



Sacred Forests, Modes of Transmission of Cultural Knowledge and Security Geopolitics of Monarchs and Dignitaries Among the Bamiléké of West Cameroon

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Abstract

Many authors have written on problematic of natural environment in Bantu's lands in general and in Bamiléké people in particular. In fact, those "sacred" environments represent for the population in this area, a base of spiritual and cultural life because of a relation existing between natural milieu and divine. Place of highest spiritual connotation, sacred forests are presented in this paper in various forms in accordance with attributes its takes. However, this paper present in a socio historical point of view, the conditions in which natural milieu favoring transmission of knowledge and power to monarchs of Bamilékés kingdoms in western Cameroun.

Keywords: culture, Sacred forests, natural milieu, power, knowledge transmission.

1. Introduction

The issue of environmental conservation is not new. Indeed, it has existed in Africa since the sedentarization of societies. And in West Cameroon (region of Central Africa) nature and everything that composes it serve various uses. They are either used by societies or deified by them. Speaking of the uses of the environment in the Bamiléké country, it appears that these populations of western Cameroon use nature, which occupies a prominent place within their cosmogonies (Djiope et al., 2022). The Bamiléké natural environment is certainly sacralized but this sacralization does not induce only a receptacle of the divine but also a place par excellence of the transmission of ancestral magico-religious knowledge and knowledge even more visible in the great royal courts or among certain powerful dignitaries. Therefore, this article is divided into three articulations including the birth and evolution of the concept of sacred forest among the Bamiléké peoples, location and geostrategic characteristic of the sacred forests in the Bamiléké country, and finally the cosmogony of the divine and transmission of endogenous knowledge among the dignitaries in Bamiléké country in the West of Cameroon. To better understand this phenomenon, we have made use in this manuscript of investigative techniques that take into account oral, written and iconographic data collection methods, but also the use of cartography and geospatial imagery.

1.1 Methodology presentation of the study area

Covering an area of 13,890 km² and culminating at an altitude of around 2,000m (Kuate and Dikoume, 200), the region of the highlands of western Cameroon includes both the Bamiléké country, the Bamoun country and certain groups of the Cameroonian English-speaking area. The Bamiléké occupy a territory where a very interesting floristic, faunal and landscape (natural) diversity abounds. As for the Bamiléké country, it is a block of land which, located in the very center of the western region of Cameroon, is rich in cultural diversity and whose unique history and the dynamism of its peoples is impressive (Dongmo et al., 1972). The Bamiléké region presents itself as a rich wooded savannah, reign of many botanical zoo individuals who are an integral part of the cultural life of the peoples who live there. The Bamiléké are found in five (five) zones of the western region of Cameroon, namely: Menoua, Mifi, Ndé, Koung-Khi, Hauts-plateaux, Haut-Nkam and Bamboutos. It is in this region of Cameroon that the Bamiléké originate, who are included in the grassfields region.

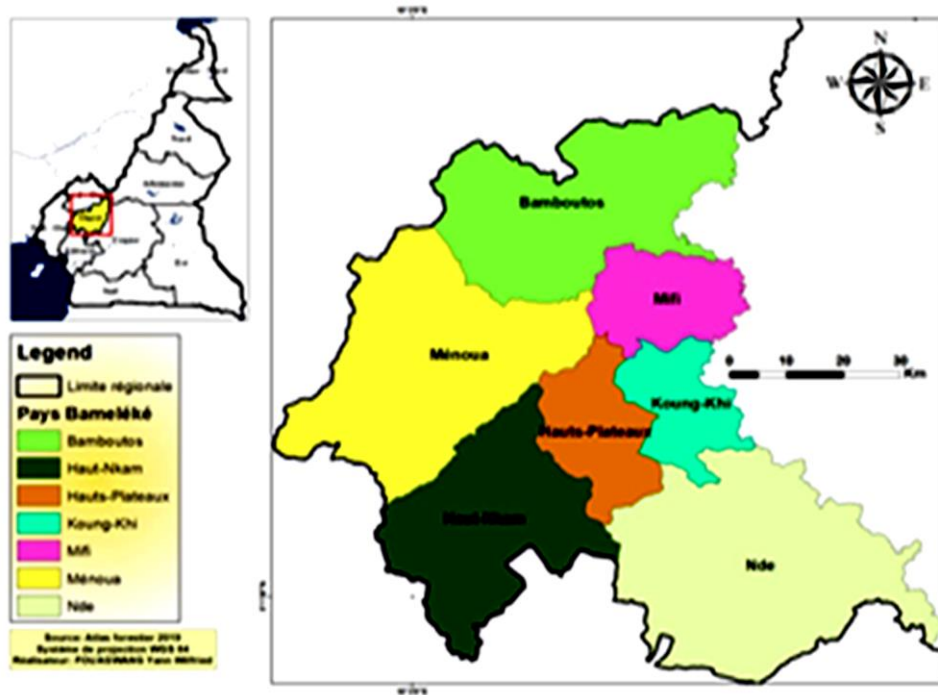


Figure 1. Location map of the country Bamiléké, West Cameroon

2. Data collection and processing

To carry out this work, we consulted archives of various kinds including written, iconographic of the Ministry of Wildlife and Forests, Wildlife and the Environment in Cameroon; we also used the interview of ecological and environmental leaders in Cameroon, without forgetting the environmental agents and the Cameroonian public opinion on environmental issues and specifically that of the State, the future and the protection of forests in Cameroon. Since written sources alone are not enough to write history, we conducted field trips using all sorts of sources of information available to us in order to reveal the historical truth that underlies strains our subject; because as Lucien Febvre says so well: “History is made with written documents when there are any, but it can be done, it must be done without written documents when there are none. With all this that the ingenuity of the historian can allow him to use to make his honey, in the absence of the usual flowers” (Febvre, 1953; Prost, 1999: 386). We carried out a meticulous investigation and by collecting information from various sources, including oral ones, which are

seen as the living museum of all the socio-cultural productions capitalized by peoples without scriptures (Gormo, 2004: 17), written, iconographic, etc., which will lead us to specific information whose analysis and interpretation would be likely to produce concrete results. Claiming to be historical, our research will focus on the consultation of written, oral, iconographic and multimedia sources. In this regard, we will consult various schools of thought. With regard to the iconographic sources, they will mainly consist of photos, results of our various field visits, as well as maps, plans and other image sources that would allow us to better understand the context in which our research takes place.

3. Birth and evolution of the concept of the sacred forest among the Bamiléké peoples

In Cameroon abounds a rich cultural and natural diversity which earned him to sit in Africa at the rank of 4th country with the greatest floristic diversity and at the rank of 5th with regard to fauna. (Tokeng et al., 2020). This variety of environment is certainly considered as heritage of the State of Cameroon and even of the world (with regard to world natural heritage) (Noumdoukou, 2020), but also proves to be very symbolic for the indigenous peoples to whom these are linked. world gems. With regard to the sacred forests of West Cameroon, it should be noted that it is a concept which is deployed and established in the Bamilékés societies during the period of the sedentarization of the peoples of the regions of the western highlands (DeLarossière, 1950). Once the populations have settled, a sacred place is revealed by specific processes (Djiopé et al., 2022: 259) and these places serve as landmarks for worship and traditional ceremonies of a spiritual nature.

The concept of “sacredness” (Djiopé et al., 2022: 258) of forests in Bamiléké countries therefore arises from the fact that the Bamiléké peoples have stabilized on the one hand, but also because at the base, the sacred places were designated by the diviner of the people and the fact that the creation of a magico-spiritual atmosphere around the chiefdom limited attacks or permanent incursions. The concept of sacred forest also arises from the fact that the Bamiléké peoples are gradually becoming sedentary and are beginning to adopt certain practices. To begin with, the sacred forests of West Cameroon and in Bamiléké country are born of the will first of dignitaries and religious leaders to maintain permanent contact with the ancestors. The arrival of the first Europeans in the Bamiléké region of the Cameroonian grassfield favored a new configuration of the so-called sacred forests.

First of all, it must be understood that in Bamiléké countries in particular, the formation of kingdoms took place in relation to a sacred site. This site was sacralized either by spiritual gymnastics of the initiates, or because they were picturesque and significant (like the installation of the very first Bafou chieftaincy by Dschang, in Men lepè, a symbolic zone by its fall and its small wooded environment). In reality, the sacred forests in the Bamiléké country appear not only with the process of sedentarization and stabilization of the peoples, but also it should be noted that they have remained unstable for justified geopolitical and strategic reasons.

4. Situation and geopolitical and strategic characteristics of sacred forests in Bamiléké country

The notion of strategy has existed among the peoples of the world since the establishment of distinct societies. As for the sacred forests in western Cameroon, they are not created in a completely harmless way. Indeed, by browsing the migratory history and the sites occupied by the sacred forests in Bamiléké country, we realize two striking elements: the sacred forest is either always located near the royal huts; or these forests serve as camouflage to put the royal palace and the huts of important dignitaries in safety. In another sense, we realize that in

Bamiléké country, the sacred forest is full of jewels of the royal court on the spiritual, societal and family levels. Indeed, it is in this forest that the remains of deceased kings reside in a particular place (sanctuary-cemetery) called füm in the Bamiléké language.

On the other hand, the geographical location of the forest in relation to the royal palace allows it to be better controlled and better protected from both physical and mystical intrusions. It should be remembered that in these forests also reside zoomorphic totem deities (totems) (Djiope et al., 2022: 261). Placing a sacred forest near the royal palace therefore strengthens its guard since all the soldiers present at the palace are also assigned (even by moral duty) to the protection of the surroundings of the palace and therefore of the surrounding forests. Remember, however, that West Cameroon is made up of arboreal savannahs and evergreen forests (Tiomo, 2015), which facilitates access. However, the sacred forests are almost all made up of arboreal and dense forests and groves that protect the royal palaces or royal chiefdoms at two main levels. The first level is the camouflage and the difficult access to the lower royal court, and the second level is the initiation of the dignitaries of the kingdom: we therefore speak of forests as a receptacle of the divine and as a mode of transmission of intrinsic endogenous knowledge among the Bamiléké of Cameroon.

5. Cosmogony of the divine and transmission of endogenous knowledge among dignitaries in Bamiléké country in west Cameroon

The divine in Bamiléké country uses various and varied means to enter into contact with the people. Indeed, it moves most often in the different elements of nature which surrounds the people and through which it manifests itself. We will therefore speak of “tutelary deities” (Djiope et al., 2022: 259). The chiefs and future chiefs especially are once chosen (arrested by the ancestors) are subjected to a certain number of initiatory tests which will allow him to reach a certain degree of spirituality and wisdom. The geostrategy and traditional geopolitics of the sacred forests at that time reside in the fact that they, being considered the receptacle of the deities and spirits of the ancient chiefs, present themselves as the ideal place for the training of the new monarch to come. The transmission of knowledge both about the people and the history of the territory and about ancestral magico-mystical knowledge to allow the new future leader to become not an accomplished man, but a superman.

Indeed, very great dignitaries also go through these initiation rites which bring into play the geopolitics and the security of the village. The sacred forests are not only a physical element of protection of the dignitaries of the village or the kingdom but they also allow them to be able to acquire the maximum of elements which are essential to them for the management of the city. On the other hand, local beliefs hold that serving chiefs may contact their predecessors in order to seek advice on a situation in the kingdom that they would have dealt with before him. To achieve such a level of communication with the spirits and nature, the chiefs or dignitaries go through a certain number of initiation rites. The mastery of certain magical-religious powers also allows a people to assert its geopolitical and strategic ambitions. This was the case during the battle between the Bafou people and the Baleveng people when the first used the magico-military method of Nzong tsoüh to monopolize the lands of the Baleveng. Such practices are part of traditional military strategy but also of geopolitics. These practices were therefore derived from knowledge transmitted from generation to generation.

6. Results and discussion

All in all, it is important to note that the traditional geopolitics of dynasties and royal courts in Bamiléké country are visible at different levels. It therefore appears that sacred forests in Bamiléké countries emerge in very specific contexts. First, they are the result of the

sedentarization of peoples following multiple settlement movements. Once these peoples have settled, they have created a living space that embraces their cultures and beliefs. Among these environments there are the forests of chiefdoms or la'akam which sometimes serve as a cemetery for the deceased monarchs, sometimes as sites of initiation for new ones. These sites characterized by their naturalness and their strong spiritual concentration are wooded places (forests) which represent not only a geopolitical and strategic asset, but also a place carrying cosmogonies that Bamiléké Man strives to respect and preserve. As a result, all natural resources from this “sacred” wood are prohibited for consumption by the uninitiated, thereby promoting the emergence of traditional (cultural) modes of natural conservation in Bamiléké country.

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