



DYNAMICS OF PULL DOWN AND RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS COSMOGONY IN CULTURAL ENDOGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OF ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION IN BAMILEKE TRADITIONAL AREA (WESTERN CAMEROON) MAROTI POPADEM DJIOPE, YANN WILFRIED FOUAGWANG, JEAN BEAUDELIN ADJOU MENYOUNYO.

Ph.D Researcher in History of International relations-University of Yaoundé 1

Abstract

Socio environmental changes in the Bamilekes of western Cameroun open a new gap to natural conservation policies. It is on that way that this article try to illustrate the implications of traditional believe and knowledge in the modern process of environmental conservation, though that those ones faced various obstacles. In other words, we examine in the sociological and historical point of view ecological implications of indigenous knowledge in the nature conservation process in the Bamilekes area in western-Cameroun.

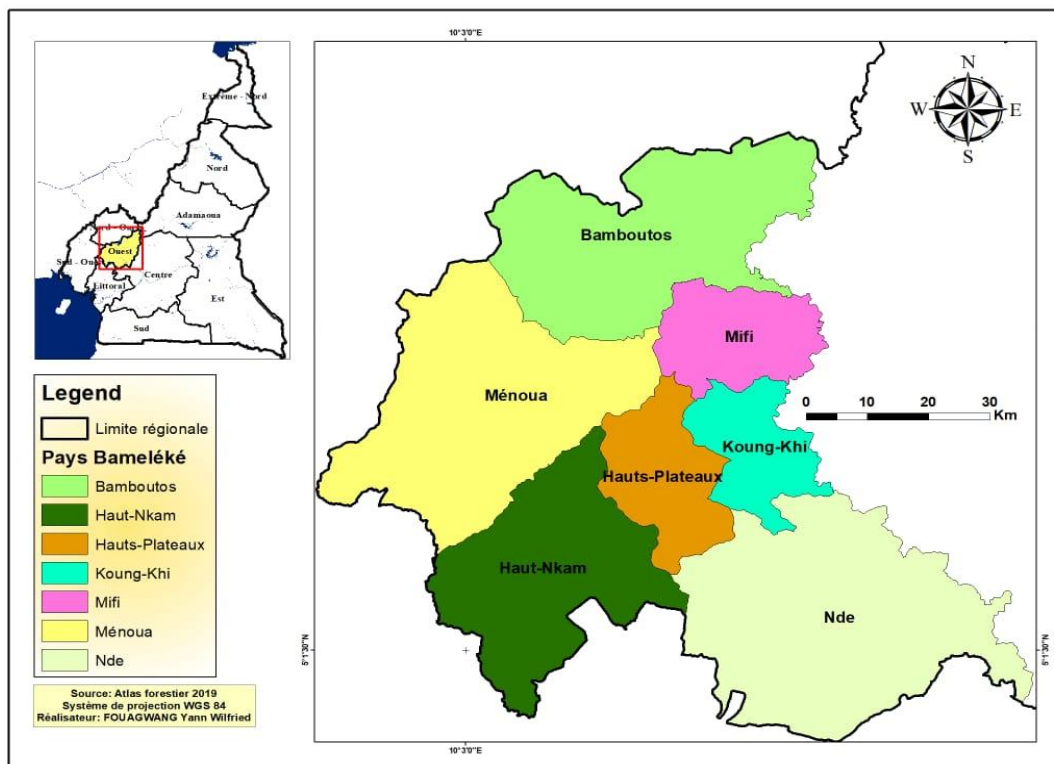
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INTRODUCTION

Bamileke kingdom is a territory in western Cameroon which is specifically characterize by multiplication of plains and Highlands. Commonly named as western grassfield, this milieu equally glugged various sociocultural activities in many regards. Deep-rooted in tradition, those people of western Cameroon maintain a particular relation with natural milieu around them. Gradually, distanciation between natural and spiritual has been done in the bamileke lands, impulse by various factors like modernization, deforestation, it is on that logic that we propose to present in our analysis, factors of deforestation in the bamileke traditional area, his

manifestations and his implications on decline of local behaviours which, we remember are purely naturalist. Based on oral traditions, natural environment is a part and parcel of divine in the region. It is relevant in this paper to relieve various implications of traditionnal methods and behaviours in the conservation process of desanctification of local natural milieus, it importances on national and international policies of protection of the nature before present consequences of environnemental conservation on the process of de-sacralizing of milieus; anyway, it is necessary for us to present in the rear on nature conservation based on local and cultural behaviours.

Picture: Localization of Bamilekes grassland in western Cameroon



realized by Yann Wilfried Fougang. 2022

SACRALISATION OF NATURE IN TRADITIONAL BAMILEKE AREA: BETWEEN SANCTUARY OF DIVINE AND ARENA OF MAGICAL AND CULTURAL INITIATION

Bamileke territory in particular during precolonial era, is strewn with groves, savanas and forests. These natural elements rus hed gradually on the domain of local cosmogonies. Recall that Bamilekes of western-Cameroon are people issues of longer migrations which

ancient origins are based on ancient empire in Egypt. We don't have by this sentence the pretention to recall ancient migrations refered to theses peoples, we just want in this article, to insist on the process of sacralization of milieu after the settlement of bamilekes.

Sacralization of the milieu refer to process of consecration, sanctification and mystification of elements of natural environment; to append on it a sacred character. Bamileke traditional milieu represent henceforth on thought and local behaviors, a receptacle of divine. To understand the importance of nature in the bamileke area, it is normal for us to relieve that many ceremonies highly spiritual and cultural are based on natural resources; it is on that way that the process of sacralisation and of mystification of the milieu by appose on it a spiritual character and it is on that way to that the process of sacralisation of the nature based on pre-establishes in culture. Forest begins to Shelter spirits and tutelary divinities. According to local traditions, sacred forests and all natural elements represents receptacle of gods, a ecosystem which divine create a connection with the people, and people with gods. After his settlement, Bamilekes peoples have beginning to construct a structured behaviour environment and while they have immerge on animism and they are convinced that nature represent a gift of gods to facilitate livings of human beans. But the most popular idea which we defend is that natural milieu is perceive as a receptacle of divine in the Bamilekes area.

Interdicts on environmental resources in the bamileke behaviours and in their oral tradition show how much divine prefer to occupy virgin places, wild environment which have resist to population settlement. Sacralisation means 'sanctuarisation' of places, characterized by distinctive signs (in particular understandable by initiates) which remind to populations the entry of a sanctuary. In other part, some sacred forests like chiefdom forests are established as 'sacred woods' (Tchandeu et Al., 2019:4) which are eventually use for practices of initiave rituals of Kings and higher dignitaries in the region. According to cosmogonies an local behaviours, le sacred character confer to certain forests in the western grassfield in Cameroon, a mystical and cultural aspect and characterize therefore the nature and the common practices in those traditional societies. Sacred areas are those where was manifested a "holy spirit" of a god or of a ancient who engage himself to protect the territory or a part of his current activities.

It is necessary for this to look for a place where was manifested a holy spirit of a god or a good ancestor and adjust it to permit to the spirit to install himself. These spiritual and physical adjustments are part of the process of sacralisation of the environment using specific methods. Therefore, divine in bamileke countries which take possession of a particular natural milieu

(woods, big stones, rivers, *etc.*) push populations which after receiving a revelation about the site and the nature of the new god, invest the place and transform it in sanctuaries. Sacralisation of natural milieu in the bamilekes kingdom means to transform environment, to adjust it. It became at that time necessary to understand clearly the process of sacralise milieu by insisting on advantages for natural conservation in the sense of ecology. Certain natural resources impose for her using, a higher degree of knowledge.

In other part, sacred which belongs in the character of natural or environmental resources is also used as spiritual initiation sites for many kind of people in the Bamileke traditional area. Some milieu are used to spiritual initiation and live sites (as sacred forests and chieftdom forests) for totems. Cosmogony, religious and cultural believes assign to itch chieftdom a sacred wood on what the king and some initiated peoples can enter and manage their power. This mystic on forest show that natural entities in the ancient Bamilekes traditional culture are stamped by interdictions, exclusion entry for non-initiated peoples. For a place or a natural element to by sacralise, some rituals are necessary to purify the site and to invite the gods to install themselves. Theses sacralised areas represent also sanctuaries for prayers and spiritual retreats to converse with ancestors and gods; to ask what we want for the family and for the community. These places are also used to swear before solving a problem between peoples (like problems of lands, steel, witchcraft, money ...). Natural milieu is now perceive as base and consolidation of traditional faith. These proceeds permit to sacralise elements of nature.

The choice of this topic have been done throw specifics spiritual and cultural process because certain natural resources have been arise to a sacred rang. Forest is a milieu that sheltie divine in one part, and also a place where they can meet divine; a particular place used to initiate specific persons by washing-up the a category of population inside the sphere of knowledge. These sphere or natural arena of knowledge are to prepare this cast of population in spiritual and magical realities. Finally, cultural and social charge of natural environment push to the construction around this one, present equally the impacts of duties on traditional knowledge based on local cultures which are transmit throw myths, legends and local stories. Certain local initiations use of picturesque forestry milieus, aquatic milieus, *etc.* it is in that optic that many chieftdoms forests are used for initiation and are also forbidden for local classes of people; and those arenas of initiation are called *la'akam* which is a veritable facilitating transmission of endogenous knowledge throw bamileke's believes and cultures: that characterize atmosphere

inside that acquaintances and trades which ancestors (guardians of knowledge and link with divine) are more fluid. Forestry resources are considered as a unit that, according to local traditional knowledge, initiate an procure a certain degree of spiritual science; it is a domain that introduce a person interactions with gods that permit to receive astral knowledge. Arenas dedicated to blooming of various *alter ego (pi)* are formally recognize in the traditional and local arena and it is in that logic that *Bamboutos* and *Menoua* divisions some hills (like Mengoufuet hill¹) are recognized as areas of highest magical and spiritual charge in which lives totems. In the spirit and believes of these people, the bamboutos Hills are presented as the garden of those totems where they are free to move.

It is on that way that we propose also in this paper to relief how the living of those totems influence in the process of sacralisation of natural areas and then their conservation.

FROM THE SACRALISATION TO CONSERVATION OF FORESTS, LEAVING SITES OF ANIMALS TOTEM IN THE BAMILEKES SOCIETY OF WESTERN CAMEROUN

Cosmogony of natural milieu in the Bamilekes traditional area in western Cameroon consider alive natural elements like the “first gift of god” (Butare, 2011:23) to humanity in prevision of their creation. Certain natural elements are considered according to local traditions as alter ego of humans’ beans which have the capacity to live in parallel worlds, in a kind of astral mastering an unnatural proceeds. In fact likewise Judea-Christian traditions, ancestral believes in bamileke’s lands based on postulate that the divine can takes any form he want in the nature and belongs inside it. Conceive as a spirit, divine just leave in natural elements and in that logic, man can express itself throw nature. This relation between men and nature in the traditional milieu in western Cameroon participate to construct local believes around myths and legends. The simple fact to know that a forest or a natural milieu or an animal is sacred is sufficient to participate to construct a myth around an area. Totemism in socio spiritual arena in western Cameroon is that capacity which have some individuals to transpose their spirit inside nonhuman (animals) natural elements. This cultural behaviour specific from bantu people in general, rise up the depositories of traditional politic power to put in place laws and policies in the sense of respecting totems. Therefore, animals influence on conception of political and spiritual power. Western Cameroon characterize by Savannah, the more important population of mammals is fawn and elephants. The simple fact to know that a major of the

¹ Designation of Bamboutos hills in “Yemba”, a local language of Bafou kingdom in the Menoua subdivision in western Cameroon.

animals leaving there are totems participate to limited activities like hunt and deforestation, and in particular inside sacred forests. In bamileke believes, many animals are sacralised and lives retired of humans, in specific sacralised sites, protected by local traditions. Sites of the Mbo² plain for exemple, or the *Mengoufuet* site have many totems and to communicate with gods, certains days are considered like holidays because of some rituals. Among those days we have the « Ngan » and the « Nsèh » (according to the local language of the Bafou Kingdom which is the *Yemba*) (Ngouadjeu Gaston 2021) are forbidden days in farm working for exemple.

the study of endogenous knowledge and zoo-botanical cosmogonies among these peoples leads us to think that, as with many Bantu peoples, the endogenous knowledge of cultures among the Bamileke of western Cameroon are based on physical elements to materialize the presence and actions of the divine. The sacralization of these zoo-botanical resources therefore imposes itself as supports of the traditional faith in the tutelary Divinities of the kingdom in a dytic "environment - receptacle". Natural resources that served as multipurpose resources are therefore made sacred and "protected by a set of prohibitions that are partly religious" (Mathieu Salpeteur, 2010: 2). The tutelary powers, depositories of political, religious, cultural power, etc. (like the chiefdoms, the initiated huts, ...) are so to speak counted from then on among the main guardians of the spiritual and mystical charge of the environmental resources and in this case of the "chieftaincy forests" (Mathieu Salpeteur, 2010:4) .

In another sense, the process of sacralization has certainly made it possible to protect the natural resources in western Cameroon, but this local cosmogony and beliefs are losing more and more of their influence on the minds of the indigenous populations. It is this deconstruction of beliefs that is at the origin of the progressive degradation of environments placed under the seal of cultural and traditional protections.

SACRED FORESTS, TRADITIONAL LAW AND SAFEGUARDING NATURAL HERITAGE

Far from us the idea of the carried by the media speeches on the socio-environmental reasons of the protection of the environment. Indeed, since the holding of an international

² The *Mbo* plain is a site in western Cameroon popular in the localities because of cosmogony around the site. It is consider as environment of totems in grassfield region in particular and for this reason it is consider as sacred and some forbidden invest that site.

summit convened by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Fund (FAO) and later the development by the State of Cameroon of a National Management Plan Environment (PNGE) (MINEFOF and UNDP, 1996:54). It was therefore a question of making a reliable instrument for the protection of the environment in a context marked by cultural traditions, beliefs and ways of life of certain peoples. By taking communities into account, conservation actors have discovered in them environmental management policies that are already well anchored in their different ways of life, in their beliefs and ancestral knowledge. Regarding the Bamileke chiefdoms for example, it becomes clear that the sacred forests as well as the specific elements of nature; the beliefs and cosmogonies around them consolidate a model of environmental conservation that is skilfully described and rooted in the cultures and customs of these peoples.

The sacred woods are rightly considered as models (products) of the knowledge of the divine and of communication between the two (02) worlds (physical and spiritual). Sacred forests and the prohibitions that accompany them participate in a certain way in limiting acts of destruction of environmental resources via very simple methods such as the affixing of prohibitions. Let us understand here that the sanctification of some of the natural and forest resources in particular has built around these forest massifs, beliefs and cultural burdens that serve as barriers to the assaults perpetrated against nature. The population is forced, because of endogenous knowledge, to protect the environment and to preserve it in view of the perceptions received as to the importance of the natural in the spiritual and cultural transition, environment considered by the local people as "indispensable intermediaries between the inhabitants (of the region) and their ancestors" (Camille Constantini, 2014: 1), and it is also in this logic that the prohibitions imposed on certain environmental resources are inscribed, thereby contributing to the protection of those -this. By serving as a communication belt between the divine and men, the sacred forests are full of a great physical cultural heritage. Indeed, the sites of worship and prayer are found in places with particular natural characteristics. The forms, natural composition and landscape of the designated area must reflect a specific charge of spirituality, then assessed by specific initiates; they are sorts of cultural priests who lead the cults.

Indeed, sacred forests are perceived in another sense as "cultural constructions" (Juhé-Beaulaton and Roussel, 2002), the result of beliefs constructed from scratch in the service of the effective organization and administration of the territory. This means that the sacredness of forests is gaining momentum in people's minds and keeping this momentum because of the promotion of policies in this direction. We should therefore think, according to Juhé-Beaulaton

and Roussel, that the principle of sanctification of forests in Bamileke kingdoms is a political construction that allows traditional authorities to participate in the protection of nature for various reasons that may be purely political or better still. still contain a form of spirituality in respect of the spirit world and the relationship of mutual support between men and the environment in which they move.

Among the Bamileke, traditions want the ancestors and the spirits of the communities to be attached to the environment. The sacralization of natural elements of animal origin limits poaching: a socio-cultural process at the service of anti-poaching struggles. Local endogenous beliefs thus secure the animal and plant elements of the environment, which UNESCO expresses well in its recent declaration of the rights of peoples and those of cultures. In this nature conservation movement, the knowledge endogenous to the cultures and beliefs of the Bamileke come up against many limits and obstacles.

MODERN SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE LOCAL RELIGIOUS TRADITIONAL COSMOGONY

In view of the cultural and religious processes in the process of the fight for the protection of the environment in the territories of West-Cameroon, it becomes more and more logical that the endogenous cultural knowledge among the peoples of West-Cameroon Cameroon face some major obstacles to their full development, also in relation to the process of conservation of the natural environment. Indeed, the rise of modernity since the end of the 1990s has favored a decay of local traditional powers and beliefs regarding the systems of thought and perception of the environmental resources of the peoples in question.

The process of nature conservation is certainly rooted in cultures and beliefs, but the modern world has disseminated a good part of these values which were at the service of nature. The considerations of the sacred, magical and spiritual charges of the natural elements in Bamileke country are increasingly collided with new considerations of cultural and socio-environmental concepts. In short, endogenous cultural knowledge is no longer sufficient on its own to effectively protect the natural environment in current traditional Bamileke societies in view of the multiple mutations and dynamics that the latter have undergone since the arrival of the "white man". The process of environmental conservation in so-called traditional societies in Bamileke countries therefore evolves according to varied and specific contexts. To better understand these dynamics in the process of deconstruction and/or reconstruction of the socio-traditional beliefs of these so-called Bamiléké peoples, it is necessary to highlight the games

and issues of environmental resources in the processes and mutations of today and 'in time. This cultural knowledge comes up against numerous obstacles in the process of environmental protection, obstacles that are not, however, insurmountable a priori. Indeed, the blossoming of modernity, which has increasingly taken root in Cameroon since the 1990s, has favored a decay of local powers and beliefs in several areas, particularly in the sense of inculcating (imposing) new values and beliefs that would adapt to the context of current globalization (although still visible in the regions of West-Cameroon). The environmental changes that take place in the Bamileke traditional socio context included in the process of modernization of new forms of natural conservation. These are mostly scientific studies based on equally scientific and rigorous data. Scientific study follows in the footsteps of cultural, religious and traditional empiricism. It is on the strength of this observation that, with regard to the intimate relations between Man, societies and the environment, one is tempted to return to simple socio-cultural considerations in order to better protect natural resources on the one hand, and local traditions on the other hand. on the other hand (Maroti Djiopé, 2021:13.); something that many international actors are working on (IUCN, UNEP, Unesco, etc.). Despite this feeling of dismantling of cultural burdens in the idea of environmental conservation in West Cameroon, a gradual return of the feeling of belonging and the cultural burden formerly allocated to environmental resources seems to be reaffirming itself. , with the support of various actors, including NGOs such as the "Route des Chefferies", which was recently launched.

RETURN OF LOCAL SOCIOCULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN NATURAL CONSERVATION PROCESSES BY CSOS IN WEST CAMEROON

After a relaxation of the influence of cultural considerations on the modes of environmental protection among the peoples of West Cameroon, the trend is revised upwards with the support of new actors from civil society. This new movement of the traditional religious and social implications of the protection of environmental resources among the peoples of West Cameroon is returning at a gallop under the impetus of the NGO "Roads of Chiefdoms", based in Bafoussam (capital of the West Cameroon region). Thanks to its militant actions, it supports the importance of a revalorization of natural resources, bases of the culture and the ancestral beliefs of the peoples of West-Cameroon which is subject to multiple problems. It is in this wake that the natural environments in Bamileke country, with all that they contain, are no longer perceived as "static environments" (Mathieu Salpeteur, 2018: 1), but as spaces in perpetual

change whose dynamics characterize even more the originality of the peoples who occupy them. Thus we observe three times in the course of the environmental components in according to the levels of consideration which are allocated to them, namely: the times of nature, characterized by a certain hegemony of natural and environmental resources, erected to the ranks of sanctuaries and zones of spiritual mystical expression; the times of modernity, characterized by a decline in socio-cultural, spiritual and religious considerations with regard to the natural environment; and finally a third time (the time of retreat and return) which is characterized by a gradual revival of the initial place that environmental resources held within local beliefs. This triptych process is the result of a fierce struggle and a difficult fight with regard to the current context of globalization (and therefore modernization) which is gradually taking place in Western Cameroon, considered to this day as one of the parts of Cameroon still ingrained in its traditional cultures and whose knowledge and know-how internal to local cultures are still considered. As culture regains ground, local knowledge participates, or better, is an increasingly important cause of resource protection for both international and local actors. Indeed, socio-cultural considerations are increasingly influencing current conservation methods. For Unesco and actors such as “Roads of Chiefdoms”, traditional practices are revealed as a springboard for current conservation methods, taking into account socio-cultural concerns.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Beyond a conceptual analysis, this study focused on the traditional mechanisms of conservation of the natural environment in grassfields, in a context characterized by modernity and a constant dynamic of local beliefs. It therefore appears that the modes of protection of the natural environment in Bamileke countries based on local beliefs and customs have strongly influenced local conservation processes. It should also be noted that the issue of the protection of the natural environment in Bamileke country is not a recent (imported) concern, but a result rooted in local beliefs and customs. Endogenous knowledge and local beliefs are therefore an undoubted means of protecting nature in the traditional Bamileke environment, although constantly plagued by various current problems that disrupt its mode of action. Modernity and the decline of beliefs are therefore at the origin of the degradation of the natural environment and resources in the Grassfields region. Apart from modernity, current natural conservation methods are increasingly opposed to local cultural practices and beliefs. The prohibiting of certain sites prohibits access to indigenous populations who use them as a place of worship, of communion with the spirits. The defense of natural resources which certainly protect the

resources but deprive the people of their rights will push to think of new forms of conservation, namely Sustainable Development.

Therefore, to deal with this issue, civil society actors are mobilizing. They engage in a logic of sustainable development, and with the support of the populations, actions in the sense of jointly managing the policies of environmental protection and promotion of the (socio-cultural) rights of the so-called indigenous peoples and, if necessary of the peoples of the West-Cameroon region.

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