Socio-cultural characteristics of the Isam people, from the observer's perspective

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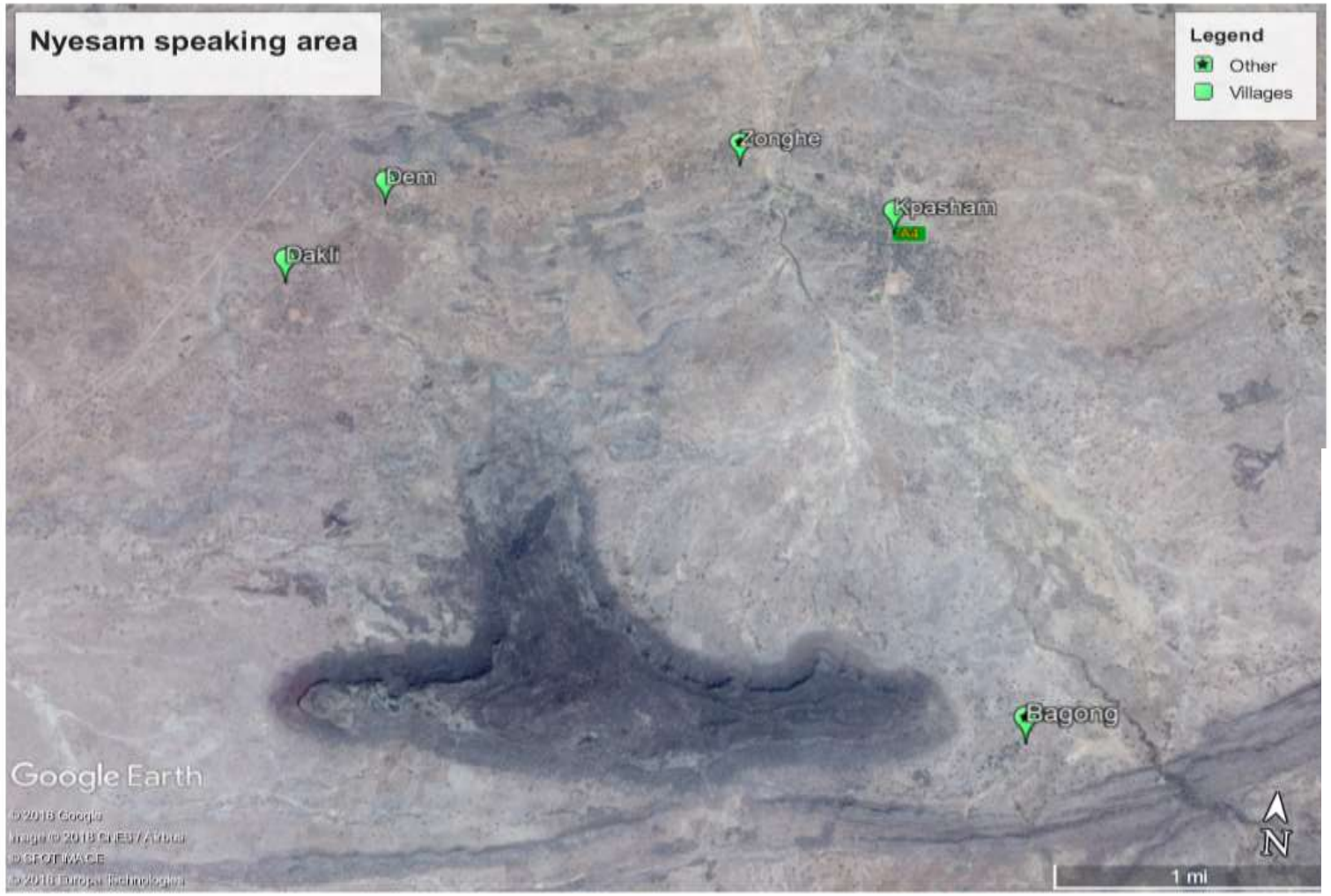
Socio-cultural Characteristics

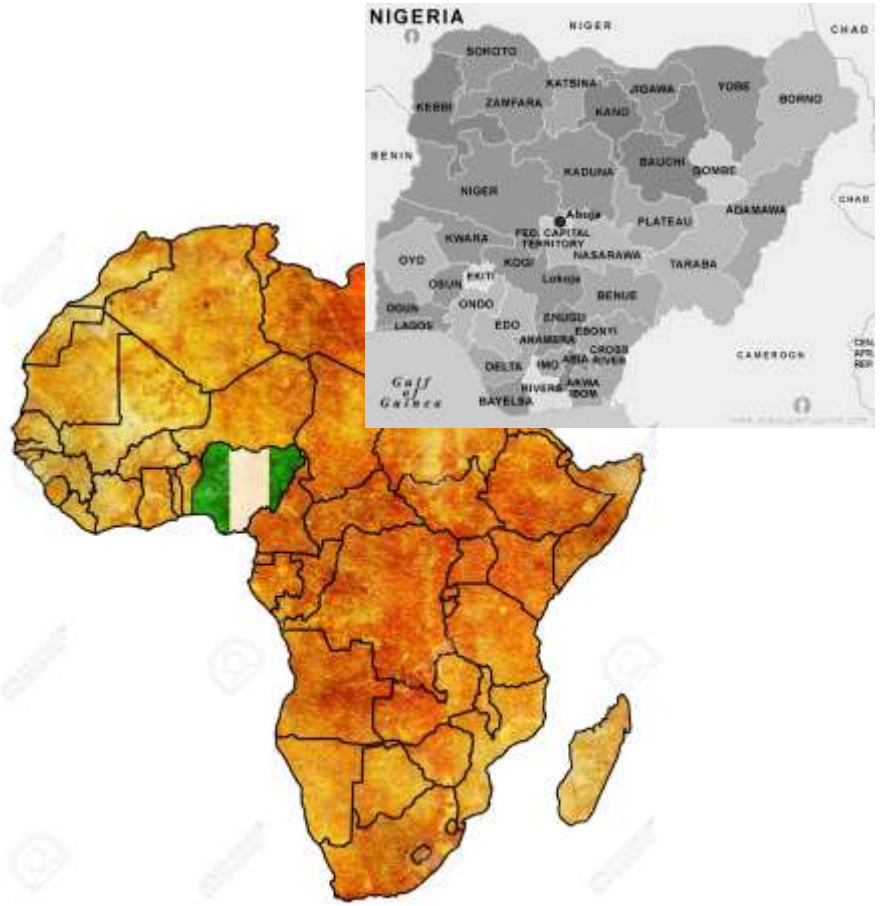
Kpane Isam (Current chief of Kpasham)

The Isam community is lead by men. They occupy positions of power within the villages and they represent their people at a national level.

Women are in charge of children and the household, but in many cases, they also finantially support their homes.



Location



The Isam people are located between the Taraba and Adamawa states of Nigeria. There are three main villages located along the main road: Kpasham [k͡páʃám], Dakli [dáglī], and Dem [dèm].

Picture: Satellite view of the mountain

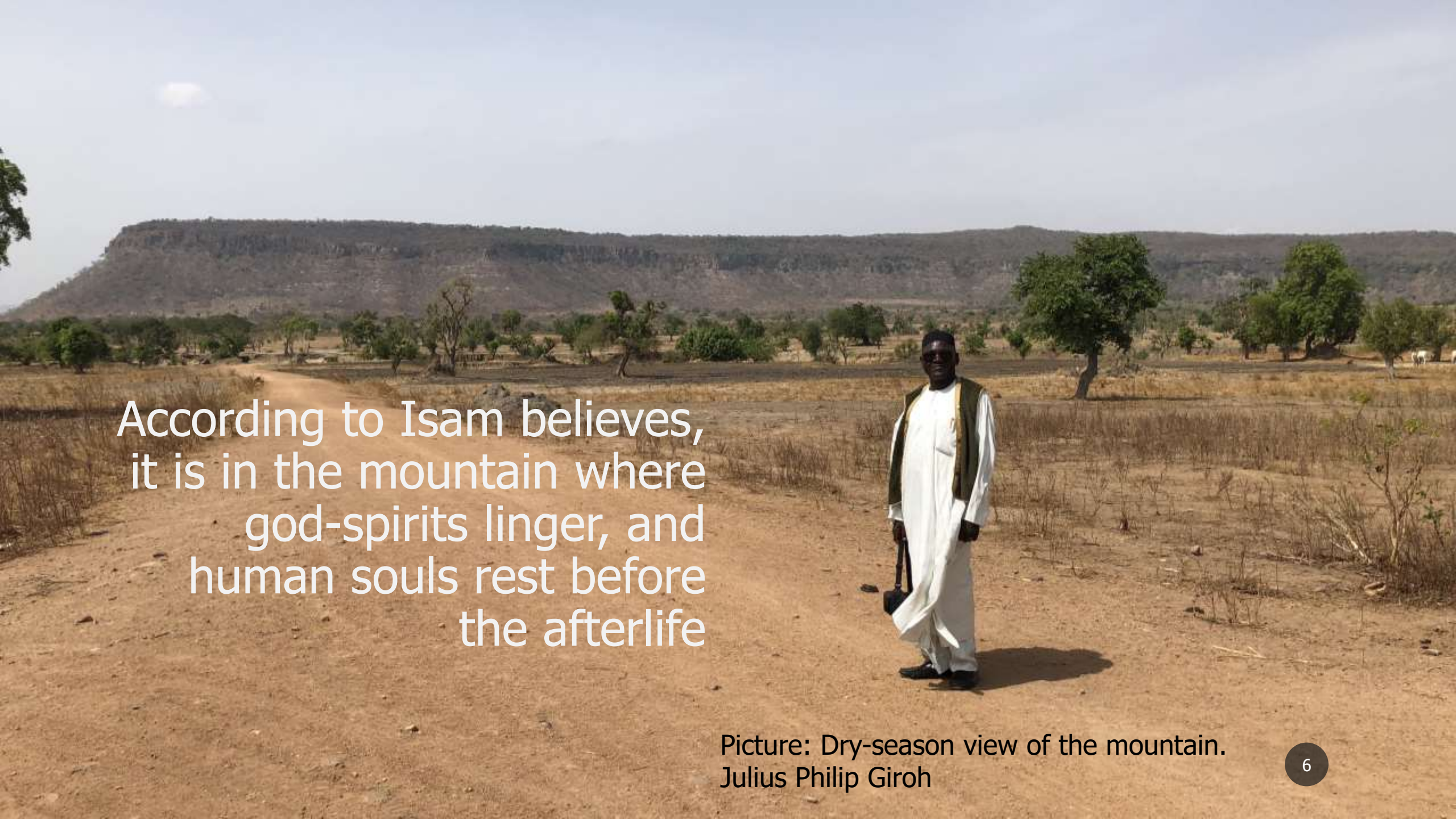
The mountain

Original settlement of Isam ancestors

Strategically located.

Water supplies available around.

Summit used for protection against wild animals and enemies.



Picture: Dry-season view of the mountain.
Julius Philip Giroh

Nowadays, the mountain
is the ceremonial ground
for various festivals and
funerals.

Material Culture

Traditional housing

A traditional Isam compound is characterized by the use of at least one basic round hut made of clay or mud-bricks, a straw-grass rooftop, and a dry grass fence that surrounds the area.

Traditional housing (continued)

They create mud bricks and assemble straw-grass for roofing and fencing.

Roofing

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmSVgxh-FAs&t=3s

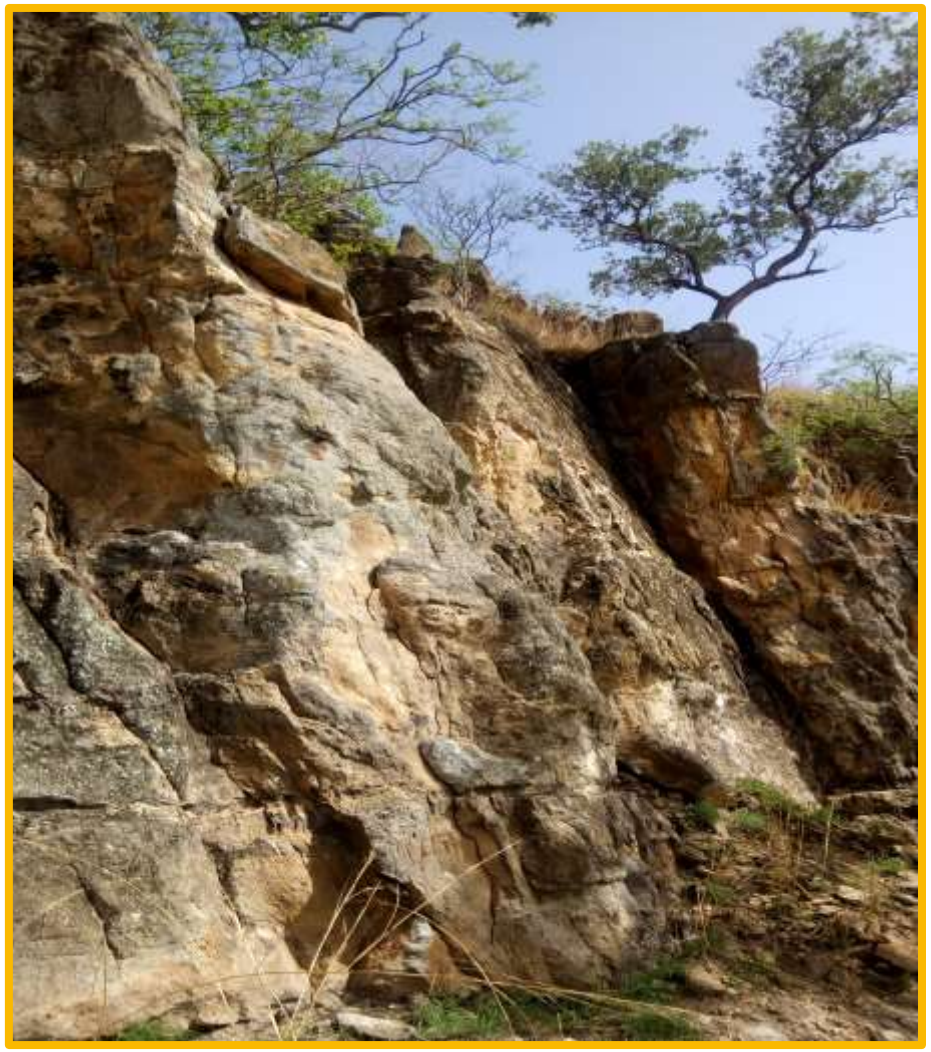
Non-traditional structures are square cement buildings.

Most schools, the medical center, some private homes, and the majority of churches.

Picture: LCCN Church of Kpasham.
[From left to right]: Julius P. Giroh, Elder David Tiyina, Elvanus Elkanah Mijah.

Religion

- The Isam community has two religions: Christianity and traditional religion called *núkú*.
- Most people abide by both doctrines.



Detail of the caves at Bagong (the mountain)

Subsistence

They are agriculturalists.

Due to the sharp climatic variations in the area, the majority of the population is dedicated to seasonal farming.

Primary crops

Photo: Elder David Tiyina farming Guinea corn

Groundnuts, Bambara nuts, rice, maize, corn, guinea corn, cassava, and yam.

They celebrate Yale [*jáálé*] "the harvest feast" during the entire month of November.

Harvest feast
[jáále]

- Gratitude towards the god*nébìè.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax2Z45IQwGY

Traditional Grinding

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOs7JVQYkVY

Photo: Azara Karon at Zonghe

Kpasham Clan System

Dengle:	(a) the Idong [ī-ɗóŋ]:	Bagora [ɓágórā]
		Nazam [nāzām]
		Bashee [ɓáʃì]
	(b) The Bajie [ɓádʒìé]:	Tamgban [tā́mbā]
		Tambion [tā́mbjóŋ]
	(c) Dengle [dēnglē]:	Dengle [dēnglē]
		Banue [ɓānwé]
		Keanue [kèā́nwé]
Taamzulun:		Zonghe [zǒŋ-ʔé]
		Bangshi [ɓáŋʃí]
		Kutale [kútālē]
		Taamzulum [táamzulũm]

Social structure

There is a total of thirteen clans in Kpasham sub-grouped as the diagram shows. Each of them have specific functions and responsibilities in traditional ceremonies.

Dem and Dakli have their own clan system.

- The Isam kingdom has two chiefs: one from the village of Kpasham and another from the village of Dem.
- Inhabitants of Dakli are under the rulership of Kpasham.

The Elder’s Forum

They are a group of men from all clans to whom people address problems or concerns before establishing a case in front of the chief.

Rite of passage: [*bínzúlúm*]

Entering a new restricted social group.

Age-group [ém]: people from the same year of birth.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQZ3Du77prs

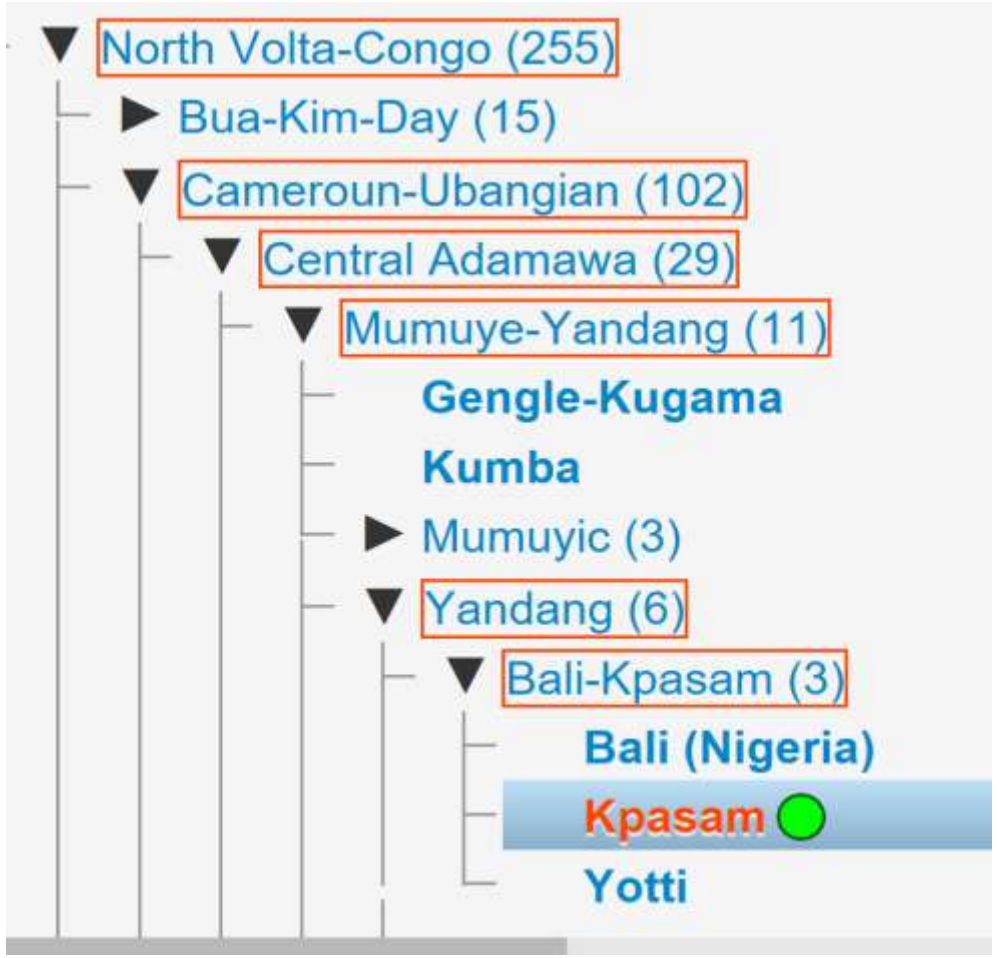
Coming of age: [bòhē kúní]

- Boys become men.
- They learn to hunt.
- Show endurance to gain independence.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gr808Ks3zY

Language

- The Isam people are speakers of Nyesam [ɲé sàm]
- Glottocode:kpas1242/ISO: 639-3 (pbn)
- There are fifteen thousand speakers.
- It is threatened.

Classification:



Education: in Hausa

The Isam community is characterized by a great sense of hospitality and conviviality with other ethnic and linguistic groups of the area.

Traditional Game: Serata [sèrátá]

Only women play.

Clapping and chanting.

Fosters trust among players.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBIIDZeRVws

Hunter’s culture

Hunter's Feast [*bínwōbe*]

- Tribute to the best hunter.
- The dance takes place around the head of the biggest animal caught during the hunting time.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNv2gNZzIME

Important Objects

Death and funerals

The Isam believe in the reunion with spirit ancestors in the afterlife.

The passing of an old person is celebrated while the death of a younger member of the community is grievous.

Christian families abide by the rules and customs of traditional heritage too.

- Intimate celebration of death, similar to a wake. Members of the family sing special songs from the clan, prior to the public burial. It is the corpse of a very old woman, and as such, it is revered, honored, and prayed upon for her parting towards the spirit land.

Thank you!

To know more visit

Adagram: http://llacan.vjf.cnrs.fr/AdaGram/nyesam.html

Nyesam Channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXb21qtNEpqXZKB3F8b5pmA

@Adamawanist: https://www.instagram.com/adamawanist/?hl=en