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TABOOS AND TRADITION BELIEFS IN THE BATOUFAM AND BANSOA COMMUNITIES, WEST CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper aimed at documenting what are considered as taboos and traditional beliefs in the Batoufam and Bansoa communities in West Cameroon. Focused group discussions were realized during village meetings and ceremonies in 16 villages from April to October 2010. We found that half of the respondents are ignorant of traditional beliefs in their area, particularly what is considered as sacred. Four social taboos and nine traditional ceremonies that are specific to each community or common for both communities are mentioned.

KEY WORDS: Bansoa and Batoufam, Cameroon, Culture, Taboos, Tradition beliefs.

INTRODUCTION:

Factors such as rapid human population increase, inadequate local support for conservation policies, limited strategies for survival among local communities and inadequate capacity of the government to fund law enforcement operations against illegal activities subject the species and habitats to unsustainable use (Kideghesho, 2009). The diffusion of the Christian religion during the second half of the 19th century led to social mutations with numerous conversions, the abandon of traditions rites and the lack of respects for rules that govern sacred sites. Nowadays, with the phenomenon of globalization, traditional beliefs are threatened and are disappearing as the youth is no more able to cope with.

Some critics view the practice of taboos as irrational and a hindrance to development, while others dismiss any ecological reasons behind them (Colding and Folke, 1997). But, traditional practices should not be overlooked as they may at least locally play a major role for the conservation of natural resources, species, and ecosystems (Colding and Folke, 1997; Kideghesho, 2008). Human uses of natural resources in traditional societies are generally guarded by certain rules which make them ideal partners for modern conservation and development efforts (Hobbs, 2006).

The objective of the present paper is to document taboos, traditional beliefs and practices that may promote the conservation of cultural and biological diversities in the Batoufam and Bansoa

communities located in the West region of Cameroon where natural habitats are very rare and where the landscape has been transformed into a mosaic of degraded gallery forests, farmlands and human settlements delimited by exotic trees.

STUDY AREA:

The study was carried out in the Batoufam and Bansoa communities which cover a total surface area of 27 km² and 113 km² respectively. These communities are located in the West region of Cameroon between 5°14 to 5°18 latitudes North and 10°26 to 10°32 longitudes East for Batoufam, and between 5°22 to 5°33 latitudes North and 10°13 to 10°21 longitudes East for Bansoa. Belonging to the western highlands, their relief is hilly and the climate is typically the Cameroonian altitudinal equatorial type characterized by abundant rainfalls and moderate temperatures of about 20°C – 22°C. The vegetation is constituted of a mosaic of annual crops, fruit and cocoa/coffee trees, gallery forests usually used as sacred forests and degraded woody savannah. The fauna is less abundant and less diversified due to the destruction of natural habitats with the high human population density observed (see some details in [Bobo *et al.*, 2011](#)).

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Data collection

The study was carried out from April to October 2010 in the Batoufam and Bansoa communities. Focus group discussions were organized in the 10 villages of the Bansoa community, and in seven of the 16 villages randomly selected in the Batoufam community, during participation in village meetings (family meetings, congress ceremonies) and in traditional ceremonies. To have a same understanding, it was first explained to respondents what is "sacred" i.e. all animals, plants or objects that have a surnatural reality, thus are protected by the tradition, and as such can not be cut, killed, consumed, used or practiced by any non initiated member of the community". Then respondents were particularly asked what is considered as "sacred" in their tradition. They were also asked to list at least three taboos, cultural and traditional beliefs or events.

RESULTS:

Level of knowledge of the "sacred"

Half of the respondents are ignorant of what is "sacred" in their communities. This was less due to the fact that almost half of them reside far from their villages, in other regions of Cameroon. Other combined reasons, including the globalization, might explain the lack of knowledge on cultural and traditional values particularly among the youth.

It was found that sacred sites could be located at household (Picture 1) as well as at village (Picture 2) levels: These are sites set aside for rituals and where all human activities are prohibited.



Picture 1: Sacred site of a household in the Batoufam community



Picture 2: Sacred site of the Mbé village in the Batoufam community

What is sacred for the Batoufam and Bansoa communities?

- **Sacred forests:** known as “*Lah sa'a*” or “*Nepah me si*” or “*Nkah me si*” in *Nguemba* (the dialect of the Bansoa community) and “*Væ*” in *Batoufam* (the dialect of the Batoufam community), they are generally situated besides the palace and occupy an important surface area. They are used during the initiation ceremony of the Chief and also serve as a shelter for totems. It is strictly forbidden to hunt or fell a tree in these forests.

- **Certain water bodies:** known as the “*Nkeu tah tet*” and “*Menevet*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Ketsock*” in *Batoufam*, they help to remove the “bad luck” and are used during some healing processes.
- **Human skulls:** Mainly used during the skull cult called “*Sock trô meteth*” or “*Tieh trô meteth*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Norgue tsue*” in *Batoufam*.
- **Certain plants and animals:** Three plant and seven animal species are sacred in the studied communities and are entirely protected by their traditions (see [Bobo et al., 2011](#)), partly through social taboos. These practices turn unconsciously to play a great role in biodiversity conservation.

Social taboos

Amongst the social taboos identified:

- The “*Njuh chuck*” and “*Djie-djie*” i.e. holidays in the *Bansoa* and *Batoufam* communities respectively are days during which no activities are allowed in the community (farming, hunting, ...). It is also requested to those who have not yet performed the “sitting on the chair” ceremony (Picture 3) to do so on chairs of those who have performed it already.



Picture 3: The “sitting on the chair” ceremony in the *Batoufam* community

With respect to taboos found only in the *Batoufam* community, respondents mentioned:

- The abiding of any person other than the family head to kill a fowl that is thrown in the sacred site of the compound or which has been used to cleanse bad luck from one of the sons of the compound.
- The restriction of any non-initiated person or person who has not yet made all the funerals of his parents or grand parents from killing a goat.

With respect to taboos found only in the *Bansoa* community, respondents mentioned:

- The restriction of the exploitation of physically immature fresh Indian bamboo (*Arundinaria sp.*) and Raphia (*Raphia spp.*). This restriction has permitted these species to constantly remain green all through the year and thus to continuously play the role of recycling rain waters and raw materials necessary for the confectioning of artifacts.

Traditional ceremonies in the Batoufam and Bansoa communities

Traditional ceremonies common to both communities are:

- **The customary marriage:** known as “*Lah ndeuh lah*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Mpè twue*” in *Batoufam*, is a ceremony that marks the union between two partners or to an extent two families. During this ceremony, kola nuts *Cola acuminata* and sap from raphia *Raphia sp.* (palm wine) are indispensable since they are traditionally known to seal the union between two partners. Populations thus promote the conservation of the species from which these products are derived because the extinction of these species may indirectly lead to the disappearance of customary marriages.

- **The twins ceremony:** known as “*Ntsieh mehack*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Yoh tchack pfouor ngne*” in *Batoufam*, during which a plant of the wild hevea *Hevea sp.* called «*rwam and tcheuh toh*» in the Bansoa community is planted, meanwhile the Ficus *Ficus thoningii* called «*tse tchack*» and the Peace tree *Dracaena deisteliana* called «*mfekrock*» are planted in the Batoufam community. Later in the future, the area where this ceremony took place, together with the tree species planted, becomes a sacred area.

- **The sacrifice:** known as “*Sock tro*” or “*Ha me tsè bo si*” or “*Saleka*” or “*Salaka*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Tsè nougn*” in *Batoufam*, is the offering of an immolation solemnly done to pay homage to the ancestors in sacred areas, makes use of a chick *Gallus domestica*. This chick is used to cleanse the person organizing the ceremony from misfortune or bad luck. From this moment, the chick used becomes a sacred animal and thus has to be protected.

- **The sitting on the chair ceremony** also called “*Nan kouoh*” in *Ngeumba* and “*Tchie kouoh*” in *Batoufam*, is a ceremony through which a person goes to his maternal grand fathers’ compound and sits on a chair. This not only denotes signs of maturity but permits equally to avoid curses. As a function of the rank you occupy in the society, several types of chairs can be used: Chairs made with the stem of raphia are used for people residing in the village, meanwhile four and three legged chairs made of white wood are used for the nine notables and the other notables respectively (Picture 3).

Specifically in the Batoufam community:

- The “*Nkack*” which is a traditional dance. It takes place every two years and all sons from Batoufam must participate since it favors mutual identifications.

- The “**Lock**” which is a ceremony that occurs only once in a life time of a chiefs reign. Here, the chief endows a woman out of the village with whom he gets officially married. They return to the Batoufam palace where they perform the « *lock* » dance.

- The “**Meguedjouock**” dance, which is the dance of the warriors and represents the greatest dance of the Batoufam community. It is performed each time the warriors or soldiers obtain a victory.

Only in the Bansoa community:

- The “**gwo gwong sa’a**” ceremony” which is the main ceremony covered by the media. This ceremony has as objective to gather all communities of the West region whose spoken dialect is the *Nguemba*. Here, a collective sacrifice is offered to the sacred site called “gwo gwong” which unites all the communities using the *Nguemba* language as a mean of communication (i.e. the Bansoa, Bamengoum, Bameka, Bamendjou and Bafounda communities). In consideration of the floristic riches of this sacred area, these five communities have decided to make this latter an area for tourism recognized in the national territory.

- The “**Ndeuk**” or the ceremony of the age clan, which is celebrated in the Bansoa palace and is reserved uniquely for the youths (for changes of social classes).

DISCUSSION:

Sacred sites are important features for the traditions of the Batoufam and Bansoa communities (see also [Mwihomeke et al., 1998](#)). These sites are set aside for rituals, and where all human activities are prohibited ([Kideghesho, 2008](#)). Due to these restrictions, their potential to conserve biodiversity is very high (read also [Kideghesho \(2008\)](#)). A similar case was observed in Guinea-Bissau in the Boloma Bijagos sacred forest which serves as a holy place for ceremonies and initiation rites and consequently plays a role in the conservation of Nile crocodiles, hippopotamus and fish species (Lean, 2006).

Social taboos are also found in the studied communities. A social taboo is an invisible system of local resource management and biological conservation ([Colding and Folke, 2001](#)). These social taboos are known to cater for some plants and habitats ([Kideghesho, 2008](#)) like the sacred sites.

Traditional beliefs are still much implanted in the studied communities even if most of the youth seemed to have difficulties in coping with them. But, it is known that “*traditional cultural practices, among other strategies, have promising potential to enhance sustainable resource use and conservation and, therefore, realize the desire for ecological and social sustainability*” ([Kideghesho, 2009](#)).

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