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# **The Sacred Forest and the Mythical Python: Ecology, Conservation, and Sustainability in Kom, Cameroon, c. 1700-2000**

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## **Abstract**

Scholars have taken a 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 mythical python (*iigw-im*) and their link with livelihood and sustainability in Kom, Cameroon. The paper argues that the Kom people have always been conserving their forests since the pre-colonial era. During the colonial period and especially in the 1930s many hectares of land including the sacred forest and the sites of the mythical python were carved out as forest reserves. The paper will demonstrate the extent to which colonial and post-colonial forms of conservation have ignored indigenous notions of forest conservation in Kom. It shows that 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 sustainable livelihood in Cameroon taking Kom society as a case study.

## **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 indigenous peoples' time-honoured efforts at protecting and conserving their environment.

The conservation of landscape which involves forest and ecology has thus brought lively debates to the forefront. 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 are also designed to teach them about the importance of forest preservation (Cohen & Odhiambo, 1989; Wilson, 1989). Yet there were others who hold very strongly that indigenous people have been conserving their forest and ecology for a very long time and do not need to be taught how to handle conservation by 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 the abundance of writings on the subject, Cameroon has not benefitted much from such studies. In addition, there has been the near neglect by international organizations to understand how African people have conserved their fauna and flora. This paper 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 mythical python. I will go further to argue, taking Kom as a case study, that Africans have been at the forefront of understanding and preserving their own environment; they are not passively awaiting external redemption.

## **Conceptual Analysis**

Generally, ecology is the relationship of living things to one another and their environment or the study of such relationships (Gumo, Gisepe, Raballah, Ouma, 2012). In many instances, these relationships cover the social, political, economic, spiritual, and natural environment which comprises living and nonliving things (Guha, 2000). The sacred is a thing or things, situations, and places that are set apart,

considered very special, and emit an aura of the holy and mystical (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 paper I draw from the notion of the sacred forest propounded by Madeweya, Oka, and Matsumoto (2004). 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 Ultera 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*. This paper makes a contrast between indigenous notions of conservation throughout the world and the modern bureaucratic efforts—and how they seem to be at odds with indigenous mechanisms. This is because conservation schemes around the world have ignored 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 high or low, is a necessary condition for a global attempt to achieve sustainable development (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 include 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 players. 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 characteristically is top-down rather than bottom-up (Kiawi & Mfoulou, 2002). The social distance in conventional thinking, between development planners and beneficiaries, is wide (Pitt, 1976). In other words, development is externally imposed by governments or other actors (Eyong, 2003; Harcourt, 1994; Weaver & Kusterer, 1997; Wolfensohn, 1998; McCann, 1999; World Bank Group, 2001).

## Objectives

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 land, including woodland with python, were carved out as forests reserves. How have colonialism and the post-colonial state impacted our understanding of African landscapes in relation to their 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

Data collection for this paper used several methods. First, I conducted oral interviews with 20 respondents whose ages ranged from 65 to 86 years. The idea was to collect as many versions as possible about the conservation of the sacred forest. Second, I combined these data with my personal observations. I grew up in Kom, observed what was going on in the sacred forest, and also listened to stories told by the old people about the sacred mythical python which led the Kom people out of Babessi. Third, I used archival sources. The Buea National Archives, which is located in Buea, holds a small quantity of documents 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 of which Kom was a part.

## 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 judicial, 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. Figure 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).

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 are 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-18<sup>th</sup> 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, Mbueni, Baiso, Baicham, Mejang, Mbengkas, and Mejung (Chilver, 1981; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). Figure 2 shows the Kom fondom with all its vassals and villages including its capital, Laikom.

**Figure 1: The position of Kom in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon**



Source: Aaron S. Neba, 1987, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 15). Bamenda, Cameroon: Neba Publishers.

**Figure 2: Kom Fendom 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 mythical python could be linked to the Kom migratory history. According to Kom oral traditions or origin myths, the ancestors of the Kom migrated from Ndofo in north Cameroon with other Tikar

groups fleeing from the jihads, as those who were not willing to be converted to Islam migrated (Fanso, 1989). Oral information further maintained that the Kom first moved to Babessi where they settled temporarily, and where the king of Babessi plotted 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. 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 mythical 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

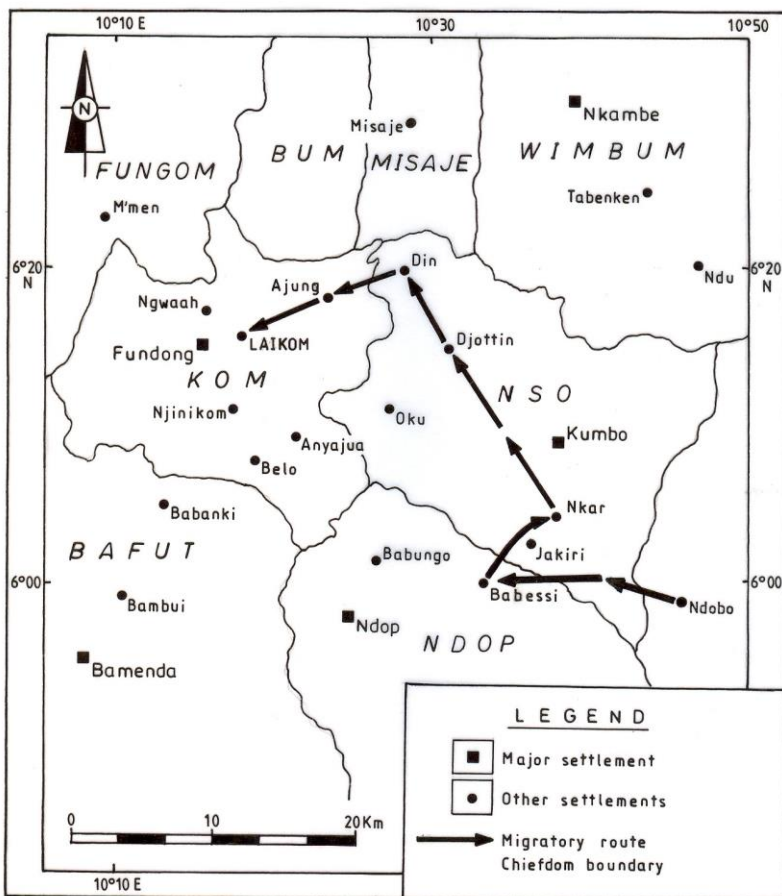
At Idien they settled near a stream beside a raffia bush. There, the Queen Mother, Tih, bore a son who was to be the next king. That son was called Jingjua, meaning "suffering." She also gave birth to Nange Tih, future mother of the *Ikui* clan, Nakhinti Tih, future mother of *Itinalah* clan, and Ndzitewa 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 areas. 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 migrants moved through Ijim to Laikom where the mythical python disappeared and has never reappeared again. Figure 3 shows the migratory routes used by the mythical python and survivors of the Kom who were the first to settle at Laikom.

The Kom migratory history to their area of settlement and led by a mythical python (*iigv-im*) has deeper historical and cultural meanings in relation to the understanding of their ecology and cosmos in general. The python is quite relevant to this subject of indigenous knowledge and conservation. It is strongly believed among the Kom that the mythical python represented the lost *fon* and founder of the fondom. According to oral sources, the sacred forest is located in the spot where the mythical 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 dead *fons* are buried. The traditional capital of Kom, Laikom is located where the mythical 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).

**Figure 3: Migratory routes of Kom people to their present site**



Source: Compiled by the author from oral sources.

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

The sacred forest serves many functions ranging from aesthetic to ecological, spiritual, and cultural. It gained the name “sacred” because the mythical python disappeared on the spot and also because a tree fell down and cried out lamenting that the *fon* 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. This demonstrates 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 permitted there (Bruce et al., 2001; Ingold, 2000; Kwashirai, 2010; Leach and Mearns, 1996; Poore, 1989).

The talking tree needs further explanation; in the Kom oral traditions, the tree spoke by crying. Again, myths contain fantastical claims which defy every day or scientific logic. For instance, Terence Ranger (1999), writing about Matapo hills in Zimbabwe, suggests that stones can talk. Ranger further explained 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 rare plants that are used for treating various 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), and other leaves, fruits, and roots. Traditional healers who were authorized to use the forest showed a deep knowledge of the secrets of the forest (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).

Traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere have used plants to promote healing and naturopathic medicine, which is still the predominant means of healthcare in many parts of the developing world (Harris, 1987). The forest also provides the population with various uses such as honey production, food, dye, fibre, fodder, medicines, fuel wood, building materials, and production of kitchen utensils.

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. Firewood collected from the forest was exclusively of fallen dead branches, 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. Since not just anyone was allowed into the sacred forest, the forest has been preserved. Hunting 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 one of its kind in all of West Africa (de Hoyo et al., 2014; Njabo & Laguy, 2000).

### Rituals, Conservation, and Sustainability

Agriculture has been the backbone of societies. The sacred forest played a role in Kom agriculture and helped to sustain the fertility of the land and its people. No farming is carried out in the sacred forest. There was no careless fetching of wood or felling of trees. The Kom believe that the forest has to be preserved for societal sustenance. Religious 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 steady supply of food in the Kom Fondom. The shrine, *ndo-fuchuo* stood in a spot held to be the place where the mythical 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 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. 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 seven days had 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, the *fon*'s farms would be planted, 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. The same ritual is repeated at royal compounds at Yang, Fuli, and Alim. From the royal compounds, other villages are nourished.

The *fuchuo* and *azhea* rituals could easily be understood as 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).

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 means which people employ to deal with insecurity. 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 factors ranging from human to natural factors. Two of the dynamics that have threatened the existence and cultural understandings of the forest are colonialism and Christianity

Colonialism has been held as one episode which had lasting effects on Africa. Whether it was the British, French, Germans, Portuguese or Belgians, the impact on African people and their cosmos was virtually the same. Between the wars, the colonial regimes in Africa embarked on the crusade 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. As far as the conservation of forest was concerned, 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).

The ramifications of such policies 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 were desecrated. This showed that 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, 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 (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, placed it under government control, with the population restricted on what they could do in the forest.

Christianity followed on the heels of colonialism in Kom. The introduction of the church in Africa in the 19th century brought about tremendous changes. Christianity gained a foothold in Kom in 1912 through the help of the Pallotine Fathers from Germany. When World War I erupted, the missionaries and German colonial administration were sent out of the territory. In 1927 the Mill Hill fathers from London took over from the Pallotines (de Vries, 1998; Nkwi, 2015). Fon Ngam resisted the introduction of Christianity at the early stages (1912-1926) but after his death Fon Ndi embraced and legalized Christianity. Nevertheless, the indigenous practices of environmental conservation and rituals continued side by side with Christianity.

Colonialism and Christianity both made significant efforts to undermine the Kom’s cultural conceptions of their landscape. It is not 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 contexts, the colonial state 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 ceased to happen. The colonial and post-colonial governments seemed to have failed to interrupt or obliterate indigenous methods of conservation.

## Lessons for Today: Recommendation to Policy Makers

From the foregoing, there are practical implications for policy makers. The concept of conservation adopted by international agencies has remained 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). Policy makers in Cameroon should encourage and sensitize the indigenous people about the accomplishments of their methods. They should also educate traditional rulers, who would in turn educate their people, on the importance of conserving the forest and protecting their environment. Traditional and modern forms of forest conservation should therefore complement each other rather than operate at loggerheads.

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 non-sacred forests attracting increasing attention. This may 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. The introduction of trees like the eucalyptus and *tephrosia* usually planted alongside crops on the farms has helped to alleviate the 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. If these are not provided, people may resort to exploit the forest (Atampugre, 1991; Fairman & Leach, 1998).

## Conclusion

Tropical Africa has been observed as one of those places which is gifted in forests. These forests in many societies have served specific functions. Like in other parts of Africa, the Kom sacred forest serves a variety of cultural and symbolic functions. This forest is intimately linked with ancestry and cultural heritage and it plays a very crucial role in the livelihood of the fendom. The sacred forests are maintained in this region for almost the same reasons in some parts of Africa where these forests serve as habitats for the gods or the spirits of the ancestors, 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 changing perceptions of the people. Significantly, environmental protection has become a topical issue today. While there is so much talk about by advocates, there is almost the near neglect of how indigenous people protected their environment. There can be no doubt that cultural values in many

aspects have changed, and will continue to change. Yet the forest continues to play its important role to the Kom people despite external pressures.

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* influence conservation that is motivated by traditional values and practices (Luig & van Oppen, 1995). This shows that 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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