

# RITUAL USE OF CURRENCY IN LAIMBWE HISTORY, CAMEROON

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## Introduction: Methodology, Objectives and Relevance of Study

Initiation ceremonies, the display of material wealth and money often give people a new grade, an alliance or an office in traditional African community. Ceremonies also mark social maturity and the graduation from childhood to adulthood for males and females. The social alteration, which is accomplished through initiation ceremonies also assist in constructing and legitimating differences in eminence and authority that permeate daily community life. The initiation of a person into a social position goes with doorway money or fees and the payment of a penalty if a member breaks a law. In Africa south of the Sahara, several male and female institutions define status within their spheres of influence. Such institutions exist among the Kaguru, Lovedu, Ndembu, Wagenia Kuranko, Nuer, Bemba of Tanzania, Southern Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Zambia respectively. Initiation ceremonies into adulthood, healing associations or political office generally speaking, give African people a new status, an association or an office (Kratz 1997, 378). Some educated elite who aspire to political positions at the national level rely on membership of these traditional institutions to fight their way through. Others have become prominent personalities of their communities because they command respect in ritual and traditional institutions. Membership into these institutions involves the accumulation of material things and money.

In many African communities in general and Cameroon in particular, different items were demanded and provided for ritual and other initiation ceremonies in the distant past. These are still in use today but on a declining scale. Marriage in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa before

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and during the early years of colonial rule involved field services, giving of slave-attendants, provision of oil, soap, dresses, blankets, umbrella, gifts exchange, mortuary responsibilities, transfer of livestock like among the Turkana of North western Kenya, beads, gold, copper, brass, iron rods and cowries (Nkwi 1987, 48; Fanso 1989, 65; Moore and Vaughan 1994, 157; Yiridoe 1995, 17-32; Peters-Golden 1997, 7; Hamisu 2000/1, 66; Ikpe 2004, 6; Ohta 2007, 3). Some items like cowries, iron rods, beads, gold, copper and brass served a dual purpose namely as money and as commodities (Vansina 1990, 155 and 206).

While material contributions still play an important role in initiation rituals, the introduction of “king” money during contacts with Europeans had an impact on the material and monetary contribution use in marriage. Among the Akan of Ghana marriage from the colonial period involved the provision of two bottles of palm wine or 1:30 cedis and 32 cedis or 200 cedis depending on the social status of the girl to be married. In some cases, men provided presents which included a trunk, a Bible (in the case of a Christian), bottles of rum, beer, and soft drinks to the girls they wanted to marry. While they used palm wine for libations in honour of the ancestors, rum was used to propitiate family divinities and the ancestors (Quarcoopome 1987, 122). In different areas the monetisation of bride-wealth undermined the stability of marriage, threatened social relations, corrupted social values, and inaugurated new identities, status, labour and obligation (Moore and Vaughan 1994, 157-8; Peters-Golden 1997, 7). Elsewhere, in South Western Nigeria, the British introduction of a currency and the monetisation of the economy led to problems of transition and adjustments during the colonial period (Falola 1997, 122). This scenario has survived to this century. The set of social relations, earlier strengthened by a regular exchange of services was replaced by ‘king’ money. The result threatened the stability of the social system in several ways.

All over Africa, initiation into other institutions relied heavily on material contributions which involved European made goods and the currencies they introduced. In the spider divination of the Yamba of North East Cameroon’s Grasslands, pupils of divination made payments of money, fowls, small pots of cooked game and much palm wine to their master. When the master was satisfied with the pupils’ ability to manipulate the cards, a final payment was demanded. This payment by the turn of the last century was something to the neighbourhood of £3 (Gufler 1995, 53). Meanwhile initiation of novices of the Dugi or medicine men among the Pere in Cameroon now involves money unlike before. These novices pay a symbolic 25 francs CFA and after their training, they pay another 25 francs to the officiating Dugi. To secure membership in the last stage of the ritual,

each of the initiate gathers three pieces of wood (Pradelles de Latour 1995, 84-5).

Similarly, the initiation of boys into the *Poro* society or girls into the *Sande*, the women equivalent among the Mende of Sierra Leone goes with an initiation fee. The fee for the *Sande* is money, cloth or some other commodities (Quarcoopome 1987, 119). Among the Yoruba, initiation into the *Ogboni* society in the past included human sacrifices but from the colonial era, fowls replaced these human sacrifices (Quarcoopome 1987, 182). These examples are indications of the increasing importance of money in initiation and other ritual activities from the colonial period onwards. Today, many of the societies in need of members have relaxed their material demands in favour of money, some of which is used in socio-economic development of the community.

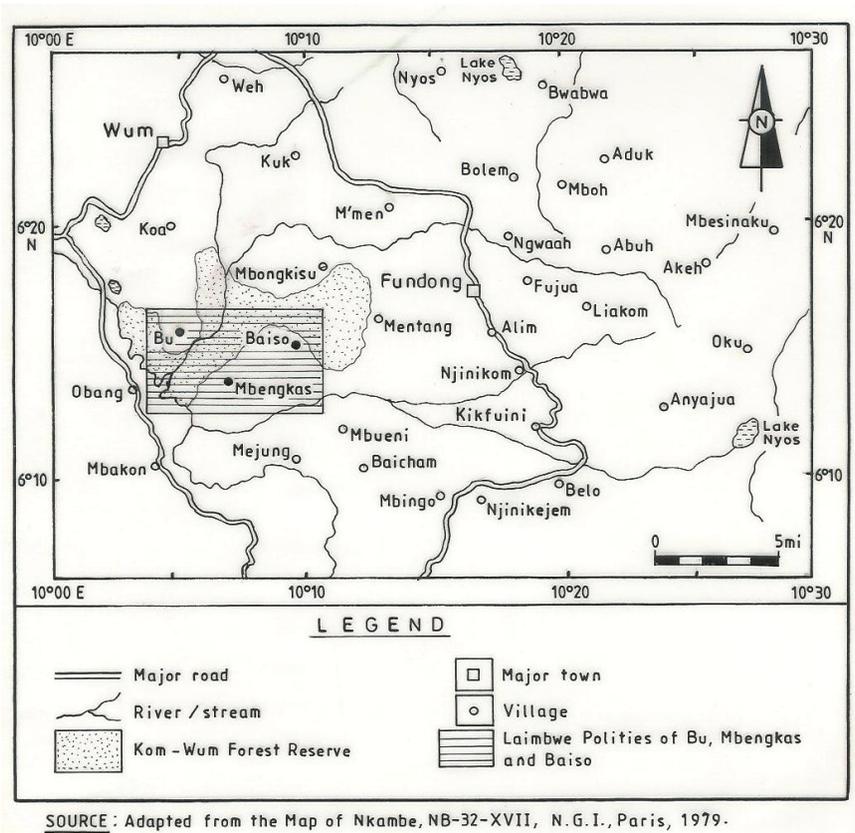
## Study Area

The Laimbwe people are located in the North West Region of Cameroon (See Map). Laimbwe polities straddle Menchum and Boyo Divisions and are principally three in number. Bu is the largest and Baisso the smallest and a reference point for Laimbwe traditions and custom. The census statistics for Bu, Mbengkas and Baisso at independence were 1,118, 530 and 185 respectively. In 1979 the population of Bu was 6,944 with a work force of 2,701 while that of Mbengkas was 1,978 and a working population of about 900. The estimate for the population of Baisso by 1993 was 500 people (Shultz 1993, 10). The population of Bu is projected to reach 17,000 inhabitants by the year 2025 (Strategic Plan of the Wum Council 2009-2014). Mbengkas is a sandwiched settlement between Bu and Baisso and second to Bu in population<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> NW/Ac. 1960/1/Bk, Historical Notes Bamenda Grassfields, Regional Archives Bamenda (RAB); NW/Qc/b. 1979/4/Bk, Annual Report 1979/1980 of the Divisional Delegation of Agriculture Menchum Division North West Province, RAB.

**Image 1: A Cross Section of Menchum/Boyo Divisions Showing the Laimbwe Polities**



SOURCE : Adapted from the Map of Nkambe, NB-32-XVII, N. G. I., Paris, 1979.

Mbengkas is neither accessible by a motorable road network from Baiso nor Bu because of a difficult and undulating topography. Since the late 1970s, the people have made several attempts to dis-enclave the area but without much progress due to financial difficulties and the deceitful attitude of some of their elite. Although they have been engaged in digging or maintaining the road themselves almost every year, this has not produced the required results<sup>3</sup>. There is however hope because since December 2015, a fresh attempt to dis-enclave the area was initiated by the Mbengkas Development and Cultural Organisation (MBEDECO).

3 File No. NW/Qc/b. 1979/4/Bk, Annual Report 1979/1980 of the Divisional Delegation of Agriculture Menchum Division North West Province, RAB; File No. NW/Qb/a. 1985/6/Bk, Diagnostic Account of the Economic, Social and Cultural Situation of the Menchum Division since the Inception of the 5th Five Year National Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan, RAB. Frantic efforts are presently made by the Boyo administration to link Mbengkas to Fundong through Baiso and Mentang.

The Laimbwe polities are bordered to the North and North East by Mentang, Teitengem, Ehwi-njong, Endeng and Mughom. The village of Mentang speaks Kom and shares boundary with Baisso while Mughom, formerly under Mbengkas suzerainty now seeks the protection of Kom (Lah 1989, 2)<sup>4</sup>. The Aghem ethnic group borders the territory to the South and to the East and South East are Mbakong (Mile 28), Obang (Mile 30), Ndung (Mile 34), Aguli (Kekuli) and Befang, an economically viable road junction village and the gate way into the Menchum Valley subdivision from Bamenda, capital of the North West Region of Cameroon. The first three settlements are southern border villages of Bafut sub division of Mezam. To the West of Laimbwe are Kuk, Bafmeng and Mbongkesso villages.

Baisso is located near the western boundary of Kom and near the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. Bu is separated from the other two Laimbwe polities by the River Meteh and the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. Shultz (1993) erroneously asserts that Bu was once a Kom village which is now under Wum but is right when he argues that few of the Bu people speak and understand Kom. Mbengkas on the other hand is located to the South West of the Kom border and within the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. On the whole, Laimbwe territory falls within latitudes 60 degrees 50 minutes north of the equator and longitudes 10 degrees 10 minutes east of the Prime Meridian. They are a people with their own peculiarities.

The Laimbwe like other ethnic groups of the West and North West Regions were considered as a semi-Bantu speaking people. They belong to the Tikars who trace their origin to Ndobo and Bankim in the Adamawa Region of Cameroon; their ancestral home (Amaazee 1964, 54; Muam 1999, 2; Cheng 1996; Ngwoh 2006, 14-15; Asang 2008). Studies about the Tikar, a contested terminology today (Jeffreys 1940, 32; Jeffreys 1952, 141-53; Chilver and Kaberry 1996, 249-57; Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996, 1-16), excludes the Laimbwe whenever mentioned is made of the Tikar groups of the North West Region of Cameroon (Mafiamba 1969; Nkwi 1987, 15 and 23; Fanso 1989, 35).

The Laimbwe cultivate food and cash crops like maize, cocoyams, rice and coffee. They also engage in other related activities like hunting, lumbering and fishing. Their socio-political structure is centralised and similar to that of the matrilineal Kom, Kuk, and Bafmeng people but

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4 Misunderstanding and Disagreement between H.R.H. Fon Yibain James of Kom and Chief Kpwai II Clement Toh of Mbengkas Chieftom over the Mughom Chieftaincy/Kwifondom Issue since 18 May 1990-29 May 1994; Minutes of a Meeting Held in the Divisional Office Fundong on the 31/01/91 Concerning the Dispute between the Chief of Mbengkas and the Quarter head of Mughom in Mbengkas Village. Other settlements under the influence of Mbengkas include Teitengem and Endeng but these settlements also have close cultural affinities with the valley settlements of Tingoh and Obang.

not matrilineal Aghem; a confederacy of semi-autonomous polities. The *laimbwe* language is spoken in three of its principal polities of Bu, Mbengkas and Baisso. It is also spoken in neighbouring Mughom, Endeng, Teitengem, Aguli and Mbongkesso polities and hamlets. While Mughom, Endeng, Teitengem and Aguli speak a variant of the Widikum language, Mbongkesso blends Laimbwe and Itanghi-Kom, a result of the mixing of cultures at the edge of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. These villages value culture, which explains the popularity of initiation into cultural institutions.

## Initiation into Institutions

There are several ritual and/or traditional institutions among the Laimbwe and include masquerade societies, marriages and other associations but our study will be based on the most important of these male and female institutions.

### *Tschong*

*Tschong*, a friction drum institution is prestigious among elderly men in Laimbwe country. In the past, that is, before colonisation family members assisted men of age and status with material gifts like beans to facilitate initiation into *tschong* but this has evolved with growing individualism and personal advancement. Some of the people see in the initiation of lineage elders into *tschong* as a burden. Those who sought initiation into *tschong* fulfilled a number of conditions before they could be considered. They would begin by going to their fathers or their heirs with five goats. This was to clear the way for consideration into membership (Buhghebei 2007; Wakem 2007; Kom 2008; Kendang 2008; Chief Kpwai II 2008; Kpwa 2008; Ngeh 2009; Sei 2009; Zoh 2009). In the colonial era, the people decided to reduce the number of goats usually demanded for initiation of members. They made this up by introducing the use of the British pound sterling in replacement of some goats. Today, a man who seeks admission into *tschong* may give his father the sum of five thousand francs CFA or five bags of salt each of which represents a goat among the Laimbwe people (Kom 2008; Ngoh 2009).

Following the meeting and presentation of goats or bags of salt to one's father, senior members of the *tschong* society were given two goats for entertainment. This was the commencement of the initiation ritual. When money was introduced as a medium of exchange in the colonial period, new members gave two pounds as replacement for some goats. The amount is not known during the era of German administration of the

area. People had also started to rear goats not only for initiation rituals but for sale as well. After the independence of British Southern Cameroons through reunification with the Cameroun Republic on October 1 1961, further innovations were introduced in the payment for initiation rites. New members were now expected to give two thousand francs CFA or two bags of salt. These members were then led into the *mbai-azung* or fence of *tschong* for the ritual proper (Kahghesah 1997; Ngong Mathias 1997; Ndong Teacup 2008). At the fence, they presented two pigs and sticks of fish or *kembou* (sing.), *eh'mbou* (pl.) and (tadpole(s)), a preferred delicacy for the *Isile*. The priest of the *mbai-azung* often request today the sum of five thousand or more and cocks from the new members. This is for the ritual they perform during the *mbai-azung* ritual ceremony.

In the pre-colonial and early colonial epochs, after the *mbai-azung* ritual ceremony, each new members who were rubbed with camwood by elderly women started what was called “searching your father’s *tschong* bag” (Kom 2008). This literally meant going back to their fathers to give them more gifts such as blankets, salt and bush meat in appreciation of their having permitted them to join the *tschong* institution of status, adulthood and nobility. Some fathers however spared their children this burden to bringing them more gifts after the *mbai-azung* ritual activity. Others, especially non-members of the *tschong* welcomed these additional gifts and blessed these children who had now become adults. The searching of the bag of one’s father was however one of the important aspects of initiation into the *tschong* society in Laimbwe land.

The mother or sister of the father (aunt) of the new member of *tschong* was and is still given a new piece of cloth during the initiation ceremony. This is in honour of fatherhood among a matrilineal speaking people. She wears beads on the neck of the son’s or brother’s son. This is usually after the rubbing of camwood following the *mbai-azung* ritual. It is the mother or sister of the father of the new member that initiates the rubbing exercise with camwood and other family members and people follow her example (Buh 2008; Ekai 2008; Ewi 2008; Izhoi 2008; Kule 2008; Ngoisey 2008). Her recognition and pre-eminent role in ritual matters was and remains the respect accorded fatherhood among the Laimbwe matriline of Cameroon. Members of *isaa'enduoh* (lineage) made gifts of money and materials to the newly initiated member of *tschong*. This was to appreciate them for becoming men of status, dignity and influence in the community (Tsche 2007; Tschi 2008; Wei 2009). Generally speaking, during the pre-colonial era most of these gifts were in kind. People attached a lot of importance to material things then. Such material gifts like goats, fowls and pigs were either consumed at the ritual ceremony or kept by *tschong* members to

multiply.

The ownership of the *tschong* entails undergoing a process. Any adult willing to own one for his *isaa'endouh* or lineage could do so. The one who desired ownership of *tschong* needed the support of his *isaa'endouh* to entertain the villagers with food and corn beer. Many of the smaller *ehsaate'nduoh* or *eh'nduoh* (lineages) found it difficult to own a *tschong* of their own because of the cost involved. Others since the 1980s are vehemently opposed to owning or soliciting initiation into *tschong*. Their argument is that this society serves only the purpose of eating, drinking and contributing to famine in the land (Ngai 2007; Muhnjang 2008; Kpwai 2008). This is however contested by owners and senior members of *tschong* who argue that *tschong* comes with influence, status, blessings and opportunities for its members. It is also a way of valorising a people's culture, which if well-handled can promote cultural or heritage tourism in Laimbweland.

The initiation into *tschong* takes place in three main stages, which include the *quekezung*, *ikoi-azung* and *tschuka-azung*. To *quekezung* involves preparing food for members of *tschong*. For the *ikoi-azung* a new member prepares beans for the others and owners of the *tschong* and for the *tschuka-azung* the new *tschong* member prepares pounded beans in red oil. It is only consumed by members of *tschong* because it is mixed with some medicines. If a member cannot eat all the beans, the left over is thrown into the toilet because it contains a poisonous substance. Apart from the *tschong* prestigious club, there is the *kuiifuai* regulatory society that is involved in initiation, the use of material and money.

### ***Kuiifuai/Andzjom***

The *kuiifuai* regulatory society is an important society for men in the Laimbwe villages but that of Bu village is the most revered compared to the *kuiifuai* of the kin village of Mbengkas. The *mu'ukuum* of Baisso is also highly respected as *kuiifuai* (Afuah 2008; Ache 2008; Bong 2008; Zoh 2009). Although in some quarters *kuiifuai* is referred to as the *andzjom*, it is a misnomer because *andzjom* is one of the grades within the *kuiifuai* regulatory society which consist essentially of three grades. The other grades after *andzjom* in ascending order are *ehteighetschuuh* and *ikuuum*. The *kuiifuai* is not the property of any single person but its leadership is from the Eselemei matrilineage in Bu and Mbengkas villages.

In Bu village, the Ehzem matrilineage plays a key role in initiation and other pertinent activities of *kuiifuai* as founders of the fondom and the Eselemei, one of the royal families of the village (Ngai 2007; Wakem 2007, Kpwa 2008; Akou 2008; Ngong 2008). This society operates the consensus

will of the population and maintains justice, peace, progress and stability in the Laimbwe polities. This takes place through family heads, notables and other members of the society. Members for initiation into *kuiifuai* are materially and financially supported by their *isaa'endouh* and friends. In the pre-colonial era, their *zheh'abei* (family head) or any senior family member were supported materially and financially in their bid for membership of *kuiifuai* than it is the case now because of growing individualism and the decline in regular family meetings.

Several considerations determine the initiation of a man into the *kuiifuai*. A prospective candidate into the lowest level or first rung of the *kuiifuai* simply known as *ekehghekuiifuai* (to become a member of *kuiifuai*) began when a would-be member of *kuiifuai* lobbied senior members with corn beer or beer. When his candidacy found favour with the elders, they openly discussed his membership into the society during their secluded meetings. He was then asked to pay to the leader of the *kuiifuai*, some shillings in the colonial period and 1000 francs during the post-independence period (Kom 2008). In the pre-colonial and early colonial eras, the payment was evaluated largely in the form of goods.

Upon the payment of dues on an agreed date, the candidate for *kuiifuai* presented three goats, a bag of rice or 5000 francs. The rice became an important ritual commodity during the colonial period when this commodity was first introduced into Laimbwe territory in 1953 from Abakaliki in Nigeria by the British (Ambei 2008; Ndong 2008; Kom 2008; Ngai 2008). Members of the *isaa'enduoh* supported him especially during the pre-colonial and colonial periods because of the need to preserve the unity and pride of the family. This is only partially the case today because some family members have broken with tradition. They no longer support elders during initiation into *kuiifuai* because they consider this to be paganism. In the pre-colonial era and a greater part of the colonial period, the payment was a basin of beans to complement the goats (Ambei 2008; Kom 2008). This was/still considered the first step into the three grades of *kuiifuai* for a member. All new members are initiated on the occasion of the death ceremony of a member. No initiation takes place ordinarily.

The next grade is the *kooh* lodge, *andzjom* or *ehteighetschuuuh* (*tschu-ibhuh*). It is a senior rank for position, fame and influence among the Laimbwe. The candidate who asked to be initiated into the *andzjom* made a contribution of a sizeable pig, four healthy fowls and 2000 francs depending on the case. Today 20,000 francs is demanded in place of a pig. Prior to independence, the currency for initiation was the pound sterling and today, it is the franc CFA. Many of the elders of the *andzjom* today prefer the sum of 20,000 francs for several reasons. First, they share part of the

amount, the money is used to purchase basic household needs, and part of it is invested in education, water and the construction of bridges in the community (Kahghesah 1997; Kom 2008).

Membership into the *ikuum* (*tschu-ituoh*), the third and highest grade of *kuiifuai* was and remains highly selective. Some elders of the Laimbwe villages are members of *ikuum*. Initiation of its members in the pre-colonial and colonial eras took place at night. Prior to this, women cleaned up places in anticipation of the initiation ritual of new members. Initiation was organised when only a few members of the *ikuum* were still alive. They were/are expected to teach the new members the ways, secrets and mysteries of the society before God calls them to eternity (Ngai 2007; Wakem 2007). This practice has survived the Laimbwe people to the 21st century.

For a hitch free initiation into the *ikuum*, a candidate made available two pigs, a crate or two crates of beer, 2000 francs and five logs of firewood for their entertainment. In the pre-colonial era pots of locally distilled corn beer did the trick in place of beer which was introduced in the colonial era by Laimbwe who worked in the commercial plantations along the coast of Cameroon or who were engaged in long distance trade in other towns of Cameroon like Bafut, Bamenda, Guzang, Mamfe and Nkongsamba (Afuah 2008; Sei 2009). Those who did not reconcile differences within their lineages were rejected by the *ikuum* during the ritual ceremony. The purity of heart and peace in the lineage were and remain prerequisites for a successful initiation of new members into the *ikuum*. The material things and money demanded of members did/do not automatically guarantee the admission of a person into the *tschu-ituoh* until confirmation or rejection for reasons outlined above during the ritual.

Besides, at the death of *kuiifuai* members the lineages provide what is expected and demanded of them in food and money. In announcing the death of a member of the ordinary rank, that is to *tschai-epheh*, the family gives 5000 francs today through the father of *kuiifuai* to Teacup Ndong of the Ehzem lineage or his assistant John Wakem still of the Ehzem in Bu village. In the years before and some two decades after independence, the amount was smaller. The amount is 7000 francs for a member of the *kooh* or *tschu-ibhuh* lodge and 15000 francs when an *ikuum* member passes on. Before the introduction of money and even when it was introduced during the colonial period, it was not emphasised in ritual and other ceremonies but this is the case today since some of the goods which were demanded for initiation like goats, pigs, beans and rice are sold for money to build houses, pay medical bills of family members or pay for the school fees of children.

During the celebration of a 'fresh death' for an ordinary member

of *kuiifuai*, the family provides four goats and two bags of salt which traditionally are also considered to represent goats for each bag. In the past, what mattered was the goats and corn fufu with which the meat was consumed. This was/is done to *epheh ipheh*, which is to postpone the death celebration awaiting the final death celebration a year or more thereafter. In addition, when a member of *kooh* lodge and *ikuum* passes away, a pig is given to members of these lodges for their entertainment (Kahghesah 2007). In most cases, they divide it raw and take it home for their wives, sisters, nephews and mothers. If the meat is prepared in the *kuiifuai* grove women cannot eat it because it is believed that they will not procreate.

When the *isaa'enduoh* agreed on the date for a final death celebration of an ordinary member of *kuiifuai*, preparation was/is made to entertain *kuiifuai* with five to eight goats usually a mixture of goats and bags of salt and forty-seven loaves of corn fufu. For the member of the *kooh* lodge, the *isaa'enduoh* presented five goats and two bags of salt. If their relative was an *ikuum* member, the *isaa'enduoh* was asked eight healthy looking goats, which were both goats and bags of salt since a bag of salt is taken for a goat (Ngai 2007; Kom 2008). Many more loaves of fufu were prepared by women of the *isaa'enduoh* and presented to members of *kuiifuai* who ate it with the goats or pigs (Ngei 2008; Ndum 2008; Ndong 2008; Ngoi 2008; Ngoweizoo8; Nyoo8). While women made contributions of corn flour and prepared fufu corn collegially, the men provided fowls, goats, pigs, dry meat, oil and salt for the celebration. These things are provided today but much emphasis is on converting most of them into money to ease initiation for those who do not have these things. Some of the material things are however still given for the purpose of keeping faith with traditions and custom. The *kuiifuai* is one of the many other male institutions in Laimbwe country like the *mekuum*.

On a general note, although there is variation in initiation cost into *kuiifuai* from the past to the present, initiation today in Bu village has taken on the following characteristics. The person for initiation pays in one bag of harvested rice, which co-incidentally is in abundance in the village, three goats, one of which is supplied by the father, three to five bottles of beer to the *tsite'nduoh* (errand boys) club. For burial, 10,000 francs is given for the death announcement, two fowls to the *mebuuh* masquerade, two fowls to *kembaikoh*, three to four goats, 60 or more loaves of fufu corn. During the final death ceremony, a tin of honey is given and this is mixed with several pots of corn beer, three to four goats and 60 loaves of fufu corn. Initiation into the *andzjom* involves five fowls and during burial, one fowl is given and another one the final death ceremony or memorial. Groundnuts are also an accompaniment. For the *ikuum* lodge, initiation involves one goat,

2000 francs, five logs of wood, two cocks, one crate of beer and during burial the family is demanded one cock and 2000 francs. In the memorial celebration, a goat, 2000 francs and *kemuh*, that is fried maize in powder form (Muam 2001, 151).

This culture of contributing money during funerals is not limited to the Laimbwe because around the Roi-et-Province in Thailand, during traditional funeral rites currency is inserted in the oral cavity of the deceased. Usually 5 or 10 Baht coins are preferred. In some funerals, the people insert personal items like watches, rings, necklaces, and additional money in the coffin. In doing this, they are convinced that this is their own way of providing the deceased with money to pay for the fare to Hell or Heaven (Senaraj, Yodmalee, Potisam and Sohphohn 2008: 208). This aside, the different masquerade societies in Laimbwe country have used money in varying degrees to fulfil membership obligations.

### ***The Mekuum (Masquerade Societies)***

Membership of the *kekuum* (sing.) in Laimbwe country entails performing a *rite de passage* into adulthood. While a few of the *mekuum* (pl.) are controlled by the general public most of them are the property of *saa'tenduoh* and directed by the *zheh'nduoh* or *zheh'abei*. As young men grow to maturity and marry, they are admitted into *kekuum* of the *isaa'enduoh* or community through an entrance fees and material. In the pre-colonial past of Laimbwe, initiation of males into the *mekuum* began at infancy through material contributions. After the colonial era, this form of initiation has weakened partly because of Christianity and education of children out of Laimbwe country (Afuh 2007; Buhghebei 2007; Ebu 2007; Chief Kpwai II 2008; Ngeh 2008). Mostly grown up children and those who have rejected Christianity go for initiation once they have built a compound of their own. They make several monetary contributions and other materials to change from one grade to another within the *mekuum* societies. Many Christian boys have refused membership of these societies describing them as satanic but some of them who have left the church have joined the *mekuum* like the *libah* of the Ehzem and Eselemei lineages in Bu and Mbengkas respectively. A few others belong to the church and these *mekuum*.

During the pre-colonial era to the early decades of independence, children of five to ten years, their peers and age mates met in a meeting of the *mezhuuh* masquerade. This was because for one to be admitted into the senior masquerade societies he obligatorily went through the *rite de passage* in *mezhuuh* with material assistance from his parents. This involved a loaf of fufu corn with a bowl or some quantity of *eh'feghe* (okro-like watery soup)

or boiled cocoyam leaves, roasted or boiled crab/tadpoles or pepper soup and fish (Muam 2001, 150). During the period of mourning the same levy was demanded especially so because there is no memorial ceremony for a child who dies. With the monetisation of the economy from the colonial period onwards, this has come to involve some coins usually less than a dollar. This amount is demanded by the elderly members for their own personal entertainment after the *mezhuuh* gathering is over.

In actual fact, initiation into the *mezhuuh* was and has remained relatively simple in terms of material contributions and money. The boy who asked for membership was given corn fufu and vegetables or meat to members for entertainment. It was and still is not an exclusive club because all young boys, Christians and non-Christians alike joined/join it. Although a simple masquerade society, *mezhuuh* cannot be ridiculed or attacked by any one small or big. If this happens, a fine in goats, fowls and money is demanded as a corrective measure. In the pre-monetary period, *mezhuuh* fines never included money but today money is required.

After the initiation into *mezhuuh* one qualified for membership of *fehndzjeh*, a masquerade society for young boys. Initiation during the non-monetisation period was in material like the other *mekuuum* and *mezhia*. The use of money for initiation became common after independence when young boys paid an initiation fee of 100 francs and between one and ten fowls per masquerade society of their choice (Muam 2001, 150). Today the material things that use to sanction full membership of any masquerade or any other society have declined in importance and money has replaced them. The more money someone has and his belonging to a higher social status has often attracted a higher initiation fee than the one presented by the ordinary village folk because he is relatively poor. The cost of burial of members of the lineage in the *nduoh'ehveh* (death celebration house) was some 30 or more fowls or five fowls and 1250 francs including another fowl for the masquerade society (Muam 2001, 150). However, for a few modifications, during the final death ceremony, the charge in monetary terms and material contributions is the same. The availability of money has made some lineages to buy more wines, palm wine, corn beer and beer to entertain the community.

The general entertainment of the community varies from person to person and status. This may involve as small as 10 fowls (50 francs representing a fowl) to as many as over 200 fowls (Ambei 2007; Ngai 2007). The one that involves many fowls is determined by one's social status and promotion to different grades of the village institutions. The two things given include the *baike'ibeh* and the *teh'ndom*. The first is given immediately after the burial of a person and the second follows. It is composed of money

and food but given as part of the *baike'ibeh*. The goat that use to be given may now be given in the form of a bag of salt which is equal to a goat in the traditional milieu and it is divided only to the people present. During the final death ceremony the *zeike'duoh* and *teh'ndom* are presented. While a few are in the form of fowls, the majority is in money which is used for different purposes to develop people and the community.

Initiation of people into the *mekuum* from the pre-colonial era to the first decade of independence began from the quarter to the village level. The grown up was encouraged and supported by his kith and kin with material and money during the colonial period in the initiation ceremonies into *mekuum* at the quarter and village levels. After this, initiation into other *mekuum* from other quarters or lineages and into *ehzhia*, (sing.) *mezhia* (pl.) was pursued. It was always an honour for one to be presented by his father to the *mekuum* and *mezhia* and with material and financial support. At the same time, fish or meat was made available to women and corn fufu prepared to entertain the men and women at the compound of *kieteh* (quarter head's compound) or the palace of *fuai*. In the absence of goats five fowls were accepted in replacement (Afuh 2007; Ebuh 2007; Ibo-oh 2008; Ikai R 2008; Ikai Z 2008; Kendang V 2008; Mukoi 2008; Ndang 2008; Ngwa 2008). It was however honourable to present a goat during this ceremony of the coming of age. After independence, a few fowls were asked and the remainder was converted into money and given to the quarter elders depending on the level attained by the member being initiated.

In fact, men performed the ritual of *kezewai* when their wives gave birth to their first child. The *kezewai* ceremony involved the contribution of a goat and later on after independence, five hundred francs (slightly more than a dollar) was given to represent a goat. After the *kezewai*, fifteen fowls or the equivalence in money during the colonial and post independence periods was made available by the grown up individual. Since independence the sum of fifty francs CFA has been accepted for a fowl. These fifteen fowls were presented as the *nduoh* or house (Afuh 2007; Ambei 2008). This was to tell the elders that this man had come of age and could now move and discuss with them.

The building of a house for which an open ritual was organised in commemoration was a mark of maturity for any Laimbwe male child. For the *itschuoh* ritual, five fowls were given making a total of twenty fowls. During the first two decades of independence ending in the 1980s, these things were done mostly in money. This money was shared among those who had attained senior grades in village societies (Kom 2008). Amounts or material things asked for during these rituals varied from quarter to quarter, *isaa'enduoh* to *isaa'enduoh* and from one Laimbwe village to the

other. Initiation into *mekuum* of the *isaa'enduoh* often took precedence over those of the quarter, other *saa'tenduoh*, the village and ethnic group as a whole. Among the Laimbwe, it is generally believed and rightly too that initiation into societies today is more costly in monetary terms in Bu than in Mbengkas and Baisso because of its accessibility and greater external influence than the other two Laimbwe villages.

The general qualification for the *mezhia* stemmed from fulfilling certain obligations prominent among which were presenting the *mendeng* to one's father. This was when one had built his own house, had domestic animals and other sylvan wealth around his compound. This included bananas, pears, oranges, mangoes, guavas and other fruit trees (Kahghesah 1997; Ambei 2008). When a father felt satisfied with his son's achievements and maturity he urged him to present the *mendeng* to him as tradition demanded. Today, emphasis is not necessarily on the sylvan wealth found around the compound but the ability of a child to do any kind of business, become rich and responsible. Many of them now offer *mendeng* in the form of money to their fathers. Money has thus simplified the process of providing things to one's father.

In contemporary times, the *mendeng* which hitherto was in the form of material contribution has generally been transformed into money which is equal to five thousand francs CFA or less (about 11 dollars) still in attempt to fulfil tradition. According to the Laimbwe people, this ritual of *mendeng* provided enormous blessings from the father to the young adult. Meat was also presented to members of the *ehzhia* for entertainment. This ritual exercise opened the floodgate for the child to scurry for initiation into *mezhia* such as the *kekikum*, *ndonyi*, *mekwasuuh*, *kuumkengang*, *phesoo*, *libah kekuleh*, *leh'atang* and *tschong*. The process of initiation differs from one *ehzhia* to another today where money is involved as it was before. It has also changed over time because certain things that use to be given in material form are now being given partially in material and in money. Such things include castor oil, fowls and goats.

Initiation into different *mezhia* entails expenditure at different stages. The most basic things like paying an entrance fee are done. In the *libah* for instance, a new member presents money for the *tehmbang*, which are two well decorated sticks, one representing male and the other female used to signal the arrival of the masquerade and its group of flute blowing dancers. The coins for these *tehmbang* are usually given through an old member to the senior members of the society who divide it among themselves (Ebuh 2007; Bong 2008).

After the declaration of intent, the one seeking for membership is told what it takes in monetary terms, fish, fowls, salt, goats and other

items to be fully incorporated into the *libah*. This entails moving from one stage to the other as one grows older and matured. Rank in the society is a measurement of status and influence. Members aspiring to a higher rank to command the respect of others toil day and night and also solicit the material and financial assistance of their sisters, brothers, mothers and uncles. Such support nowadays is based on one's contribution to the unity and growth of the lineage. If one fails to contribute to the progress of the lineage, he is not supported financially and materially when he is seeking for admission into *mezhia*.

Many of these *mezhia* have declined in importance because of a combination of factors. Some of the former members in Bu for example argue that it is a subtle way by the dominant matrilineal groups to perpetually subjugate the smaller and less influential *saa'tenduoh* and dictate the pace of events in the village through the extortion of money (Afuh 2007). In addition, some owners of these masquerades are disenchanting with the young because of their selfish handling of material gifts and money that come in after a funeral or death celebration in the village.

Many of them roast fowls presented during celebrations and share the money among selves leaving nothing for the owner and the older members of the *ehzhia*. In anger therefore, the owners and other older members have resolved to keep the masquerades in the ceilings and in some cases they have been abandoned. The dressing of some of the *mekuuum* have deteriorated beyond repair with the result being the inability for these masquerades to animate during death celebrations even of family members as was the case prior to independence of Cameroon in 1960/61.

In other cases, *zhehtebei* are inexperienced and unwilling to learn. Soon after they assume the position of manager of lineage property as *zhehtebei*, instead of improving on what they met; they have taken to naive and irresponsible behaviour and refused to associate and learn from the elders. They have also used their religious inclinations to abandon the once revered masquerades of their lineages. Other successors are absentee landlords who talk more and act less. Proposals for them to make some improvements in the *kekuuum* of the lineage are not heeded to. Money raised for this purpose by members of the lineage is very carefully diverted into other personal gains. 'King' money so they say has come to create problems for some of these societies than solve them. Apart from male institutions, there are female institutions of status and nobility.

## **The Kefa'a**

The *kefa'a* is an elderly women society in the Laimbwe villages. It is

under the titular leadership of the *zhehfuai* or queen mother. Lineages are owners of the kefa'a. In the Laimbwe villages, the principal *ehfa'a* (pl.) owning lineages are the Ehzem, Eselemei, Ukwosuuh and Nduokang (Ngoisey 2008; Izhoi 2008; Kule 2008; Mbei Ikai 2008). The other lineages are simply participants as members of the society. Membership into the *kefa'a* is by an initiation ceremony. Today, many women of the younger generation are disinterested because to them membership into the *kefa'a* insubordinate them to the lineages owning or persons controlling the society and also entails a lot of expenditure.

When members of the *kefa'a* of the lineages are performing in public, the distinguishing mark is the rings of different colours they wear round their heads. These instruments were either bought with the pound during the colonial period, the franc CFA during the post-independence era or succeeded to from mother or grandmother. Some of the women bought the material from Bamessing in Ndop and the beads from the market or in the past from Nigeria through traders or smugglers. Most recently, the beads were brought to the women by Hausa traders. The cylinders are today purchased from neighbouring Fundong in Boyo Division of the North West Region of Cameroon (Ngoisey 2008; Mbei Ikai 2008; Ekai 2008; Nyoooh 2008). The camwood, a very highly prized condiment for long was imported from the South West Region of Cameroon because of the abundance of the trees in this part of the country.

For anyone to be admitted into the kefa'a, the assistance of the father's mother or sister (paternal aunt) was solicited. If her aunt rejected her admission she was sure not to be initiated. Initiation was in two stages in the pre-colonial to the early independence period. The first stage was the presentation of a tin of oil and three or four dry bush meat. Today, a sizeable quantity of dry cow meat is provided because of the scarcity of bush meat. In the second phase, the member brought to the *kefa'a* members gathered *keh'tia* or pepper soup which was a combination of one tin of oil, one bag of salt, three pieces of dry meat and a good quantity of camwood for their entertainment and distribution (Ngoisey 2008; Mbei Ikai 2008; Ekai 2008). These things today are bought with money since very few people are engaged in palm oil production in the Laimbwe villages.

At the death of a member of kefa'a, her matrilineage did some of the following things. In the first place, the leader of the *kefa'a* who was usually the oldest surviving member was informed. The official announcement was much smaller in shillings in the colonial period but today it is one thousand francs in replacement of material gifts and shillings given in the past. During the death celebration of a member, *kefa'a* women are presented with two basins of corn fufu and a bundle of tadpoles or dried tilapia fish

in the morning and evening respectively (Izhoi 2008; Ngoisey 2008; Mbei Ikai 2008). They are further entertained with five basins of corn fufu and five bundles of tadpoles representing the *koh-afa* (the taking away of *kefa'a* instruments from the fire place), *zhe-eh-afa* (the waking up of the *kefa'a* in the morning), *mbwe-keh-afa* (sending the *kefa'a* to sleep). These are the three levels of entertainment known to members of the *kefa'a* today. Some of the things like tadpoles are today in short supply and so are expensive.

Other things presented to *kefa'a* members include a tin of oil and a bag of salt for distribution. Some lineages give more during death ceremonies out of their own free will. There are however slight differences in what is given in the three villages of Laimbwe of Bu, Baisso and Mbengkas but what is usually given come from the lineage of the late member of the *kefa'a*. Some people are criticising the society on the basis that initiation is very costly because even the many material things given are bought with money. There are however many other women associations and clubs to which they enlist their membership if they cannot make it to the prestigious *kefa'a*.

### ***Zhiamehzele (Women Associations and Clubs)***

The *kefa'a* women regulatory society notwithstanding, there are other *zhiamehzele* in Laimbwe country serving different purposes. Among these are the *ketaah*, *keseem ndzjang* and *fembweih*. Some of the clubs are directed by particular lineages. The *fembweih* is under the control of the Ehzem, Eselemei and Nduokang in the Laimbwe villages. Its membership is open and performs mostly when an adult male or female dies. The *ndzjang* on the other hand is very well established within its ranks are interested men. The strength of this club lies in its ability to draw together children of the palace to providing its leadership in Mbengkas (Ngei 2008; Ngoi 2008; Ngwa 2008; Ewi 2008). In Bu village, *ndzjang* does not necessarily has palace connections and remain popular among its members. The other *zhiamehzele* like the *ketaah* and *keseem* have remained clubs for women expression of their ability to entertain and provide comic relief to grieving members of the community. They bring together women of age from different lineages who get together to maintain the values of their village and their lineages through performance. Membership into these clubs is simply by monetary or other contributions when the need arises. Expenditure is therefore not as much and those who cannot secure membership into the *kefa'a* join any of these.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in both female and male societies in the Laimbwe ethnic group of the North West Region of Cameroon, initiation was a mark of the coming of age, a marker of status and influence in the community. Evidence from this study shows that during the pre-colonial period, the rite de passage was determined by material accumulation and provision. Many people were assisted by members of their lineages and by friends to provide the huge quantities of material that was requested for initiation into the *kuiifuai*, *kefa'a*, *zhiamehzele*, *mezhuuh*, *libah* and other societies. Identity and status markers were all determined by the wealth one possessed and the willingness to give it during initiation.

The colonial administration beginning with the Germans in 1884 introduced money as a medium of exchange and as a measurement of value. Material contributions were still overwhelmingly made available but some of the demands were given in money. It is worth noting that some of the materials like rice were introduced from abroad as commercial crops and it came to play a significant role in the political economy of the Laimbwe people. After independence, money has increasingly played a pivotal role in ritual ceremonies. Even some of the material things presented like pigs and honey are bought with money from other neighbouring villages. Many of the elders also need money and not material contributions because of development projects in the community like the construction of health centres, schools, culverts and bridges. Money has therefore fundamentally impacted on the process of initiation and entertainment of people in Laimbweland like elsewhere in Cameroon.

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## ABSTRACT

The advent of Europeans in Cameroon in the 15th century and the introduction of a western currency as a standard of exchange and a measurement of value to replace other indigenous currencies had an impact on initiation into regulatory and entertainment societies in Cameroonian communities including the Laimbwe of the North West Region. Male and female institutions eventually began using these currencies during initiation rites. These included *nwerong*, *ngiri*, *ngumba*, *takembeng*, *ndofoumgbui*, *kwifoyn* (also *kwifo'o*, *kwifeu*, *kuiifuai*) *kefa'a*, *tschong*, *libah* and *ikuum* in the grasslands and *Liengu*, *male*, *ahon*, *muankum*, *nganya*, *monekim*, *ekpe* and *obasinjom* in the forest region of Cameroon. Prior to the introduction of standard money, some local currencies like cowrie shells were used together with the provision of material things like goats, pigs, fowls and bush meat. Money is effectively a measure of value, status and a store of wealth within the Laimbwe traditional milieu. This paper examines how and why the introduction of money in initiation and other ritual activities led to the emergence of new social classes and the re-enforcement of the socio-political order of the Laimbwe people. The study essentially relies on discussions with members of societies, observation and written material.

## KEYWORDS

Cameroon; Laimbwe; ritual; currency; institutions.

*Received on November 11, 2017.*

*Approved on January 11, 2018.*