give+inj. scarf long here no?, I beg+asp.
   kú nyáá âdíîkô dójógûwá bààrà, n sârrârì
   he give+inj. scarf long two, I say+you+asp.

1  Since Umaru's son has taken over use of the treasury,
2  ought he not give me a long scarf, I beg of you?
   he ought to give me two long scarves, I tell you.

Notes

1  Again Nyàá sâá múù wéë 'Nyaa-Saa-Muu's child' can replace Úmáru mìì.
   The verb lii is replaced by nyáá 'give', têê 'take', or kêê 'him' (gààn kêê 'got
   (something) for himself').
   ê wàâ gà is sometimes -ââni 'that (treasury)'.
   bây tàì is the Fulfulde word for 'court treasury', which was placed under the control
   of the assessor.

2  múftí wà ('mufti' with euphonic extension) is often used instead of m fâki.
    âdíîkô dójógûwá: Hausa for a long head scarf. The purchase would have been made
    from a Hausa trader.

   In the next song, Bìsívèèrì seems to have placed a real event in a special light, as we shall
   see below.

Song 4

1  ñ kpáá ñ jàâm i Màànyìnè múm gà
   I cry I stand with Mayo-Ini mouth when
   Bìsívèèrì gèr è dàâ jìi Màànyìnè múm
   Bìsívèèrì go mod. down with Mayo-Ini mouth

a1)  Bìsívèèrì sùùn nwósùmëni, ñ gèt bóò
    Bìsívèèrì husband hurt+me+foc.+asp., I go top.

a2)  téèm kôîm só wà
    heart come not euph.
    diìng kôîm só sàng gà
    leg come not again since
Since I stand and lament on the bank of the Mayo Ini, Bisiwééri went down to the bank of the Mayo Ini.

1) Bisiwééri's husband is the one who has done me ill. When I walk, I have not the courage. Since my legs no longer carry me,

take me and carry me across the river. Take me and carry me to the other side of the Dűūnű. For [someone] must take us to the other side,

My husband is away in Yola town.

Notes

1) Verse 1 can be changed to the form marked a1)-a2).

The text, "Bisiwééri's husband is the one who has done me ill", may well represent the words of the boat owner involved in the altercation (see below).

2) Dűūnű (Chamba) and Màànyűně (Maayo Ini in Fulfulde) are used here to refer to the same river, the first as it passes through Ganye, the second further downstream towards Yola.

Bisiwééri's commentary on this song suggests that she has adapted her version of events to evoke abandonment:

Gèr i Yōōlā. Í báá só. Í tùùn kpááng gūsí. Gàáan wók /bê go with Yola. They come not. They carry groundnut rainy_season. so+dem. water mod.

wàà tűünën kimláŋg kimláŋg dàâ. Gbëëëën i báá làâáng só. Í làâ with come_out+inf. ideo. ideo. down. End_of_season they come quickly not. They stay


He went to Yola. They did not come back. They were carrying fresh grounduts. But
the river was overflowing. Towards the end of the rainy season, they could not travel quickly. They stayed for a long time there in Yola. They spent two weeks. So I sang this song.

Bísiwéèrî's family tell a slightly different and more complicated story. Her husband did in fact make a business trip to Yola, but he took his wives with him along with two donkeys. At the Mayo Ini ford, where they were crossing by canoe, an altercation occurred between Aliyu and the canoe owner, who had ordered him in discourteous fashion to do the bailing. A fight ensued, which ended when Aliyu snatched the punting pole and hurled it away into the river, leaving the canoe to drift dangerously. Other canoes immediately came to their aid, but the rescuers sided against him and refused to transport him, his wives, or their baggage. Aliyu went alone upstream and found a place where he could ford the river by swimming. From the other side of the river he returned to the crossing place to make new arrangements for his wives and possessions to be brought across.

A listener unacquainted with this story will assume the song to be that of a woman left behind by her husband, separated from him by a river, and fearful of following after him, despite a desire to do so. She therefore implores others to come to help her on her journey. Bísiwéèrî's simplified story suggests that she preferred this generalised interpretation (and may have composed her song with it in mind). While verse a1-2) may be a reference to the events members of her family believe to have provided the inspiration for the song, it can also be interpreted as a slightly enigmatic reference to the emotions of the singer herself. Such ambiguities are common in Bísiwéèrî's songs and may add to their charm for listeners.

In a related vein, the next song deals with her husband's trip to market – in order to buy a horse, according to her family. Literally, it suggests that Bísiwéèrî is fearlessly proposing to take the initiative of going to seek him out. However, given that her intention to journey is presumably rhetorical, the song could also be interpreted as an advertisement for her well-travelled husband who is countenancing so expensive and prestigious a purchase as a horse.

Song 5

1 m báá gërëni, dòn gà n nyéén mòò Yáám míi múftí tɛɛ
   I come go+inf+asp., other top. I see at last Yaam child mufti there

m báá gërëni, dòn gà n sààm Wéyàà sùùn è tɛɛ, gi
   I come go+inf.+asp., other top. I find Weya husband mod. there, dem.

m báá gërëni, dòn gà m bàmkëni i Yáám míi tɛɛ sógà
   I come go+inf.+asp., other top. I meet with Yaam child there rather

2 lùùmò Môôbi líí mó dòn wàà
market Mubi eat day other euph.

1 I am about to go, perhaps I will finally see the court assessor from the Yaam patriclan there.
I am about to go, perhaps I will see Weya's husband there!
I am about to go, perhaps I will meet the man of the Yaam patriclan there.

2 Mubi market day has come again.
Notes
2  *Lūumọ*, market, is Fulfulde. There is no Chamba equivalent. *Mọgbọ* (Mubi) is sometimes replaced by *Giiré* (Girei), another market town.

'The assessor', 'Wéyàà's husband', 'the man of the Yáám patriclan' are all references to her husband. Bisiwéèrì did not have a strong singing voice but Wéyàà did; that is why she was often the first to perform Bisiwéèrì's songs in public.

To end her song, Bisiwéèrì sings the first part of the verse, replacing the final *tèè* 'there' with the perfective modal particle *gò*, changing the meaning to 'I shall *certainly* see ...'.

Bisiwéèrì's family say that, when she composed this song, a trip to Mubi could last two to three months and was a dangerous matter, as captives were still being taken. They think Aliyu was among the first in the region to venture there.

In the preceding songs, Bisiwéèrì seems to represent the absence of her husband as a serious matter, involving the conflicting emotions of regret and pride. She was also capable of treating absence in a lighter vein. In the next song, she again proposes to follow her husband, but more to poke fun at him than to satisfy a longing to see him.

Song 6

1  Tòlà yàà sè
   Tola compound first

   Tòlà kààm è gòórè
   Tola village mod. where+?

2  mákùm Dùtál yàà sè
   show+me Dutal compound first

   ñ kéè súún mè múftí
   I seek husband my mufti

3  ñ kéè bànggààrù làà ré nyèm dúmá wá
   I seek butcher sleep mod. home vulture euph.

1  A Tola compound in particular,
   where is Tola town?

2  Show me Dutal's compound,
   I'm looking for my husband, the judicial assessor.

3  I'm looking for the butcher who lives at the vulture's house.

Notes
1  *jààm* 'stand' is sometimes substituted for *kààm* in the second form of this verse. The result means literally, 'where does Tola stand?'
2. *n gèr i* ‘I go to’ is sometimes substituted for *n kèè*; thus, ‘I am going to my husband’.

3. This verse, which is translated with a relative clause, is actually a sequence of two propositions in Chamba: ‘I’m seeking the butcher (Fulfulde, banngaaro); he lives ...’

As she explains herself,

Gāmsi nwùù, gèt Tòlà, làà ... Tòlà dòn pèè bà líi jè. Í báá só. Í
Court wife, go Tola, stay ... Tola other return and eat just. They come not. They

say: stay mod. home friend his. Court Lamja child, anaphore fut. certainly take. Fact.+I

sàró ré: dűmá yàà déèn é goó gà, m màá gá nyèm.
say+fact. that: vulture compound that mod. where since, I go imp. home.

He went courting a wife in Tola and stayed there... Tola market day came with no news. They did not come back. People said he was staying at his friend's house. He was courting a Lamja girl and the rotter wanted to marry her. So I said, 'Where is that vulture's house? I must go there.'

It turns out that her husband's friend was named Dutal, the Fulfulde term for 'carrion bird, vulture', and at the same time, was a butcher by profession. So she drew the evident conclusion that in Tola there was a butcher living at a vulture's house. Tola is the Yàám-ruled chiefdom founded by Damashi that became administratively separated from the other Yàám chiefdoms by the demarcation of the Anglo-German boundary (as explained in our introductory background notes). Lamja are a distinct Daka-speaking people considered indigenous to the northern Shebshi mountains and therefore somewhat inferior (at least in Bìsíwééři's eyes) to her own Bata pedigree or to her husband's illustrious ancestry. Bìsíwééři's wit is at its keenest here as she sweeps references to meat and carrion, chiefly and non-chiefly peoples, scavenging and butchery into a play of mutual allusions around the topic of her husband's proposed marriage. The effect is to portray her husband's temporary abode, as well as his trip and its purpose, in a simultaneously humorous and derogatory light.

Bìsíwééři was well able to stand up for herself in disputes with her husband, as she shows in the following three songs. In the first she upbraids her husband for his behaviour; in the second she defends a co-wife; and in the third she asserts her own standing within the polygynous household.

Song 7

1. jàng pèsìrí, gìì, Bìsíwééři, kèè Sú/ù ré tèčć
   throw propriety+asp. dem, Bìsíwééři, pres. God mod. there

2. néè sīkā bèè móć pé
   person insult+freq.+us mod.+with day also

   í sīkūm bèè móć pé
they insult+freq.+me mod.+with day also

3 m bîsâ mîí Yaâyá wêçrê
I change+you child Yaaya your+q.

m bîsâ nyáá Dîjá wêçrê
I change+caus.+you mother Diija your+q.

m mà mií wêç Sâajî bîrëní
I fut. child your Saajo become+inf.+q.

1 He has thrown propriety away! Bisîwëré, surely God is there [to see].

2 Someone insults us every day.
I am insulted every day.

3 Am I to replace your child Yaaya?
Am I to replace your daughter Diija?
Am I to become your child Saajo?

1 Bisîwëré is sometimes replaced by bàá mîrí, literally 'my father's child'.

2 Note the stylistic device: singular subject and plural object in one form; plural subject and singular object in the other. This is likely to express ambiguity in the position of her co-wives.

3 She cites the names of her two sons and her daughter. Note that the boys are 'your child' while the girl is 'Mother Diija', named by "title" as if she were already an older woman who had already exercised her reproductive function (compare song 9 below).

We do not know the particular circumstances that Bisîwëré rails against in this song, but her next song is in defence of one of her co-wives.

Song 8

1 kêç nyá/á wööñ i vwaärkân /nyángán jé gà, ñ wöö më só
pres. what like+inf. with beat+freq.+us+inf. useless just when, I like me not

kêç nyá/á wööñ i yâálênë, yâálên gà, ñ kâá têë
pres. what like+inf. with upbraiding+q., upbraiding top., I refuse still

2 pàná súún mè mùftí, nè yèrèn wööñ gà, tóómi
please husband my mufti, person foreign like+inf. top., work

úsëní súún mè múftí, nè yèrèn yàà gà, tóómi
please husband my mufti, person foreign compound top., work
What kind of love is this with useless beatings for us? I want none of it. What kind of love is this with such upbraiding? I will have none of such things.

Please my husband, the court assessor, to treat (your wives) as a savage would, what a chore!

Please my husband, the court assessor, to run your home as a savage would, what a chore!

Bisiwêgréi explains,


In this song, the beating was not for me, it was for my co-wife. She was having an "affaire". He cut off several long switches and put them behind the house. When she arrived, he planned to whip her.

Although she might support her co-wives against her husband, Bisiwêgréi was highly attentive to her status among them within the polygynous household. In the following song, she complains of being assigned the task of 'answering the door'. She likens it to drawing water for horses, which would normally be done by a servant, a captive, or a small child.

Song 9

Gaaru's daughter is answering the door. Gaaru's daughter waits at every stranger's beck and call.
She just relays messages to some headman inside.

Diija's father, would you like me to draw water for the horses next?
I am asking you, someone like myself, should I be drawing water for horses?

Notes

'someone like myself': Bisíwééri is referring to the fact that she was taken as wife from a clan of high standing. She is not a worthless person and will not be ordered about as one.

The following song also involves marital dissension. Displeased at having been assigned a sleeping hut with no shutter for its entry, Bisíwééri likens her position to that of the caddis – the larva of a may-fly – that is encased in a silken case covered with bits of debris that it carries around with its head protruding.

Song 10

1 Kambe mii kàà kàñnyìim wá
Kambe child like caddis euph.

2 mènéen /bànggààrù wòòm só sàng bô̩qq
someone butcher love+me not again top.

3 m fàwni m bàkì n lèngsi mìì ì bì̂n gù gà
I dress-up I break I lay shoulder mod. front him when

m fàwni m bàkì n lèngsi tìm ì tì/ì ̀je
I dress-up I break I lay tree at head just

1 Kambe's daughter is like a caddis.

2 Since that butcher So-and-so doesn't love me any more,

3 when I dress myself up and move my head from side to side before him,
I dress myself up, break off twigs, and lay them across my head.

Notes

2 Fulfulde banngaaro 'butcher' is used as a term of insult for her husband (in some repetitions, she replaces mènéen with suùn mè 'my husband').

3 In the two versions of this verse, Bisíwééri compares her position to that of the caddis larva cocooned in its casing and covered in twigs and debris. In the first version she suggests the movement of her head as she emerges from her hut to appear before her husband; in the second, she points to the poor state of her dwelling, which only has branches for a door. However, in the absence of any reference to a hut in the song, a listener unacquainted with the immediate circumstances that impelled her to compose it might also understand her to allude to
a seductive side-to-side movement of the head. The use of the Fulfulde verb, *fawnaago*, to dress up, encourages this sense.

Note the use of the subordinating particle *gà* 'when, since', which establishes a loop in the song whereby verse 3 is dependent on the next repetition of verse 1.

Chamba women's first marriages are not made at the whim of the partners; they imply family alliances and require the participation of the future affines in the arrangements. In the event of marital dissension that threatens the continuation of her marriage, a Chamba woman may turn back to her own family - either to reproach them for having assented to the unhappy union, or to seek their help and support. So in the following song, Bìswéé separator appeals to her matrikin, accusing her mother of having taken the bridewealth paid for her daughter as if she were selling a captive. At the same time, she appeals for help from her grandmother (Mangla, the ethnic name of the people living on the hill above Mbulo) and her maternal uncle (Yeriima, the title 'prince' in Fulfulde). (She does not comment on the immediate circumstances that made her compose this song.)

**Song 11**

1. mànää i lëbá á têë
   people they sell+you mod. still

   ŋ lêmìn têë
   you sell+me still

2. káká Mánglá î Büßô, bää vëc së, ŋ dât tiri
   grandmother Mangla loc. Mbulo, come+imp. you+mod. first, I miss problem

   à vit Yëriímá î Büßô, bää vëc së, ŋ dât tiri
   you+imp. call Yerima loc. Mbulo, come+imp. you+mod. first, I miss problem

3. nyää mè gààn bá'y gâ, tâmm bëë sârì
   mother my receive cowrie when, put+me mod.+with trouble

   nyää mè gààn bá'y gâ, tâmm sât jüm mè
   mother my receive cowrie when, put+me trouble on me

1. **People sell you all the same.**
   **You sold me all the same.**

2. **Grandma Mangla in Mbulo, come right away, I'm in trouble.**
   **Call Yeriima in Mbulo, come right away, I'm in trouble.**

3. **When my mother took the [bridewealth] cowries, she put me in trouble.**
   **When my mother took the [bridewealth] cowries, she landed me in trouble.**

A woman's children are her other mainstay in the midst of marital discord. But to remain with her children she must choose not to sever her marriage. For on divorce, she would return to
her natal family alone. In her next song, Bisiwééri weighs the unhappiness of her marriage against her love for her children.

Song 12

1  Bisiwééri wōōn gà, míí Yààyá
Bisiwééri love+inf. when, child Yaaya

2  ŋ nyíí nè dōn bīn gà, gíì.
I know person other front when, dem.

 ŋ kèè nyiíín mūm, ŋ kèè dōn nyiíín sáří
I seek now mouth, I seek other now speech

1  Bisiwééri's only love is her child Yaaya.

2  If later I meet someone else, so be it.
For now, I am looking for conflict, for now I am causing trouble for someone.

Notes

2  The use of dōn (rather than nè dōn 'another person') in the final proposition of this verse is grammatically unusual.

The final verse may well reproduce the reproaches that are being addressed to her by her husband.

Bisiwééri explains,

pén déèn nákèn ŋ nǐm àán wää, i nóó: súün wōŏm só gà,
thing dem. do+foc. I sing+rel. dem. top., they say: husband love+me not when,

ŋ lāà nỳēm gō/ón kpákè. N lāà ŋ kèè nyā/árè gà, ŋ nóó:
I stay home him uselessly+q. I stay I seek what+q when, I say:

m bāk mè miírí, só ŋ wōò mè súün só.
I follow me child, not I want me husband not.

What made me sing this song was that people were saying that since my husband doesn't care for me, is there any sense in staying in his home? As to what I was looking for by staying, I said I was staying for the sake of my child, not because I loved my husband.

While she clings to her children, constant worry over them is part of a mother's lot; witness the next song.

Song 13
1  dùrí nàà sòmsì mór á bén
   rain fall choose day mod. down

   Kàmbé míírì, m bàá tím nìp tāānēnà
   Kambe child, I come tree sap chew+inf.+q.

2  Gāārù míí mà tím má/án kōsē/énà
   Gaaru child fut. tree which pluck+inf.+q.

   bàá Gāājé míí mà tím má/án tāānēnà
   father Gaaje child fut. tree which eat+inf.+q.

   Kàmbé míí kōsì mà tím má/án kpālé/én
   Kambe child pluck fut. tree which taste+inf.+q.

3  kùn kēērò mëémbùrè
   fact+I seek+fact. child+pl.+?

1  Rain only falls from time to time.
   Will I, Kambe's daughter, end up chewing the sap from wood?

2  From what tree['s fruit] can Gaaru's daughter pluck?
   From what tree['s fruit] can Gaaje's niece chew?
   From what tree['s fruit] can Kambe's daughter pluck and savour?

3  To get [something] for my children?

Notes

1   sòmsì can be replaced by gāāki 'count', and mór á by bùm 'place'.

2   Bìsìwéērì invokes her mother (Gaaru), her father's youngest brother (Gaaje, from
   the Fulfulde gaajì, youngest child), and her father (Kambe).
   In verses 1 and 2, the interrogative suffix is unusually -à rather than -á (or -è as in verse
   3).

3   kēērò can be replaced by nyáārò 'give+fact.'.

Of this song, Bìsìwéērì says:

Dùrí nàà rì jēē dēēn sò, sùùmli jààm háá, sù/bànén tāārā,
   rain fall loc. year dem. not, short-dry-season stand long, moon three,

kùn nìmò nóó: dùrí nàà só gà, yírì nwààn só gà,
   fact.+I sing+fact. say: rain fall not since, guinea-corn bear not since,
The rains did not come that year, the break in the rains went on and on for three months, so I sang, since the rain will not fall, and the guinea corn will not grow, what will I give my children?

In the following simple and expressive song, Bìsiwêçâri asks God to grant her continued life so that her children will not be deprived of her care.

**Song 14**

1. m mà lään gà, é, nüddì Sûû
   I fut. lie+inf. when, that, trust+imp. God

2. bùm kú dákûm nàà gòngsi pè
   place it+inj. be_light+me in breath also
   Sû/û kú vèrûmè ri Sàâjó pè
   God inj. leave+me with Saajo also

3. m báá lään kàán sîn
   I come lie+inf. thus just

1. When I go to sleep, I think, Trust in God.

2. May the dawning day find me alive.
   May God let me stay with Saajo.

3. That is how I go to sleep.

**Notes**

1. Bìsiwêçâri uses nüddî rather than the longer form of Fulfulde derived verb nuddînà 'trust in', from nuddà 'to be true, right'.

2. Sometimes the name of her daughter, Diija, replaces that of her son, Saajo.

Bìsiwêçâri became a Muslim after her marriage. Among her songs, one is concerned primarily with religion and was composed, according to her family, when she was planning to convert.

**Song 15**

1. Kàmbé míí wòò Mâkkà nyêénêní
   Kambe child want Mecca see+inf.+asp.
2  Bisi Máà-Mbülülo, á gèt Sú/ú wá/á gürɛn tɛɛ
Bisi Mayo-Mbulo, we go God hand seize+inf. there

3  ã bõksá tɛ Yáâyá wàà
you+imp. follow+freq.+us still Yaaya with

á mà gèrɛn i mií Yáâyá pè
we fut. go+inf. with child Yaaya also

1  Kambe's daughter wants to see Mecca.

2  Bisi from the River Mbulo, we are going to pay hommage to God

3  Follow me along Yaaya.
Young Yaaya and I will go together.

Notes

1  Bisi Máà-Mbülülo combines the first part of her own name with the name of the river near her home town of Mbulo (Maayo Mbulo in Fulfulde). We have three different explanations for the sense of bìsí, the first part of her name (including the suggestion that the name is specific to women of Bata ancestry); the second part of her name, wééérì, means 'child'.

Commentators from her family add that in 1977 she was offered the opportunity to make the haj with her son Yaaya. She refused the offer on the grounds that her age and frailty meant that Yaaya would have spent all his time looking after her rather than attending to his religious duties. The pilgrimage was made by Yaaya's sister instead.

The songs presented thus far have been lyrical: the composer appears to be expressing her intimate feelings to people close to her. In other songs, Bisiwééérì's pungent critical sense seems to be addressed to a wider audience. While her lyrical songs also contain satirising materials (as in the songs protesting her lodging or poking fun at her husband's efforts to court a new wife), the songs that complete this collection reveal her at her most editorial. In the next song, she jibes any of her jealous rivals who might claim her husband is too good for her.

Song 16

1  màỳ jábbà tŭū̀ làà wūu, ñ nyënku jë
owner robe owner stay in_room, I see+him simply

màỳ jábbà tŭū̀ nàà sāā-gāā, ñí nyënkuɾè
owner robe owner in bird-egg they see+him+q.

2  i bāà gà, sûùn mè dâ/án gà
they+inj. come when, husband my that top.

ñí dóó̊m sûùn mè múfîtì
I greet husband my assessor
The man in the jabba is in his room, I have only caught a glimpse of him.  
The man in the jabba is doing his paperwork, have they seen him?

Let them come, as for that husband of mine,  
I greet my husband, the mufti.

Do other women want him?

We know Bisíwèéùí’s general intention from her remarks cited below. Her first verse remains, nonetheless, grammatically and semantically obscure to us. "The man with the jabba robe" (Hausa mài jabbà; the Chamba rûú is redundant with mày) is apparently her husband. We assume her to mean that he is so taken up with his court work that she sees little of him. She is therefore not so fortunate as other women may think.

She comments,

géèn bóò, á ì Fàrèn ãán wàá, nè-nwúù báán ì Fàrèn ãán,  
this top., we loc. Faren dem. when, woman pl.+dem. loc. Faren rel.

ì nóó: wóórá nyàngsèn é wàá súún sèmèn, wóórá vèçmèn  
they say: we spoil mod. with husband handsome, we be_ugly

kàà nyèè, kùn sàrà, ì nóó: màà bóò, kú bàáréèén,  
as what, fact.+I said+fact, I say: who top., he come+inj.,

ì wòò súún sèmèn dá/ání gà, i báá ri tèè  
they want husband handsome that when, they+inj. come they+inj. take

That time, we were in Faren, and the women in Faren were saying that a handsome husband was wasted on us, that we were as ugly as anything. So I said, let anyone who wants that handsome husband come and marry him.

What happens when rivals pursue the suggestion of marrying her husband is the subject of the next song.

Song 17

1  n’òò sèè, súún sèmèn gà, dùk gèéén sìnè  
I ask mod. still, husband handsome top., remain it only+q.

ì láá lá/ám só, pàná, súún sèmèn yàà rè nyèèm sìnà  
I sleep sleep not, please, husband handsome compound loc. home only+q.
bùm gàmkèn jè, kàà sùùn sèmèn gà, dûk gö/ón sin gbàt
place resound simply, like husband handsome top., remain him only just

lá/ám tûk gùrùm sá, sùùn sèmèn gà, dûk gö/ón sin gbârè
sleep eye catch+me not?, husband handsome top, remain him only just+q.

1  Now I ask you, are there no more handsome husbands (to be found)?
   Please, I can't sleep, is this the only handsome husband's compound?
   There is such a din, there are no more handsome husbands around, then!
   I can't get to sleep, are there really no more handsome husbands around?

2  Why is it so noisy, Waasa son of Umaru?
   The place is in commotion, court assessor, Waasa son of Umaru.

Notes

2  Waasa is said to be the Hausa wàsa 'game, play', which was given as a surname
   both to Umaru and to his son.

The women were apparently so anxious to become Aliyu's next wife that they were
fighting among themselves over him. In Bìsiwéèri's words,

Í kàmèn í nòng dàà lòng míi, kùn nimbûrò ŋ nóö: í mà nòngèn
They meet they fight down gulley child, fact.+I sing+them+fact. I say: they fut. fight+inf.

gà, sùùn sèmèn gà, dûk móøn gi sìn gbârè
when, husband handsome top., remain really it only just+q.

They met and fought down in the gulley, so I sang to them saying, since they were
going to fight over the matter, did that really mean there were no handsome husbands left?

The preceding songs suggest that Bìsiwéèri considered other women's envy of her position
as mere silliness. But their jealousy could be sufficiently strong to wish her harm. In this case,
Bìsiwéèri entrusts her fate to God.

Song 18

1  nè dònëbú í nàkùm ñë/ë dòwà
   person other+pl. they make+me death prayer
I sit when they give death mouth just euph.

they+inj. take beg there, death day my be-full not

so God top. know time my+asp.

Some people are saying prayers for my death.
I am still alive, yet they are giving out word of my death.

Let them make their entreaties, the day of my death is not yet due.

For only God knows when my time will come.

Notes

1. 

Notes

1. 

dòwà is from Fullulde do’a ‘prayer’; it contrasts with the Chamba verb póp, pōpsi, in verse 2 which has implications of non-Islamic practice in this context.

3. 

sāāyi is from the Hausa sa’i ‘time’ (taken into Fullulde).

The next song also involves evil intentions, probably manifested in the form of witchcraft, since Bìsíwégréi refers to accusations that were no longer allowed in court under the British colonial regime. It would seem that Bìsíwégréi considered someone under accusation of evil-doing by witchcraft to be guilty, but could not make her evidence public, as she and the accusers could then all be charged with an offense against colonial law.

Song 19

Kambé mií lár é tē, é, jàmāänû móón /sò
Kambe child fear mod. still, that time past not

Nèsáárá wák wōqðá tē, sóbāán kùn yēqwtiri
European strike order there rather+dem. cont.+I speak+asp.

Kambe’s daughter is quite afraid, she knows the present times are not as in the past.

The Europeans have made a law, otherwise I would speak out.

Notes

1. 

jàmāänû ‘time’ is Fulfulde, but we sometimes hear a final -i as in the Hausa zàmani, both being originally from Arabic.

ě, jàmāänû is replaced in the last repetition of this verse by tit wòq ‘our matter’, in
this case meaning 'our justice'.

2 Nészárá is from the Fulfulde Nasaaraajo; yeewtugo 'converse' is also Fulfulde. But wóódá is English 'order'. Wák wóódá is sometimes replaced by nyáá (or táp) dòóká 'give (put) a law', using the Hausa dòká for 'law'.

Even in her old age, Bísíwéří did not divulge the specific details of the affair that prompted her song. The only explanation she would give was,

Í fákum láà fák gá, ŋ nyíí tít déěn gò. Gà nè déěn
They beg+me tongue beg when, I know matter dem. asp. Since person that

sóón sóón sëni gò gá, ŋ nóó: ŋ lát mè sááří.
deny deny be_difficult asp., when, I say: I fear me trouble.

They were asking me how I came to know what I said, and I knew all about it. But since the person concerned was denying everything, I said I was afraid of getting into trouble.

Bísíwéří's "editorial" songs often comment on the lighter aspects of the social and economic changes of her times; in the next song she has a word to say on new habits of dress.

Song 20

1 Nèe báy wàà só lép só, sèé müftí
person cowry with not buy not only mufti

2 Yísí kààkí gèr éé YòOLá
cloth khaki come mod.+loc. Yola

1 A person with no money cannot buy (anything), but the court assessor can.

2 Khaki cloth has arrived from Yola.

Notes

1 Sààm 'get, find' may replace lép. Bisíwéñá sometimes also changes this statement to a question, by using gòërè 'perfective+interrogative' instead of the negative só (can someone without money buy [anything]?).

2 Sààgò is sometimes used instead of Yola.

Here is her explanation:

Kààkíbù déěn móón/én sèé nóó: kááy, yísí sèměn só, kàán só.
thus not.

Khaki+pl. dem. before only say: ah! cloth good not, thus not.
People used to say that khaki cloth was no good. When they started to go to Saago, as soon as the Fulani who were around there came, people bought those little tunics from them. When they tried them on, they said, hm! not so bad!

According to Bisiwé's family, the reference to her husband (the mufí of verse 1) reflects the fact that he was one of the first to buy the new khaki cloth at market and bring it back to Chambaland. Clothing fashion also figures in the next song, which would however be hermetic to all those who did not know exactly what it refers to.

Song 21

1 Úsmánù Jiddà bèwéè këgg lép bëni kááyá dòn bëeen
Usmanu Jidda brother his buy bring load other mod.

2 türúzà pási gà, lâmbà jüm sín
trousers new top., number on simply

1 Usmanu Jidda's junior brother bought some things at market and brought them back.

2 The new pair of trousers had a trademark on it.

Notes

1 The Hausa word kaya is used for goods bought at market. The words dòn bëeen are sometimes replaced by sààdâ (-rì) or sààdàwà (-rì), from Hausa tsâda 'costliness'.
Lép is sometimes replaced by tüùn 'carry'.

2 Túrúzà is, of course, borrowed from English, as is lâmbà, although Bisiwé is taking the latter from Hausa where it has all the meanings required in this context: 'trademark, number (size), vaccination scar'.
Túrúzà can be replaced by mày guígâ 'owner of a kind of rough white cloth (often used for shrouds). While mài is Hausa for 'owner', we find no reference to this cloth in the standard Hausa dictionaries.

Here is the explanation:
Usmanu Jidda’s junior brother left here for Mutum Biu with some others saying they were going to find work. He brought smallpox back with him. So they sent him to stay up behind the compound enclosure, over among those stones on the other side of that little gulley. Then they took all the people from Jada and vaccinated us, everyone here in Faren, even women who were pregnant. Some who were two to three months pregnant miscarried. God willed that, I being in that state, either it did not affect me or there was no swelling at that spot. But they vaccinated Yaaya, and when they did, it showed up on the other arm. It was hard for me to sleep at night [because of crying]. They pierced it but it would not clear up. They tried everything with no result. This went on for a long time until the thing finally
went down and just disappeared. So I sang saying that Jidda's junior brother brought us back an expensive present.

To prepare for the leera (flute) festivities, the young men would go off to the towns to seek work so as to be able to buy fine clothes for the occasion. Usman Jidda's brother may have got clothes, but he also got smallpox. This situation was perfectly adapted to a play on the Hausa word *lambà*, which would cover the trademark on the clothing or fabric, the pock marks left by the disease, and the scar left by vaccination. Since she thinks the vaccination caused the abscess on her son's other arm, Bìsìwéěrí can reasonably say that what the young man brought back with him cost them all dearly.

According to Bìsìwéěrí's family, the last song in this collection was composed "by commission". Umaru Sanda, her husband's junior brother (and District Head of Mbulo at the time of this writing), who lived in Faren at that time, asked her to provide a catchy song to be sung on the occasion of the first use of his new drum. In this case, even more than for each of the preceding songs, we must leave the reader to imagine the musical quality of this piece from her words alone.

Song 22

1  máy gúmbà lép gààn gànggà bée bęp kêɛ
   owner drum buy get drum mod.+with money his

2  bùm gàmkèn é nyäärè, Ùmärù Sàndà, Yáám miiri
   place resound mod. how+q., Umaru Sanda, Yaam child

1  The "gumba" owner has bought himself a two-headed drum with his own money.

2  How it resounds! Umaru Sanda, son of the Yaam clan.

Notes

1  Mài 'owner' and gàngga 'two-headed drum' are both Hausa words. Gúmbà, however, is apparently not; its origin remains to be determined.

2  Yáá zọ́, Hausa for 'he has come', sometimes replaces Yáám míiri.

Conclusion

A few concluding remarks may help to set Bìsìwéěrí's songs in a wider context of traditional African music.

Rhythm: on the recording from which we have transcribed these songs, Bìsìwéěrí sings without rhythmic accompaniment. The outsider to Chamba musical tradition will nevertheless perceive the repetition of similar musical material within a strict periodicity. We use this perception as the basis for organising our transcriptions into numbered verses. We would, however, expect (from our knowledge of the music of neighbouring regions, see Arom 1991) each period to be divisible into a given number of equidistant pulsations. The words of the verse would
be distributed with respect to these pulsations in a specific way. The pulsations could presumably be provided not only by the singer herself, but by any participant in the same musical tradition.

Melody: the melody of each song is conditioned by the tones of its words. As a general rule, movement from a lower to a higher, or from a higher to a lower, tone requires a melodic movement in the same direction. This rule may be disobeyed in the course of a song, but not on every repetition of the same material. The proper relationship of the tones must be made apparent at least once.

Rhythmic and melodic variation: Chamba music, like that of most other African traditions, is based on achieving variation within repetition. As our notes to the individual songs show, certain words in a given verse may be replaced in the course of successive repetitions. Such variation is an intrinsic part of the song. It may be limited to simple word play (as when bïrën 'become' replaces gïrën 'abstain' in song 1, verse 2) or to creation of relations of synonymy and antonymy (as when lïi 'eat', nyáá 'give' and téé 'take' alternate in verse 1 of song 3). In such cases, the original tones, number of syllables, and usually, basic syntactic structure are preserved. The new verse thus need involve no alterations to the rhythmic or melodic pattern. Substitution may, however, also lead to melodic variation, when, for example, a low-tone word replaces one with a high tone (song 21, verse 1, tiùn 'carry' for lép 'buy', or song 3, verse 1, kéé 'himself' for téé 'take', with rhyme as well, on successive repetitions). Likewise, longer words may replace shorter ones or words or phrases may be inserted, allowing rhythmic variation by a change in the relationship of words to pulsations. Additions often occur between two verses, where melodic rests may be provided in the singer's simplest pattern. This device may create new grammatical or semantic linkage between the verses, thus temporarily altering the cyclicity of the song.

Insertions within individual verses will never extend to replacement of the entire verse. Part of the material must remain unchanged so that repetitions can be recognised as such. An example of particularly rich variation is found in verse 1 of song 17, where the alliterative sïïn sëmën 'handsome husband' and sïn 'only' are the only constant terms. Furthermore, the basic syntactic composition of this verse can be seen to be a short introductory sentence (always ending with a monosyllabic particle on non-low tone), followed by a longer interrogative sentence introduced by a topicalised noun phrase. Note that, on one occasion, Bïsiwégréi alters the structure of the longer sentence, substituting the vocative pâna 'please' for the topicalised phrase and shifting the constant element, sïïn sëmën, into the following interrogative. But by retaining the short initial sentence, she assures that even syntactic rearrangement within the verse will remain partial.

The greatest length to which substitution can go is shown in verse 1 of song 4, where the first two variants have Mâànyínê múm 'the bank of Mayo Ìní' as constant element, while the third (marked a) is linked to the second only by the singer's name, and has an entirely different syntactic structure. Bïsiwégréi of course supports recognisability by creating a special syntactic and semantic link with verse 2. This is certainly a limiting case of variation within repetition.

The features described above are undoubtedly found in the musical traditions of many African cultures. They are applications of formal principles of musical composition, not features of style. In each of her songs, Bïsiwégréi has a message (or set of messages on various levels) which she wants to transmit in an effective way through music. The style in her music is what gives it this "effectiveness", its ability to strike other Chamba as good music. Are there features of the "best" Chamba music which distinguish it from the "best" music of other African cultures with similar traditions? Are there features of Bïsiwégréi's music or of some specific songs in her repertory which earn it or them a higher degree of approval among the Chamba? These are questions to which we cannot reply, as we have conducted no cross-cultural studies of musical
traditions or surveys of musical preferences among the Chamba. We can, of course, easily spot structural features of Bisivëjë’s texts which can be identified, from our own literary perspective, as figures which give them depth and density, and we attempt to bring this out in some of our commentaries. To our knowledge, however, there is no explicit codification or analysis of such features among the Chamba. The best of new compositions are identified as such, but we have not yet carried out the investigations that might allow us to assume that any judgements on our part that wordplay is skillful or substitution and repetition are ingenious in specific instances, will always coincide with majority opinion among Chamba.

Note on the transcription of Chamba

Consonants: most Chamba consonants can be represented by familiar signs from the Roman alphabet: b d f g j k l m n p r s t v w y (and h in a few borrowed words). Chamba also has a few less familiar consonants which are represented by two consecutive letters: the 'labiovelars' kp and gb (found in many other African writing systems), the palatal ny (a nasal y), the velar nw (a nasal w) at the beginning of words and a corresponding ng (like the sound at the end of the English 'sing') between vowels and at the end of words, and the 'labiodental flap' written vw, a sound which is characteristic of several West Central African languages. Between vowels, Chamba will also allow certain groups of two consonants chosen from this set.

Vowels: some Chamba vowels can be represented easily by the ordinary Roman a e i o u. However, Chamba has two sounds for both e and o that we need to distinguish. The more common e sound is that which occurs in the verb kèè ‘to look for’ (similar to the English ‘kept’); the more open sound in kèè ‘to tear’ is slightly less common, and so we employ the ‘hooked’ e to represent it. The same applies to wòò ‘to like’ (similar to the English word ‘law’) and wó ‘to hide’ (similar to the English ‘hope’).

Chamba also has a ‘central’ vowel, that occurs in káá ‘to refuse’ (similar to the English ‘earn’).

The full set of Chamba vowels, therefore, numbers eight: a a e e i i o o u u.

Vowel length: in the examples just above, we have written each vowel twice. This is because Chamba can distinguish in some cases between ‘long’ and ‘short’ vowels. Although there are many cases in which lack of contrast means that no confusion could result, we have chosen to write vowels that can be clearly heard to last longer with double letters.

So as not to increase the number of special signs, we give borrowed words in a form corresponding to their Chamba pronunciation. The source word is cited in a footnote.

Tones: Chamba has three "registers": high, medium (or mid), and low. We represent them by marks placed above the letters which stand for the sound pronounced on the given level. Thus: báá ‘to come’, gáá ‘egg’, dàá ‘to fall’ carry respectively a high, a mid, and a low tone.

The representation of Chamba tone is complicated by the existence of a phenomenon which is known technically as "downstep". This means that a given tone, when compared with a preceding tone, may sound as if it were one register lower than it actually is (in particular, if a low tone is affected, it will sound as if Chamba has a fourth, extra-low register). The actual register of a downstepped tone must be determined by comparing it to the following tone.

Downstep has been marked by placing a slash (/) before the affected syllable (usually the first in a word). This allows the great majority of words always to be written in the same way (with the same tones), whether they are affected by downstep or not.

Downstep occurs particularly after high tones which are derived from original low tones by some rule of grammar, and (perhaps a special case of the preceding) after the modal particle.
It also appears before the next term in the predicate following high-tone verbs (or high-tone clitic object pronouns, after a low-high modulated tone). For the purposes of this paper, we have omitted marks for this type of downstep, which we believe the native speaker will supply automatically. In this way, our notation will appear less cluttered. We are required, however, to mark downstep in those terms which could be analysed in isolation as having high-mid tone, but which behave as having a high/high sequence in context, e.g. sî/i 'sun; God'. Words of this type which end in a non-nasal consonant cause downstepping of the following term. We therefore write, sât /mè 'my problem'.

Translations: below the Chamba text, we provide a word-by-word translation so that the reader can pick out the general meanings of individual elements. Given the current state of our understanding of Chamba grammar, the exact meanings and functions of grammatical modifiers and relational words may be improperly or insufficiently specified. We hope to be able to remedy these inadequacies in future publications. For the time being, we use the following abbreviations in our word-for-word translations: asp. = aspect marker; caus. = causative; cont. = contrary to fact; dem. = demonstrative; euph. = euphonic extension; fact. = factitive; foc. = focaliser; freq. = frequentative; fut. = future; ideo. = ideophone; imp. = imperative; inf. = infinitive; inj. = injunctive; loc. = locative; mod. = modal; pl. = plural; pres. = presentative; q. = interrogative; rel. = relative; top. = topicaliser.

In addition to the word-for-word translation, we offer a free translation to assist readers whose main interest is in the meaning of Bisiwêç‘ri’s songs.

References


Notes

1. For support of fieldwork since 1987: Boyd is grateful to CNRS and Fardon to the Carnegie Foundation, University of St. Andrews and British Academy. Both acknowledge the official support of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and of the Chief of Ganye and his traditional council, as well as of the different administrators who have held local government office since 1987. Graham Furniss (SOAS) was kind enough to help us with a critical reading of this text.
2. There are a number of versions of the foundation of Mbulo; this one was favoured by Bisiwéri. However, other accounts would suggest it unlikely that her actual grandfather would have been old enough to lead the founding party.

3. Details on Chamba Area Reorganisation 1933-40 can be found in the 'Yola Profile' G3 and G3A at the Nigerian National Archives Kaduna.

4. It is not certain whether Aliyu Umaru was the first holder of this position.

5. Unpublished work by Esperanza Ruiz suggests that certain themes are widespread and have analogues in women's songs in many parts of the world. Themes are stated in global terms, though the analogues are integrated in specific ways in different cultures. Complexes of notions seem to recur (as when 'regret' is associated with expressions of 'loneliness' and 'insecurity'). It may be objected that the identification of these themes is simply a projection of an investigator's cultural categories. Whether the analogues would be recognised as such from the standpoints of members of different culture remains an unanswered question of comparative aesthetics. Even conceding the possibility of generalising about themes, there is no guarantee that the frequent occurrence of a theme cross-culturally has interesting implications. Because this approach is debatable, in addition to ordering Bisiwéri's songs thematically we also provide an explanation of content from Chamba perspectives.