

The Transformation of Identity Among the Bassa People of Cameroon: A Field Study on Mbombog

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ABSTRACT

Mbombog serves as the religious leader of the Bassa and is also regarded as the spiritual figure of the entire ethnic group. The Bassa people are not confined to Cameroon; they can also be found across many regions in Central and West Africa, where groups identify themselves as Bassa or as cousins of the Bassa. However, with the intervention of colonial governments, the erosion of modernization, and the encroachment of foreign religions, many ethnic leaders, exemplified by Mbombog, are witnessing a similar trajectory of gradual decline in their historical significance. This phenomenon more profoundly reflects the diminishing political identity of small ethnic groups, alongside the rise of regional and national politics designed to satisfy colonial governance.

Keywords: Bassa, West African tribal leaders, Mbombog, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mbombog is the religious leader of the Bassa and serves as a spiritual figure for the entire ethnic group. The Bassa are not limited to Cameroon; various groups throughout Central and West Africa also identify themselves as Bassa or as members of the Bassa brotherhood. Ethnic leaders, such as Mbombog, are present not only among the Bassa in Cameroon but also in the Central, Littoral, Western, and Southern Regions of Cameroon, as well as in other Central African countries such as Gabon and Congo. Many ethnic groups have similar representative figures and face a comparable fate of gradual historical decline.

2. MBOMBOG AMONG THE BASSA PEOPLE OF CAMEROON

The Bassa people of Cameroon migrated from Egypt, with an extensive history of migration across North, West, Central, and South Africa. The language spoken by the Bassa belongs to the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family.¹ Similar to other Bantu peoples, the prefix

"ba" signifies a plural form that denotes groups of people. Numerous other ethnic groups in Cameroon share this prefix, including the Bamileke, Bamenda, Bafoussam, Bangangté, Bakoko, and Baham. Therefore, scholars classify this ethnic conglomerate at a higher level as Bantu.²

Mbombog, the religious leader among the Bassa people, is often referred to as mbombog or mbombok in foreign literature; this term derives from a repetition of "mbog." Scholars from Indiana University have suggested that "mbong" in the Liberian Bassa context connotes "elder." In the context of Cameroon's Bassa language, "mbog" refers to a locality, a country, or the cosmos.³ The term Mbombog is an extension of this, meaning a vast area or the leader and organizer of a region. This aligns with Mbombog's role in the tribe, which includes divination, healing, and resolving tribal disputes; he is regarded as the most respected traditional leader among the Bassa in Cameroon. Nevertheless, the Bassa people do not consider their ethnicity as having a "king" as they view themselves as an egalitarian society. Moreover,

1. Blench R, New developments in the classification of bantu languages and their historical implications, In Barreteau Daniel and Graffenried C. Von eds., Dating and chronology in the Lake Chad basin, Bondy: ORSTOM, 1993, pp. 147-160.

2. Carl Meinhof, Grundzuge einer vergleichenden Grammatik der Bantuspraehen (A comparative study about basic grammar of Bantu languages), Berlin: Gliickstaedt, 1906.

3. Pouka Louis-Marie, Les Bassa du Cameroun (The Bassa of Cameroun), Paris, Cahiers d'outre-mer, 1950, pp. 153-166.

there is not just one Mbombog; the size of the tribe determines both the number and hierarchy of these leaders, who periodically convene to relay divine messages and thoughts.

The position of Mbombog is hereditary, typically passed down to suitably chosen members within the original leader's family. This transmission includes teaching methods and abilities related to divination, witchcraft, and spirit communication. According to Jean-Marcel Eugene Wongou, this choice was a survival strategy for the Bassa in the face of adversity after "after passing the cave", which is called "Mbon wog, minson mi yihga" (Father died son after).⁴ The new Mbombog usually requires years of learning and practice to succeed, which entails significant investments of time, energy, and financial resources. Prior to officially assuming the role, a new leader must go through rites of passage to gain the recognition and endorsement of tribal members, with the duration of this ceremony (three, seven, or ten days) indicative of their rank within the Mbombog association.

3. FROM EUROPEAN SCHOLARSHIP TO INDIGENOUS ACADEMIA

Since the colonial era, numerous scholars have conducted varying degrees of research on the Bassa and other local ethnic groups. In 1973, the French Institute for Development and Cooperation conducted a study on the Bassa in the Mam region, noting that the original functions of Mbombog — responsible for land distribution and waging wars — have become obsolete, with contemporary roles focused on everyday matters such as marriage.⁵ Research conducted by the National African Language Resource Center at Indiana University points out the significant role of proverbs within the linguistic practices of Bassa people in Liberia.⁶ But I want to emphasize that even if the Bassa of both Cameroon and Liberia share a common ancestry, centuries of history have led to distinct differences.

Athanase Bopda's work underscores the foundational role of African myths in territorial transformations in Cameroon by referencing the

4. Jean-Marcel Eugene Wongou, *Les Basaa du Cameroun: Monographie Historique d'après la Tradition Orale* (The Bassa in Cameroon: A Historical Monograph Based on Oral Tradition), Niamey: CELHTO, 2010, p. 81.

5. Jacques Champaud, *MOM: Terroir bassa*, Paris: ORSTOM, 1973, p. 16.

6. <http://nalrc.indiana.edu>

Bassa creation myth.⁷ I argue that as creators of myths and territoriality, leaders like Mbombog inevitably experience disruption during the political and territorial reorganization processes. The indigenous scholar Martine Cécile Ngo Nyemb-Wisman highlights through detailed descriptions of funeral rites the ongoing power struggles between witchcraft and modern medicine, indirectly supporting the notion of Mbombog's decline.⁸ Furthermore, Zhang Xiaozhen's case study on a funeral in the Ngong Ren Gai village demonstrates the shift from traditional practices towards Catholic ceremonies, showcasing the compromises made by the Bassa under colonial cultural pressures.⁹

4. THE DECLINE OF MBOMBOG

4.1 Delegation of Power

Although the Bassa people believe that their tribe does not have a king, the term "Mbombog" itself is a repetition of "mbog" (meaning country or world). While Mbombog is not the king of the Bassa tribe, he serves as the religious authority and cultural symbol of the nation, addressing critical matters such as healing and resolving tribal conflicts. He is indeed a leader; after the arrival of the colonizers, the terms "patriarch" or "chef" began to be used to refer to tribal chiefs, with Mbombog representing the Bassa.

However, the advent of colonialism disrupted the original tribal society, replacing it with a "modern" organizational structure that extends from the national level down to regions (provinces) and villages. Positions such as the President of Cameroon and regional administrators emerged accordingly. In the tribal areas inhabited by the Bassa, village chiefs and police stations were established to carry out the functions of the national

7. The Bassa people believe that they migrated from ancient Egypt. During this process, due to tribal conflicts and land disputes, some of their ancestors bravely crossed the mother river of present-day Cameroon—the Sanaga River—and passed from the Ngog Lituba mountain. The Bassas consider the Ngog Lituba mountain to be a sacred place where all the deities reside, as passing through the cave guarantees the bravery and strength of their tribe members.

8. Bopda, De l'usage de fonds mythiques dans les remaniements territoriaux en Afrique et au Cameroun (The usage in the Mythical Fund in the territorial reorganization of Africa and Cameroon), *Quêbec: Cahiers de géographie du Quêbec*, Vol. 45(126), 2001, pp. 451 - 478.

9. Zhangxiaozhen, *On Cameroonian Funeral Custom: A Case Study of a Funeral Ritual Eglonga Village, Central Province of Cameroon*, Beijing: Foreign Language Academia, Vol. 6, 2020, pp. 235-252.

framework, meaning that Mbombog no longer mobilizes tribal members or manages tribal conflicts.

The arrival of colonizers not only introduced village chiefs in a political sense but also brought foreign religions such as Catholicism and Islam. Many tribal members, due to the cultural pressures imposed by the colonial government, were compelled to convert to other religions or to hold both foreign beliefs and traditional animist practices.¹⁰ As a direct consequence, approximately 40% of Cameroonians practice Catholicism, and 20% follow Islam. This transformation undoubtedly stripped Mbombog, the tribal leader cloaked in a religious facade, of his last vestige of authority.

In their eagerness to integrate into “modern society”, tribal members have increasingly converted to foreign religions as a crucial step. Those who have successfully assimilated into modern society often don Western-style clothing and provide significant financial support to traditional activities, seeking to minimize or even forgo participation in traditional ceremonies to showcase their belonging to the “modern world.” For the more traditional members of the tribe, even essential events like funerals have incorporated Catholic mass into their practices. Martine Cécile Ngo Nyemb-Wisman subtly notes, “The inclusion of mass before traditional funeral activities does not imply that we believe in it; rather, it is a response to colonial authorities prohibiting traditional rituals deemed pagan. Since then, we have become accustomed to conducting mass prior to traditional funerals.” However, I believe that the mass, which has persisted for hundreds of years since the onset of colonialism, has now become an integral part of traditional Bassa ceremonies.

Foreign religions often receive government support, which grants them a strategic advantage in the struggle against tribal religions. There has been a longstanding controversy between Catholicism and the indigenous religion of the Bassa regarding Ngog Lituba Mountain. The Bati people and the Mpoo people, both of whom identify as descendants of the Bassa, agree that their ancestors emerged from the caves of Ngog Lituba Mountain, a site that historically provided refuge for tribal warriors during conflicts, rendering them invincible. As a sacred dwelling of the gods, Ngog Lituba

10. Messina Jean-Paul, Van Slageren Jaap eds., *Histoire du christianisme au Cameroun: Des origines à nos jours (Christian History in Cameroon: From Origins to Today)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2017.

Mountain holds tremendous significance for the Bassa and their sub-tribes. Consequently, since the erection of a cross by Catholics on the mountain, tensions between the two groups have escalated. In 2017, tribal members led by the Bassa removed the cross, but a month later, Catholics, with police assistance, reinstalled it at the summit. Although Mbombog Sim Mbog Bassong subsequently expressed support for traditional religion, this did not alter the status of the cross.¹¹

4.2 *Displacement in Daily Life*

Mbombog has lost his political leadership and therefore lost the follow of the sons of Ilomlunbi¹², the principal deity of Bassa traditional religion who was regarded as the god of beginnings. The immediate consequence of this loss of leadership is a decline in the customary tributes typically given to him. Traditionally, the gifts given to Mbombog consisted primarily of goats and palm wine, as well as shells that served as currency, prior to colonial rule. After colonization, these gifts were replaced by whiskey and money.

Economically successful urban members of the tribe seldom seek the assistance of Mbombog and even aspire to detach themselves from their original communities to highlight their social standing. On the other hand, members living in tribal areas no longer can afford the costly gifts and money that once sustained Mbombog. As a result, his sources of gifts have diminished, and with the loss of his status as a political leader, his economic standing has similarly declined, leading to a necessity for him to seek work elsewhere to provide for his livelihood.

Mbombog Michel, a Mbombog working in the Western Region of Cameroon¹³ — home to the Bamenda and Bamileke people — once told me, “There is no other choice; we have to go out and work. When someone in the village needs my help, I will return.” I am aware that another Mbombog in the village works as a teacher at a university. Such circumstances are quite common, especially with

11. Cameroon Concord News; <https://www.cameroonconcordnews.com>

12. According to Bassa legend, the others holds that the god Nyambe created the first human Ilomlunbi, who had two sons, one being the Bassa and the other the Mpoo.

13. The Western Region of Cameroon is primarily inhabited by the Bamenda and Bamileke peoples. Each region in Cameroon has its own dominant ethnic group, which often leads individuals to identify themselves based on their place of birth. Consequently, birthplaces hold significant importance in the construction of identity within Cameroon.

traditional leaders from various ethnicities, including Bassa, working in cities like Yaoundé and Douala. For instance, Zomeloa from the Ewondu people and Ganga from the Douala people, both formerly tribal leaders, are now compelled to seek external employment to cover their living expenses.

It is noteworthy that economically successful tribal members may compensate for the deficiencies in ethnic political leadership through their economic influence and subsequently become a new Mbombog. A respondent of mine remarked, "Nowadays, becoming a Mbombog requires a lot of money. If you have enough money, you can be a Mbombog even if you are Chinese."

4.3 Status Transition

As the role of Mbombog changes, respect previously afforded based on lifestyle and power has come to be replaced by respect founded on cultural identity. The respect that the community once showed him in various aspects of life has gradually shifted towards a more habitual respect based on ethnic cultural identity.

In the modern era following Cameroon's independence, life has not been as successful as during the colonial period; traditional culture and customs coexist prominently, and even calls and cheers from the jungles can be heard in urban areas. However, this does not indicate a failure of modernity in Cameroon; rather, it highlights the country's relatively stable political situation and history, which attest to the strength of the new political forces within Cameroon. Urban Bassa individuals, having achieved economic success, find it easier to integrate into "modern society." They often wear Western-style clothing, speak French, convert to other religions, and gain status and respect in their native tribal regions through their economic achievements.

New economic and political powers within tribal areas often gain social respect, contributing to a cycle of influence that may marginalize traditional powers. As one of my respondents noted, "You should first seek out the village chief and obtain their approval before approaching Mbombog." This reflects the shifting hierarchy of status and respect.

Nevertheless, figures like Mbombog and other traditional leaders are not insignificant; tribal members still refer to him as "patriarch" or "chef." Mbombog continues to organize religious activities

that attract significant participation from the community, with members contributing economically and providing gifts to support these events. In everyday life, Mbombog does not wear attire that symbolizes his status and identity, appearing much like ordinary tribal members. He only dons traditional garments associated with his position during organized events or when he needs to meet others in his role as Mbombog, wearing a hat that signifies his identity and carrying a bag containing various ritual tools. Outside these specific occasions, he does not overtly display his status, and the respect shown by tribal members typically manifests itself only during tribal activities or moments when identity recognition is significant.

4.4 Cultural Displacement

Historically, the Bassa people possessed a written form of their language known as Bassa script, which has unfortunately been lost for various reasons. Today, many scholars have worked together to create a new Bassa alphabet based on the Latin script, consisting of 27 new letters. Mr. F. M. Samnick compiled a fundamental Bassa language text and added French translations at the end of the booklet.¹⁴ The government has also promoted this booklet in schools within Bassa-speaking regions. However, due to the weakened state of the country after colonization, and challenges related to funding and teaching resources, the new script has not been widely disseminated; as a result, the majority of tribal members have not learned it and can only speak the language, struggling to read or write it.

In fact, among the elites in traditional society, including figures like Mbombog, another form of Bassa has been transmitted, which we refer to as "elite Bassa" to distinguish it from the Bassa spoken by other tribal members. This elite version of the language is not mentioned in existing literature, and many younger Mbombog have not even heard of it. However, I have learned from respondents that this language differs significantly from the Bassa commonly spoken by ordinary Bassa people, creating a situation where individuals might hear each other without truly understanding one another. I later confirmed this during interviews with other Mbombog.

14. F. D. Samnick, *mee a*, Douala: College Libermann Print, 2018. "mee a" means "hello" in Bassa.

As Mbombog has gradually exited the political stage of the tribe, the cultural language associated with him, along with the practices of traditional witchcraft, is inevitably diminishing. French has unified many of the languages spoken across Cameroon's eight regions, and its convenience is clear; however, the cultural erosion resulting from the dominance of French and modern medicine in tribal areas is an undeniable reality, which is indeed a source of regret.

4.5 Shifts in Interpretive Agency

In the pre-colonial era, the Bassa people organized their historical narrative into four distinct periods — Mbog koba ni kwan; kwan; koba; and len — based on collective memory, prominent historical events, and mythological tales.¹⁵ For ordinary tribal members, who lacked the opportunity to engage with cultural education, the Mbombog served as the storyteller, occupying a crucial role in the oral transmission of history. He was undoubtedly regarded as an authoritative figure in the interpretation of cultural history and worldviews, embodying the knowledge and wisdom of the community.

The arrival of the colonial government disrupted the existing societal framework. To maintain colonial dominance, the government dispatched scholars to study and research the Bassa and other ethnic cultures in Cameroon, effectively positioning these scholars as primary contributors to the colonial intellectual apparatus. While a few scholars, such as Jean-Marcel Eugene Wongou, are from the Bassa ethnic group, the majority remain foreign researchers. Under this new framework, authentic interpretations of Bassa culture by figures such as Mbombog have become exceedingly rare.

The influx of adherents to foreign religions, supported by the colonial government, has significantly undermined traditional animistic beliefs, with rituals conducted in churches and mosques gradually replacing indigenous practices rooted in nature. Consequently, religious leaders in these new spaces emerged as the authoritative figures on how the world should be understood.

In modern educational institutions, which are founded on a scientific curriculum, teachers have supplanted Mbombog as the primary vehicles for

knowledge dissemination. Both in the Bassa people's interpretation of the world beyond their community and in the broader world's understanding of the Bassa and their culture, Mbombog has lost his position as a central interpretive authority. His presence is no longer deemed necessary for such interpretations, highlighting a profound loss and displacement in the frameworks through which cultural narratives and worldviews are constructed.

5. CONCLUSION

While Cameroon achieved independence, the ambitions of the Cameroon People's Union faced failure under the new colonial puppet government. The transformation of Mbombog into a mere ceremonial figure reflects strategic concessions linked to existential realities faced by the Bassa people. Traditional leaders strive to maintain their significance through cultural and ceremonial avenues. The disruptions caused by colonial forces have undermined small group political identity, paving the way for broader regional identifications within a new state framework.

Cameroon, located at the gateway to the western coast of Central Africa, is a key member of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC). As a regional power, the country boasts the Port of Douala, which serves as a critical transit hub for goods flowing into the interior of various countries and is often referred to as the economic capital of Cameroon. The modern deep-water port of Kribi, situated along the Gulf of Guinea, stands as the largest port by throughput in Cameroon and the entire Central African region.

In the urban areas of Yaoundé the political capital, and Douala, along with Kribi, live the relatively under-researched Bassa people, alongside other ethnic groups that share similar social structures and customs. Accompanying the urbanization sparked by colonial history, a significant influx of tribal members has moved to the cities, including the Ngue community, which is rarely discussed in scholarly literature. This transition underscores a disconnect between what should be a familiar group and the broader society.

Despite the disintegration of their original social structures and the waning influence of traditional tribal leaders, the historical existence and roles of these communities must be recognized as significant components of African history deserving of attention and discourse.

15. Jean-Marcel Eugene Wongou, *Les Basaa du Cameroun: Monographie Historique d'apres la Tradition Orale* (The Bassa in Cameroon: A Historical Monograph Based on Oral Traditio), Niamey: CELHTO, 2010, p. 81.

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