

# The Mbay People

## 1.1 Geography

The Barh-Sar River in south-central Chad forms a section of the border between Chad and the Central African Republic, flowing eastward before turning North and Northeast. It winds its way between Koumra and Sarh near Manda National Park, and continues northward, eventually emptying into the Chari River. The region near the border, reaching about 50 kilometers into Chad, is the principal homeland for the Mbay people. The Mbay are a member of the Sara<sup>1</sup> group, and are closely related to many of their neighbors throughout Southern Chad in an area extending from Moundou in the West to Kiabe in the East.

Mbay villages line the road that runs east-west on the Central African side of the Barh-Sar, but are soon replaced by Kaba and Suma villages to the west, just after the road turns to the southwest at Gale. South of these villages lies the vast and uninhabited Nanya Baryen National Wildlife Reserve. Mbay villages north of the river stretch westward to the area around Koldaga, center of the Kan Mbay on the road to Gore. To the east of where the Bahr-Sar first turns to the North live the Bedege Mbay, concentrated in the area around Dembo and along the north-south road on the east bank of the river. South of Dembo, in a small number of villages near the border, are still more Mbay, speakers of the Bekonje dialect. Thirty kilometers to the north, on the west bank of the river, lies Moissala, administrative center and largest Mbay town. Mbay territory here extends only a short distance to the east: Ngam villages begin within 10 kilometers of the river at Moissala, and to the North, a number of Ngam villages are found right on the east bank of the river. Ngam territory extends all the way to the Maro region, due south of Sarh. On the western side, Mbay villages extend about 25 kilometers to the North of Moissala before being replaced by Day villages; the Day are a non-Sara people, centered here in the area around Ngalo. Still further north lies the Mandul flood plains, which run into the Bahr-Sar River at this point, and beyond lies Bedaya and Sar Madjingay territory. Slightly to the West the Mbay are bordered by the closely related Nar, who are concentrated in the area around Beboro, an important market town on the road from Moissala to Koumra. West of the Nar are another group of Day, and Day villages spread westward to where the Mandul and Niamete rivers curve around the region from the South. The majority of the dominant Beju Mbay are found to the west and southwest of Moissala, and the cantonates of Dilingala, Gong and Bekourou are made up entirely of Mbay villages. In all, there are approximately 80,000 Mbay living in the subprefecture of Moissala, in addition to those found in Mbay and Sara neighborhoods in N'djamena, Sarh and Koumra. Since the wars Muslim invasion of Moissala in the 1980's, a very large number of Mbays have fled to N'djamena.

Moissala is a town of about 5000 people, and has a post office, a large elementary school, a secondary school (CEG), a small government center, numerous fixed shops, a mosque and 3 missions, and a fairly large daily market. The main streets entering the town are lined with tall, thick-trunked cotton trees. A dense layer of dark green mango trees can be seen rising above the mud walls of the compounds through much of the town, and well placed African mahoganies

provide shade near the market, school, and other public areas. Although the Mbay are the principal inhabitants of Moissala, there are also sizable numbers of Day, Hausa, Arabs and other Muslims, and sections of the town have a distinctly Muslim flavor. Over the years, different Muslim groups have created their own neighborhoods, constructing square mud houses with mud roofs. But the bulk of the town is Mbay, and Mbay compounds, surrounded by mud walls or grass fencing, contain round houses with thatched roofs, granaries, and drying structures typical of Mbay village life.

Moissala is connected to the outside world principally by means of the dirt road to Koumra. This road is maintained most of the year, although deep sand near where it crosses the Mandul flood plains makes travel slow. The principal means of transport is by truck -- especially small pickups -- which local merchants use to have their wares transported to and from the area; passengers are permitted to travel for a set price. Since the development of the oil pipeline in Southern Chad, a group of oil company workers now work at Moissala, and transportation to the outside world has been improved for them. In addition to the road to Koumra, there is a road southwest to Gore (south of Moundou), and two roads east of the river -- one which leads south to Central Africa through Dembo, and another which winds northeast to Sarh; a small one-vehicle raft is used to ferry vehicles between the east and west banks of the river. Numerous other roads and paths connect Moissala to the towns and villages within the subprefecture.

It is in these towns and villages that the majority of the Mbay live, principally as farmers, cultivating millet, beans, peanuts, groundnuts, corn, squash, yams and manioc for personal consumption, and cotton to raise cash needed to purchase clothing or other consumer goods, or to pay government taxes. The land throughout the region is remarkably flat, covered for the most part with a thick growth of grasses, plants, bushes and small trees. Reports from colonial times indicate that the region was heavily forested in the very recent past, but persistent expansion of agriculture, especially for cotton, has resulted in the destruction of all major forests. The appearance of the land changes radically over the course of a year. During March and April, at the height of the hot dry season, it is arid: streams have dried up -- even the Bahr-Sar can be crossed on foot -- and those plants which have escaped bush fires are dried and withered. The earth becomes hard and almost impossible to dig in, wells begin to dry up, and the oppressive heat makes activity unthinkable during much of the day. The rains can begin arriving as early as late April; at first they are mere windstorms, covering everything with a fine layer of sand, but dropping little water. But the first rain follows shortly thereafter, and the ground turns suddenly green, as grasses and young plants spring out from the seemingly barren earth. The storms continue to increase in strength and duration until by July the rain will occasionally fall steadily for days. By this time, the once arid region has turned tropical; tall grasses and a large variety of plants fill every inch of soil, trees are bright green, and the roads become flooded and at times impassible. The rains begin slowing in August, and by early October have stopped completely, permitting the farmers to begin the harvest. Although the cold months of December and January provide a brief respite to the heat, the rain will not fall again until April, and as the dry season progresses, the ground gradually begins to

dry out again. This process is hastened after the harvests, when tremendous bush fires break out, blackening huge tracts of land, and filling the skies with thick smoke and black cinders.

The activities of Mbay farmers closely follow the seasons and depend entirely on the rainfall. Planting begins in May for most crops, and it is necessary to weed the fields, plough the earth, and plant, all in a relatively short period of time. Most cultivation is done with a short handled hoe (kòsè), although the use of oxen is also fairly common. An expert farmer can hope to cultivate between 10 and 14 'chords', which is a field measuring 70 meters by 70 meters. The heavy rains of mid-summer permit the growth of destructive weeds in the fields, and it is necessary to weed twice in the course of the growing season. The harvests begin in October after the rains have stopped, and different millet varieties continue being harvested until January. These varieties have substantially different yields: some produce abundantly, but only when there is ample rain; others produce better with less water, and still others produce moderate amounts regardless of the rainfall. Between October and January, the food crops are harvested, dried, and stored for use over the year. Cotton is cleaned and sold at the December cotton market to cotton buyers who come from the plant in Koumra. The most important food crop is the millet, and if the rains are sufficient, enough of it can be grown to last the farmer and his family until the next year's crop. In bad years, food supplies become very scarce in July and August, and corn and peanuts will be harvested early and consumed. The price of a 100 kilogram sack of millet rises dramatically over the course of a year; at harvest time in November and December, a sack can be had for as little as 2000 CFA; nine months later its value will have increased tenfold.

A typical farmer also raises a small amount of livestock: chicken, goats, sheep and guinea fowl. Chickens are allowed to run loose in the compound during the day, but are closed up in coops during the night to protect them from mongoose or wildcats. Goats and sheep are allowed to roam about freely most of the year, but must be tied up during the growing seasons to prevent them from destroying the crops. For the most part, ownership of sizeable numbers of goats or sheep is limited to wealthier families.

The rivers and streams of the region produce a large quantity of fish, and in November and December, as the waters begin to recede, collective fish hunts are organized. Dams are built, water removed, and fish gathered with nets, baskets and spears. There is also a small minority of Mbay who make their living almost entirely by fishing; using small pirogues, long nets, and fish traps, they are able to extract fish from the river most of the year. The catch not consumed is sold, and money used to purchase millet and other necessities.

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in water levels caused by drought.

A small amount of hunting is still conducted by the Mbay, although most of the larger game (elephants, hippopotamuses, giraffes, and larger antelopes) were virtually eliminated from the region during the civil wars of the early 1980's. Birds are the most common quarry, and snares are set in the fields to catch pheasants, guinea hens and other ground birds. Their meat is eaten, but the hunting is also designed to keep them away from crops. After the harvests have been completed, hunts for other small animals are organized; fires are used to chase rabbits, squirrels and other rodents out into the open where they can be trapped or killed. These fires frequently get out of control, growing into destructive bush fires.

While the majority of the Mbay live in small villages working as farmers, a substantial number also live in towns and cities outside the region, especially in N'djamena and Sarh. Many consider government service, free from the risks inherent in subsistence farming, a more desirable method of earning a living. Those who are able to obtain a job as a civil servant, or even more rarely, as an employee in a private firm or an agency of a foreign government, move with their families to their posts. They are nearly always followed by younger members of their extended family, who come with the hope of finding support while they complete their education, so that they, too, might find work as a civil servant. The failure rate in High School, however, is extremely high -- probably above 90 per cent -- and even those who finish are unlikely to find work. But few of those who fail desire to return to the village, and many remain in the city. Since the construction of the oil line, many of these young men have returned to Moissala in the vain hope of obtaining work. When this hope fails them, many of these have turned to alcohol and drugs.

Villages vary a great deal in size, from tiny hamlets of a hundred inhabitants to small towns of a few thousand. The Mbay tend to form fairly concentrated settlements, typically surrounded by tall grass fencing, with alleys and pathways leading between the different family compounds. The compound itself is also surrounded by fencing, with the husband's house by the entrance. A typical house is small and round, constructed with sun baked mud bricks; it will have no windows and a single door, normally corrugated metal in a wooden frame. The roofs are supported with heavy branches, to which are woven lighter branches or millet stalks, which in turn support the grass thatching. Larger rectangular houses are less common but readily found. If a husband has more than one wife, each will have a separate house, and a separate house is also constructed for the children. A compound will also contain thatched covered granaries (*dàm*), numerous structures for drying grain (*dàw*), a cooking area or small kitchen, a small enclosure for washing, and a separate one for the WC, as well as pens for any animals. During the rainy season, certain crops are grown in patches within the compound, and pumpkin is planted to grow up the houses, walls and fencing. Mango trees are very common within the village compound, and occasionally banana, papaya, guava or lemon trees are also planted. Women also tend other small trees and plants used for sauces or medicines.

An Mbay proverb states that the work of the man is tilling, while that of the woman is cooking, but in reality, the division of labor is not that clear-cut. It is true that men bear principal responsibility for the field work: plowing, planting,

weeding, and harvesting of the major crops. But women and older children help with the harvest, and women take charge of most of the gardening within the compound, and may also have their own fields near the home. In addition, they are responsible for taking care of small children, as well as for all cooking and cleaning.

The most important food is millet, and it is used to make the preferred food among the Mbay, 'boule'. (For lack of a better term in English, I will use this French word throughout the dictionary.) Boule (mbùr) might be best described as a large thick dumpling made of millet flour mixed in boiling water. A woman will first place the millet grains in a mortar, and pound them into a fine flour. The flour is then cooked in hot water, constantly stirred with a large wooden spoon until the consistency is that of sticky bread dough. When the millet flour is cooked, it is packed into a gourd to give it its round shape. It is then placed onto a tray with the rounded side up, together with an accompanying sauce, and the entire dish is covered with a woven cloth to keep sand and flies off. The tray is then set among the persons eating, who remove the gourd from the boule, and begin breaking off pieces of the boule with their fingers, dipping it into the sauce and then eating. Among the Mbay, the pinkie is used to 'cut' the sauce in order to stop it from dripping. It is customary for men to eat first, followed by the women, and then the children. Sauces are made with a base of fish or meat cooked in oil -- typically that of the karite tree. There are two basic sauce types: 'long sauce' (táa) is one which is cooked with okra, *Grewia venusta*, or leaves from other bushes which give it a gummy or even slimy texture. This type of sauce is extremely popular among the Mbay. A second type (ké-mbītē) is one made without any gummy ingredients, and which usually has a smoother texture caused by adding flour, peanut butter or crushed sesame. Millet is also used to make a type of porridge (bíyā), which is considered especially healthy for small children or for breakfast.

Cooking is done almost exclusively with firewood in Moissala. Three finely finished clay hearthstones (hīl) are placed in a circle, with gaps between them large enough to insert three thick pieces of firewood. The cooking pot, traditionally made of black clay, but more recently replaced by imported aluminum pots, is then placed on top of the hearthstones. The task of obtaining firewood has become increasingly difficult as more and more of the forests have been cut, and as a result, the price of firewood in the market has increased astronomically.

Land ownership among the Mbay is collective, in that it theoretically belongs to the village and not to individuals. Village leaders, and particularly the land chief (ngār-ḃēe), are responsible for granting land usage to the farmers. In practice, a farmer who has planted in a field in past years will continue to work that field year after year until such time as he decides to let it go fallow. Up until very recently, the relatively low density of population has resulted in little pressure on land resources, as there was generally more land than could be planted. Since the droughts of the eighties, however, that situation has begun to change. The desertification process which has destroyed much of the arable land in northern Chad has begun to have an impact on the south, making good land scarcer. As the land has become dryer, more farming is done in flood plains and areas that were previously too wet to plant. To add to the further deterioration of the land, increasing numbers of nomadic herdsman, both Fulani (Mbororo) and Arab, have

begun living in the area year round, bringing with them huge herds of cattle which they are no longer able to support in the North. In the past, their visits to the region were seasonal, occurring only during the hot season when no farming was being done. The practices of the nomads can wreak havoc on a village's crops: a herd of cattle can reduce a crop to dust in a very short span of time. The nomads also start bush fires in the flood plains, to spur the growth of more tender grasses for their cattle; but the resulting fires frequently spread out of control into the village fields, resulting in hostility and occasional conflict between the farmers and the nomads.

More amicable relations exist between the Mbay and other agricultural people living in the subprefecture. The Ngam, Sar, Nar, Daba and Gor are all Sara people, sharing similar language and traditions. The Day also live in close proximity to the Mbay, and are an agricultural people with a similar lifestyle. In a surprising number of cases, Day and Mbay live together in a single village, and intermarriage between them is very common.

Events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have had an extremely destructive impact on the Mbay agricultural world. Since the invasion of 1984, Moissala has become a conquered town, run by Muslim northerners with little interest in protecting the needs of the Mbay farmers. Theft of crops has become so rampant that farmers are beginning to feel they are wasting their time planting. A large number of young men, many of them ex-students who cannot find work but who are no longer suited to work as farmers, have lapsed into alcohol and drug abuse. Cotton, once a major cash crop, has lost its importance as its price has plummeted. Farmers no longer receive payment when they deliver their cotton, but now have to wait many months before receiving any compensation for their substantial investment. Prior to 1984, nomads were fined for allowing their cattle to destroy Mbay fields, but in recent years they have been allowed by the government to let their herds run free with impunity.

## **1.2 History.**

It is not known how long the Mbay, and more generally, the Sara, have lived in their present homeland. Sara legends from Bedaya speak of a westward migration, followed by a Southward migration after their brothers in the North, the Bagirmi, had accepted Islam. Anthropological evidence, however, suggests that the Sara and Bagirmi have lived in the same area for a very long time. Little is known about their history prior to the 20th century, although it is clear that they were always subject to attack and enslavement by their northern neighbors during much of the millennium. The area now encompassing Chad was dominated by predatory empires, such as Kanem, Ouaddai, and Bagirmi, whose major source of power was the accumulation of slaves. During the 19th century, the Sara were perhaps the principal source of slaves taken by the Bagirmi empire. At the end of the century, the region was ravished further by the Sudanese Mahdist, Rabah. Rabah's control was brief, however, and in 1900, three French armies succeeded in killing Rabah and destroying much of his army at the battle of Kousseri, across the river from the current site of N'djamena. A decade later, the French began establishing control over the Mbay and neighboring regions in southern Chad. Many of the Mbay village

leaders cooperated with the French, and Moissala become an important district capital. The western Day, on the other hand, who were said to have cooperated more with the slave traders, resisted in the area near Bouna, but were quickly crushed.

The colonial period was one of continued domination and repression. From the outset, the French realized that it would be difficult to make the region profitable, and cotton was forcibly introduced as a method of creating a cash crop which could be sold to Europe. The impressment of large numbers of men for work on the railroad in French Congo generated much resentment among the Mbay and their neighbors, and the death toll among these "volunteers" was high. But the local leaders, with the support of the French colonial administration, were always able to keep the situation under control. In 1929, Mbay participated in a punitive expedition against the Day at Bouna, and the surviving Day were subsequently removed to camps in Sarh, where they remained until 1947.

As the colonial period progressed, a substantial number of Mbay began participating in the educational system established by the French. Others were recruited by the French army during World War II and subsequent conflicts. As a result, when independence arrived in 1960, the Mbay, and the Sara people in general, found themselves more familiar with French language and customs than were their northern neighbors, and hence in a better position to assume power once the French had departed. The period 1960-1979 marked the height of Sara importance in Chad. The first president, François Tombalbaye, was a Sar, and southerners, including a disproportionate number of Mbay and other Sara peoples, were appointed to key government posts. In 1975, the increasingly tyrannical Tombalbaye was over-thrown in a coup d'etat, and an Mbay, Felix Malloum, became president.

But the historic animosity between Islamized northerners and non-muslim southerners remained intense. Rebellion in the North, which had been simmering for years, and which was supported by Libya, burst out suddenly again in February, 1979, and after a fierce battle in N'djamena, the southerners were expelled from the North. Subsequent fighting and massacres in the South temporarily reduced the Muslim presence in the Sara areas, while sporadic fighting continued for several years in the North between rival Toubou groups. In 1980, a faction headed by Goukouni succeeded in driving out troops loyal to Hissan Habré, and Goukouni was able to establish a government which was recognized by the French. A peace agreement was worked out with the southerners, giving them substantial power within the new government, and leaving them in control of the South. Goukouni's decision to unify Chad with Libya, however, alienated much of the population, and solidified opposition to his rule. In June of 1982, with the support of several foreign powers, forces loyal to Hissan Habré returned to Chad from Sudan, and succeeded in ousting Goukouni, and established a new government in N'djamena. Hissan Habré delighted his American supporters by defeating Libyan forces in northern Chad and in southern Libya.

A period of uneasy peace between the government and the South broke down in September, 1984, when southern forces entered Sarh, Moissala, and other major towns and executed Northern government administrators. Hissan Habré

responded by sending a large well-armed force into the South, and over the next 2 years, the entire region was subject to a brutal and extremely bloody civil war. In the subprefecture of Moissala, the situation was particularly violent, and a large body of the population fled to the Central African Republic. After two years of warfare, the government found itself in control of all the major towns, but unable to subdue the countryside. Negotiations were begun with the southern rebels, and in December, 1986, an agreement was reached which eventually led to peace, and to the reintegration of the southern forces into the Chadian army. However, it was the northerners, and especially the Toubou and Zaghawa, who remained in charge.

In 1990, the increasingly paranoid Habré was overthrown by Zaghawas led by Idriss Deby. In time Deby gained the key support of the American and the French governments, and in 2003 an oil pipeline from Doba to the Cameroonian coast was completed with funding from the World Bank. Deby's forces brutally crushed resistance from the Sara inhabitants of the area. The revenue from oil resulted in a huge influx of funds and arms to the central government, but very little money is used for basic services. The Chadian capital remains without sanitation or running water, teachers and hospital workers outside the capital go unpaid, and the living situation for the average Mbay, and indeed for the average Chadian, has become worse than it was thirty years earlier.

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