

Assessing Indigenous and Colonial Forest Conservation Policies on the Kilum-Ijim Forest of the Bamenda Grassland, Precolonial to 1961

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Abstract: - Too often in the past, the contributions of indigenous people to forest conservation have largely been ignored or belittled by the colonial administrators. Yet indigenous people controlled most of the world's natural forest through their traditional practices, and often strong conservation ethics. The study explores the role of the indigenous groups and the colonial government in the conservation of Kilum-Ijim forests. Based on information collected through oral interviews, archival materials, published and unpublished works, the study contends that the original practices in the conservation of forest by communities of the Kilum-Ijim and Bamenda Grasslands forest as a whole have been diluted over the years, following contact with exogenous forces such as colonialism which introduced colonial laws, encapsulated in Ordinances. The colonial powers believed that their policies were superior to local customs and traditions of Africans, as a result; they imposed forest policies, which over the years have gradually seen the disappearance of the hitherto rich cultural heritage. Hence, their involvement in forest conservation, preservation methods, difficulties encountered and the consequences of modern forest policies on the local forests in the Bamenda grassland, constitute the analysis of this paper.

Key Words: Indigenous, Forest, Conservation, Policies, Kilum-Ijim, Bamenda Grasslands

I. BACKGROUND

Forests are among the most valuable ecosystems on earth. They are an important source of bio-diversity, essential in the regulation of climate, and invaluable in maintaining biosphere integrity. Forests generate many economic goods and services such as timber, energy, food, water, pharmaceuticals and recreational opportunities. It plays an important role in the preservation of the culture of a people. The availability of forest also had an important influence on the activities of the indigenous people such as house construction, fishing, farming, traditional medicine and rituals.

The Kilum-Ijim forest is located in between two divisions (Bui and Boyo) of the Bamenda Grasslands, of the North West Region of Cameroon. The contiguous Kilum and Ijim mountain forests (now known as Kilum-Ijim forest) are located between Latitude 6° 07' N and 6° 17' N and Longitude 10° 20' E and 10° 35' E covering an area of about 20,000 ha. The Kilum forest in particular is found on Mount Oku at an altitude of over 2000m, located between Oku and Nso and the

nearby Ijim Ridge of Kom, in the Cameroon mountains, with Lake Oku lying in a crater at the center. Kilum-Ijim, is therefore found within three major ethnic groups of the Boyo and Bui divisions; Kom, Nso and Oku. The section of forest found in Oku and Nso is called Kilum, while the other part located in Kom is called Ijim - hence, the appellation Kilum-Ijim forests.¹

Generally Cameroon is a country endowed with abundant forests which constitutes a diversity of fauna and flora that have put Cameroon on the biodiversity map of the world. It is home to over 8,000 species of birds, close to 400 species of mammals, and more than 9,000 plant species, 150 of which are found nowhere else in the world.² The Kilum-Ijim forest harbour a good quantity of these species such as 31 birds species, of which 15 of them are endemic in Cameroon; 40 species of endemic plants, and six species of mammals.³

During the pre-colonial period, natural resources including forests in Cameroon were mostly managed through customary institutions headed by traditional rulers, who were custodians of the culture. This was in accordance with customary norms and belief systems. The land which was uncultivated was communally owned and exploitation of forest resources such as timber, fuel wood and animals (antelopes, elephant and squirrels) were primarily for subsistence purposes. This was because the culture encouraged the conservation of the forest for sustainability, coupled with the low population pressure at the time. As such, the inhabitants exploited the forest primarily to meet their basic needs.

With the arrival of European traders in 1472, and gradually fostering of trade links with indigenous people, Cameroonians began to undermine customary laws governing the use of resources. Lulled by ostentatious goods from Europe, they began to illegally exploit forest resources such as trees meant for medicinal purposes and ivory in exchange for salt, mirrors and machetes without permission from the chiefs

¹ The appellation Kilum-Ijim Forest came into existence in the year 1992, when the Kilum-Ijim Mountain Forest Project was instituted by BirdLife International to save endangered species.

² Mbatu, Forest Policy: Forest Loss," 3.

³ Mbatu, Forest Policy: Forest Loss," 3.

and Fons.⁴ Thus, the expansion of trade-by-barter and the introduction of a monetary system led to a decline in the regal ethics that had guided the use of resources in the pre-colonial Cameroonian society.⁵

From this background, this paper analyses the traditional as well as colonial forest conservation strategies while interrogating the mechanisms by which colonial forest conservation strategies supplanted the traditional forest conservation strategies in the Kilum-Ijim Mountain forests in Cameroon. In other words, the study focuses on the manner by which indigenous forest conservation strategies were punctuated by colonial-imposed strategies.

II. INDIGENOUS FOREST MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Environmental/forest conservation strategies was not entirely new to the people of the Kilum-Ijim forest region, neither was it a colonial invention or a product “Western civilization.” Though the people around these forests carried out conservation through various strategies, the advent of colonialism led to the introduction of another phase of conservation based on ordinances and written forest policies. As such, the role played by the indigenous people and the colonial government over the years will be clearly brought out. While the local people focused on the Law of Status, the colonial government based her strategies on the promulgation of ordinances and forest policies.

During the precolonial period, the indigenous people that benefitted directly from the Kilum-Ijim forests instituted practices ranging from belief in taboos, sacred groves and rituals that controlled and limited entrance into some major parts of the forest. In Africa, and the surrounding communities of the Kilum-Ijim forest in particular, environmental conservation was always a common practice.⁶

Taboos

In African societies, taboos served the purpose of ritual protection or ritual hygiene. Among the Kom, Nso and Oku of the Kilum-Ijim forest area, traditional rulers and *Kwifons* were the custodians of taboos. One of the taboos that was highly respected in this area was to venture into the Fon’s hunting ground, which constituted part of the Ijim forest in Kom, Nso and Oku without permission from the Fon.⁷ Any

inhabitant who went against these laws received sanctions from the *Kwifons* ranging from fines to instant death.

Consequently, most taboos were taken seriously since they were believed to have been imposed by traditional rulers and priests in the general interest of the community. These taboo sanctions were mostly instantaneous and “automatic” unlike sanctions in other religions (Christianity) that had to wait till the end of life or stand to be mitigated by God’s mercy and forgiveness. Most people did not intentionally violate them, even if they were doubtful of their metaphysical presuppositions. This contributed a great deal in the conservation of the forest, since most people refrained from committing the crimes for fear of more or less inevitable consequences. As a result, the value of taboos as a source of moral guidance and motivation for social order cannot be dismissed theoretically in the African context.⁸

Access to shrines in Kilum-Ijim forest, such as the *Lumutu* Sacred forest in Oku and *Akua-fichua* in Laikom was highly regulated. Some of these sacred forests were used for the Fon’s enthronement rituals and annual ceremonies to commune with ancestors in order to secure good health and harvests.⁹ According to Ingram, the *Lumutu*, Lake Oku, *Akua-fichua*, *Iwe-Awoi* and *Kongang* sacred forests were under the strict control of the traditional authorities, with shrines which represented a buffer zone and surrounding open access forest forming a transitional zone. These provided a seed bank and maintained tree cover.¹⁰ As such, the people on the environs of the Kilum-Ijim forest had taken steps to preserve nature through it different forms of taboo. Traditional authorities utilized taboos for regulating the ethical use of the environment in view of preserving the ecosystem and ensuring sustainable development.¹¹ The use of taboo in the conservation of the forest was expressed in different ways which included the belief in sacred groves. Those who violated these local laws earned sanctions ranging from fines, banishment and instant death. For instance, the felling of trees in the *Lumutu* forest was punishable by instant death. These taboos generally favoured forest conservation since it restricted the exploitation of forest resources as well as entrance into the reserves.

⁴ In the context of this study, Chiefs are traditional rulers of indigenous states in present day South West Region of Cameroon, while Fons are traditional rulers of “centralised” states in present day North West Region. In centralised societies, the Fons had absolute political power. These traditional rulers claimed divine rights and hereditary was from the royal family. In non-centralised states, at the helm of the authority was a constituted council that managed the affairs of the state.

⁵ Richard Sungkekang Mbatu, “Forest Policy: Forest Loss and Land use Cover Change in Cameroon,” (Master Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 2006), 20.

⁶ Interview with Nkwambi Samson Taghah.

⁷ Interview with Ngwainmbi Simon Chia, Aged 52, An Environmentalist and currently serving as the Director of the grass root organisation called Belo Rural Development Association (BERUDA). This organisation was formed in

1997, and has continued to work with local inhabitants of the Ijim Mountain Forest, preserving it for posterity, Belo - Kom, Monday November 28 2017.

⁸ Daniel Asante Boamah, “Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs And Environmental Preservation: The Role Of Taboos,” (Master’s Essay School of Religion, Queen’s University: August, 2015), 33-34.

⁹ Verina J. Ingram, *Win-Wins in Forest Product Value Chains? How Governance Impacts the Sustainability of Livelihoods Based on Non-Timber Forest Products From Cameroon*. (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014). 180.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview with Grace Mban, Oku, Aged 52, She is a Conservator of the Kilum-Ijim Forest and Committee member of the Kilum Mountain Forest Project during the era of Birdlife International. She was in charge of one of the Forest Management Institutions created by Birdlife International, Elak – Oku, Friday 26 January 2018.

Sacred Groves

Sacred groves were areas of vegetation preserved through local taboos and sanctions that express ecological and spiritual values.¹² One may argue that the continued existence of these groves were not merely based on the fact that they had been designated as “sacred”, but rather, was based on the strict observance and the fear that comes with breaking taboos attached to these reserved areas. Unlike ordinary forests, people did not tamper with sacred groves because failure to observe the taboos associated with these groves resulted to misfortunes such as ill-luck, diseases, untimely death, drought and social sanctions.¹³

The notion of worshipping sacred groves was a common practice in the Kilum-Ijim forests. It was the belief of the indigenous people that such groves were the habitat of the gods, ancestors and other spirit beings. For any sacred grove, there was a reigning deity that oversaw and controlled all forms of its vegetation and waters. Only qualified members (usually priests/priestesses, Fons, *kwifon*, Sub-chiefs, and lineage heads) were permitted to enter the “sacred groves” to undertake official rituals on behalf of the entire community.¹⁴ The primary motive for the existence of these sacred groves was to conserve nature.

The gods of Oku (*Emyin me Ekwou – Marwes, Tolon and Lumutu*) were a group of distinct named beings, and associated with sacred areas like prominent landscape features and the forest, also influenced forest use. They influenced daily life and often appeared to diviners or healers in animal form during unusual and extraordinary events, especially in the forest. The gods of the land (*Emyin Mentieh*), usually associated with plants and animals in the fields and forest, was omnipresent and largely beneficial to the Oku people. Their spiritual force empowered the plants used in healing and containing witchcraft.¹⁵ The Kilum-Ijim forests served as areas to maintain law and order. Healers and diviners interacted personally with *emyin* who was either visited or called out while in the forest. Some of the above mentioned traditional laws were therefore aimed at ensuring forest health (production) for which the Fai (a traditional council member in Oku) may receive tributes from forest users (such as honey, crops and rats).¹⁶

Within the Kilum-Ijim forest community, taboos also helped in the preservation of various species of animals, birds and rivers around such groves. For example, killing of a tiger in the Ijim forest of Kom was the prerogative of the Fon’s hunt.¹⁷ It was meant to be utilised by the Fon only. Tigers, elephant and panthers were major important animals in Kom and most of the Tikar fondoms. Only the Fon had the right to

put his feet on the skin of the tiger and panther, with two elephant tusks on the left and right side feet.¹⁸

The various patches of forests, which were all attached to the Ijim ridge, had groves that helped to regulate forest exploitation. As such the areas surrounding the sacred groves provided habitation for important endangered trees, plants, shrubs, animals and birds. This was because wherever there were shrines, encroachment was limited. As a result, most animals ran into these areas for hiding and the vegetation allowed to grow unperturbed. This encouraged the growing and preservation of rare species of plants which were of high medicinal value. Hence, the people around the Kilum-Ijim Forest believed so much in sacred groves, because they served as a means to preserve their culture and harbour rare plant species, especially those of medicinal value such as *kigelia* and *prunus africana*.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, indigenous Oku and Kom taboo, and restrictions on access to sacred groves had ecological implications. They had the knowledge that cutting down all or a large amount of the existing forest would not only disinherit the future generations from rare plants and animals, but would also have an effect on the delicate balance between plants, animals and humans with their needs for food, medicine, space, clean water and clean air. This demonstrated that environmental consciousness had been part of the people of this community centuries ago.²⁰ Apart from the use of sacred groves in the conservation of the Kilum-Ijim forest, the complete practice of rituals in the forest also contributed to the preservation of this forest for posterity.

Rituals and the Forest

Indigenous leadership was inseparable from the spiritual and ritual duties of the Fons. Rainmaking, land fertility and control of witchcraft were entrusted to the Fons, although in some societies he led the rituals with the know-how of a priest. The people belonged to the community, which guided and protected its members through a set of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals, for their well-being. In this light, societies were so tight to their ecological environments because their indigenous knowledge had developed and was sustainable in their ancestral land.²¹ Sacred parts of the Kilum-Ijim forests were used for the Fons’ enthronement rituals and annual ceremonies to commune with ancestors in order to secure good health and harvests. That explained why

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview with Lawrence Chiabi, Njinikom, Aged 57, He is a Forest Conservator and worked with the Ijim Mountain Forest Project from 1994 – 2004. He was a member of the Forest Management Institutions attached to the Ijim forest, Monday November 28 2017.

²⁰ Interview with Emmanuel Kuh, Aged 54, He is a Conservator and an Agriculture Expert. He is the General Manager of Mix Farming Common Initiative Group (MIFACIG), based in Njinikijem, Njinikejem – Kom, Friday 30 November 2017.

²¹ Jussi Ylhäisi, *Traditional Protected Forests and Sacred Forests of Zigua and Gweno Ethnic Groups in Tanzania* (Finland: Helsinki, 2006), 40.

¹² Boamah, “Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs,” 37.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 36.

¹⁵ Ingram, “Win-Wins in Forest Product Value Chains?” 118.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ NW/Sa/e 1998, *The Stories of the Kom People*. By Iwoi Daniel Wam.

the Kilum-Ijim forests were made up of shrines as earlier mentioned.²²

Rainmaking, rites of purification, planting and harvesting rituals were important to the unity of the society. It was believed that the rainmaking ceremony brought abundant rains that promote ecosystems service production including growth of various plant species. In keeping the agenda of imperialism and colonisation, the art of rainmaking among Africans was reduced to writing in a distorted, Eurocentric manner. Therefore, an Afrocentric investigation of the religious-cultural practice of African communities to bring about rain is warranted. As such, the erroneous conclusion of most European scholars, have bedeviled the study of some cultural forms.²³ Scientifically and in line with Eurocentric view, rainmaking is a method designed to produce rain in drought areas around the world. Scientists used a technology called cloud seeding to induce rain from clouds. In order for rain to form in a cloud, tiny specks of dust must attract moisture that grows into raindrops.²⁴ Research into the disappearing phenomenon of rainmaking among Africans should preserve the indigenous knowledge as well as purge it of Eurocentric distortions. Rainmaking sacrifices were offered before planting seasons in Kom and Oku to ensure bumper harvest.

Indigenous groups around the Kilum-Ijim forest area in the pre-colonial period devised strategies of conserving nature, while at the same time guaranteed access to the forest. Although access into the forest and use might have been mitigated by policy, religion, custom and practice to reflect existing stratification and other imbalances in pre-colonial society, the motivation for conservation was to guarantee human access to nature. This was in direct contrast with the colonial model of conservation, which led to the development of nature conservation areas such as areas cleared of all human influence and settlement, with highly restricted access to resources by humans. Colonial conservation was based on a myth of nature which emerged from the scientific processes of exploration, mapping, documentation, classification and analysis. Nature came to be defined as “the absence of human impact.”²⁵ During the British colonial period, many hectares of land, including woodland with the python trail (*Akua Mufii* – Laikom), were carved out as forests reserve, and attached to the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve.

III. GERMAN FOREST CONSERVATION POLICIES, 1884 – 1916

The advent of colonialism introduced a shift in forest conservation strategies from indigenous/traditional to an exogenous/colonial system of conservation. When the

Germans annexed Cameroon in 1884, they instituted the Crown Land Acts on 15 July 1896 declared all land in the territory *herrenlos* (vacant and ownerless), and the traditional Law of Status as a base for land and forests management was supplanted. The Crown Land Act rendered all land and forests in the territory ‘vacant and ownerless’ unless attributed to someone as indicated by the compulsory national land register, the *Grundbuch*. This dismantled the system of collective use of land and forests which the indigenous people had relied on for centuries. The theory of “land control” in the African context was ransacked and the people were forced to abandon their old cyclical logic of land use in which a virgin forest was transformed into farmland and allowed to fallow, eventually regaining its status as a forest land. Instead, the system of individual property based on the law of contract was instituted. The law of contract lent itself to the utilitarian ideology of the Western world; alluding to the capitalistic and accumulative logic of the German Empire in Cameroon.²⁶

As early as 1884, missionaries interfered with ancestral veneration and destroyed ritual forests where such rituals were performed. The Germans, just like what other colonialists had done, overlooked the interaction between the indigenous people and the environment. Instead, the German colonialists were interested in the management and development of the production of natural resources and considered the locals to be a threat to the environment. In this way, they legitimised their control of the most important material resource of the locals – the land – and isolated the locals from the best lands and forests.²⁷ For the indigenous groups, conservation for the public good meant restrictions of their private rights: the rights to graze their animals, to cultivate, to harvest herbs and to cut timber and fuelwood.²⁸

In 1900, the first official Forest Conservation Ordinance designated three-quarters of a million hectares of crown land as forest reserves where no settling, farming, grazing or other unauthorised use was allowed.²⁹ The new forms of governance by the colonial administration over traditional societies did not only serve to erode the authority of traditional institutions, they also had a negative effect on village level social conventions that previously controlled natural resource use.³⁰ Before German annexation of Cameroon, the indigenous groups were organised into Kingdoms, Fondoms and Chiefdoms. The communal management of the forest and its resources gave way to German legal ownership. The cohabitation of the new version of the state introduced by the Germans and customary systems

²⁶ Richard Sungkekang Mbatu “Forest exploitation in Cameroon (1884–1994): an oxymoron of top-down and bottom-up forest management policy approaches,” 747-763, in *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 6, (2009), 751.

²⁷ Ylhäisi, *Traditionally Protected Forests and Sacred Forests*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Clement N. Ngwasiri, Robinson Djeukam and Michael B. Vabi, “Legislative and Institutional Instruments for the Sustainable Management of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in Cameroon” (October 2002), 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

²² Ingram, “Win-Wins in Forest Product Value Chains? 180.

²³ Lesibana Jacobus Rafapa, “At the Heart of African Rainmaking,” *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* Vol. 18, 51-62 (July 2008), 51.

²⁴ Lesibana Jacobus Rafapa, “At the Heart of African Rainmaking,” *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* Vol. 18, 51-62 (July 2008), 51.

²⁵ Murombedzi, “Pre-colonial and Colonial Conservation Practices.”

created problems that continued after independence and the reunification of Cameroon in 1960/61.³¹

The arrival of the Germans led to a shift in the management system from the indigenous people to the state. All natural resources and land were considered as state property. A formal institution of a forest management administration led to the alienation of local communities from the vast areas of land considered as theirs.³² In 1902, a military station was set up in Bamenda by the German colonial government which ensured a proper subjugation of people of the Bamenda Grassland and their eventual penetration into the hinterlands.³³ The Forest Service (FS) created in 1912, encouraged harvesting of timber by setting up provisions for logging through extraction techniques and enforcement of cutting diameters for timber.³⁴

Roads and railways were constructed through the forests to support plantation and logging activities. For instance, the construction of road linking what became known as the Kom-Wum forest reserve, which included part of the Ijim forest. It gave way for the destruction of shrines and exploitation of forest resources from the forest. The German forest law in Cameroon consisted of eight main provisions:

1. Reservation of forest Areas;
2. Classification of forest offences and procedure for the arrest and prosecution of offenders;
3. Issuance and control of timber licenses;
4. Issuance of special licenses for the local use of wood and secondary forest produce;
5. Compounding of forest offenses by duly appointed forest officers;
6. Establishment of the procedures and functions of the forest service;
7. Prescription of circumstances in which bona fide land owners and certain forest operators could take specified forest produce free of charge;
8. Rule governing the payment of fees and royalties for forest produce harvested; and Responsibilities for licenses for the establishment and maintenance of succeeding forest crops.³⁵

Britain and France took over the management of Cameroon forest after the defeat of Germany during the First World War (WWI) in 1916 and officially began their administration of the territory in 1922. Although

both powers granted the local communities rights over land, they owned trusteeship over the forest. The jurisdiction over forest was with the Forest Service. The local communities could only extract resources from the forest for household consumption. During this period, the British policy recognized and preserved the indigenous rights in community forests to an extent. This differed from the French and German policies of *terres vacants et sans maître* and *herrenlos* respectively where they ignored the rights of indigenous populations.³⁶

IV. BRITISH COLONIAL CONSERVATION FOREST POLICIES, 1916-1961

When the British took over her own portion of Cameroon (one-fifth), she further divided it into two parts – British Southern Cameroons and British Northern Cameroons, which were both ruled as an integral part of Nigeria. British Southern Cameroons was ruled as part of the Eastern region of Nigeria, while British Northern Cameroons was ruled as part of Northern Nigeria.

The British forestry policy in Southern Cameroons was oriented towards achieving a maximum sustainable yield. Similar to the German experience, the early decades of British resource development in Southern Cameroons were strongly oriented towards the expansion of plantation agriculture. The timber industry played only a subsidiary role. After WWI, the scale and rate of conservation reached the point of “diminishing returns.” Increased exploitation began to threaten the possibility of long term regeneration, especially in Bamenda Grasslands.³⁷ The regime recognized that increased exploitation had to be balanced with increased control over forest access and use. Thus the fundamental and immediate reason for forest conservation was apparently economic. Yet conservation policy was also scientifically oriented to conserve the integrity of tropical ecosystems, especially soils and watersheds.³⁸ British colonial policies that governed exploitation of the forest and its products were tailored to benefit the colonial state. The conservator in British Africa was more or less a watchdog of the colonial state over the forest and its precious resources.

The British shared the German’ interest in forest protection, and one of their first tasks after the war was to reclaim the old reserves and empty them of the people who had entered them during the war. They also added sizeable additional areas of woodland to the reserves, and extended the 1916 Forest Ordinance of Nigeria into British Cameroons.³⁹ The new reserve areas became important because they made large-scale exploitation of these forests possible. In 1916,

³¹ H. Kam Kah, “Wuui, Kesiazeh, Nyengui: History and Livelihood Challenges in a Cameroon’s Montane Forest Reserve,” 93-104, in *Economic and Eco-history*, Vol. XI, No. 11 (2015), 95.

³² Lilian Nkengla, “Community-based Forest Management and Changing Gender Roles in a Patriarchal Society in Cameroon: The Case of Korup and Bechati Forest Areas” (Ph.D Thesis, Brandenburg University of Technology, 2014), 68.

³³ Adig Mathias Azang and Nfi Joseph Lon, “Chiefs and the Crisis of Transition from German to British Administration in the Bamenda Grassland of Cameroon, 1916 – 1922,” 1-6, in *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, Issue 5 (2017), 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁵ Mbatu, “Forest Policy,” 23-24

³⁶ Nkengla, “Community-based Forest Management,” 68.

³⁷ Tobias J. Lanz, “The Origins, Development and Legacy of Scientific Forestry in Cameroon.” 99-120. *Environment and History* 5, No. 1 (February 2000), 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Qh/a (1916)2, Forestry Ordinance: Regulations made under the Forestry Ordinance – Nigeria, 1917.

Unwin, a British environmentalist, was assigned by the British government to make a tour and evaluate the forest resources of Cameroon. His report revealed an abundance of forest resources in the territory that were useful both to the indigenes and the colonial government. He went through Kumba, Dschang, Bamenda Grasslands, Mungo, Ikiliwindi, Ossindinge (Mamfe), Ndian and Rio del Rey. During his tour, he discovered rich forest resources in these areas.⁴⁰

Unwin's Report revealed that one quarter of the British Southern Cameroons was covered with evergreen forest. He however emphasized that the Southern part of the territory (Tiko, Mungo and Rio del Rey) should be preserved because it was easily accessible and more likely to be the first forest to suffer from exploitation.⁴¹ This can possibly be one of the reasons that made the colonialists to easily give in when the Oku people rejected the idea of creating the Oku Bush Forest Reserve in 1931. Even though Unwin suggested that government should consider mountains and swamps as paramount areas in creating forest reserves because of their richness in plants and trees.⁴² However, Kom-Wum forest reserve was later created in 1953, which covered part of the Ijim ridge.

According to Part I of the 1916 Ordinance, it prescribed the exploitation of any protected timber and protected minor forest produce in government land. It also outlawed the tapping of palm wine from palm trees. The colonialists claimed that these indigenous economic practices were destructive to the palms. However, under exceptional conditions, indigenes could be issued licenses to do so. Yet, the owner of protected trees had the right to extract any timber owned by him provided it was not within Classes I, II and III.⁴³ These trees were used only for domestic purposes or for the construction of agricultural implements, fences, vessels (canoes), construction of bridges and houses.⁴⁴

Licenses were granted to Southern Cameroonians for a period of five years, renewable once for an additional period of five years, with the consent of the British forestry service.⁴⁵ In the granting of licenses, the government was

excluded from using local timber in public works or buildings. However, it did not exclude her from the cutting and removal of trees in the course of any railway, road, tramway, telegraph or any public works.⁴⁶ Licenses were terminated if all the rules and regulations binding the extraction of the timber exploitation were not respected.⁴⁷ The issuing of licenses also served as a means to raise funds for government. For instance, the fees paid for licenses upon application were 3 pounds, upon execution of the license – 5 pounds, transferring of a license -2 pounds.⁴⁸

In 1927, as a modification of the 1916 ordinance, the forestry ordinance legalized the position of traditional authorities to take active part in forest conservation. This explains why when the creation of the Oku Bush Forest Reserve was proposed, the people were able to object through their Chief.⁴⁹ In addition, the ordinance stipulated that traditional rulers could fell protected trees for public use without the payment of fees or royalties.⁵⁰ So traditional chiefs who could not interfere with the forest due to taboos were later supervised in order not to destroy the forest.

By 1928, a new forestry law was promulgated, which stipulated that if 25% of every division was to be constituted by a Forest Reserve, the government was free to end reservation in the said area. This law was extended to all nations within the British Empire in Asia and Africa. It is significant to note that this law necessitated the modification of the 1928 Forest ordinance creating forest reserves. According to this ordinance, 25% of every division was to be carved out as a forest reserve. As such, the Kom-Wum forest reserve was earmarked.⁵¹

Generally, the British established seven forest ordinances to guide forest management in British Southern Cameroons. Prominent provisions of the ordinances included:

1. The obligation of a timber operator to plant seven saplings for each felled tree;
2. Acquisition of land in which the destruction of forest affected continuous supply of forest produce;
3. The establishment of itinerant courts to speed up the reservation program;
4. The establishment of the traditional authorities to control all unoccupied land and forest resources; and
5. The requirement that not less than 25 per cent of the land be set aside as forest reserves.⁵²

However, these policies were applicable to the Kilum and Ijim forests only to a limited degree. Oral interview reveals that, when the people of Oku objected the creation of

⁴⁰ Q/ha (1916)1, Dr. Uwin's Report, 1916, Forests.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The tree species in Class I included Mahoganies (*Khaya grandifolia*, *Khaya ponchii*, *Khaya anthotica*, *Khaya ivorensis*), all species of scented Mahoganies, Iroko, Walnuts, *Piptadenia africana*, *Oldfieldia africana*, *Sarcocephalus esculentu*, *Orchrocarpus* and *Carapa* (Iron wood of all species). Class II trees on the other hand included Pearwood, *Canarium schweinfurthii*, *Detarium guineensis*, Shea Butter wood, all species of *Azelia africana*, all species of *Albizia*, Rubber Trees and West African bullet wood. Class III trees on their part included *Cyclicodiscus gabunensis*, *Pterolobium*, *Santiriopsis klaineana* (the incense tree), *Brachystegia specoformis*, *Pterocarpus tinctorius* (camwood), *Khaya senegalensis* (dry zone mahogany), oil bean tree, Barwood, sassawood, gum copal and Yellow satin wood. The last class of trees exploited by the foreign companies was the products of Class IV which included Shinglewood, ebony, *Cordia millenii*, *Triplochiton johnsonii*, *Bertinia acuminata* and *Daxoglottis gabuniensis*. Q/ha (1916)1, Dr. Uwin's Report, 1916, Forests.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Q/ha (1917)3, Timber: Report on System of Felling – calls for, 1917.

⁴⁷ Q/ha (1916)1, Dr. Uwin's Report, 1916, Forests.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Q/ha (1934)2, File No. 1409, "Sylva" Société des Bois de L'Ouest Africaine Douala Application for Timber License (Area E. 128), (NAB).

⁵⁰ Q/ha (1917)1, Forests Proclamation, 1917.

⁵¹ Q/ha (1932)2, Forestry Department Licenses and Permits to General Correspondence (NAB).

⁵² Mbatu, "Forest Policy," 25.

the Oku Bush Hill type, the British government succeeded in carving out only a small portion of the Ijim forest which they linked to that of Wum, and named it the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve in 1951.⁵³ As such, the British administration and later the post-colonial government never succeeded to create the forest reserve they had earmarked until 1987. This was because of the inaccessibility of the area. The colonial administration was far off from the people; it was therefore difficult for them to have a grip of the area. The indigenous people valued their preservation methods, as such; they did not want any person(s) to infiltrate on their traditional conservation methods. In addition, the powers of the traditional administration were still very strong at the time. As such, they wanted to maintain their originality. Moreover, the colonialists were interested in the exploitation of timber products, whereas, the Kilum-Ijim forest was richer in non-timber forest products.⁵⁴

The German and British presence in Kom, Nso and Oku between 1900 and 1961 accelerated the exploitation of its natural and human resources. The tracing of Bamenda-Wum road by the German colonial administration to facilitate administration and promote commerce, opened up what became gazetted under British colonialists as the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve in 1953.⁵⁵ The construction of the road through the forest led to the destruction of shrines belonging to lineages within and around the reserve. Even the rights of the people to the surviving shrines when the reserve was established were systematically forfeited. Forest guards restrained the Kom people and those of the surrounding communities in Kom-Wum forest reserve from the exploitation of certain resources like the iroko and mahogany trees in the reserve. Those who defied forestry rules were sanctioned by officials of the forestry department. From this period onwards the people who were located around the forest reserve were at conflict with forestry officials.⁵⁶

The paucity of personnel to implement these forest policies was one of the major setbacks of the British forest administration in Cameroon. As a result, the indigenous population had to be trained in forest management techniques in both Government and Traditional Authority schools. Local chiefs were also trained and “Anglicized” as the British had to rely on the concept of Indirect Rule, by which local chiefs were charged with implementing and enforcing these policies.⁵⁷ Although the British administration experienced shortage of trained foresters, it nevertheless continued the forest management policies that was started by the German government. The British government continued with the

creation of forest reserves that led to the carving out of more reserves within the Bamenda Grasslands area, amongst which was the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve.⁵⁸

One of the steps taken by the British government in the protection and control of its forest was the assurance given to the traditional rulers to engage community forest guards on a salary. Guards employed by traditional administration worked only within their division of origin, and were supposed to be local indigenes. This was because they had more knowledge of the local conditions. They were also recruited following a number of conditions.⁵⁹

It should be noted that in 1932, the Governor ordered that a community was entitled to use their timber and minor forest produce for domestic purposes such as the making of canoes, the construction of bridges or houses. He added that the community was forbidden to use these products for export or sale out of its boundaries. To the British, the government wanted to limit the indiscriminate cutting of trees in order to control over exploitation.⁶⁰ Failure to obtain a free permit was punishable. However, this did not apply to foreigners or stranger inhabitants.⁶¹

V. IMPACT OF COLONIAL FOREST POLICIES

Colonialism dealt a big blow to the indigenous forest rules and regulations of the Nso, Oku and Kom people and other indigenous communities in Cameroon. This was because new laws were put in place to regulate the exploitation of environmental resources. The German colonial land laws ensured the expropriation of indigenous fertile land for colonial use. Some of the land expropriated contained forests which were used for hunting and sacred sites, whose management and exploitation was taken over by the colonial government.

In response to the frustrations the action of the colonial administration caused amongst the local people, successive colonial governments created hunting reserves for the locals and also taught them how to afforest the region with trees such as eucalyptus, Neem and cypress.⁶² In 1953, eucalyptus trees were planted in the Kom-Wum forest reserve under the guise of regeneration. This prevented the indigenous people from the exploitation of natural resources in their once community forests. Most of them intentionally, resorted to illegal activities which were also destructive to the wildlife and the ecosystem of the colonial protected forest reserves. It should however be noted that, these eucalyptus trees contributed to the rapid dryness of the area today. It drained a

⁵³ Interview with Velma Ful Neng, Aged 40, Belo. Environmentalist and Liaison Officer with Belo Area Development Association (BERUDA), Belo 28 November 2017.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ A small portion of the Ijim forest was cut and attached to what became known as the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve.

⁵⁶ Kah, “Wuai, Kesiazheh, Nyengui: History And Livelihood Challenges,” 98

⁵⁷ Mbatu, “Forest Policy,” 26.

⁵⁸ Mbatu, “Forest Policy,” 26.

⁵⁹ Q/ha (1928)1, Forestry – Cameroons Province.

⁶⁰ Q/ha (1933)1, Forestry Department: General Correspondence.

⁶¹ Q/ha (1932)2, Forestry Department Licenses and Permits to General Correspondence.

⁶² This was the case in the Kom-Wum area, where forest reserves of Eucalyptus trees were created. Bongmba and Talla, “Environmental Sustenance.”

lot of water, hence, most of the streams which used to transverse the area dried up.

The creation of forest reserves and management also encouraged the practice of regeneration (to replace what was cut) in the territory. By 1937, some acres of land had been planted. In Bamenda, 8 Km of land was planted, in Bande 30 Km and in Kumbo 9 Km.⁶³ Regeneration was common in the Kom area, which provided the indigenes with steady supply of firewood.⁶⁴ This was therefore an incidental benefit to the indigenous people.

Before German and British rule, the area covered Kilum-Ijim Forest was three or four times more extensive than what it is today. The reduction in size was principally as a result of clearing of the forest over the years for agriculture. This gave room for plantation of cash crops such as coffee, which was grown for export and population pressure. Many drier wooded areas were cleared for cotton, tobacco, groundnut cultivation and road construction.⁶⁵ The coming of colonialists alongside the introduction of Christianity in Bamenda Grasslands witnessed a socio-cultural transformation of the entire area. This was because some of the sacred forests that had limited human encroachment were destroyed during construction of churches, schools, hospitals and other administrative buildings, since some of the wooded materials used for construction were gotten from this forest. The construction of the Bamenda-Wum road by the Germans led to the destruction of importation shrines and forests in an area that later became the Kom-Wum forest reserve. With the arrival of Catholic Priests in Nso and Kom, the new converts were indoctrinated. They were contemptuous of traditional chiefs, and showed extreme disregard of traditional values and more.⁶⁶ Kajembe and Kessy argue that:

The emergence of the colonial state marked a major challenge to traditional forms of governance. The top-down colonial model was introduced for the prime purpose of serving the interests of the colonial administration. Independence marked the end of colonial state but there was little change in the attitudes towards local institutions.⁶⁷

It is important to note that the exploitation of certain tree species ranging from classes I to IV became a source of conflict between the indigenous populations and the British colonial administration. Unlike in the pre-colonial period, the

British colonial government selected trees of valuable importance, classified them under high category and prevented the indigenes from using them for the construction of houses and bridges. Even though the British argued that the control of the forest was to prevent indiscriminate forest destruction.⁶⁸

From precolonial period to 1930, most of the forest reserves in British Southern Cameroons were still inaccessible. For instance, in March 1937, the Senior Assistant Conservator of Forest was unable to visit and evaluate work in the Nso Fuel Reserve because it was inaccessible. Motorable roads were quite insignificant. Forest officers trekked for months to examine forest reserve boundaries.⁶⁹ Reason why it was difficult to gazette the Kilum-Ijim Forest Reserve.

The construction of feeder roads rested upon the traditional authorities. They were assisted by the Colonial Development and Welfare Funds under the Feeder Road Schemes.⁷⁰ The Kom road (Bamenda-Njinikom road) was surveyed in 1924 by British engineers, but heavy rains delayed the beginning of work until 1928.⁷¹ According to the colonialists, the construction of the Bamenda-Njinikom road was designed to link with the Bamenda ring road at Bambui and eventually to Kom in order to draw labour and abundant resources from these areas.⁷²

The creation of forest reserves led to scarcity and sometimes lack of fuelwood. This was because the control of local forests was taken over by Europeans and created as forest reserves. Although Europeans created fuel reserves to solve the problem of fuelwood shortage, these fuel reserves were however used to derive some limited amount of income from the issuance of permits to help run the colonial Forest Department.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of the various stakeholders in the conservation of the Kilum-Ijim forest. These stakeholders included the indigenous people and the colonial government. The article has shown that during the precolonial period, local inhabitants carried out forest conservation activities based on the Law of Status, with the use of sacred forests, belief in taboos and rituals. From the analysis, it was discovered that indigenous contacts with the Europeans led to an adulteration of the culture of the indigenous people, especially with the introduction of new forest management policies, "modern science," considered superior to indigenous ways of interpreting and managing the

⁶³ Q/ha (1950)1, Departmental Annual Report (Forest Department).

⁶⁴ Q/ha (1936)1, File No. V. 634, Taungya System Forestry (NAB).

⁶⁵ Ylhäisi, *Traditionally Protected Forests and Sacred Forests*, 18.

⁶⁶ P.N. Nkwi and Jean-Paul Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields* (University of Yaoundé, 1982), 218.

⁶⁷ G.C. Kajembe and J.F. Kessy, Joint Forest Management in Urumwa Forest Reserve, Tabora, Tanzania: A Process in the making Paper Presented at a seminar and workshop on Governance, Property Rights and Rules on Woodland and Wildlife Management in Southern Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe, November 23–24, 1999.

⁶⁸ Q/ha (1933)1, Forestry Department: General Correspondence.

⁶⁹ Q/ha (1946)2, File No. 21206, Timber Production: Cameroons Province (NAB).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Walter Gam Nkwi, *Kfaang and its Technologies: Towards a Social History Mobility in Kom, Cameroon, 1928-1998* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2011), 56.

⁷² Ibid., 59.

environment. During the era of German colonial rule, they instituted forest policies based on the reservation system, classification of forest products, payment of fees/timber licenses, forest offenses and rules that governed the payment of royalties. The British shared German interest on forest protection and reserve system adopted from the Nigerian forest policy, even though it was based on the policy of Indirect Rule.

Arguably, the law did not stand out as the best option for the indigenous people because all major decisions concerning their forest was imposed by the colonial government forest service, which in the long run encouraged corruption, and eventually led to excessive exploitation of the forest. During the colonial era, the indigenous people were regarded as people who were not reasonable enough to conserve their environment, but as members of stereotyped class. The Europeans believed that nature must be “pure,” and uncontaminated by human influence.⁷³ Once the other was marked as inferior, there was strong motivation to represent them as inessential. In ecology, the colonised were firstly denied as “uncivilised.” Nature was seen basically as an inessential constituent of the universe.⁷⁴ However, in the case of the Kilum-Ijim forest, the people in the surrounding forest objected the creation of the reserve. But the colonialists succeeded in carving out areas within Ijim forest area and linked with another reserve, which became known as the Kom-Wum forest reserve.

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