

Signification of Plants in Traditional Peace Building in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon: The Case of Fig Tree and *Dracaena* amongst the Bali Chamba Polities

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ABSTRACT

Gifts of nature such as streams, hills and vegetation constitute the centre of activities in African cultural practices. Communities across the continent in the face of conflicts seek peace using one of several gifts of nature just like the the Balis make use of fig tree and dracaena in their socio-cultural economic and political life. From Fondom creation to contemporary times, these trees have occupied a preponderant place in the Bali peace culture as they are used in the domain of traditional governance, conflict resolution, and peace building. Further, these plants are used to pass various messages namely; the birth of twins, the end of wars, and also to indicate the entrances or exits from a community or farmland. This chapter argue that, the fig tree and dracaena locally called *ghim* and *nkeng* respectively, amongst the people of Bali Chamba polities of North West Cameroon played fundamental roles in the preservation of peace in the life of the people. These plants having dark green beautifully designed leaves, have cultural, moral, spiritual, economic and political implications. Planted around shrines, graves, boundaries and used in performing rituals, the *ghim* and *nkeung* are also symbols of traditional authority, source of economic growth, traditional medicine health and peace. The introduction of foreign cultures amongst these people during the wave of migration, settlement and colonial rule, greatly diminished the symbolic values assigned to these plants. Although the deep cultural and moral implications of these plants are fading away as a result of religious influences and western secular culture, their significance have not been completely eroded especially as the plants are still used in Bali and most communities in the region for different reasons.

Key words: Fig tree, Dracaena, Peace, Tradition, Significance

INTRODUCTION

The environment provides people with material In African communities as in other parts of the Worlds that fulfil their social and spiritual life, as well as symbolic items (plants being one of such) in African communities as in other parts of the World. Mankind extremely rely on nature to reshape their civilization (improved way of life) that is at the center of their identity, seen in their political, cultural and socio-economic life. All of natures' gifts be it streams, mountains, valleys or plants are reflected in the people's way of life as exhibited in the activities carried out by inhabitants. The fig tree (*ghim*) and dracaena (*nkeng*) [1] with their varied cultural symbols which constitute some of the plants that prominently impacted the life style of the Bali Chambas it is worth assessing in this chapter. Dracaena is seen in the Bali palaces just like the fig tree, probably because they are some of the plants used in the sacred ritual sacrifices observed during traditional dances, such as *Lela* and *Gbwana* (Benjeing, 1984, p.283). The five Chamba communities that make up our study area are all found in North West Cameroon are Balikumbat, Baligansin, Baligashu, Baligham and Balinyonga (Ndifontah, 1988:31). These *Fondoms*[2] were formed from the split of the main Chamba Empire of Gawolubi. While other factions moved to settle around river Benue in present day Benue state in Nigeria, others migrated southward under Gawolubi to the Grassfields located in the North West Region of Cameroon (Ndifontah, 1988, pp.33-50). Though a warring people, in a quest to secure

geographical space where they could live and freely practice their culture, the Bali system of governance gave chance for peace building through which the dracaena and fig tree stood symbolically.

Several scholars (Terashima, Bollig, Hellermann, Kakudidi, Sama) have examined the importance of plants in the economic and cultural life style of Africans since they serve as food, medicine, material for artistic works and are also used in performing ritual rites, demarcation and protection of agricultural lands and for cultural identification. Terashima (2001, p.43) in his write up focusing on the relationship that exist among humanity, plants and animals in Africas Tropical rain forest argues that, plants contribute to the establishment of the material world of forest foragers, and their eternity gives people and the animals living in the forest, a sense of security and certainty for life. That means, the natural environment plays an important role not only in practical and material aspects of every days life, but also in social and spiritual domains of the life of the local population. Simply put, the natural environment (both plants and animal) provide several possibilities on which the forest people construct their material, social and spiritual life". This strong relationship between people and their natural environment as in *ibid*, serves as context on which this chapter appreciates the cultural symbolism of the fig tree and dracaena among the Bali people for a peaceful existence.

In addressing the issue of plants, Bollig very maturely examines soil depletion in Africa from pre-history to the COVID19 era. He states that, there has been an "ever changing landscape that challenges the allegedly primitive or natural site of its environment. Using Namibia, this anthropologist presents his narratives blending both the biophysical process and the interventions of humanity as factors that shape the Kaoko landscape (Bollig, 2021). Natural and human factors are therefore responsible for the continuous changes in the landscape of Africa. Animal grazing on the environment eposes the bare soils for erosion while people's destruction of the vegetation for settlement or agriculture is another major cause of the change in African arid landscapes (Bollig 2008, p.302). The dracaena and fig tree trees are plants with specific roles in the life of Bali men and women. Writing on the ritualistic representations of dracaena plants in Tanzania, Sheridan (2008, pp.491-521) on his part-holds that the dracaena carries a complex cultural load just as in several other African societies. This anthropologist maintains the view that, dracaena is a plant loaded with symbol and power in several African societies. Drawing his investigation from the Pare region of Northern Tanzania, Sheridan demonstrates that, numerous symbols are associated with the dracaena plant which integrates ecology, social organization and the people's morality. It is on the relevance of Sheridan's study that the background of this chapter on same plants in Bali Chamba polities is based. Having done much investigations on the significance of dracaena plants, Sheridan argues that the dracaena or boundary plants lie at the intersections of landscape ecology, social structure and cultural meaning.

Dracaena is presented as a boundary plant with symbolic importance based on the fact that it is widely used in boundary mapping in North Eastern Tanzania and Western Cameroon (Sheridan, 2016, pp.29-49). According to him, dracaena is used throughout Oku and other Bamenda Grass fields communities on property distinction, boundaries and ritual performances. After investigating the social and cultural symbols of plants to man Kaku didi (2004, pp.114-118) concludes that Africans rely on plants for their day to day life. His area of interest is the Kibale National Park in Western Uganda. He states that the cultural symbolic functions of plants range from their significance as a link to culture and beliefs, location for socio-cultural and religious activities, sacred significance of particular resources and judicial function of trees, to the use of various parts of it as medicine. "Hundreds of different tree species form an integral feature of this variegated landscape. They can be divided into three broad categories sacred groves, exotic timber trees, fruit and fertiliser trees each with its own kind of tree symbolism (Hellermann, 2016, pp.368-379). Making reference to the dracaena, Kakudidi, (2004, pp.114-118) narrates its association with marriage and religious ceremonies as well as in surmounting witchcraft in the society. From his findings we scrutinise the relevance of plants to the Bali societies of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The cultural values and symbolic functions ascribed to fig tree and the dracaena are as numerous and divers as the peoples of Africa.

Branches of these, planted on a piece of land handed to a young man for construction symbolises independence and authority in the Bali communities. Its presence in a place signified either power in traditional administration, religious spirituality, medicine or economic specification (Deyeb, 2013, p.31).

The encounter of Bali Chambas with non Chambas of the Bamenda Grass fields during migration and Western cultures during colonization, introduced new functions attached to fig tree and dracaena plants. The introduction of new values did not downplay the importance of these plants, rather it shaped the socio-political and economic day to day life (Chilver, 1961, p.242) of the Balis. The values of these plants in the Bali Chamba *Fondoms* is rooted in the continuous relevance of the plants through the wave of migration and quest for geographical space, German and British role to the present (Chilver and Kabrry, 1967, p.143).

A. Dracaena

B. Fig tree



Source: Authors collection during fieldwork. Balikumbat village on 10th July 2021.

Political and Economic Importance of Fig tree and Dracaena

The symbolism of the fig tree and dracaena is significantly reflected in traditional governance, in the execution of justice as well as economic activities. Political symbolism signifies that much value is attached to these plants in the day to day administration of the communities. In the exercise of local governance, power is handed to a young adult by an older authority when he plants a branch of the fig tree on the boys plot or compound (see plate B above). This action served as a mark of social responsibility examined in the political usefulness of the plants and their significance in power distinction, boundary demarcation, peace building within the family/communities.

Amongst the Balis, planting of fig trees and dracaena on a piece of land was considered to be symbols of ownership and power over the given area[3]. From the time of Fondom creation or settlement, the identification and planting of these plants became the focal points of socio-cultural practices, ranging from initiation ceremonies to Land Tenure institutions (Sobseh 2011, p.46). When these trees were planted in an area, it often became thick forests later used as shrines in which sacrifices were made to the gods by the traditional leaders who legitimized their authorities by performing rites of initiation there. In all the Bali Chamba villages, abandoned settlements/residences could be identified with the presence of wild fig trees and dracaena indicating burial sites/graves, boundaries and shrines.

Still in the domain of governance, fig trees and dracaenas are seen to be useful during enthronement of family successors. In Balinyonga, the new successor wore leaves of dracaena on his/her neck and held another on both hands which was 'deepened in a ritual bowl of liquid medicine'[4] that is sprinkled on family members (Mana, 2019, p.43). This ritual does not only symbolized blessings and peace, but also legitimized the authority of the new family heads (*ibid*, 54). In the Balikumbat polity, a branch of fig tree was planted in the compound or plot of a new successor (see plate A above) and his initiation rites included

the use of dracaena handed to him to symbolize his supremacy over the other family members.[5]

Since it is a belief that land is a witness to all human transactions[6], the Bali people believed that it is endowed with sacred powers, as such it is used as a source of guidance to public morality and source of fertility. They very much valued land which is needed for settlement, source of food and bearing of their remains after death (Fanso, 1982, p.42). Thus, land to them, as with other Africans, is a sacred asset with strong ancestral ties linking the dead to the living on the one hand, and the living even the unborn on the other as in *ibid*. Ownership of a large piece of land signified wealth, power and integrity. Since it contained places of traditional sacrifices, it makes it inalienable to which ever ethnic group that owns it.[7] Again, it is on land that people grow varieties of plants needed for specific usage. Works of arts made from forest products are used in the decoration of palaces, shrines, and museums. These items are displayed in community occasions which exhibit and help support the ideology of royalty, ancestral and spiritual values of artistic heritage (Ahndinwo, 2017, p.26).

The political and economic importance of land cited above resulted to varied forms of land tenure and boundary demarcation, taking into consideration indigenous perceptions of land. Within the Bali Chmba *Fondoms* and based on the politico-economic values attached to land, boundaries are made after performing rituals from existing natural features, or and planting of boundary plants. During mediation in conflict situation, in order to successfully arrive at a consensus, representatives of the polities concerned met on the site to agree on a stone, hill, stream or tree as their boundary after which a ritual[8] was performed (Fomin, 2011, pp.32-42). These immovable natural features were from the time of the agreement respected by both parties/societies as their boundary. In cases where no trees, stream or mountain were available for use as a boundary, dracaena or fig tree (or even both) were planted to serve as boundary between the parties thereby giving it its political symbol of peace. A case study of a boundary conflict amongst villages that was resolved following the planting of fig trees and dracaenas was Baligashu versus Bamunkumbit villages. Oral history in both villages holds that from the time of settlement, conflict was the order of the day amongst the two communities. When asked to describe their relationship with their neighbours, the regent of Bamunkumbit said: “when our forefathers returned to this land during German administration, fighting ensued with Baligashu because of boundary discrepancies. The third wave of conflict under our king Fon Chafing II ended when boundary trees were planted during peace talks. The big fig tree at the borders was planted as a branch which had stopped conflict between our communities till date.”[9] A reduction of conflict situations amongst the villages gave the inhabitants adequate time for concentration in agrarian activity.

C Fig tree at the boundary between Baligashu and Bamunkumbit



Sources: Authors collection during field Tour in the Area, 19th February 2022. The size of this Fig tree is clear indication of its longevity on that spot.

On their part, Baligashu people claimed that the presence of German soldiers in the Ndop plain, and the fear of their neighbours inviting them to help fight against Baligashu, forced their leader to accept planting boundary plants, See plate C above. When asked to comment about the post conflict relationship between Baligashu and Bamunkumbit, the traditional leader of Baligashu confessed that, ‘the respect I and my subject have for the rituals performed after a conflict and the fig tree that is still there on the boundary, makes it that we haven’t gone to war with our neighbours till date’.[10] From the analyses of the above informants, coupled with the fact that the mentioned plants are still visible on their boundary, one is forced to conclude that fig trees and dracaenas are symbols of peaceful coexistence.

As earlier discussed, land is an important asset to the peoples of our study area, thus, having a clear cut boundary was a necessity. Amongst the Balis, as in other communities in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, boundaries are demarcated with fig trees or dracaenas or with both[11] See plate D below. These plants are long lasting and could resist several generations, thus, serving as a reminder and symbol of warning to younger generations that a ritual of peaceful coexistence was done on that point, as such no conflict must arise.

D Fig trees and Dracaena used in Mapping Plots and farm Lands



Source: Authors Collections during field Tour in Baligham 25th February 2022.

To further elucidate the significance of the plants, we identified the fact that Bamenda Grassfields communities very often exhibited aspects of conflicts and the dracaena was at the Centre of negotiations for peace to return. What preoccupied the Bali people during the pre-colonial era were, raids, wars of conquest and struggle for geographical space for settlement, while during colonialism, and post-independence, inter-ethnic conflicts and civil disobedience, were still observed. To resolve crises amongst villages, a branch of dracaena was sent to the enemy palace (Bos, 1984, p.21) as a sign that peace was requested thus, it gained its name peace plant. Using dracaena leaves for rituals ensure that the country becomes cool, no sickness enters, free from crisis, thus, there is peace (Sheridan, 2008, pp.491-506). Similar plants were often used in political demonstrations in towns and villages during colonial and post-independence eras in Cameroon known as civil disobedience. It was believed that going against an oath taken with the use of dracaena, a symbol of peace or that anyone nurses grudges after a settlement or reconciliation that was made using the plant, faced unexplained forces against his life.[12]

Its presence at the door post of a person (occupant of the house) meant that he/she welcomes peace loving guest. Another interpretation could also be that recently he had twin birth, children belief to possess mystical powers and reconcile disputing members in the family. Though these believes in the power of the plants might not have been as important as the social control and power of elders over youths created through ritual and secrecy (Hellermann, 2016, pp.368-379), they kept the Bali people just as other communities in Africa to stay off from the negative impacts of conflicts.

In the Bali Chamba polities, when one obtained a plot of land for any purpose, in order to have full ownership, the seller or the person handing it over, pinned a branch of either fig tree or dracaena or even both to serve as sign of authority over the said land and from hence could the land be productive if cultivated so to say (Teno, 2021, p.43). It is actually difficult for one to prove that proper ownership of a piece of land (where those ritual plants dracaena or fig trees were used) influenced the output of the said land. But it is worth mentioning that the plants were used and served as boundary demarcation of farmlands. Agricultural life was founded on belief in several forces having a role to play on soil fertility and high yields. Crop production for the inhabitants of these communities were said to be influenced by stronger forces that come to bless the harvest or curse it. In the event of nature's curse on their crops that resulted from insect attacks or droughts, leading to poor yields, the only remedy to neutralise the powers of insects or other crop diseases, was by planting dracaena or fig tree in the farm even it were just branches of the plants. [13] In the economic domain, given that these are agricultural communities, a branch of dracaena is pinned on farms when crops began to suffer from blights and it is believed that it results to good yields (superstitious believes). The relevance of these plants to the agrarian life of the people is that the philosophy attached to the plants causes them to respect land ownership and proper transfer to others in order to avoid calamity and poor yield.

In a nutshell, the political and economic usefulness of fig trees and dracaena shows that they contribute in checking land disputes between individuals and limit inter-village land conflicts. As such, they stand at the centre of peace building (example is the boundary case of Baligashu with Bamunkumbit). Their presence on a piece of land signifies legal transfer of ownership to a new owner, or symbol of power to a new familyhead upon enthronement. Dracaena was used in fencing compounds seen here as flowers to beautify the yard (surrounding). Thus, dracaena and Fig tree are plants that shape the social and politico-economic life of Bali Chamba people. The values attached to the plants are interwoven with administration and agriculture. The belief attached to these plants contributed to the reduction of inter-family and inter-community conflicts giving adequate time for agrarian activities resulting to a food sustainable society.

Socio-Cultural Signification of Fig tree and Dracaena in Bali Chamba Communities

Just as in the political view point, the socio-cultural importance of fig trees and dracaena are visible in the people's way of worship and life style. In Bali *Fondoms*, shrines are easily identified from a distance because of the type of vegetation that is found around it. The fig tree and dracaena are the main plants visible from without. This is the case with the shrines in the palaces of Baligham found at the entrance, behind the *Fons* building in Baligansin, beside *Ngumba* (regulatory cult) abode in Balikumbat and at the Ntsi-sufu stream in Balinyonga [14]. Annual rituals were performed by the *Voma* sacred cult (Nyamndi, 1988, p.26), who came out to do cleansing before farming to appease the gods and ancestors. During such cleansing, the spiritual leader (*Fon* or village priest) uses branches of dracaena to carry a liquid herbal concoction from a bowl to sprinkle on his followers to bless them.

Shrines in Bali *Fondoms* had at least one fig tree and well grown dracaena which shade the shrines completely giving a dark inside. [15] All shrines located in the four main quarters of the Balikumbat village such as in Munchu, Fombangum, Fatfat and others have these plants. [16] The people believe that not pouring libations on the shrines in time, which is before the farming season would cause droughts in the rainy season and certainly poor harvest (Titanji et al., 1988, pp.79-85). These plants prevent direct sunlight and shade visibility of activities done in them from passers-by. This therefore meant that village shrines could be easily identified through a fig tree which often grew to be very large and surrounded with dracaena. Apart from the fact that the leaves of these two plants were used in sprinkling liquid herbal concoction on the people, they are also used as medicine. Furthermore, since some of the shrines were river beds, the trees helped to keep the water table high, its leaves falling off became manure in the soil (Ndenecho, 2011, pp.133-139) and also helped to regulate the weather. The plants also contributed in protecting the soils from

erosion thus, helping in environmental preservation.

Since Bali people believed in life after death, they organised memorial rites in honour of the dead. Burial rites and death celebrations were intended to appease the dead and to ensure that their journey to the land of the ancestors was peaceful as in *ibid*. The dead were given decent burials and proper mourning backed by the belief that a proper burial ensures a cordial relationship with that deceased now an ancestor. If the deceased person was an adult, with grown up children, they will each plant a branch of dracaena on the parent's grave. This cultural symbol is a physical sign of spiritual bond between the dead and the living. The living prayed for fertility of the land and women as well as for more prosperity and posterity; *Nyikob fa fumfa Ndzui* (Babila, 2004, pp.29-29) meaning that; (God, should give us wealth, give us the consumers of the wealth). African societies are built and sustained by beliefs in the intervention of ancestors. As such, rituals were performed to appease the gods of the ancestors (Nkwi, 1976, p.36) a native belief called primitive (Mbiti, 1965). 'To the Africans, everything is religious. There is no demarcation between sacred and secular or material and spiritual. Cultural manifestations are geared towards fulfilling this golden desire, that is, satisfying the ancestors to ensure harmony of existence in the two realms. This belief pushes the Bali Chambas to decorate graves with dracaena (see plate E below). These plants under examination are not only used in decorating but also to manage the health and spiritual welfare of the people. Thus, ritual ceremonies are performed during enthronement rites of successors, celebration of twin birth and marriage rites, thereby presenting its socio-cultural values. In the Bali cultures under scrutiny, all illnesses or diseases are associated to cultural beliefs.[17] Any infection be it malaria, small pox, dysentery or leprosy, were perceived depending on the socio-cultural environment in question. These illnesses when experienced are handled depending on the patient's socio-cultural background, (Ndenecho, 2011, pp.133-139 and Chilver & Kaberri, 1962, pp.4-30) which in the case of the Balis, shapes their perception of the illnesses. It is sufficing to state that Mbiti could be correct when he says; while modernists see a disenchanting nature composed only of biological, chemical, and physical forces, Africans see an enchanted nature filled with divinities, (often forces of nature), spirits (deceased men, angels, demons), and underlying spiritual forces. All powers comes ultimately from God, but His power works through spiritual beings, man and even plants and animals. (Mbiti, 1975).

Branches of Dracaena were carried along when announcing the birth and celebration of the life of twin children. The signification of that simple act was that those children were princes and princesses of peace and unity in the families and communities reason why their arrival was announced even to the Fon who as well organised a day to feed them. Twins were considered to be lucky births with special connections to the spiritual world. Twins bare specific names already designed for them, depending on their sex, which of them is born first (Nagwah, Nahje, for girls while twin boys are named Samgwa and Samje), and their parents also gained new names of honour (Manyi and Tanyi) for their mother and father respectively. With the belief that twins are mischievous personalities "having powers to cause things to disappear, to cause sickness to family members, transform into different animals and have four eyes they were feared like witches but admired like gods.[18] To neutralize their negative powers, branches of dracaena were placed on the door posts of relatives, while those visiting the twins brought branches of dracaenas placed on calabashes of palm wine or baskets of food stuff that he/she carries along (Benjeng, 1984). When twin children are born to a couple, a new kind of house is supposed to be constructed for them by a paternal uncle of the babies, that is, everything being equal. "At home, a fence of dracaena is built in the Front Yard of their mother within which these babies were to stay until they were able to walk out of the fence before the fence is demolished. "Twin birth celebrations are performed a year later by a person who must have been delivered of twins, an occasion in which dracaena is central in all the rituals.[19] The children being considered as peace bearers have peace plants the first and very important gifts offered to them by their visitors.

Dracaena used in Decorating Graves F. Dracaena used in building Fence



Source: Author's collection during field Tour, Baligansin village, 21st July 2021.

Signification of Fig Tree and Dracaena in Traditional Medicine

When poor health hit the people, treatments applied were both physical and psychological. Traditional medicine is built from experience in the people's culture and belief.

The health of the body, the mind-set of the sick and his/her spirit were all considered during treatment. Traditional doctors be they herbalist or spiritualist both use dracaena in administering treatment. While the herbalist used branches of fig tree or and dracaena to sprinkle liquid medicine on the sick, the spiritualist waves it in the air to drive away evil spirit from all direction. [20]

The process of treatment mostly combined the two ways through which they were able to maintain efficient healthcare. Leaves of fig trees are used in similar ways as the dracaena, for the treatment of aches in the ears and teeth. When patients complain of ear and tooth aches, some medicinal leaves are put into the leaf of a fig tree, wrapped and baked in hot wood ash, then the liquid it produces is squeeze into the patients ear or teeth. During clan/family cleansing, the successor used leaf of a fig tree to carry liquid concoction from an ancestral head (object representing the deceased may be a skull or stone) to rub on the forehead or chest of the participants. Similarly, during child naming rites, the familyhead (Bah) used same leaves in which grind guinea corn is mixed with water to feed the baby while pronouncing the surname the baby will be called (Deyeb, 2019, pp.175-177). Same leaves were pieced out with grains of guinea corn and thrown on a corpse during funeral rites in Bali *Fondoms* aimed at bidding peaceful farewell to the deceased as he joins his ancestors (*ibid*, p.58). Fig trees are important for use in rituals of cleansing, which explains why they are planted in a family head's compound (Mana, 2019, pp.42-49).

However, these very significant plants have over the past century faced some challenges to their functions though their continuous relevance to the Bali peace building culture is worth upholding. The symbol of the plants suffered mutation during foreign domination, due to over bearing socio-cultural, political and above all economic system (Nkwil, 1987). The factors that contributed to a mutation in the signification of these plants are owing to acculturation, western religious system, administration and system of agricultural. The changes were marked by westernization of several aspects of the people's culture, the agricultural sector not exempted. These exported Western cultural traits quite often are at loggerhead with the people's indigenous culture which lead to unprecedented cultural transformation (Ambe 1986, p.42). African religious values,

including purification ritual practices, dwindled in the face of Christianity (Fardon, 1980, p.88) so too did the use of fig trees and dracaenas. Informants add that the plants use started narrowing to the point that it is only more visible in marking of properties such as boundaries and graves.[21]

Relevance of Dracaena and Fig Tree in the Bali Peace Building Mechanism

In examining the cultural symbolism of fig tree and dracaena, we brought forth the signification in the political and socio-economic life of Bali people. From the above paragraphs, the chapter brings out the usefulness of the plants in agriculture. The economy of any given community is the back bone of its political stability (Sama, 2021, pp.89-91). In the Bali communities, when a man[22] acquires a piece of farm land be it by the principle of first settlement on a virgin land, inheritance from family descent, by exchange with another person who might want to relocate or by claiming for unpaid debts from a debtor or better still by buying, his presence on that piece of land was only visible with one of the two plants planted on it.[23] The plants are relevant as a Bali peace building tool in terms of ownership and conflict resolution. It was believed that until land ownership respected these traditional norms it will not yield the desired product if cultivated and a couple settled on such land would face mischievous happenings such as infertility or deaths. In conflicts prevention and resolution (especially boundary disputes), these plants were planted after a ritual or blood pact to ensure everlasting peace while a branch of either fig tree or dracaena were presented by a party at conflict during dialogue in a quest for peace. Its presence on a boundary signifies peace and on a grave stands for a physical sign for spiritual peaceful relation existing between the dead and the living. The Bali believe in the mystical powers of these plants in question therefore encouraged them respect familyheads during and after his priestly duties. Peace also means respecting authorities and other people's property thus, these plants are relevant.

CONCLUSION

This piece of work examined the signification of dracaenas and fig trees in African traditional communities with a focus on the Bali Chamba polities of North West Cameroon. These plants also known as *nkeng* and *ghim* respectively, from the chapter findings, shows socio-cultural, economic and most especially political importance. In traditional administration it is used in boundary demarcation, planted in the compound of a familyhead as a symbol of authority, branches carried along during political protest to sue for peace, planted on a farmland handed to someone else to stand for ownership and on cultivated farms it is intended to treat crop diseases thereby ensuring good harvest. In the socio-cultural spheres, the plants are used in making announcements of the birth of twins in a family, to cleanse or purify the people when herbal concoction are sprinkled on the people during religious cleansing in order to dispel evil spirit especially from the sick. This chapter unveiled that, amongst the Balis just like other communities in the region, traditions, customs, beliefs and the economy are hinged on the way man interacts with his natural environment. It was realized that, given the complexity and relevance of fig trees and dracaenas in the communities with all the challenges put together to disfavour the continuous use of the plants, it is still very relevant. However, enculturation, following the influx of persons from other communities, the activities of western institutions such as in administration, churches, health care centres, schools and agricultural policies, dispel some of the mystified notions about fig tree and dracaena. Furthermore, the aforementioned institutions adapted the use of these plants in the decoration of graves, marking of boundaries of plots or farmlands, waving in churches during worship standing for peace perfect peace and used in peaceful political protests. Religious cleansing of farms till date is done with the use of branches of these plants, believed to possess spiritual powers worthy of protecting crops from diseases thereby ensuring good harvest. These plants continue to be relevant in the agrarian philosophy of the Bali Chamba people and used in their day to day life despite challenges faced due to westernization and modernity.

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FOOT NOTES

[1] Fig tree/*ghim* is a tall house plant or tree with single trunk that grows large having beautiful dark green broad leaves and it bears fruits when matured. *Dracaena /nkeng* is similar to fig trees but for the fact that it has several tinny trunks, might have yellow leaves and golden coloured leaves when just shooting up. Besides are smaller, narrow and have pointy edges but doesn't bear seeds. These plants are found in Africa, Central America and Asia.

[2] *Fondoms* are communities or villages ruled by *Fons*. The word *Fon* is a North West Cameroon appellation of traditional ruler or chief with similar functions to kings in kingdoms and Emirs in Emirates.

[3] Interview with Martin Oban, 62years, familyhead, Baligashu 19th February 2022.

[4] This was an act that was aimed at casting out evil spells from kinsmen to restore peaceful existence.

[5] Interview with Doh Kentibe, 65years, Balikumbat 19th February 2022.

[6] Land according to the Bali custom and belief is the silent listener to all conversations and witness to all agreements. This belief stems from the fact that people stand or sit on the land before carrying out negotiations of any magnitude and since the land does not move they are thus, sure that if parties can remember that the land was a true witness (land) to any agreement, logically the truth shall always prevail because swearing on the soil when guilty attracts mischief on the defaulter.

[7] Land was very significant in all African cultural practices. They saw that their lives rotated on it given that it carried them both when alive and dead, provided them with food and bears witness to all secret and sacred arrangements.

[8] Land was very significant in all African cultural practices. They saw that their lives rotated on it given that it carried them both when alive and dead, provided them with food and bears witness to all secret and sacred arrangements.

[9] Interview with Ayamba Jones, 88years, regent Bamunkumbit, 20th February 2022.

[10] Interview with Fon Doh Gashu, 70years, traditional ruler of Baligashu, Baligashu palace, 19th February 2022.

[11] *Idem*.

[12] Interview with Vincent Pangvah, 54years, ritual priest, Balikumbat, 19th March 2022.

[13] Interview with Doh Kentibe.

[14] During field tour in the study area, it was discovered that all the Bali palaces had identified shrines. These shrines were surrounded by either Fig trees or *Dracaena* or both. These plants were often so thick that it shaded public view of ritual activities taking place inside. Plate A is a clear example.

[15] Interview with Bamenze Billa Linus, 49years, familyhead/priest Baligham, Bamenda, 23rd March 2022.

[16] Shrines were located in the main quarters of the *Fondom* and sacrifices were performed on each of these all aimed at appeasing the gods of the land in order to beg for favour from them

[17] Interview with Doh Langbuga Martin, 73years, traditional religious priest, Balinyonga, 20th March 2022

[18] Interview with Manyi Adija Nahbit, 66years, twin mother, Balikumbat 19th February 2022.

[19] Interview with Tanyi Sama Anthony, 56years, father of twins, Balikumbat 19th February 2022.

[20] Interview with Benjamin Labia, 71years, spiritualist Balignsin, 21st July 2021

[21] Interview with Ba Menze Dohbit.57years, familyhead Baligham, 23rd March 2022.

[22] Land in these communities were owned only by men. According to the peoples' customs and tradition women were viewed not different from commodity as such, the thought of them owning land was not even a topic of discussion by the elders. Land ownership was gender bias in favour of the male gender. While in her fathers compound, farm lands were owned by her father and could be distributed to his sons and the daughter was seen to be another man's property upon marriage. In her marital home farmlands were owned by her husband and she can only cultivate on them. In recent years the Cameroon law has favoured women to own farm lands which though some men keep opposing the idea saying the women are buying for their husband.

[23] Interview with Doh Labia, 67years, familyhead, Baligham, 23rd March 2022.