

**THE SACRED FOREST AND THE PYTHON: ECOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND
SUSTAINABILITY IN KOM, CAMEROON, C.1700- 2000**

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have taken keen interest in the social and cultural meanings of the African landscape in the reconstruction of the continent's history (Giblin, 1992; Spear, 1997; Wagner, 1995). But how much did Africans know of their environmental past? This article explores the indigenous history of ecology, focusing on the medicinal forest (ak'u mii-fii) and the python (iigw-im) in Kom, Cameroon and its link with livelihood sustainability. The paper argues that the Kom people have always been conserving their forests since the pre-colonial era to the present. During the colonial period and especially in the 1930s many hectares of land including the sacred forest and the python were carved out as forests reserves. The paper will also demonstrate the extent to which colonial and post-colonial forms of conservation have ignored indigenous notions of forest conservation in Kom. Despite this, Kom citizens have continued to protect their forest. Using archival sources and secondary material, along with oral interviews, this paper explores the environmental history of and sustainable livelihood in Cameroon taking Kom society as a case study. Keywords: Kom, sacred forest, sacred python, ecology, conservation, sustainable development

Introduction

Ecology, conservation, and sustainable development have become buzzwords in international discourses (Beinart & McGregor, 2003; Calvert, 1986; Fairhead & Leach, 1996; Grove, 1995;

Grove, Damodaran, & Sangwan, 1998; McCann, 1999; Harms, 1987; Rietbergen, 1993; Ingold, 2000; Kjekshus, 1996; Webb, 1995). The conservation of forest has become a major issue. The emphasis is often laid on the fact that it is a global problem because it is assumed by apologists that the destruction of forest will lead to the disappearance of biodiversity which includes rare and endangered species. As a result of the gravity of the challenge, a lot of financial and human resources have been put into ecological studies and conservation. For instance, from December 17-20, 2007, an international conference was held in Kunming, China, which was jointly organized by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), Task Force on Traditional Forest Knowledge, the Chinese Academy of Forestry, and the Asia-Pacific Association of Forestry Research Institutions (APAFRI). Many such conferences have taken place around the world. What is striking is that these efforts have largely ignored time-honoured indigenous efforts at protecting and conserving their environment.

The conservation of landscape which involves forest and ecology has thus brought to the forefront lively debates. From a global perspective, one school of thought promotes the view that the forest should be saved from indigenous people who are perceived to be destroying it for fuel and food. Others are of the opinion that indigenous people should be compensated for losing their access to resources due to conservation projects – which will also teach them about the importance of forest preservation (Cohen & Odhiambo, 1989; Wilson, 1989). On the other hand, others hold very strongly that indigenous people have been conserving their forest and ecology for a very long time and so need to be taught how to handle it rather than imposing exogenous strategies (Ranger, 1993, 1999; Vansina, 1990). Others have maintained that the forest and people live hand in hand and so their relationship with nature is mutually interrelated (Kwashirai, 2010; Maddox Giblin, & Kimambo, 1996).

Africa appears to have taken center stage in the ecology, environmental conservation, and sustainable development debates. There have been enormous efforts by researchers to understand the perception and the use of forest (Okali & Eyog-Matig, 2004; Agnoletti, 2000; Anderson & Grove, 1987; Beinart, 1989; Bruce, Cunliffe, & Hudak, 2001; Green, 2002; Ichikawa, 2012; Schoenbrun, 1998; Schoffeleers, 1978). Despite this plethora of literature, Cameroon has not

benefitted much from such studies. Apart from the disciplinary poverty, there has been the near neglect by international organizations to understand how African people have conserved their fauna and flora. This essay argues that the Kom of northwest Cameroon, despite the many external forces which have been introduced into their culture, have not lost sight of their sacred. Although the region has undergone significant social transformation since colonial times, the Kom have continued to believe in their sacred forest and python. I will go further to argue, taking Kom as a case study. Within African environmental history, Africans have been movers and shakers of their own environment rather than simply being passive captives in search of external redemption. This perspective counters reductionist and simplistic views held in certain domains that Africans were inferior and lacked the technological sophistication to master their own society.

Conceptual Analysis

Generally, ecology is the science of mutual rapport of organisms in their environment. It can also be the relationship of living things to one another and their environment or the study of such relationships (Gumo, Gisepe, Raballah, Ouma, 2012). Environment could also be taken to mean the totality surrounding a substance or a person's existence and the way they relate to the world. In most instances this covers the social, political, economic, spiritual, and natural environment which comprises living and nonliving things (Guha, 2000). Sacred is a thing or things, situations, and places that are set apart, very special, and emit an aura of the holy (Giles-Vernick, 2002; Green, 2002). They are regarded with respect as they are connected with the supernatural and thus are also super ordinary. In this article I draw from Madeweya, Oka, and Matsumoto's (2004) notion of the sacred forest. According to these scholars sacred forests have long been in existence in Ancient Rome, Greece, and most of Asia and Africa. It is often associated with cultural and religious beliefs of the indigenous peoples. They are known by different names in different societies. For instance, in Kenya, they are called *kaya* forest. In India they are variously known as *Dev* in Madhya Pradesh, *Deorais* or *Deovani* in Maharashtra, *Sarna* in Bihar, *Oran* in Rajasthan, *Devarakadu* in Karnataka, *Sarpa* or *Kavu* in Tamil Nadu, and *Kerela* and *Kaans* in Utara Kannada. In Japan it is known as *Chinju-no-mori*. In Zanzibar the sacred forest is known as *misitu ya jadi* or *misitu ya mizimi* in the Swahili language. Amongst the Kom it is

known as *ak'u mii-fii*. In this article, I wish to make a contrast between indigenous notions of conservation throughout the world with modern bureaucratic efforts – which seem to be at odds with indigenous mechanisms. This is because the world conservation schemes have taken it only to mean large hectares of forests and parks and ignores the local conservation carried out by the indigenous peoples who conserve their environments by establishing taboos (Ylhaisi, 2006).

Sustainability as applied in this article is sustainable development. As a concept sustainable development took its roots in 1981 following the work of Brown and in 1987 through the Gro Harlem Brundtlandt Commission. It is a planned cultural, economic, social, environmental, and political change for the better. It also calls for cooperation at all levels by all stakeholders geared towards the well being of the masses and by the masses. It fosters inter- and intra-generational equity. The respect for other cultures be they inferior or dominant, high or low, is a condition – *sine qua non* – for a global attempt to achieve sustainable development with every stakeholder getting involved and staying engaged (Braddotti *et al.*, 1994). Generally, sustainable development is understood as development which meets the needs of the present without altogether compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (Braddotti *et al.*, 1994). It is often built on three pillars: social, economic, and environmental. To achieve sustainable development, the needs of people must be met. These needs amongst other things are: access to medical care, affordable and suitable housing, better education, and food.

However, sustainable development has recently become a cumbersome subject to define because it encompasses so many different things as well as actors and actresses. The complexity of the subject makes it imperative to look at the significance of sustainable development in a more holistic way. In conventional practice, it has been widely held that development be it sustainable or not, characteristically comes from top down rather than bottom up (Kiawi & Mfoulou, 2002). The social distance in conventional thinking, between development planners and beneficiaries, is too wide with the beneficiaries gaining almost nothing (Pitt, 1976). In other words, it is externally imposed by governments or other actors (Eyong, 2003; Harcourt, 1994; Weaver & Kusterer, 1997; Wolfensohn, 1998; McCann, 1999; World Bank Group, 2001).

Objectives

To what extent have colonial and post-colonial forms of conservation ignored pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial forest conservation in Kom? On the backdrop of recent debates on climate change and environmental protection how can indigenous meanings of such concepts be appreciated? During the colonial period and especially in the 1930s, many hectares of landscape including the one that had the tree and python were carved out as forests reserves. How have colonialism and the post-colonial state impacted our understanding of and the meanings of African landscapes in relation to its ecology, environment, and sustainable livelihood in local community? How do traditional cultural practices conserve the environment? Finally, what recommendations can be made to policy makers?

Methodology

Various methods were used to gather the data used in this article. One of these include, interviews I conducted with 20 individuals whose ages ranged from 65 to 86 years. The idea was to collect as various versions as possible about the conservation of the sacred forest. I combined these data with my personal observations. I grew up in Kom seeing what was going on in the sacred forest and also listening to stories told by the old people about the python which led the Kom people out of Babessi. After these versions were collected through oral interviews, I proceeded to the archives. The Buea National Archives, which is located in Buea, southwest region of Cameroon, holds a small quantity of files written by British colonial administrators in the nascent years of British occupation of the territory under the League of Nations Mandate (1919-39) and Trusteeship (1946-61). Although these files were not generally on Kom, they nonetheless show how colonialism attempted to disrupt the traditional ways of forest conservation by carving out hectares of community forest in the British Southern Cameroon in which Kom was a part. I consulted 10 files and compared the results of the interviews against a thorough review of the literature.

Kom: The Case Study

Kom is a fondom, located in the Bamenda Grassfields in the present-day northwest region of Cameroon. A fondom (akin to the classical state) is ruled by a fon who exercises judiciary, quasi-religious, and executive powers over his people. According to the Kom, the fon is the spiritual leader, the chief priest, and pontiff of his people. He sees the Kom cosmological world

view in the physical and beyond as well which means that he also belongs to the spiritual world. Map 1 shows the location of Kom in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. It is the second largest fondom after Nso (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967; Terretta, 2014).



Map 1. The position of Kom in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Source: Aaron S. Neba, 1987, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon* (2nd ed., p. 15). Bamenda, Cameroon: Neba Publishers.

Kom is one of 250 indigenous ethnic groups found in the Republic of Cameroon. Its geographical area is 280 square miles. Kom shares its eastern boundary with the fondoms of Oku and Nso and the southern frontier with Kedjom Keku or Big Babanki and the Ndop plain. Bafut is on the western border while to the north is found Bum and Mmen (Chilver & Kaberry,

1967; Dillon, 1990; Rowlands, 1979; Nkwi, 2003, 2011, 2015). Under the Fon is the *kwifoyn*, which is like the executive arm of the traditional government. Its main function is to help the fon to maintain law and order and also to check the excesses of the fon. The fon also checks the excesses of the *kwifoyn* (Nkwi, 2015; Ritzenthaler, 1960).

The Kom fondom is believed to have been founded about the mid-18th century. It includes sub-chiefdoms which were incorporated into Kom proper as “vassal states” by Fon Yuh (c. 1865-1912), the seventh ruler of Kom. These tributary chiefdoms included Achain, Ake, Ajung, Mbesinaku, Mbuene, Baiso, Baicham, Mejang, Mbengkas, and Mejung (Chilver, 1981; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). Map 2 shows the Kom Fondom with all its vassals and villages including its capital, Laikom.



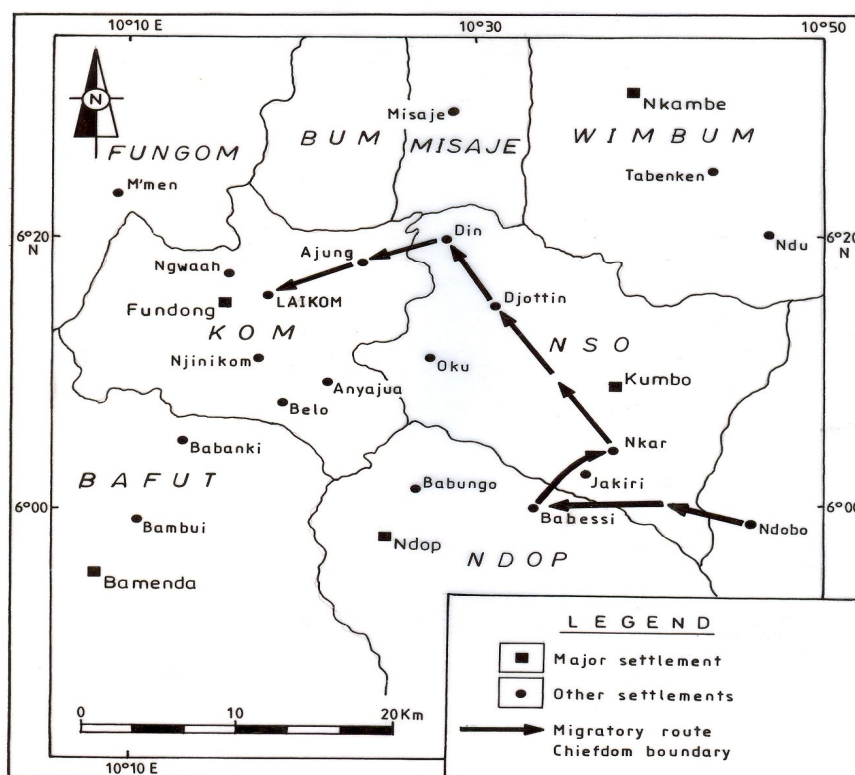
Map 2. Kom Fondom showing its villages and sub-chiefdoms. Source: Chilver and Kaberry (1967) *The Kingdom of Kom in Cameroon* (p. 126).

The history of the sacred forest and the python could be linked to the Kom migratory history. According to Kom oral traditions or origin myths, the ancestors of the Kom migrated from Ndobbo in north Cameroon with other Tikar groups at a time when the jihads were sending out those who did not want to be converted to Islam. The jihads of the 19th century provided the single–most important means of spreading Islam far and wide in areas of northern Cameroon. Those who were not willing to be converted to Islam migrated (Fanso, 1989). The oral informants further maintained that the Kom first moved to Babessi where they settled temporarily. It further states that while the Kom were at Babessi their presence was seen as threatening. The King of Babessi therefore devised a trick to eliminate them (Nkwi, 1976)

A popular legend recounts their movement from Babessi to their present settlement. One day the king of Babessi told the fon of Kom that some of their people were becoming obstinate and might cause a war between the two groups. He therefore proposed that they should each build a house in which the trouble makers would be burnt. The Fon of Kom, Muni, agreed to the plan and the houses were constructed accordingly. But while the king of Babessi constructed his house with two doors, Muni built his own house according to what was agreed, with only one door. After locking the front doors, the houses were set ablaze. The Babessi people escaped through the second door while Kom people were burnt to death. This trick reduced the size of the Kom population in Babessi and made the fon of Kom very angry.

Oral informants further state that in his anger and frustration, Muni promised his surviving wives and sisters that he would avenge the death of his people. He told them that he would hang himself on a tree in a nearby forest and on that spot a lake would emerge and all the maggots from his decomposing body would turn into fish there. The lake was discovered by a Babessi hunter and immediately reported to the palace. A royal fishing expedition was organized. At the peak of the fishing the lake turned upside down and all the Babessi people present in it drowned. Following Muni's instructions a python's track, believed to be the reincarnated fon, led Kom people from Babessi to Nkar and Idien in the present-day Bui division of the northwest region of Cameroon

At Idien they settled near a stream beside a raffia bush. There, the Queen Mother, Tih, bore a son who was to be the next king. That son was called Jingjua, meaning “suffering.” She also gave birth to Nange Tih, future mother of the *Ikui* clan, Nakhinti Tih, future mother of *Itinalah* clan, and Ndzitewa Tih, future mother of the *Achaff* clan. The *Ikwi*, *Itinalah*, and *Achaff* are seen as the founding lineages of Kom because the three people who arrived in Laikom occupied three geographical cardinal points. Once the python trail reappeared Kom people left Idien for Ajung where the python’s trail disappeared again. The fon of Ajung married Nangeh Tih and bore Jinabo, Nangebo, Nyanga, and Bi. After a while the python’s track reappeared and Kom people left again for Laikom.. From Idien, the trekkers moved through Ijim to Laikom where the python disappeared and has never reappeared again. Map 3 shows the migratory routes used by the python and survivors of the Kom who were the first to settle at Laikom.



Map 3. Migratory routes of Kom people to their present site. Source: Compiled by the author from oral sources.

The Kom migratory history to their area of settlement and led by a python (*iigv-im*) has deeper historical and cultural meanings in relation to the understanding of their ecology and cosmos in general. The relevance of the python to our subject of study cannot therefore be left in doubt. It is strongly believed amongst the Kom that the python represented the lost fon and also the founder of the fondom. According to oral sources, the sacred forest is located in the spot where the python is believed to have disappeared. It is not clear whether the snake met the forest or the forest grew up later. Whatever the case may be, it is the spot on which the snake disappeared that the sacred forest is located. It is where the death fons are buried. The traditional capital of Kom, Laikom is located where the python disappeared. Consequently the fondom's traditional ruler lives at Laikom. Pythons and/or snakes are reptiles commonly found in the myths of many African societies. The python for example is thought by the Luo of Kenya to be sacred and may not be killed by the people. When such snakes are seen at home they are given food because it is also thought that the snakes are ancestors (Gumo *et al.*, 2012).

The python is central to Kom migration narratives. This origin myth, which according to Fanso (1989) is understood as the indisputable sacred story about the origin, early beliefs, and realities of a people and are handed down by word of mouth from through successive generations. Narrators of myths have three important safeguards against error and for maintaining the story intact. First the narrative is frequently repetitious; second, events which occurred in different places are set down in precisely the same choice of words; and finally a poetic rhythm is maintained during its recitation (Fanso, 1989). Whatever the case, myths sometimes do change depending on who's telling the story and they may tweak it to suit new experiences. The sacred forest to which our attention turns now has reasons why it is called thus and over time and space have been conserved by the indigenous people.

The Sacred Forest *Ak'u Mii-Fii*): Its Historical Role in Conservation and Sustainability

The sacred forest serves multifarious functions which range from aesthetic, ecological, spiritual, and cultural. It is alleged that it gained the name sacred essentially because the python disappeared on the spot and also because a tree fell down and cried out lamenting to the fon that he has died. (Beatrice Gam, personal communication, August 23, 2013). The forest is linked to the life of the villagers and their activities. This interaction between people and their

environment means that people living in the forest both depend on it and act on it. Elsewhere in Africa sacred forests have played similar roles although sometimes it is very difficult to prove using western science and shows how little the world understands African ways of interacting with their nature. Amongst the Shona, the word sacred, *inoera*, is an adjective describing a thing or a place. Sacredness has the connotation of being life sustaining such as providing food, fruit, or water. The concept is closely linked to rain and fertility of the land. A sacred place (*nzvimbo inoera*) is a place where spirits are present; it has certain rules of access, as well as behaviours that are not allowed there (Bruce et al., 2001; Ingold, 2000; Kwashirai, 2010; Leach and Mearns, 1996; Poore, 1989).

The talking tree needs further explanation. It is common knowledge that trees do not talk but in the Kom oral traditions, the tree spoke by crying. It might be because somebody must have heard the tree crying. Again all myths contain fantastical claims which defy everyday or scientific logic. For instance, Terence Ranger (1999) suggests that stones can talk. He goes on to maintain that “It is because African pilgrims and worshippers hear the rocks that they speak; it is because adepts see the messages of the rocks as they walk round –them - so that to walk entirely around Njelele mountain would be to come to possess all divine knowledge and hence is prohibited that I can reconstruct this African landscape” (Ranger, 1999, p. 56). Ranger was insinuating that the impossible can happen especially when people are so close to their natural *habitats* to the extent that they can take ordinary events seriously or accord them an aura of sacredness.

The Sacred Forest and Traditional Pharmacy

The sacred forest offers many scarce plants that are used for healing different diseases in the region. These medicinal herbs are extracted from the sacred forests with little restriction. However, some restriction is imposed on those who wish to exploit the interior of the forest for even more rare and highly valued medicinal plants. Some of the medicinal plants extracted from the forest include *prunus Africana* (tree barks used as quinine long before western quinine was introduced into the region) (Iliffe, 1995), leaves, fruits, roots, or just simply medicinal herbs. Traditional healers who were authorized to use the forest showed a deep knowledge of the

secrets of the forest (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). The traditional surgeons get nearly all their herbs from the sacred forest.

Traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere have always used plants to promote healing and naturopathic medicine which is still the predominant means of healthcare in developing countries (Harris, 1987). The forest also provide the population with various uses such as honey production, food, dye, fibre, fodder, medicines, fuel wood, building materials, and production of kitchen utensils. Scholars elsewhere in Africa have carried out research on forest and its pharmaceutical importance to the people. Moore and Vaughan (1994) show how forests were central to the livelihoods of the people in the Northern Province of Zambia especially as it provided medicinal plants. Ranjan (2000) discusses the scientific ideas of the pre-colonial and colonial foresters in British colonies while Rattray (1954) discusses how medicinal plants were useful to the indigenous people by curing diseases like headache, stomach problems, and sophisticated diseases such as leukemia in southern Rhodesia, modern-day Zimbabwe. Anderson (1996) provides a link between disease and cure utilized by people making use of the forest in tropical Africa. Drayton (2000) in a very global perspective analyzes the link between disease, nature, and imperial science. The implication here is that the Kom case is far from isolated and demonstrates the extent to which forest practices are embedded in people's livelihoods across Africa.

Closely linked to the pharmaceutical importance of the forest was the fuel it provided for the people. Biofuel has been proven to be of absolute importance for people living in rural areas of the world (Anderson, 1984; Munslow, 1988; Salim & Ullten, 1999; Webb, 1995). Certain parts of the sacred forest could be used to fetch firewood for consumption and although this does not involve the whole of Kom, people of the royal palace and those living at Laikom often get fuel from the forest. Firewood collected from the forest was made exclusively of fallen dead branches which were generally dry or dead trees, because it was forbidden to fell any tree in the sacred forest. Here, we see that indigenous ideas about the sacredness of the area enabled the conservation of the forest. Firewood, which is the main source of energy for heating and cooking, could be very scarce during the rainy season unlike the dry season when firewood could be fetched abundantly and reserved against the rainy days.

From the above discussion it is not an overstatement that the Kom have been excellent conservers of their forest. Annually the forest is ritually cleansed by the *kiwfon* the traditional executive arm of the traditional government in order to fortify the forest against destruction both by humans and spiritual beings. This is usually a big ceremony carried out by the most senior members of *kwifon* during which food and animals like goats and chickens are sacrificed to the forest gods. Coupled with this, new medicinal crops are planted and the dry trees of the forest are collected in order to give room for the young plants to grow. Medicines are put at the four corners of the forest to prevent the invasion of predators like “*ike Muso*”, a mysterious wind believed by the Kom to be enemies of the land.

In spite of the scarcity of natural forests in this area, the local community continues to depend on indigenous and exotic trees in their surroundings for survival. Thus, there was need for cultivation, protection, and sustainable management of these valuables resources for rural livelihood. The importance of timber and other tree products from outside the forest is attracting increasing attention to help meet growing demands and to reduce pressure on the sacred forest. Furthermore, trees which are growing in open areas seem to have the potential to provide options for rural livelihoods and need for conservation while the introduction of trees like the eucalyptus and *tephrosia* usually planted alongside crops on the farms has helped to reduce significantly in the constant exploitation of the forest for fuel wood. Since not everybody is entitled to visit the forest, this has given way for the survival of the forest. Hunting too was done once a year thus preventing the extinction of valuable species of animals, birds and trees in the forest. For instance, the forest was home to a unique species of bird, *Tauraco bannermani*, believed to be the only of its kind in all of West Africa (de Hoyo et al., 2014; Njabo & Laguy, 2000).

Rituals, Conservation, and Sustainability

Agriculture the world over has been the backbone of societies whether developed or underdeveloped. The sacred forest played a role in Kom agriculture and thus helped to sustain the constant availability of food and the fertility of the land and its people. No farming is carried out in the forest. There was no fetching of wood or felling of trees carelessly. The Kom believe that the forest has to be preserved for societal sustenance. Religiously, rituals were performed in

the forest to inaugurate the beginning of the planting season. The high priests performed the rituals in a dedicated shrine located in the sacred forest. *Fuchuo* was the ritual carried out by the *achaff* and *ekwu* priests (all founding lineages of Kom) to inaugurate the planting season and ensure the constant supply of food in the Kom Fondom. The shrine, *ndo-fuchuo* stood in a spot held to be the place where the python disappeared. It stood on three pillars with a grass thatch roof. The performance of the ritual by the *ekwu* and *achaff* priests was because of their proximity to their traditional settlement when they arrived Laikom. The toponymic explanation further lends credence because the two lineages were kingmakers. They were thus thought to be sacred. Prior to the ritual, the path leading to the shrine is cleared (*usu leng fuchuo*) and the following day the priests offer guinea corn porridge (*sorghum bicolor*), palm oil (*Elaeis Guineensis*), salt (*sodium chloride*), and palm wine, a white milky substance extracted from the palm tree. The rite was followed by a libation in the *ntul* shrine poured by the fon and *achaff* priests who both offer prayers for peace, fertility, and more food in the kingdom (Joseph Ndocha, personal communication, August 23, 2014).

In the one week following the *fuchuo* ritual, social gatherings of a festive nature where musical instruments may be used are all forbidden. No funeral ceremonies were to be carried out until the period of seven days elapsed. The performance of this ritual was followed by the distribution of apostropaic medicine which is believed to protect food and people and compounds against maleficent spirits (Anna Ayumchua, personal communication, July 14, 2013 & May 14, 2015). Persons who are caught uprooting crops and trees maliciously are to be punished by retainers of *fuchuo*. On the eighth day after the ritual, there was the planting of the fon's farms, first with guinea-corn and then the commoners could start planting their own farms.

Closely related to the *fuchuo* ritual, which is performed in the sacred forest, is *azhea*. *Azhea* is linked in both function and content to *fuchuo*. The shrine is found at the precincts of the sacred forest (Nkwi, 1982). According to Chilver and Kaberry (1961) it is "a ritual which is performed to ensure a regular fall of rain" (p. 76). This ritual also ensures sufficient sunshine and a future bumper harvest. When this ritual is performed at the sacred forest, it is repeated at royal compounds found at Yang, Fuli, and Alim. From the royal compounds the other villages are nourished.

The *fuchuo* and *azhea* rituals could easily be understood within territorial cults. These are a typology of religious institutions found widely throughout Central Africa. Schoffeleers (1978) calls them “profoundly ecological ... apart from engaging in ritual action, however they also issue and enforce directives with regards to community’s use of its environment ...” (p. 145). Territorial cults operate on the principle that management of nature depends on the correct management and control of society. The Kom case does not show the contrary and rather re-enforces the way indigenous peoples could understand and conserve their environment. By putting in place certain taboos they inadvertently keep the devastation of their environment intact (Thadeus Ngong, personal communication, August 5, 2014).

Rituals have occupied an important place in African traditional religions. It is through these rituals that the Africans through their traditional priests communicate with their ancestors, the living and the dead, and fertility of their lands are achieved. Through these rituals there is conservation albeit indirectly. Koizumi (2007) shows how various agricultural methods in Tandala and Iniho villages of Maharastra district, India utilized rituals to fertilize their land. Teeken et al. (2012) shows how in Lolobi, Kumasi, Ghana, the Bouadekamo plays an important role in the offerings to ancestors and local gods, while Zimon (1990) suggests that the oldest member of the *Nalatiib* clan (*uninkpel*) of Eastern Ghana performed the ritual at the sacred forest. Through *fuchuo* and *azhea* rituals, the fon and the chief priests (*nkwife*) who performed the rituals are empowered more through these acts. They are a representative of the people and by performing additional responsibilities only go ahead to confirm that they are empowered.

The *fuchuo* and *azhea* rituals illustrate more importantly the cultural understandings of Kom people of their environment. The premise upon which the rituals are performed is to prevent insecurity thereby protecting the environment. Cultural understandings are a means which people employ to deal with insecurity situations. It was first used by Croll and Parkin (1992) and popularized by de Bruijn and Van Dijk (1995) who worked amongst the Fulbe society of Mali. According to them cultural understanding was meant to close the hiatus which existed between culture and environment. It denotes both the experimental and provisional nature of peoples’ coping strategies and their changing interpretations of what constitute work and resources as

well as the fact that they can only proceed step by step on the basis of some sort of distinction (de Bruijn & Van Dijk, 1995: 10). Through their rituals, the Kom illustrate the extent to which indigenous knowledge is a powerful force for conserving their environment.

Conserving the Sacred Forest and Contemporary Challenges

This sacred sanctuary has been threatened by many factors which either help to degrade the forest or make it lose its original value, especially the cultural aspect. The forest in this area is becoming so rare that it is possible to miss it entirely. Vegetation is currently dominated by grassland with patches of savannah and farms caused by some factors ranging from human to natural factors. Despite these threats, the sacred forest as well as its conservation by the Kom people has remained indifferent. However, it is relevant to appreciate some of these dynamics, which have threatened the existence and cultural understandings of the forest. They include amongst others: colonialism and Christianity

Colonialism has been arguably held by African scholars as one episode which had lasting effects on the continent of Africa. Whether it was the British, French, Germans, or Belgians and Portuguese, the impact on African people and their cosmos was almost the same. Between the wars, the colonial regimes in Africa embarked on the crusade of what was widely known in the colonial lexicon as the “native problem.” By this phrase the colonial administration justified that the native was to be brought out from his jungle and shown the light. According to the apologists, the Africans were still “hewers of wood” and “drawers of water.” As far as the conservation of forest was concern, the British carved out huge hectares of local and community forests as native reserves and animal parks (Qa, 1946, p. 3; Forestry, Government: General Correspondence). Following the Indian Forest Act of 1878 the British obliterated centuries of customary use of the forest by local people in both British India and British Africa (Rajan, 1998; Sivaramakrishnan, 1995; Beinart, 1989).

The ramifications of such policy were striking. Not only was the land of the indigenous peoples taken, the shrines, temples, and sacred forest which had existed long before the colonial administration was introduced in the continent was desecrated. This showed that the indigenous forms of environmental conservation had no place in the colony, yet the Kom people resisted and

continued with their rituals and taboos surrounding their forest. In colonial reports found in the Buea National Archives, Buea it is evident that attempts to conserve this forest began in 1931 when the conservator of forests for Bamenda Division, J.O. Fielding, drew limits for the proposed Oku Mountain Forest Reserve, known then as “the “Bush of Hill Forest” Type” (Qh/a [1939]5 Annual Report of the Forest Administration of Cameroon; Qh/a [1974]4, Annual Reports: 1937, 1939, 1940; Qh/a [1917]1 Forests). When the notice of the proposed reserve was published the people adjacent to it objected very strongly because they saw the cultural meanings attached to the forest being threatened (Qh/a [1916]1 Forestry Ordinance Regulations). An agreement was then reached between the conservator and the indigenous population with the latter given certain use rights in the proposed reserve. Subsequent efforts by government to gazette the proposed reserve failed in 1938, 1961, and 1963. Finally, in 1975, the conservator was successful in demarcating part of the forest although the boundary was not universally respected. By 1986, the forest had been reduced to 50% of its 1963 size (Asanga, 2002, p. 5). The post-independence period continued to implement forestry regulation laws and this time (Forbesseh & Ikfuingei, 2001)

Forest conservation, to be successful, must involve the local population and address their needs (Geschiere, 2004). In ignorance of this the Ministry of Forestry (MINEF) agreed to shelve the original indigenous ways of understanding their forest and went ahead to gazette the whole forest, which came now under the government control and the population now was to be censored on what they had to do in the forest.

Christianity accompanied in some many respects followed directly in the heels of colonialism in Kom. The introduction of the colonial church in Africa in the 19th century brought about tremendous changes (Ajayi, 1982; Fields, 1982; Markowitz, 1973). Western Christianity gained a foothold in Kom in 1912 through the help of the Pallotine Fathers from Germany. When World War I erupted they were sent out of the territory alongside with the German colonial administration. In 1927 the Mill Hill fathers from London took over from the Pallotines (de Vries, 1998; Nkwi, 2015). The introduction of Christianity at the early stages was ferociously resisted by Fon Ngam (1912-1926). After his death Fon Ndi legalized Christianity. Obviously one would have thought that through that action indigenous practices will be compromised. The

indigenous practices of environmental conservation continued side by side with western Christianity.

Colonialism and western Christianity both made significant efforts to undermine the Kom's cultural conceptions of their landscape. It is not very clear whether the ideology behind the colonial and post-colonial state carving out these reserves was to undermine indigenous knowledge or to preserve it. As in many other contexts, the colonial state always thought that what was indigenous was not right and consequently, should be eliminated. This ideology was further re-enforced by the post-colonial state. Colonialism and Christianity did not completely succeed to obliterate Kom beliefs. As a matter of fact, when I was in Kom in May 2015, the rituals at the sacred forest were carried out to mark the beginning of the planting season. This has never failed since the Kom people founded their kingdom and the conservation of the forest has never seized because the colonial and post-colonial government asked them to do so. Rather the colonial and post-colonial governments sought to interrupt or obliterate indigenous methods of conservation.

On the backdrop of recent debates on climate change and environmental protection indigenous meanings and methods of conservation should be appreciated. First, it should be understood that Africans were and have been environmentally conscious of their ecologies and above all the conservation of their bio-diversity. The sacred forest of Kom is just one example to prove the point. Whatever the case may be, colonial and post-colonial states as well as Christianity have impacted the understanding of Africa and the meanings of African landscapes in relation to its ecology, environment, and sustainable livelihood (Feierman, 1990). In Kom, the fact that rituals are still being carried out in the sacred forest and all the taboos still respected illustrates the fact that colonial and post-colonial regulation of the Kom landscape has been resisted. Abbink, de Bruijn, and van Walvaren (2003) inform us that communities have resisted various forms of rule and/or domination throughout African history. The question at stake now is how does the post-colonial state improve on indigenous efforts in preserving their environments?

Lessons for Today: Recommendation to Policy Makers

From the foregoing, there are practical implications for policy makers. The concept of conservation to the international agencies has remained so far quite narrow and simplistic. This is because the world conservation schemes have taken it only to mean large hectares of forests and parks and ignores the local conservation carried out by the indigenous peoples who conserve their environments by establishing taboos (Byers, 2001; Wanyancha, 1992). For the policy makers in Cameroon they should encourage and sensitize the indigenous people about the accomplishments of their methods and not replicate the failed initiatives of the colonial era. They should also educate traditional rulers on the importance of conserving the forest. Traditional rulers will then turn to their people and give them useful lessons about the protection of their environment. Traditional and modern forms of forest conservation should therefore complement each other rather than operating at loggerheads. This complementary nature will help to enhance the conservation of the environment in more profound ways than would be possible were the traditional or the modern methods applied exclusively.

In spite of the scarcity of natural forests in this area, the local community continues to depend on indigenous and exotic trees in their surroundings for survival. Thus, there is need for cultivation, protection, and sustainable management of these valuable resources for rural livelihood. The importance of timber and other tree products from outside the forest is attracting increasing attention, to help meet growing demands, and reduce pressure on the sacred forest. Trees growing in open areas seem to have the potential to provide options for rural livelihoods and need for conservation. The introduction of trees like the eucalyptus and *tephrosia* usually planted alongside crops on the farms has helped in constant exploitation of the forest for fuel wood. Environmental agencies have now resorted to discouraging Kom people from planting the eucalyptus on the grounds that it consumes a lot of water. Yet these agencies have not given alternatives. People need alternative trees for their biofuel which if not properly handled; people might resort to exploit the forest (Atampugre, 1991; Fairman & Leach, 1998).

The whole idea underlying environmental protection is limited to the forest. This again is quite narrow. Does the idea of conservation revolve only around large forest areas? What about other

areas or harmful practices elsewhere in the environment? The question now is what happened to the other parts of the environment. Policy makers and environmental groups should be able to spread their activities of environmental protection beyond the forest.

Conclusion

Tropical Africa has been observed as one of those places which is gifted with forests. These forests in most societies have served multifarious functions. Like in other parts of Africa, the Kom sacred forest serves a variety of cultural and symbolic functions amongst the Kom. This forest is intimately linked with ancestry and cultural heritage and it plays a very crucial role in the livelihood of the fondom. The sacred forests are maintained in this region for almost the same reasons in some parts in Africa where these forests serve as habitats for the gods or the spirits of the ancestors, they protect species of cultural importance to the community and serve as sites for religious rituals. However, they are also threatened by recent developments and pressures associated with the growing populations and dynamics which are external such as Christianity, colonial policies, and the perceptions of the people which are changing. Despite all these pressures from changing socioeconomic and political contexts, the strong religious beliefs that have always supported the sustainable existence of the forests is trying to survive and will continue to make the forest very important to the community and its surroundings. Significantly, environmental protection has become a topical issue today and while there is so much talk about by advocates, there is almost the near neglect of how indigenous people protected their environment. The findings of this article will provide a yardstick for the government and policy makers while taking Kom as a case study. There can be little doubt, however, that cultural values in many aspects have changed and will continue to change but it is not certain at what point will the change be complete. Yet the forest continues to play its important role to the Kom people despite external pressures. Thus this article has concluded that the beliefs and practices of Kom people continue to exist and has sustained the forest over the years.

Like Bruce et al. (2001) and Clarke, (1999) observed in their study of sacred forest in Zimbabwe, spiritual or religious values can motivate the conservation of natural resources such as the Kom

sacred forest. The chief priests and the fon although already empowered by the virtue of the fact that they are ruling, are further empowered in the context of the modern government as they influenced conservation that is motivated by traditional values and practices (Luig & van Oppen, 1995). Thus policies that support traditional institutions to empower traditional leaders can foster conservation in such cases. Hence it is fair to conclude that traditional religious values do play a significant role in forest conservation in Africa.

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