

# From Denigrating Violence against African Beliefs to the Construction of Cultural Values: A Postcolonial Study of Religious Cults in the Bamiléké Country (West Region of Cameroon)

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**Mots clés—** *Religions marginalisées, violence dénigrante, culte religieux, pays Bamiléké, stéréotypes culturels, amémoire culturelle, postcoloniale.*

**Abstract—** *In the context of globalisation, African religions are marginalised because they are poorly understood and have to compete with the so-called revealed religions of the West. As a result, certain African beliefs are subjected to denigrating violence. This is the case of the Bamiléké cults in West Cameroon, which are characterised by specific rites, ceremonies and places. Based on a corpus of cults observed in the Bamiléké country (2021/2022), this article aims to rehabilitate them in order to place them in the context of a poorly understood monotheistic religion, hence the following problem: how is religious worship characterised in the Bamiléké country in a context of globalisation where certain African cultural values are marginalised? To carry out this research, we will use social and cultural anthropology and discursive memory as two approaches to postcolonial theory. Our findings are as follows: first, the problem of naming African religions is characterised by stereotypes and cultural memory. Secondly, religious cults in Bamiléké country have cultural specificities that may either be authentic to the Bamiléké or resemble cults practised in so-called monotheistic religions. Finally, these undervalued religious cults have various symbolic stakes for the Bamiléké that deserve to be taken into account in a context of unidirectional globalisation.*

**Résumé—** *En contexte de mondialisation, les religions marginalisées sont africaines car elles sont mal comprises et font face aux religions occidentales dites révélées. Il s'observe donc de la violence dénigrante contre certaines croyances africaines. C'est le cas des cultes bamiléké à l'Ouest du Cameroun caractérisés par des rites, des cérémonies et des lieux particuliers. Ainsi, en partant d'un corpus constitué d'un ensemble de cultes observés en pays Bamiléké (2021/2022), cet article se propose de les réhabiliter afin de les replacer dans le cadre d'une religion monothéiste mal comprise d'où la problématique suivante : comment se caractérise le culte religieux en pays Bamiléké dans un contexte de mondialisation où certaines valeurs culturelles africaines sont marginalisées? Pour mener à bien cette recherche, nous allons nous appuyer sur l'anthropologie sociale et culturelle et la mémoire discursive*

*comme deux approches construites de la théorie postcoloniale. De ce fait, nous allons aboutir aux résultats suivants : d'abord, la problématique de la dénomination des religions africaines se caractérise par des stéréotypes et l'amémoire culturelle. Ensuite, les cultes religieux en pays Bamiléké ont des spécificités culturelles qui peuvent, soit être authentiques aux Bamiléké, soit ressembler aux cultes pratiqués dans les religions dites monothéistes. Enfin, ces cultes religieux sous valorisés ont divers enjeux symboliques pour les Bamiléké qui méritent d'être pris en compte dans un contexte de mondialisation à sens unique.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Worship refers to a collection of religious practices such as ceremonies, prayers, and rites carried out to pay respect to a sacred being or divinity. These customary practices, as typical forms of lived religion, vary across different societies and periods, defining the unique religious identity of most societies worldwide. The involuntary contact between Africa and the West during colonization resulted in the negation of African culture. As a consequence, Africans were compelled to renounce their own demonized cults in favor of those of the colonizers, as seen in the realm of religion. In practice, Western religions such as Christianity share certain similarities with African religions, which were hastily labelled as polytheistic or animistic by colonialists in an effort to desacralise them. Although these beliefs were rejected, some African communities are currently attempting to conserve their religious practices, which are often undervalued in a post-colonial context characterised by one-sided globalisation.

This instance pertains to the Bamiléké people residing in the West region of Cameroon who follow a faith that is inadequately labelled by external viewers. They partake in their own customs, traditions, and sacred spaces. Based on a corpus of observed cults in Bamiléké country, this article aims to rehabilitate them, placing them within the context of a poorly understood monotheistic religion. This leads to the question of how worship is characterized in Bamiléké country, given the context of globalization, where certain cultural values are marginalized. To conduct this study, we will consider social and cultural anthropology (S. C. Abéga: 2007) and discursive memory (M.-A. Paveau: 2006) as two approaches within postcolonial theory. The study is structured around three components. Firstly, we will examine the issue of naming African religions, which is often influenced by cultural memory and stereotypes. Secondly, we will present the Bamiléké as a people whose cults exhibit particular features that may bear similarities to those observed in other major religions, such as Islam and Christianity. Finally, we will identify the symbolic

concerns inherent in these undervalued cults, which have cultural, linguistic and environmental dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE NAMING OF RELIGIONS IN BAMILÉKÉ COUNTRY: BETWEEN STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL MEMORY

There are two rival hypotheses concerning the etymology of the term 'religion'. According to Cicero (106-43 BC) and others, it is derived from the Latin *religere*, meaning 'to reread attentively' or 'to review carefully'. On the other hand, Henry Duméry proposes that the term derives from another Latin verb, *religare*, meaning 'to connect' (H. Duméry, online). The initial hypothesis underscores the devoted, careful attention that religious devotees exhibit in their religious practices and communal rituals. The following hypothesis accentuates the purpose of religion. Broadly speaking, religion symbolises the collection of faiths, ceremonial practices, and creeds that regulate the connection between humanity and the divine (or divinities) (Ibid). Its diversity is marked by the fact that human convictions differ from society to society and from one group of individuals to another. In these conditions, the religions practised in Bamiléké land differ from those observed elsewhere. It is only since the European penetration of Africa, specifically Cameroon, that they have been stereotyped as part of a cultural memory project.

### 2.1. The origins of the pejorative name given to African religions

The origins of the pejorative name given to African religions stem from Europeans using the pretext of evangelising and civilising peoples as a means to justify colonial conquests for political and economic reasons. In this endeavour, the European positioned himself as the pinnacle of scientific, religious, and artistic knowledge,

<sup>1</sup> Notably the Dschang Council ; capital of Menoua division in the West region of Cameroon. And Bafoussam council ; capital of Mifi division in the West region of Cameroon.

dubbing himself a ‘civilised man’, while casting the African as savage or primitive. This conflicting view of the world extended to beliefs as well. Western religions were regarded as favourable and advanced due to their shared origins: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (E. E. Evans-Pritchard 1950: 8). Conversely, African religions were classified as primitive. This denial of African beliefs lacks validity; it stems only from the Eurocentric perspectives of anthropologists who fabricated an exotic portrayal of African cultures. Evans-Pritchard espouses this view:

Remarkably, none of the anthropologists, whose theories on primitive religion carry weight, has ever closely interacted with a primitive community. It is as if a chemist had never stepped inside a laboratory. The anthropologists had to rely solely on the information provided by explorers, missionaries, administrators, and traders. It should be noted that the reliability of the information they obtained is questionable. Although not entirely fictional, the accounts provided by renowned explorers such as Livingstone, Schweinfurth, and Palgrave were often careless and inattentive. These narratives were largely unreliable, superficial, and out of context, according to the standards of modern research. This sentiment also holds true, to some degree, for the pioneering anthropologists (Ibid., p.6).

It can be understood that the negative labelling of African religions stems from the colonial era, in which binary thinking was necessary for Europeans to justify their own religious practices. In addition to this overall categorization of African religions, there are also stigmatizing labels emerging.

## 2.2 – Animism, Polytheism and Atheism: Stereotyping.

Since the earliest European exploration of Africa during colonialism, stereotypes have been a weapon that enables discursive editing in favour of denying otherness. African religions have been stereotyped as part of a process of desacralization. Several derogatory terms have been employed to classify religious practices in Africa. Of these, three are especially significant due to their frequent use in connection to worship in Bamileké country.

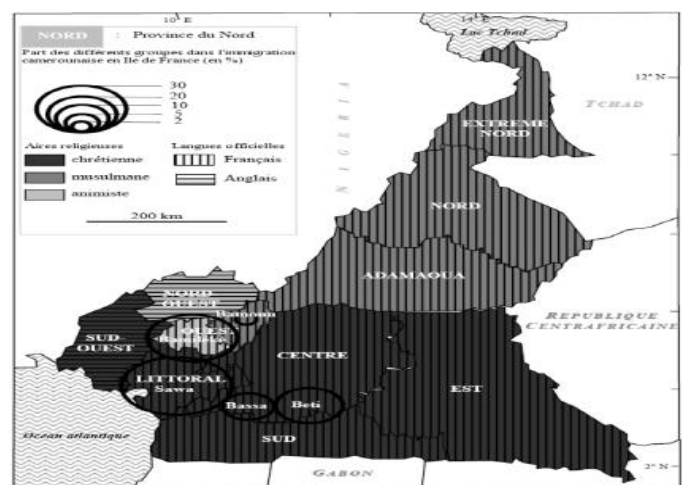
Initially, these cults are accused of practising polytheism. Derived from the Greek *polutheos* (worshipping multiple gods), polytheism is a philosophical or religious notion that embraces the existence of a plurality of divine beings. In reality, the Bamileké do not believe in the existence of multiple deities as some foreign sociologists and anthropologists suggest. Instead, they believe in a single supreme being, as revealed in religions. These cults are classified as atheism, as foreign

anthropologists and sociologists are mistaken due to the stark contrast between their observed rituals and those practiced in revealed religions. In such circumstances, the Bamileké people are occasionally viewed as atheists. Edmond Ortigues delineates the reasons for this phrase:

It is noteworthy that this pejorative label, lacking any specific verb, has been employed in various manners over the course of history. In some contexts, various interpretations may be inferred. The preferred verb we are inclined to use is ‘believe’ (an atheist is someone who does not believe in the existence of God or gods). However, some instances call for the usage of ‘deny,’ especially when referring to an ‘atheist doctrine’ that negates the existence of God. Other times, an atheist is someone who declines to ‘venerate’ or ‘worship’ the gods (E. Ortigues, online).

Finally, religious practices in Bamileké country are characterised as animist worship. Animism, derived from the Latin *anima* meaning soul, is a wide-ranging concept that assigns souls similar to those of humans to the universe’s beings and objects. As such, it refers to faith in souls and spirits (M. Eliade & N. Sindzingre, en ligne). This title is the most commonly used by scholars and in social science education to describe the cults in Bamileké country. However, the Bamileké hold a belief in a supreme being, rather than in souls and spirits. Here is one of many maps displaying religious areas in Cameroon, sourced from the internet.

Image: Map of religious areas in Cameroon



Source:

<https://journals.openedition.org/cdlm/docannexe/image/4319/img-1.png>

This map illustrates that three religions dominate in Cameroon – Christianity, Islam, and animism. Christianity holds a prominent position in five regions,

namely the South-West, the Littéral, the Centre, the South and the East. Islam has a strong presence in the Far North, North, Adamaoua and Bamoun country, which is part of the West region. Animism, meanwhile, is present in the North-West and Bamiléké country, the other half of the Western region. As the Bamiléké themselves, who practice these cults, did not construct these different denominations, it is safe to assume that they are the product of Western observers who are not familiar with the facts. Therefore, we can conclude that these denominations are stereotypes. According to Ruth Amossy, a stereotype is when one group applies a familiar schema to another, and it is the cultural equivalent of a standardized object. It is a preconceived notion that the community repeatedly exchanges in their thoughts and writings (Amossy, 1991:21). Similarly, Marie-Anne Paveau describes it as a manifestation that exists before discourse, passed down from one person and generation to the next, since it originates from shared, pre-existing frameworks (Paveau, 2006:56). Therefore, these labelled terms serve to perpetuate the remembrance of the existence of certain African communities, particularly the Bamiléké, who maintain primitive religious practices. This is because the catch-all category of African religion encompasses concepts such as magic, totemism, taboo, and even witchcraft – all of which can be attributed to the notion of ‘primitive mentality’ and appear irrational and superstitious to Europeans as noted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard 1965 :7. The transmission of so-called revealed religions to Africans was encouraged during colonisation, legitimising the practice and establishing these imported religions as universal models.

### 2.3 – An Attempt at Cultural Memory

We postulate the idea of cultural memory following the discursive memory formulated by Paveau in his work on discursive memory. In fact, discursive memory is ‘a conscious or unconscious erasure of a past or discursive legacy, of “original formulations” that the speaker no longer wishes to have anything to say, but which are nevertheless said, through the unconscious and somatisation, in other ways, in the infinitely innovative languages of the symptom’ (M.-A. Paveau 2006, p. 55).

From this perspective of discursive erasure, we see cultural memory as a process of (in) voluntary erasure of a people’s cultural markers. This process of erasure can be facilitated by two types of agent: either one internal to the culture, or one external to it. In the case of African religions, the process of cultural erasure is carried out by external agents, i.e. Westerners, who since colonisation have taken it upon themselves to set African religions back in favour of Western ones. One of the resounding facts that

explains this process of cultural amnesia on the part of Westerners is the speech made by Leopold II, King of the Belgians, in 1883 as a prelude to the colonial missions to Africa:

Reverend Fathers and My Dear Compatriots.

The task entrusted to you is a very delicate one and requires tact. Priests, you are certainly going to evangelise, but this evangelisation must be inspired above all by the interests of Belgium. The main aim of your mission in the Congo is therefore not to teach the Negroes to know God, because they already know him. They speak and submit to a MUNDI, a MUNGU, a DIAKOMBA and who knows what else; they know that killing, stealing, sleeping with someone else’s wife, slandering and insulting is bad. So let’s have the courage to admit it. (Leopold II, King of the Belgians, online).

This extract clearly shows that before the arrival of the Europeans, Africans had a religious organisation based on the worship of a supreme being, with names that varied from one people to another: UN MUNDI, UN MUNGU, UN DIAKOMBA, as indicated in Leopold II’s speech. Throughout Bamiléké country, despite the linguistic diversity, two names refer to the supreme creator whom the whites of the Leopold II generation already recognised: ‘NSé’ and ‘Nsí’. What’s more, the Africans already had a respect for otherness and human nature, which is why in this extract we note this precision: ‘They know that killing, stealing, sleeping with someone else’s wife, slandering and insulting is bad’. So the main aim of Christian missionaries during colonisation was to make Africans doubt their religions and reject them in favour of selective Christianity. But the Bamiléké are one of the African peoples who have managed to retain an authentic cult despite the influence of globalisation.

## III. WORSHIP PRACTICES IN BAMILÉKÉ COUNTRY

Worship in Bamiléké society is distinguished by specific characteristics, encompassing the venues, leading figures, and necessary prerequisites.

### 3.1. Places of Worship

One of these essential features is the diverse range of places of worship, despite the criticism and condemnation of Bamiléké religious practices. In essence, these are sites designated by deities established by ancestors within a lineage, a village, a community, etc., to function as a location for supplication and remembrance during times of necessity. In the Bamiléké worldview, multiple places of worship exist.

### 3.1.1. Sacred Forests

The sacred forests, which are typically exploited for their various resources. Amongst the Bamiléké, these spaces are also instrumental in asserting the veneration of divinities. Most of these holy sites are situated near traditional chiefdoms. The subsequent image serves as an illustration of a sacred site.

*Image: Sacred Forest, Keleng Brewery Village (Dschang)*



*Photo Sotso, 2022*

Sacred forests play a critical role in traditional chieftaincy in Bamiléké country, owing to their sacredness. These areas primarily serve as the initiation sites for the lineage chiefs. The existence of these hamlets can be attributed to 'La'akam,' as denoted by the linguistic register of Bamiléké country. Additionally, each chiefdom designates this area as its royal cemetery, as the 'Fam' hut, which houses the skulls of past rulers, is located in the sacred forest next to the royal land. The spiritual importance of the sacred forest is enhanced by the presence of animals that are not only totems for the chief but also for other important members of the chiefdom. The forest houses various secret societies that provide stability to the chiefdom and the village. Notable ones include Koungang and the council of nine or seven. It should be noted that the sacred power is not only limited to the chiefdom's sacred forest. In the Bamiléké community, certain village officials operate in the different neighbourhoods of the village instead of at the palace. They act as custodians of the little sacred woodlands in their localities, where they oversee the management of these territories. The same goes for familial lineages, where comparable areas are reserved for traditional practices, overseen by the head of the lineage or family. Such places, akin to the royal forest, are venues for diverse ceremonies, rituals, incantations and supplications addressed to relevant ancestors and deities. In brief, the sacred forest within Bamiléké territory holds equal importance to the sacred tree as a crucial element of worship.

### 2.1.2 The Sacred Tree

Additionally, the Bamiléké people erect trees as sacred sites as per the observations made during the field study conducted for this research. The following images serve as examples of this phenomenon.

*Image: Image: The sacred tree at the entrance Foréké Chiefdom (Dschang)*



*Photo Kaze, 2021*

*Image: The Sacred Tree at Bamougoum Bus Station (Bafoussam)*



*Photo Sotso, 2022*

*Image: The sacred tree at Paid-ground (Dschang)*



*Photo Kaze, 2022*

In numerous families, lineages, and even royal courts, a tree is identified as a site of worship for those involved. These sanctified trees are celebrated for their long lifespan and resilience. Practically, participants of the

cult convene at the base of the tree to recite incantations, express gratitude, and other rituals, under the leadership of a cult leader who facilitates the proceedings. Assembling in these locales necessitates gathering all the requisite elements for the worship ceremony. Places of worship are prevalent in Bamiléké territory, and their use is dependent on circumstances. They can be affiliated with a lineage, family, or group, much like sacred forests.

### 3.1.3. The Houses of Skulls

The widespread and well-known symbol of worship in the area is the houses of skulls. The relics of ancestors materialised here are a crucial point of contact between the living and the Almighty God. Every precaution is taken, from extraction to housing in the skull hut, where various cult ceremonies are performed either in part or in full. These houses, built in very small spaces, are usually found surrounding each large concession. An example of this can be seen in the following image:

*Image: House of Skulls, Keleng Brasseries Village (Dschang)*



*Photo Sotso, 2022*

There are typically three stages involved in the skull ritual. Firstly, construction of the skull house involves building a small structure where all the removed skulls can be kept. Secondly, exhumation of the skull requires removal of the skull from the grave. Lastly, the skull (belonging to the ancestor) is brought into the skull house, where it is deposited in the previously constructed house. After reaching this final stage, the departed individual transforms into a genuine ancestor capable of appealing to God and other ancestors on behalf of the living.

This practice has existed since ancient times. A synthesis of the interviews conducted before this contemplation reveals a unanimous consensus regarding the age-old roots of these worship elements. The Bamiléké have long held a desire to secure, protect, and communicate with their loved ones in the afterlife. Additionally, there is a passion to remain emotionally close to their physically absent loved ones. The prevalence of these places of worship among the Bamiléké is evidence of individual freedoms to conceive a communication

pathway to God. Modern religious people sometimes refer to these pathways as 'hotels'. Furthermore, in accordance with Bamiléké customs, the family's guarantor is permitted to worship in these locations. This also applies to the skull houses affiliated with the community, town, district, and lineage. There is nothing unusual about these skull houses, which hold significant value to the Bamiléké community. In fact, they create a link with revealed religions, only they are frowned upon by their followers. Piko Assongni has this to say:

Western religions need funds and land to build churches. They need the human resources for their relationship with the metropolis, the quests to honour Leopold II's speech from Belgium in 1883... In this context, it is a crime to allow black people to become rich or to perpetuate a cultural practice that could hinder the 'evangelisation of pagan peoples', the 'Saracens'. From then on, gris-gris, skulls, the God tree, the subsoil, anything that might have a vision contrary to the aims of the Western churches becomes a nuisance. How can we understand that priests who carry around the cross of Jesus, who guard the relics in the pulpit, who permanently guard the fingernail, the finger, the habit, the glasses. In short, the objectives or organs that belonged to a dear relative, reject in the African, the audacity to carefully guard an object, in this case the skull of his parents? A pebble, a tree planted as a symbol are signified referents, like a grave in a cemetery that recalls the passing of someone dear to us. It is this practice that is wrongly called 'pagan worship' (P. Assongni 2018:11).

Worship is performed according to the rules of the art, in the presence of the officiants and the imperatives.

### 3.2 – Officials and Imperatives

The cosmogony of the Bamiléké ethnic group acknowledges and establishes certain actors and elements as unyielding for veneration. These actors are divided into different categories and serve as religious leaders as required. On the family level, there are individuals who are responsible for the skull and are appointed by the head of the family. The latter is accountable for addressing grievances within the family unit. However, in exceptional circumstances, there may not be anyone within the family able to lead any form of religious service. As a result, another individual may be summoned, as 'there must always be a messenger in any situation, and if there is no adult within the family, we can seek the elders residing within the family circle to fulfil this customary obligation to God and our ancestors' (Assongni, 2022: interview).

The Nsi and Nkamsi likewise form part of this crucial chain of participants. The Nsi and Nkamsi possess the ability to predict destinies, prophesy, anticipate, protect, and communicate with the supernatural realm, similar to the roles of priests, pastors, and imams in revealed religions. The Nsi and Nkamsi possess the ability to predict destinies, prophesy, anticipate, protect, and communicate with the supernatural realm, similar to the roles of priests, pastors, and imams in revealed religions. Families can request intervention from them, whether in a place of worship or not, to safeguard and even heal heirs from any potential misfortunes or calamities stemming from their ancestors. The Nkamsi instruct beneficiaries on measures to ward off ancestral curses. It should be noted that the traditional chief, as well as select notables and dignitaries, also officiate depending on their area of jurisdiction. In addition, success of these events hinges on constituents that provide necessary consumable elements. From the numerous aspects of worship in Bamiléké society, a select few are deemed vital. The ensuing depictions serve as illustrations:

*Image: Peace Tree in a Funerary Context  
(Fotetsa/Dschang)*



*Photo Kaze, 2021*

*Image: Image: Salt Cult at the Entrance to the Foréké  
Chiefdom (Dchang)*



*Photo Kaze, 2021*

Generally speaking, water, red oil, salt, jujube and the peace tree are used.

Water is the primary element utilized in Bamiléké places of worship. It is brought based on the principle that the ancestors, who are deemed not truly deceased, are intercessors between the descendants and the

powerful God. The water is essential for the ancestors to consume in order to maintain themselves, much like the living. Muslims use water to purify themselves before prayer, whereas Christians use it to bless, baptise, and protect their followers.

This valuable liquid holds a significant place in religious practices. Additionally, red oil is a prevalent element used in religious ceremonies, particularly with ancestors' involvement. It is served with other meal components or separately, according to reports from the field. The significance of red oil in Bamiléké cultural ceremonies is crucial to the success of the process.

Salt plays a vital role in several cult ceremonies among the Bamiléké community. While it is added for flavour to the related mixtures, it also serves as a purifying agent and promotes peace in these settings, fostering reconciliation and preventing potential sources of social instability.

Jujube (*Ziziphus jujuba*) is a spice extensively employed in Cameroonian religious practices, specifically in the Bamiléké locality. Its mystical power is highly esteemed, serving as a symbol of peace and prosperity, which the Bamiléké use during times of both peace and conflict. In religious ceremonies, jujube seeds, extracted from the pods, are chewed and dispersed on both sides to seek ancestral divine favour.

The *Costus afer* or *Dracoena desteliana* tree, also known as the tree of peace, holds great significance within Bamiléké cults due to its rich symbolic nature. This green plant is a staple of almost all Bamiléké worship ceremonies, representing unity within these societies. It is also commonly used in religious ceremonies which mark significant events such as the birth of twins, the union of two families, the farewell of a deceased person or the distinction of a customary position. The tree is especially popular in Bamiléké culture due to its versatile nature; it is used both as a stem and as single leaf. Catholics showcase the plant as a torch on festive occasions to demonstrate the faithful's commitment to the peace the plant represents. The significance and symbolism of the peace tree are essential and universal in various religions. The tree of peace holds an integral part in all Bamiléké ceremonies as it signifies peace and unity. There is nothing unusual or superstitious about these imperatives, as they are analogous to those found in other religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, as noted by Séverin Cécile Abega:

Within the Catholic Church, for example, there are certain charismatic groups and African exorcist priests, who gather around them a large number of faithful and attract a diverse clientele to whom they sell or offer exorcism rites and promises of social

success in the form of long prayers, masses and other rituals, and through a fetishisation of Christian symbols: oil, holy water, crucifix, rosary, hosts, etc. (C. S. Abega 2007:72).

These under-valued cults have various symbolic stakes for the Bamiléké people that deserve to be taken into account in a context of one-way globalisation.

#### IV. THE CHALLENGES OF BAMILÉKÉ CULTS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

Cults in present-day Bamiléké face challenges due to rapidly increasing globalisation. These cults are often undervalued in comparison to imported cults, despite their significant symbolic value for the Bamiléké community. This creates a context of one-way globalisation, which must be taken into consideration.

##### 4.1 Examines Religious Cults in Bamiléké as a Cultural Incubator

Religious cults in Bamiléké territory, like various other local customs, serve as crucial mechanisms for asserting Bamiléké culture specifically, as well as Cameroonian culture more generally. Simultaneously, they illustrate the perpetuation of an ancient civilization in a globalized context dominated by Western cultures. These traditions are not merely crude collective worship sessions, but instead facilitate the promotion of Cameroonian culture.

The aforementioned imperatives, such as jujube, tree of peace, red oil, and salt, serve as distinctive markers of this specific population and overall identity of Cameroon. We can agree with Séverin Cécile Abega that religion has an identification function:

It has an identifying function, [because] it is part of cultural identity. In this sense, it reduces alienation from foreign values or the depersonalisation of the modern world. Africans have often had to fight against both Islam and Christianity to avoid being dispossessed of what they consider to be essential to their relationship with the divinity, and which was also important to their lives (C. S. Abega 2007:75).

The satisfaction of the faithful of these Bamiléké cults lies partly in the mobilisation of these intransigent elements, who in fact converge towards the success of the event and guarantee any spin-offs. This is what Séverin Cécile Abega calls 'the euphoric function of worship, which can be explained by the reward expected at the end of the event' (Idem). In addition, these easily obtained and less costly imperatives strengthen the attachment of the

faithful to these cults, which they willingly pass on to their descendants to prevent their disappearance. In this way, these cults have a residual function, as they make it possible to preserve 'old practices and old knowledge, making things incomprehensible that otherwise would not be' (Idem).

##### 4.2. The Promotion of Local Languages

Language is an essential component for promoting and preserving culture, as the Bamiléké people understand well, perhaps even unconsciously. The Bamiléké, much like certain modern religious beliefs, place great emphasis on the role of language in their fundamental beliefs. Nevertheless, many beliefs still maintain their own particularities. In the context of evangelism, accommodating the language of one's interlocutors is undoubtedly a crucial aspect to consider. Muslims pray in Arabic, while Christians utilise Latin and other spiritual languages. On the other hand, the Bamiléké accord precedence to their local mother tongues in their places of worship, as a means of sustaining accord with their ancestors who function as intermediaries for such events. In reality, the Bamiléké are promoting and preserving their mother tongues in the face of globalisation, which tends to trivialise all local cultural practices labelled primitive. This is a legitimate struggle to assert their local linguistic heritage, as promoters of various modern religions assert their hegemony through language and other means. In such settings, the use of local language is prevalent for exhortations, incantations, and other rituals. These actions are particularly beneficial as 'numerous mother tongues are at risk of disappearing as a result of lack of speakers'<sup>2</sup> (E. Nforbi 2012:97).

It is undeniable that religious worship, as observed in Bamiléké society, is a catalyst for vitality and overall progress. Furthermore, it can be asserted that mother tongues play a crucial role not only in Bamiléké religious practices but also in social affirmation and development. Nforbi highlighted that 'National languages are essential for a country's development and productivity. The national literacy programme must incorporate these languages in their strategies. It is only through these languages that functionality can be attained.' (Idem)<sup>3</sup>. In this manner, the practice of Bamiléké religious worship aids in preserving the regional linguistic heritage.

##### 4.3. The Environmental Protection

Delves into how these cults, unlike others, contribute to environmental protection at a time when ecological concerns mount. Séverin Cécile Abega

<sup>2</sup> Our own translation.

<sup>3</sup> Our own translation.



concisely phrases it thus: ‘Beliefs and practices provide insight into how individuals perceive economic, political, and social relationships, as well as the natural environment’ (Abega, 2007:72). As previously mentioned, places of worship are essential to every religion as they facilitate the gathering of devotees to give praise to a higher power. Synagogues, mosques, and churches are commonly-associated places of worship for Jews, Muslims and Christians respectively. In contrast, the Bamiléké community refer to sacred forests, trees, and houses of skulls as their own form of places of worship.

For the first three entities discussed, establishing a place of worship entails harming the environment, owing to the diverse consequences that a construction site brings about, including landscape disruption, noise pollution, dust emissions, and adverse impacts on soil and water, alongside waste production, consumption of natural resources, and energy usage, as detailed on the website <https://www.hagerservices.fr>. On the contrary, the Bamiléké people view the creation of a place of worship as a means of preserving nature, since it serves as the ultimate venue for praying and meditating, away from the disturbance of human commotion and conducive to effective communication with the spiritual realm.

Furthermore, the verbs employed to describe the construction of such sacred spaces offer illuminating insights into each instance. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the verb used is ‘to build’ or its synonym ‘bâtir’. Derived from the Latin *construere*, which implies the act of stacking in layers, ‘to build’ means to construct or have constructed a house, a monument, or a structure. The use of this verb conveys a certain degree of aggression towards nature, as construction entails the destruction of it. The extent of harm inflicted on the environment may differ among Christians due to the variety of religious sites available, such as monasteries, chapels, cathedrals, primatials, parishes, decanals, basilicas, oratories, each of which varies in size. To illustrate this point, consider the potential ecological impact of constructing St Joseph’s Cathedral in Sangmélima, the largest Christian edifice in Cameroon located on a 7-hectare plot in the south of the country. The cathedral can host over 5,000 devotees indoors and an additional 11,000 in its 6,000-metre forecourt.

Conversely, in Bamiléké culture, the concept of ‘progress’ pertains to the establishment of a site for communal worship. French language dictionaries define the term ‘aménagement’ as it pertains to the preservation of nature. According to Larousse, ‘aménagement’ refers to the act of arranging a location or property for installation or any other purpose, and by extension, it encompasses a

set of guidelines for the growth and effective administration of a forest (Larousse, online). Therefore, the practice of constructing a place of worship by the Bamiléké people is environmentally non-destructive. Therefore, considering its minimal impact on both the environment and the economy, the practice of worshipping in Bamiléké country is worthy of celebration.

## V. NOT TO CONCLUDE

The beliefs of the Bamiléké indicate that they have a well-structured and organised religious cult dedicated to a single God, similar to other monotheistic religions. Nonetheless, this cult has faced the challenge of being discredited due to stereotypes fabricated by colonialists during the colonial era. Like other imported religions, the Bamiléké’s cult involves reaching out to God through diverse channels and frameworks. Although one-way globalisation presents a significant challenge to its expansion, the Bamiléké religious cult persists in asserting its unique identity, promoting Cameroonian culture and languages, and protecting nature. Alors, il participe à la promotion de la culture et des langues camerounaises d’une part, la protection de la nature d’autre part.

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