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LIVING AT THE FOREST FRONTIERS: LIVELIHOOD DYNAMICS, RESOURCE DEPENDENCE, AND HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIONS IN THE MOUNT CAMEROON FOREST LANDSCAPE, SOUTHWEST CAMEROON

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Abstract

Forests and trees have an important role to play in poverty reduction. Man exploits forests for timber and other non-timber products. The forest has thus for the past years been the main source of subsistence for communities living in or near it. They have depended on the forest for livelihood needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, clothing, energy and source of income. This has led to his continuous exploitation of nature for food and other livelihood options, a practice which continues to have an unintended but damaging effect on the environment. The study suggests mechanisms and strategies for integrating community participation in sustainable forest resource management in the Mt. Cameroon forest reserve area in Buea Sub-Division. This research is qualitative ethnographic research that made use of qualitative techniques like; in-depth-interviews, observations and the focused group discussion as tools for data collection**.** Both primary and secondary sources of data collection were employed, the convenient sampling technique was used to choose the sampling population and a purposive sampling approach was adopted as the main sampling method for the study. Content analysis was the main technique used in analyzing data. Data analysis was based on the research questions and objectives of the work**.** Findings shows that actors concerned with management of forest resource have failed in their policies and activities with their target communities in forest conservation making them ineffective in the introduction and follow-up of other income-generating activities. Community Participation should be globally recognised as an effective strategy in the management and conservation of forest resource in the Mt. Cameroon forest reserve area in Buea Sub-Division. It is therefore recommended that participation should be taken as a 2-way learning process of dialogue, negotiation and decision-making between government and local communities concerning activities of forest management. Any participatory approach should therefore aim at local empowerment and accountability of individuals within the community.

Keywords:

Livelihood Strategies; Human-Environment Interactions; Political Ecology; Forest-Adjacent Communities; Indigenous Knowledge; Conservation and Livelihoods; Mount Cameroon; Sub-Saharan Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Forests and trees have an important role to play in poverty reduction. Man exploits forests for timber and other non-timber products. The forest has thus for the past years been the main source of subsistence for communities living in or near it. They have depended on the forest for livelihood needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, clothing, energy and source of income (Okafor, 1995; 1998; Kabuye, 1998; Neumann, 2000 and FAO, 2001b). Humanity stands at a defining moment in history, where man traces his origin, culture and indigenous knowledge from his environment. Forests are a source of such key variables and resources. Forests are of recreational importance to man and their products and environments are essential to the survival of a rapidly changing global ecosystem. On the human side, there is widespread poverty and loss of indigenous knowledge among forest inhabitants. As a result, most global mountain forest areas are experiencing environmental degradation. The proper management of forest resources and socio-economic development of the people deserve immediate attention. About 10% of the world's population depends on forest resources for food and medicinal products (African Journal of Plant Science Vol. 5(4), pp. 237-247, April 2011). A much larger percentage draws on other forest resources like honey, fodder, charcoal and especially water. Forest resources feed, treat, educate (through indigenous knowledge) and clothe us. The current decline in biodiversity is largely the result of human activity and represents a serious threat to human development.

The success or failures to manage conflicts arising from the exploitation of natural resources is determined by changes brought about by sequences of historical events and the rights of indigenous communities in natural resources management (Ngwasiri, 2001). The colonization experience of African States brought severe socio-economic and political challenges that aroused from rules and policies instituted by colonial lords. In Cameroon, the *divide-and-rule policy* of colonial *gangsters* expressed through indirect rule in the former British Southern Cameroons, assimilation and “association” in French Cameroon contributed significantly in distorting the ways in which “indigenous” traditional Cameroonian communities handled natural resources management and conflicts arising thereto. According to studies by Ngwasiri (2001), the colonial policies on natural resources management were intended to guarantee the regular supply of agricultural and forestry resources to Europe. These policies generated conflicts and smoldering antipathy from the indigenous populations as exemplified by the Bakweri land problem (Ngwasiri 1995; Mbuagbaw and Lambi 2003).

The natural forest environment has erroneously been considered by many as an unlimited reserve of wealth (Tassah, 2018) and this is/has been the reason why humanity continued to exploit it for food and other livelihood options. This has resulted in unintended negative effects on the natural ecosystems and the environment and a corresponding drop in the products and services provided. Increasing deforestation and land degradation has led to loss of water catchments, destruction of habitat for some species like monkeys, birds, drills, soil erosion, and loss of soil nutrients and equally disruption in the natural climatic cycles. The implications have been a fall in agricultural productivity and the extinction of some flora species like *Prunus Africana, cola subopposititifolia, Mbibabdon* and fauna such as *drill, preuss monkey,* Mt. Cameroon *Speirops,* on which humanity depends for food and subsistence (FAO, 1999, FAO, 2001a).

However, the human race stands at a defining moment in history, where man traces his origin, culture and indigenous knowledge from the environment. Mountains forests however,

accommodate such key resources as their recreational importance to man and services provided are essential to the survival of a rapidly changing global ecosystems with significant implications on climate change. On the human side, there is widespread poverty and loss of indigenous knowledge among mountain inhabitants (Beauchamp E and Ingram V. 2011). As a result, most global mountain areas are experiencing rapid environmental degradation and their potentials in regulating global climatic alterations have been on a downward spiral in recent times. According to (Veranso M.C. et al., (2011): *African Journal of Plant Science* Vol. 5(4), pp. 237-247, April 2011), about 10% of the world's population depends on mountain resources for food and medicinal products. A much larger percentage draws on other mountain resources like honey, fodder, charcoal and especially water. As mountains remain a warehouse of biological diversity and a home to many endangered species, the proper management of these mountain forest resources and the socio-economic development of mountain communities deserve urgent attention (Beauchamp E and Ingram V. 2011).

Mountain areas accommodate huge varieties of ecological systems. There is however, very limited knowledge on mountain forest ecosystems as these resources feed, treats, educates (through indigenous knowledge) and clothes humanity. They also provide humans with housing, medicines and spiritual nourishment. The current decline in biodiversity is largely the result of human activities and represents a serious threat to human development (Vabi, M.B., (2000). Despite mounting efforts over the past years, the loss of the world's biological diversity, mainly from habitat destruction for medicinal and food purposes, over-harvesting, consumption, pollution due to forest conversion for agriculture has continued. Forest resources constitute a capital asset with great potential for yielding sustainable benefits (Amungwa FA (2009).

According to studies by FAO (1995), forests and trees have an important role to play in poverty reduction and the stabilization of the natural climatic cycles. Humanity exploits forests for timber and other non-timber products. The forest has thus, for the past years been the main source of subsistence for communities living in or near it. They have depended on the forest for livelihood needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, clothing, energy and as a source of income (Okafor, 1995; 1998; Kabuye, 1998; Neumann, 2000 and FAO, 2001b). As poverty remain a complex, multidimensional problem which originates from both the local and national domains. The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution and human resource development constitute major challenges everywhere. This is one of the major reasons why people turn to the forest for livelihood. Poverty and environmental degradation are closely interrelated. While poverty results in environmental stress, the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment and forest destruction has been the unsustainable pattern of human consumerism. Therefore, the efficient use of forest resources should be consistent with the goal of minimizing depletion and reducing pollution and adjusting to the current patterns of human consumerism (Desloges C., 1998).

In order to meet the challenges of the environment and development, States decided to establish a New Global Partnership. This partnership commits all States to engage in a continuous and constructive dialogue in conserving forest resources and increasing their capacity to serve as carbon sinks while enhancing biodiversity protection. This view is inspired by the need to achieve a more efficient and equally more equitable world economy (I U N, 1994). It is for these reasons that the management of forest resources has vaulted to the top of the global political agenda with the increasing dominance of institutions, particularly the World Bank, the World Conservation Union, World Resources Institute, World Wildlife Fund for Nature

(WWF), the Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP), German–Cameroon Cooperation (GIZ), Environmental Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF), Green Cameroon, Pro Climate International and the Mount Cameroon Ecotourism Organization (Mt.CEO), of which the creation of the Mt. Cameroon National Park (MCNP) in the South West Region of Cameroon is vital for launching programs that contribute to the sustainable development of mountain ecosystems in Buea Sub-division. Cameroon is well endowed with both varieties and abundance of living things, together referred to as biodiversity. The rapid degradation of forest resources for food and traditional medicine has become a central concern with natural and social scientists (WWF and IUCN, 1994, Mboh, 2001). The exact scale of forest resources loss in the Mt. Cameroon Area through animal and natural plant consumption and over exploitation at the local, national and international level is unknown.

The entire earth depends on the natural environment for survival. The forest for instance provides a multiplicity of functions that support the socio-cultural as well as the economic life of man. Cameroon for example is one of the countries endowed with a variety of natural resources which support 70% of the population in the primary sector of the economy. The Mt. Cameroon Forest is a unique forest ecosystem located in the Southwest region of Cameroon. The forest is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, and it is an important resource for local communities who rely on it for their livelihoods. Indigenous management systems around the Mt. Cameroon forest, like those elsewhere, manage and maximize diversity as a way of reducing risk and maintaining a range of livelihood strategies in keeping with tradition, taste and personal preference. In this way, these systems support health, and provide a ‘safety net’ or ‘natural insurance’ during seasonal and cyclical food gaps, and during difficult years while also promoting resilience in an area long characterized by change. Forests support livelihoods by providing security, basic materials for life (goods, food and shelter), contributing to peoples’ freedom of choice and action (Veranso M.C. et al., 2011).
The forest serves as a milieu for forest products for income generation and increased living standard and provide the community with resources to support livelihood such as firewood, honey, medicine, charcoal, food, timber and non-timber products, other wood, forage, and some class C animals for food like; frutambo, porcupine, giant rat, cane rat, vegetables, cocoyam, pear, fruits and plantains as food for home consumption and marketing to alleviate poverty and increased their standard of living. This same forest to the people is an arena where libations are poured, cultural and ritual sacrifices made for the protection of their community from external hostilities. The community is bound to depend on the forest for livelihood since the forest resources contributes greatly in transforming their lives and come along with certain benefits. The mystical qualities of specific forest resources often play a crucial role in traditional healing practices (Ardener, 1996).

Forest products are used in healing throughout Cameroon in particular and West Africa in general, depending on the mystical values associated with the different forest species. Also, forest foods feature in cultural ceremonies like marriage, funerals, initiation, installation of chiefs, and birth celebrations. Palm wine and cola nuts are important symbolic foods throughout humid West Africa. The forest area has a symbolic and mystical power (Evasa Moto) valued by the Bakweris of South West Cameroon. The people derive significant benefits from relying on forest resources like honey, medicine, food, vegetables, animals, timber and non-timber forest products in the mount Cameroon forest for their livelihood. Increasing deforestation and land degradation for livelihoods support has led to loss of water catchments, destruction of habitat for some species like monkeys, birds, drills, soil erosion, and loss of soil nutrients and

equally disruption in the natural climatic cycles (Ardener, 1996). The implications have been a fall in agricultural productivity and the extinction of some flora species like *Prunus Africana, cola subopposititifolia, Mbibabdon* and fauna such as *drill, preuss monkey,* Mt. Cameroon *Speirops,* on which humanity depends for food and subsistence.

The rapid degradation of forest resources for food and traditional medicine has become a central concern with natural and social scientists. Deforestation and forest degradation continue to ravage global forests at an alarming rate. With an estimated population growth rate of 2.6% (World fact book, 2013), one will definitely expect these forest resources to come under greater pressure in the near future as poverty and economic hardship also worsen. Mankind cannot fail to praise the commitment of international agencies and civil society organizations which draw public attention to these issues and offer critical cooperation, employing legitimate means of pressure, to ensure that each government carries out its proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve its country's environment and natural resources, without capitulating to spurious local or international interests.

Traditional institutions, community leaders and the local council, in partnership with external agencies like the government of Cameroon and NGOs to manage and conserve the forest resources of the Mt Cameroon, these agencies in collaboration with the local community and community based organizations have introduced and encouraged alternative income generating activities like Bee Farming; Livestock Farming; Pig Farming, Snail Farming, Mush Room Farming, Cane Rat Farming and Ecotourism in the community. For instance, in Bokwaongo, there is the Mt. Cameroon Prunus Harvesters Organization (MUCAP) and in Bonakanda, there exist the Bonakanda – Bova Bee Farmers Common Initiative Group which were created and encouraged to conserve the forest resources. It stands out today in the community as one of the outstanding alternative income-generating activity contributing to the wellbeing of the inhabitants who are involved in these communities and many other neighbouring communities around and at the slope of the Mt Cameroon forest. These activities were introduced to conserve the forest and its resources and increase the livelihood of the community members and also to divert their attention from illegally exploiting and relying solely on the forest for livelihood.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic case study design to investigate livelihood dynamics, forest-resource dependence and human–environment interactions in the Mount Cameroon forest landscape, Buea Sub-Division, Southwest Cameroon. Fieldwork was conducted in four communities: Bonakanda, Bokwango, Buea Town and Likoko Membea. These communities were selected because of their proximity to Mount Cameroon National Park and the significance of forest resources to local livelihoods. Previous studies by Mount Cameroon National Park, Mount Cameroon Environmental Organizations and other conservation institutions indicate that communities within five kilometers of forest boundaries exert considerable pressure on forest resources, with dependence and environmental impacts generally declining as distance increases. Beyond ten kilometers, such impacts are reportedly less significant. The selected communities therefore provided an appropriate setting for examining the relationship between forest dependence, livelihood activities and conservation practices.

A multistage sampling strategy combining cluster, simple random, convenience, purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to facilitate participant selection. The four study

communities constituted the geographical clusters for organising fieldwork. Simple random sampling was used to select the communities from the identified eligible settlements, while proportionate allocation ensured that the initial sample reflected their respective population sizes. Within the selected communities, convenience sampling was used to approach accessible households. Purposive sampling facilitated the identification of key informants, including traditional rulers, village elders, community leaders, women, youths and individuals with direct experience of forest-resource utilisation and conservation. Snowball sampling complemented this process by enabling initial participants to identify additional individuals with relevant knowledge and experience. The target population comprised 15,121 inhabitants (Buea Council, 2014). An initial sample size of 178 participants was estimated using the single-population proportion formula, supported by Epi Info version 6.04d (CDC, 2001). The calculation employed a 95% confidence level (Z = 1.96), an estimated prevalence of 70% and an absolute precision of 7%. The resulting figure provided a preliminary guide for organising fieldwork and distributing participants across the four communities rather than establishing statistical representativeness.

Accordingly, the initial sample was proportionately allocated as follows: Bokwango (20), Bonakanda (26), Buea Town (99) and Likoko Membea (33). However, consistent with the qualitative ethnographic orientation of the study, participant selection also prioritised relevant experience, indigenous knowledge and familiarity with forest-resource utilisation and management. Purposive and snowball sampling facilitated the inclusion of information-rich participants whose experiences provided deeper insights into community livelihoods, resource dependence and conservation practices. The combined sampling approaches therefore ensured geographical coverage and diversity of perspectives while maintaining the contextual depth required for ethnographic investigation.

Table 1: Distribution of Sample Size by Communities

Communities	**Population**	**Weight**	**Sample size (number of participants to be sampled)**
Bokwango	1721	0.113815	20
Bonakanda	2200	0.145493	26
Buea Town	8400	0.555519	99
LikokoMembia	2800	0.185173	33
Total	**15121**	**1**	**178**

Source: Field work (2026).

Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data collection involved semi-structured individual and household interviews, focus group discussions, and direct and participant observation. Interview guides containing open-ended and closed-ended questions provided consistency while allowing respondents to express their experiences, perceptions and indigenous knowledge. Interviews focused on livelihood strategies, patterns of forest-resource utilisation, community dependence on forest resources, challenges associated with conservation and local approaches to sustainable forest management. Participants aged 25 years and above were engaged, with particular attention to traditional authorities, elders, women, youths, community leaders and individuals involved in forest-related activities. Household interviews

provided information on livelihood practices and the socioeconomic importance of forest resources, while individual interviews offered opportunities for discussing sensitive experiences in greater privacy. Four focus group discussions, comprising four to six participants each, were conducted across the study communities. These discussions explored shared experiences, differences in perceptions and community perspectives on forest utilisation and conservation.

Direct and participant observations complemented the interviews and discussions by documenting livelihood activities, forest-resource exploitation and conservation initiatives undertaken by government institutions, local communities, Non-Governmental Organizations and research institutions. Photographs and field notes provided additional contextual evidence. Data collection was supported by audio recorders, cameras, notebooks and prepared interview guides. Interviews were conducted flexibly, with probing and clarification used to obtain detailed and reliable accounts. Secondary data were drawn from academic books, published and unpublished studies, institutional reports, historical records, electronic publications and relevant online materials. These sources provided historical and contextual information against which primary field evidence was examined.

Interview recordings and field notes were organised and transcribed largely verbatim to preserve participants' original expressions and contextual meanings. The data were examined thematically, with attention to recurring issues and patterns relating to livelihood activities, forest-resource dependence, indigenous knowledge, conservation practices and human–environment interactions. Initial codes were developed through repeated examination of the transcripts and field notes, grouped according to related ideas and subsequently organised into broader analytical themes corresponding to the research objectives. Evidence from individual interviews, focus group discussions, observations and documentary sources was compared to identify convergences, differences and emerging relationships. The integration of these sources facilitated methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

Fieldwork and data processing were undertaken over five months, from June to October 2026. This period provided sufficient time for establishing contact with community authorities, engaging households, conducting individual interviews and focus group discussions, undertaking field observations and documenting livelihood and forest-management activities across the four communities. The duration also accommodated transcription, organisation and preliminary analysis of the collected materials, including the comparison of interview accounts with observational and documentary evidence. The extended engagement was particularly important for an ethnographic case study, which required sustained interaction with community members to understand their livelihood practices, indigenous knowledge and experiences of forest-resource management.

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research to protect participants' rights, privacy and well-being. A research permit was obtained from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Buea, before field engagement. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their expected involvement and the intended use of the information collected. Their informed consent was obtained before participation, and involvement remained entirely voluntary, with participants free to decline or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that personal information and responses were used exclusively for research purposes and handled with discretion. The

study also respected participants' privacy, cultural values and community protocols. In accordance with the principle of fair treatment, the researcher sought to minimise bias, maintain methodological integrity and report the findings accurately without fabrication or misrepresentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the study reveal that, amongst the 165 respondents sampled who use the forest resources or products for livelihood, 43.0% earn less than 30000FCFA, 40.6% 30000-100000 FCFA and only 16.4% earn above 100000 FCFA. The income is relatively low and indicates the poverty level of the respondents. A few factors account for this situation. German colonial rule expropriated vast lands from the Bakweris for plantation agriculture. The fertile, volcanic soils around Mt. Cameroon proved suitable for large scale plantation agriculture, especially for crops like banana, rubber, tea, coffee, cocoa and palms. More than 100,000ha of Bakweri land were thus expropriated. In 1964 these lands were leased by the British Trust Authority to the then newly-created CDC. This act led to the loss of the Bakweri ancestral lands (Ardener, 1996). Bakweri chiefs felt betrayed and even angered as they were totally ignored in the deal. The original occupants of the lands (the Bakweris), were expelled and sent to restrictive native reserves as German companies rushed to the area in a bid to get the best tracts of land (Konings, 1993). In protest, the Bakweris showed little enthusiasm in working on the plantations; at least not for menial jobs as semi-slave labourers in the plantations, and on their native land which was seized. They saw it as double exploitation by the Germans **(**Konings, 2001). This is why the people turn to the Mt. Cameroon forest for livelihood.

Findings equally revealed that malaria 61.2% is the major health problem faced by the communities. However, Ill health is linked to poverty and environmental degradation as. The absence of reliable and affordable healthcare has caused a high proportion of the population especially members of the local community to rely on medicinal plants for good health. Population pressure on a fragile resource base for medicinal purposes like *Prunus African* in the Mt. Cameroon forest area in Buea Sub-division has paved the way for environmental degradation. The continued reliance of the local populations on traditional medicines is partly attributable to the economic situation of the populations which places modern health facilities, services and pharmaceuticals out of the reach of the majority of the local population. Medicinal plants are of critical importance especially in poor communities where even relatively cheap western medicines remain prohibitively expensive. But in many cases, this importance is also attributable to the widespread and strong belief in the effectiveness of many traditional therapies. Despite the efforts of NGOs and Government in conserving the forest resources for sustainability, the local people still turn a blind eye to the efforts which poses significant implications on climate change mitigation.

Research findings further indicate that the target population was relatively young, with (53.3%) of them aged between 15-30 years, 18.5% between 31-45 years and 18.2% aged 46 years and above. The most active population are those who illegally exploit forest resources for livelihood and for income-generating activities. They are the most vulnerable and have to be sensitized on the need to respect existing forestry policies. Also, sustained youth employment will curb the high rate of youth unemployment and so make the communities adjacent to the forest less dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood.

Main Livelihood Strategies/Activities Practiced in the Community

Agriculture

Agriculture remains the backbone of Cameroons economy, employing 70% of its work force while providing 42% of its gross domestic product and 30% of its export revenue. Food security in Buea is presently challenged by rapidly growing and unplanned residential areas with serious ecological consequences, especially loss of farm lands which is needed to feed the ever-growing urban population (Ardener 1996). Agriculture plays a major role in economic growth and development. Before the introduction of plantation agriculture, the natives were involved in subsistence agriculture in which food crops such as cocoyam, plantains, beans, maize and yams were grown. The introduction of plantations led the natives to undertake cash crop production in crops like cocoa, palm products and coffee for export. This traditional leader stated that "we the Bakweri people are primarily subsistence farmers, cultivating crops such as plantains, bananas, yams, cassava, cocoyam, maize, vegetables and many more. We also engaged in cash crop farming like coffee, cocoa, and palm oil plantation" (Mafany Ngomba, 53years).

The population of Buea Sub-Division depends essentially on agriculture and to some extent on skilled work for their livelihood. It is very rare to find a family that is not involved in either one form of agricultural practice or another. According to findings, projections show that most of the people sampled are farmers and skilled workers, while a very small proportion are retired and an even smaller proportion are still fishermen. The limited space for agriculture has been over – exploited, mainly through the reduction of primary forest for housing construction and opening of schools and businesses. This environmental unsustainability has always led to low agricultural output which in turn has caused massive rural-urban migration in this area. The consequence has been that more pressure has been exerted on the forest resources, with the ensuing environmental degradation.

Local people use fire here for harvesting fuel wood and charcoal. Dry wood material and leaves are gathered round the tree and set on fire. When the tree falls, wood and charcoal is collected for household use and for sale. This is done and left over the night and because it is not supervised could become wild and burn huge portions of forest. Use of fire for honey harvesting is an old phenomenon here which sometimes results in destruction of forest and bee swamps. Also, the use of fire for road track during the Mt. Cameroon race of hope has resulted in the destruction of a large portion of the forest.

In addition**,** villagers, irrespective of the creation of the Cameroon forestry laws and the introduction of other alternative income generating activities by NGOs in Buea Sub-Division, they still illegally exploit forest products like timber, *Prunus Africana,* and other non-forest timber products like honey, animals, fuel wood, charcoal and fodder. Farming around the forest protected area is another major threat faced by the Mt Cameroon forest area and other protected community forests in the Buea Municipality. Villagers still go against the forestry laws to illegally carry out farming in and around the forest areas. Irrespective of these laws, communities adjacent to the forests still farm on restricted areas like the forest slope. This is so because the benefits accrue from management committee is small.

Trading

The Bakweris of Buea practice mixed farming and they hunt. Crops mostly cultivated are cocoyam, palm fruit but they mostly live on cocoyam. They sell the excess of their production.

Those who possessed many animals where consider as rich. They reared animals like pigs and bush cows, but they do not rear nor eat sheep. By trading food stuffs to the coast, and blocking the way of expedition into the interior, they had acquired considerable trade goods. Servants where taken inside the tribe, they were not payed but had free food. This described by this traditional leader as he explained that "*due to our proximity to the coast and various activities in Buea Sub-Division, many of us are involved in small-scale trade like bedspreads, café restaurant, food vendor etc, selling of agricultural products like cocoyam, plantains, vegetables, palm nuts, maize, fish and other goods in the local markets*" (Ngale Rose, 43years).

The social context of local communities in Buea Sub-Division is strongly influenced by economic misery. The native Bakweri ancestral lands were forcefully taken, occupied and transformed into vast plantation holdings by the Germans. This seizure continues to be viewed even today as one of the most shameful instances of abuse of the rights of the natives. The illegal selling of native lands by the "strangers" who sneaked in their families and resettled in Fako Division is still continuing till date in Buea Sub-Division. Today, it is not done by "strangers" or settlers but by agents of the Government (stakeholders) and sadly, even by some of the native Bakweri Chiefs and elites.

There has been a rise in unemployment, school dropout and household poverty. The rural poor are exposed to this misery. The poorest zones are therefore the rural zones where the protected reserves are found. To make ends meet and increase livelihood, there is pressure on forest resources through illegal poaching, over exploitation of forest resources and other illicit practices by this poor population. In addition, the foresters are few, poorly paid and ill equipped. There has been a steady rise in social conflicts due to poverty and poor training of park guards. The conservationist spends time settling conflicts rather than fully carrying out his responsibilities. The increase in misery and poverty has pushed the park guards out of the local communities and the local populations now take active part in illegal poaching and over exploitation of forest resources for livelihood.

Forest resources feed, treat, educate (through indigenous knowledge) and clothe the community members. The current decline in biodiversity is largely the result of human activity and represents a serious threat to human development. Poverty is a complex multidimensional problem which originates from both the local and national domains. The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution and human resource development remain major challenges everywhere. This is one of the major reasons why people tend to the forest for livelihood. The absence of a reliable and affordable healthcare has caused a high proportion of the population especially members of the local community to rely on the environment for good health. Paving way for environmental degradation. The inequitable distribution of income indicates the poverty level of the inhabitants. A few factors account for this situation; German colonial rule expropriated vast lands from the Bakweris for plantation agriculture. Poverty and environmental degradation are closely interrelated.

While poverty results in certain kinds of environmental stress, the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption by the communities living in or nearer the forest areas.

Wage Labour

Enjema Glory (41years), explained that

> "*in addition to our traditional livelihood activities, some of our community/clan members work as wage labourers in companies and institutions in and out of Buea Sub-Division such as in Education, Construction, Transportation and other Public and Private agencies/services. It is important to note that the livelihood activities of our people may vary depending on factors such as location, education and access to resources*" (Enjema xx, 41years).

The implementation of financial sustainability strategy of the village institutions is a problem. Village institutions are unable to make enough money to sustain their livelihood. The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution remain major challenges everywhere, especially in our local communities. This is one of the major reasons why the people turn to the forest for livelihood sustenance. The forest of Mt. Cameroon provides land for farming, wild foods and vegetables, medicinal plants, timber, fuel wood, craft materials, building materials, tools, bush meat, mushrooms, fibres, charcoal and wrapping leaves to the local population. This high dependence has led to increasing degradation of resources and exposure of the population to environmental hazards.

Alternative Income-Generating Activities introduced and practiced in the community

Traditional institutions have played a significant role in the management of forest resources around the world for centuries. Ethnographic studies have shown that these institutions are dynamic and adaptive, responding to changes in local and global contexts. In many traditional societies, forest resources are managed through customary laws and practices that are enforced by traditional leaders and institutions. These institutions are often deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of the communities they serve, and they play a critical role in the conservation and sustainable use of forest resources. One of the key features of traditional institutions is their ability to adapt to changing circumstances (West. P., & Brockington, D. 2006). For example, in response to increased pressure on forest resources due to population growth and globalization, many traditional institutions have developed and introduced alternative income generating activities at the level of the community in collaboration with the government and other agencies like NGOs.

They have also embraced new technologies and practices, such as community-based forest management and agroforestry, to ensure the sustainability of forest resources (West. P., & Brockington, D. 2006). Traditional leaders interviewed explained that their traditional institutions, community leaders and their local council, in partnership with external agencies like the government of Cameroon and NGOs to manage and conserve the forest resources of the mount Cameroon forest, the respondent reiterated that, these agencies in collaboration with the local community and community based organizations have introduced and encouraged alternative income generating activities like Bee Farming; Livestock Farming; Pig Farming, Snail Farming, Mush Room Farming, Cane Rat Farming and Ecotourism.

Plate 1: Livestock Farming



Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Mt.CEO introduced some of these activities to the local communities they work with to divert their attention from forest exploitation to forest conservation through the introduction of income-generating activities like livestock farming, mushroom cultivation and provide support to community agricultural projects like yam, plantains, and other non-timber products cultivation in communities like Bova, Bokwango, Likoko Membea, Bonakanda, and Muea. She also provided enormous support to the local communities in conserving the environment, alleviating poverty and enhancing self-employment in Buea Sub-Division by identifying and transforming hunters into potters, guides, guards and patrols for Mt. Cameroon forest as part of the inclusive approach to forest management.

Plate 2: Bee Farming



Source: Fieldwork, 2026

In the community of Bokaowngo, the people have the Mt. Cameroon Prunus Harvesters Organization (MUCAP) and the Bonakanda - Bova Bee Farmers Common Initiative Group was created and encouraged. It stands out today as one of the outstanding alternative income-generating activity contributors to the wellbeing of the inhabitants who are involved in these communities and many other communities around and at the slope of the mount Cameroon forest. These activities were introduced to conserve the forest and its resources and increase the livelihood for our community members and also to divert their attention from illegally exploiting and relying solely on the forest for livelihood.

Plate 3: Ecotourism



Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Pro Climate International, a Non - Governmental Organization based in Buea Sub-Division, introduced community livelihood and ecotourism activities which today stand out as having been very beneficial to the communities in and around Buea Sub - Division. Firstly, they transform hunters and illegal timber exploiters into porters and guides for mountain tours which is an income-generating activity for the youths involved; they supply improved cooking stoves for the communities around the mountain slopes to reduce forest wood consumption and indoor air pollution; they also created some activities to help people manage the forest resources by enhancing self-employment to alleviate poverty and increase living standards through;

- Transform hunters into guides and porters
- Identify illegal exploiters in the forest
- Assign guides and porters to take tourists up the mountain
- Organize trips to Mt. Cameroon and around the Sub Division
- Sensitize and educate local communities on forest management through ecotourism
- Trekking tours
- Community-based tourism activities
- The wonderful bag project realized to reduce the rate of indoor biodegradable waste

The Local community has signed Conservation Development Agreements with Park Service and are now actively collaborating in the protection and management of Parks, at the same time receiving development support in agriculture and infrastructure. Thus over 60 eco-guards, potters and guides to the mountain are currently working in the protected areas to ensure forest resource management as stipulated by the 1994 forestry laws. The community has developed joint control (control involving MINEF and wildlife management committees) in checking illegal hunters out of the system in some areas even though poaching still remains a problem. Joint control operations have succeeded greatly in reducing poaching and even stopping it in their community. The Community was invited to plan and participate in activities such as;

- Park boundary opening
- Wildlife monitoring
- Joint Patrols
- Inventories for non-timber products such as Prunus which are carried out jointly by the community members together with the Mt. Cameroon National Park**.**

Table 2: How the Community Members use Forest Resources to support their Livelihood.

Code	Code description	Respondents Quotation
Firewood	This is wood used to cook or making fire for other purposes.	*"The forest serves as a milieu for forest products for income generation and increased living standard and provides our community with resources to support livelihood such as firewood."* (Mrs. Mbella Judith, Notable, Farmer)
Honey	This a sweet yellow or brown liquid produced by bees from the nectar of flowers.	*"The Local people near the mountain area in Buea Sub-Division use fire for harvesting honey for local and economic development from the Mt. Cameroon forest area. This burning is usually done through the night. Use of fire for honey harvesting is an old phenomenon here which sometimes results in destruction of forest and bee swamps"* (Enjema Glory, 41years).
Medicine	This are natural plants and animals used to cure illnesses	*"The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution and human resource development remain major challenges everywhere. This is one of the major reasons why people tend to the forest for livelihood. The forest provides agricultural and medicinal products. The absence of a reliable and affordable healthcare has caused a high proportion of the population especially members of the local community to rely on the environment for good health"* (Enjema Glory, 41years).
Charcoal	This a carbonaceous material obtained by heating wood or other organic matter in the absence of air with a high combustible potential but producing high heat and less flame as compared to wood because of it low content in impurity.	*"Local people near the mountain forest area in Buea Sub-Division use fire for harvesting fuel wood and charcoal caused mainly by human activities such as tourism, farming, harvesting of fuel wood, honey and non-timber forest products for local and economic development"* (HRH Chief Mese, 80years).
Vegetated food	Any edible product from the forest.	"*Vegetables, cocoyam, pear, fruits and plantains as food for home consumption and marketing to alleviate poverty and increased our standard of living*." (HRH Chief Mese, 80years).
Timber	These are plant with lignin qualified as ligneous plants mostly used for construction purposes	"*The Forest and trees have an important role to play in poverty reduction. Man exploits forests for timber and other non-timber products. The forest has thus for the past years been the main source of subsistence for communities living in or near it. They have depended on the forest for livelihood needs such as food, shelter,*

		healthcare, clothing, energy and source of income"(Mr. Andreas Molua, Notable, Hunter)
Non-timber products	These are non-ligneous pants like Eru harvested mostly for consumption	"*Non-timber products*" (Mr. Andreas Molua, Notable, Hunter)
Forage	These are plants and fruits collected to feed animals	"*The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution and human resource development remain major challenges everywhere. This is one of the major reasons why people tend to the forest for livelihood. The forest provides agricultural and medicinal products*" (HRH Chief Mese, 80years).
Class C animals	These are animals with low extinction potential	"*some class C animals for food like; frutambo, porcupine, giant rat, cane rat*"
Sacred site	Forests are considered as Ancestors and gods home where spiritual connection is favorable because of the natural and peaceful environment.	"*This same forest to our community and people is an arena where libations are poured, cultural and ritual sacrifices made for the protection of our community from external hostilities*". (HRH Chief Mese, 80years).

Source: Fieldwork 2026

> *"Our community is bound to depend on the forest for livelihood since the forest resources contributes greatly in transforming our lives and come along with certain benefits. The forest serves as a milieu for forest products for income generation and increased living standard and provide our community with resources to support livelihood such as firewood, honey, medicine, charcoal, food, timber and non-timber products, other wood, forage, and some class C animals for food like; frutambo, porcupine, giant rat, cane rat, vegetables, cocoyam, pear, fruits and plantains as food for home consumption and marketing to alleviate poverty and increased our standard of living. This same forest to our community and people is an arena where libations are poured, cultural and ritual sacrifices made for the protection of our community from external hostilities"* (Andreas Nyoki, 51years).

The Bakweri people derive significant benefits from relying on forest resources like honey, medicine, food, vegetables, animals, timber and non-timber forest products in the mount Cameroon forest for their livelihood. The Bakweri and Bomboko tribes rely entirely on the mountain for cultural and traditional manifestations and practices. The mountain is generally considered as a shrine, with sacred places and spirits, and for this reason constitutes the backbone of the local culture and tradition. Several local myths of the people are derived from and referenced to the mountain. In this regard, the preservation of the mountain ecosystem is largely synonymous to the preservation of the local culture and tradition.

Hunters, especially those with hunting as their main occupation, prefer to continue operating illegally since individual benefits from uncontrolled hunting are higher than those offered by the rules and regulations of the wildlife management institutions. It has also been very difficult for Government to bring hunters that are not resident in the community to the discussion table. As a result, a high degree of illegal poaching still continues**.** Even though it cannot be denied

that weak logistical and human capacity is hindering accurate field monitoring of logging activities, at the same time the lapses in controlling illegal timber exploitation can partly be attributed to the nation's inefficient judicial system and widespread corruption. As Global Witness, the independent forestry observer in Cameroon has quickly found out, although there is currently no conflict in the country, "illegal logging is rife in Cameroon and corruption endemic in many stakeholders within the forest sector" (Forest Law Enforcement in Cameroon, 2001). Also, illegal logging "represents one of the greatest dangers in the sustainable management of forests in the country" and the practice distorts the conditions that allow access to timber, undermines measures to prevent exploitation and enables loggers to continue their illegal extractions with impunity (Global Corruption Report, 2003).

Main Benefits and Challenges associated with relying on forest resources for livelihood today

Numerous benefits associated with relying on forest resources for livelihood were identified by farmers.

Food and nutrition

These are products both plants and animals that used for feeding. This traditional leader explained that *"forest resources provide us with diverse range of food like cane rat, vegetables, cocoyam, pear, fruits and plantains. This ensures our nutritional needs are met"*.

Medicinal Plants

These are plants that are used to treat illnesses. According to this community leader

> *"the Mt. Cameroon forest is a rich source of medicinal plants which our people use for traditional healing practices. Ill health is linked to poverty. It is observed that people are forced to rely on the environment as is the case with Prunus African to improve their health condition. Medicinal plants are of critical importance especially in poor communities where even relatively cheap western medicines remain prohibitively expensive. These plants also play an important cultural economic role. The bark, leaves and roots are traditionally used either singly or in association with other ingredients to tackle a number of ailments including malaria, typhoid, chest infections, stomach ache, rheumatism and gonorrhea. "This knowledge has been passed down through generations and has contributed greatly to our healthcare"* (Andreas Nyoki, 52years).

The absence of a reliable and affordable healthcare has caused a high proportion of the population especially members of the local community to rely on the environment for good health. Ill health is linked to poverty and environmental degradation. It is observed that the rural poor are forced to rely on the environment to improve their health condition. Population pressure on a fragile resource base for medicinal purposes as is the case with Prunus African in the Mt Cameroon forest area in Buea Sub-Division has paved the way for environmental degradation. Medicinal plants are of critical importance especially in poor communities where even relatively cheap western medicines remain prohibitively expensive. These plants also play an important cultural economic role. The bark, leaves and roots are traditionally used either singly or in association with other ingredients to tackle a number of ailments including malaria, typhoid, chest infections, stomach ache, rheumatism and gonorrhea.

Income Generation

These are activities or resources that help the community to generate money or cash. This community leader identified number of them "*forest resources such as timber and non-timber products, handicraft materials are sold in local markets, providing us with income opportunities to sustain our livelihood and reduce poverty as most of the farmers are poor and they do not have enough money to invest in their farming activities*". The forest serves as a milieu for forest products for income generation and increased living standard. The forest also provides the communities with timber and non-timber products and some class C animals as food like vegetables, pears, fruits, plantain, and cocoyam to alleviate poverty and increase their living standard. Also, it is an arena where libations are poured, cultural ritual sacrifices made for protection of the communities.

Main challenges associated with relying on forest resources for livelihood

Traditional leaders identified numerous challenges associated with relying on forest resources for livelihood today.

Loss of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

There is growing loss of traditional knowledge, due to increase inclination towards Western languages and norms, intruded during colonization and maintain by post-colonial regimes. This plight is magnified by rural-urban migration as opined by Sophie Mbua (40years)

> "*Due to widespread poverty, a majority of our younger generations increasingly migrate to urban areas for greener pastures and better live. There is risk of losing our traditional ecological knowledge, loss of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices among mountain inhabitants related to the management of forest resources. As a result, the Mt Cameroon forest is experiencing environmental degradation and this threatens the cultural heritage of our people. The proper management of mountain resources and socio-economic development of the people deserve immediate attention*" (Sophie Mbua, 40years).

Humanity stands at a defining moment in history, where man traces his origin, culture and indigenous knowledge from his environment. Forests are a source of such key variables and resources. Forests are of recreational importance to man and their products and environments are essential to the survival of a rapidly changing global ecosystem. With the coming of external actors like the Government, Christianity, NGOs and other Environmental Agencies, new approaches have seen the day as explained in the following section, but which cannot actually be considered as traditional authentic to the Bakweri people. Christianity has taken over and there is no fear of nature and the gods anymore, even the '*magic stick'* (with spiritual values) on the mountain was cut down without fear that is why all is going wrong. The people have abandoned their *mooka/ikuma* or shrines that are why all is going wrong. The powers '*nginya*' given to the people by the gods are not as they should be because the beliefs are not respected, this is not correct. God '*Lohwa*' who gave them these beliefs knows why, therefore, they should be respected and incorporated in the resources management process.

Today, Christianity has infiltrated their traditional beliefs, *mojeeli* (strangers) increasing exploitation and disobeying their customs. The management (Government) has undermined the bakweri beliefs and customs and preventing them from their resources. The government, strangers or *mojeeli* and Christianity as being responsible for the degradation as a result of not

practising the beliefs. Christianity has influenced the practice of traditional beliefs which affects protection of the sacred groves in Buea Sub-Division. The chariot of the gods is destroyed because the traditional beliefs and customs are not enshrined in the management of the forest and the local people are relegated. The management does not encourage traditional forest conservation to prevail through beliefs systems. Nonetheless, there is need to understand the complexities and dynamics of these systems in order to achieve sustainable management of the forest resources in the Mt. Cameroon forest.

The mountain is a site of ancestral heritage for the Bakweri. Most of these practices have received violent denunciations of Westerners and more particularly, Western Missionaries who share with their colonialist brethren the built in conviction that they represent a "superior culture." The Bakweri have been largely Christianised since the 1970s. Evangelical denominations dominate, particularly the Baptist church. Christianity plays an important role in Bakweri regions, where many of their traditional practices and belief systems have been abandoned. Christianity has infiltrated their traditional beliefs, *mojeeli* (strangers) increasing exploitation and disobeying their customs.

The Bakweri people are burying their culture and buying the Whiteman's culture but the plants and animals around Mt. Fako understand their traditional language not that of the Whiteman and now their livelihoods are going down showing the death of their traditional beliefs. Formally certain rituals and libation were done before felling a tree or killing an animal and the purpose for the act has to be justified during the libation but today, their traditional beliefs are not enshrined in the management process of forest resources. On the human side, there is widespread poverty and loss of indigenous knowledge among forest inhabitants. As a result, most global mountain forest areas are experiencing environmental degradation.

Rural Urban Migration

The youth that was supposed to serve the relay in using traditional ecological knowledge to sustain the conservation of forests are now leaving to the cities. The concern of this leader about this matter is obvious "*the youth that was supposed to serve the relay in using traditional ecological knowledge to sustain the conservation of forests are now leaving to the cities*".

The modern life style of having a job going to school, and a host of other activities has made the modern Bakwerie man too busy to adequately attend to cultural matters as opposed to the past when life was a lot more simpler and they had time to interact with one another in the villages and not only devote time to their cultural practices but also found time to teach the younger generation. Others blame the changing patterns of these to rapid urbanization and the influx of many other foreign cultures in to the Bakwerie communities. According to the above respondent, too many strangers and urbanization is a barrier to freely exercise the Bakweri culture. Christianity has infiltrated the peoples' traditional beliefs, with mojeeli (strangers) increasing exploiting and disobeying their customs.

The management has undermined their beliefs and customs and prevent them from their resources. A good number of the respondents blame the changes experienced by these on Christianity. They claim that Christianity discourages Bakwerians from belonging to these secret cults. Even those who are part of these dances sometimes refuse to be part of our ritual rites terming them satanic. Some Christians go as far as refusing to initiate their kids into the cult. "How then do they transmit their culture to the future generation on how to use their Traditional Ecological Knowledge in managing their forest resources?

Climate Change Impacts

Over the past decades, environmentalists have been raising alarm on the inconsistency of climatic patterns as far as temperature, rainfall, windy for the main ones are concerned. The related impacts on human and biodiversity as well as bio-geo-physical systems were perceived to be more and more detrimental to human and natural equilibrium. These impacts were equally well perceived by the traditional leaders "*We are experiencing irregularity in rainfall, the place is warmer, a lot of damage due to flood and wind*". They further clarified that climate change leads to unpredictable weather patterns, affecting the availability and productivity of forest resources. Forest conversion for agriculture purposes has climate consequences. As forest conversion in Mt. Cameroon area occurs, carbon stored in vegetation and soil is released as carbon dioxide (CO2) through the burning and decomposition of biomass and oxidation of soil organic matter. The increase in CO2 is responsible for about half of the total global warming potentials from human activities (inter-Governmental panel on climate change 1990). The increasing loss of biodiversity has result in an imbalance in the global ecosystem. This is because there is a complex relationship between biodiversity and human welfare. Thus it has negatively impacted the lives of the people, food security and income generation.

Deforestation

Destruction of forest and other vegetation types by mainly anthropogenic factors has been demonstrated to accounting a lot in climate change and the reduction of natural potential to provide for human. Increased settlement also contributes a lot. Traditional leaders were actually aware of this problem

> "*Deforestation due to logging, expansion of urban areas for development, high human population growth, agricultural expansion, and infrastructural development threatens the availability of forest resources. This has diminished our access to essential livelihood resources and has in also provoked landslides like the recent occurrence in the Buea Town neighbourhood in Buea Sub-Division*" (Lucy, 54years).

Population dynamic has been identified as a major culprit to reckon with as it was perceived that Buea Sub-Division as a case in point is becoming increasingly more diverse. The demographic shift is attributed to the continual immigration of non-natives for diverse activities, most especially for economic and agricultural purposes. Mt. Cameroon, with its richness in black volcanic soils, rich vast rain forest, and fascinating volcanic craters and "Mann spring", plant species for traditional medicine and animal species for food and income-generating activity, has been admired by its inhabitants who solely depend on it for livelihood.

Uncontrolled Hunting activity is higher than when they have to operate by the rules and regulations of the Community Wildlife Management Institutions. It has been very difficult to bring hunters that are not resident in the community to the discussion table, reasons being that small hunting permits are far too expensive for a village hunter to acquire compared to small permits for artisan timber exploitation. Faced with this financial barrier, the local hunters prefer to go underground and carry out illegal hunting using unsustainable methods to maximize their exploits. In this case, endangered species are also killed. The wider village community is very reluctant to embrace community and municipal forest management policies because the financial benefits accruing from them are very low.

It is very difficult to involve all hunters in the process. Some hunters, especially those whose main occupation is hunting, continue to operate illegally since individual benefits from

uncontrolled hunting are higher than when they have to operate by the rules and regulations of the Community Wildlife Management Institutions.

In addition, the Mt. Cameroon region in West Africa is one of the sites where the equatorial rainforest is disappearing at a fast pace due to agricultural plantation expansion, illegal poaching, over exploitation of timber and non-timber forest products and rapid urban development. Local people near the mountain forest area in Buea Sub-Division use fire for harvesting fuel wood and charcoal caused mainly by human activities such as tourism, farming, harvesting of fuel wood, honey and non-timber forest products for local and economic development, and because it is not supervised, it sometimes goes wild and burns huge portions of the forest, paving the way for environmental degradation.

Land Conflicts

Traditional leaders were generally of the opinion that dispute over land has increased in their communities and they were generally aware that sustainable development is not possible without peace. In fact, development cannot be properly and sustainably planned on dispute land. This concern was raised by several of them

> "*As the mount Cameroon forest is increasingly encroached upon, conflicts arise between our local people and external actors such as logging companies, the government, who claim ownership over our forest lands, our heritage. This has disrupts our traditional way of life. For example, the vast lands of the Bakweris were expropriated during the German colonial rule for plantation agriculture. In 1964 these same lands were leased by the British Trust Authority to the newly-created CDC. This double act led to the loss of Bakweri ancestral lands (Ardener 1996), and filled the Bakweri chiefs with a sense of betrayal. These chiefs felt that they should have been consulted in the matter as custodians of the land. This feeling of betrayal has since then continued to exacerbate the indigenous land conflict in Buea Sub-Division, seen in the wrangle between Government and the indigenous Bakweris over the use and the management of the Mt. Cameroon forest*" (Enjema Mokake, 41years).

This to an extent is due to the fact that, on the 6th July, 1974, the Government of Cameroon promulgated law No.74-1 that laid down the rules and modalities governing land tenure in Cameroon making a distinction between private and national lands, which later served as the basis for reflecting prior Bakweri claims to the CDC lands on the grounds that they are ancestral and national lands. For the Bakweris, however, the land issue has continued to be a matter of priority, especially as the government is making full use of the powers it had been granted by the 1974 land law to confiscate increasing amounts (more than 100000hectares) of native land in the name of imperative interest and defense of the economic policies of the state (Interview with Barrister Ikome by Cameroon Daily Journal; retrieved March 18th, 2015).

This therefore explains why many indigenes still depend on forest resources as stressed by some community members. "Also, a major problem identified in the implementation of the strategy is financial sustainability of the village institutions. Village institutions are unable to make enough money to sustain their livelihood. The eradication of poverty and hunger, greater equity in income distribution remain major challenges everywhere,

especially in our local communities. This is one of the major reasons why our people turn to the forest for livelihood sustenance"

The vast lands of the Bakweris were expropriated during the German colonial rule for plantation agriculture. In 1964 these same lands were leased by the British Trust Authority to the newly-created CDC. This double act led to the loss of Bakweri ancestral lands (Ardener 1996), and filled the Bakweri chiefs with a sense of betrayal. These chiefs felt that they should have been consulted in the matter as custodians of the land. This feeling of betrayal has since then continued to exacerbate the indigenous land conflict in Buea Sub-Division, seen in the wrangle between Government and the indigenous Bakweris over the use and the management of the Mt. Cameroon forest.

This was further emphasized by this other community leader in these terms

> "*overall, while our people derive significant benefits from relying on forest resources like honey, medicine, food, vegetables, animals, timber and non-timber forest products in the mount Cameroon forest for their livelihood, they also face numerous challenges that need to be addressed to ensure their sustainable development and the preservation of their Traditional Ecological Knowledge on conservation and forest management and the preservation of their cultural heritage*" (Mafany Monono, 53years).

The Bakweri and Bomboko tribes rely entirely on the mountain for cultural and traditional manifestations and practices. The mountain is generally considered as a shrine, with sacred places and spirits, and for this reason constitutes the backbone of the local culture and tradition. Several local myths of the people are derived from and referenced to the mountain. In this regard, the preservation of the mountain ecosystem is largely synonymous to the preservation of the local culture and tradition.

Community Participation and Forest Governance

Conservation Organizations

According to community members, NGOs participate highly in the management of forest resources, and this is done through financial support, provision of material like wheel barrows, cutlasses, hoes, pipes to connect community water, school equipment, building materials for community halls and other constructions, scholarships, and capacity building through alternative income-generating activities and young breeds. Some of these NGOs that played a great participatory role in forest management are:

The Mt. Cameroon Ecotourism Organization (Mt.CEO) created with the following objectives:

- Transform hunters into guides and porters;
- Identify illegal exploiters in the forest;
- Assign guides and porters to take tourists up the mountain;
- Organize trips to Mt. Cameroon and around the Sub Division;
- Sensitize and educate local communities on forest management through ecotourism;
- Identify and institute alternative livelihood projects in local communities;

Mt.CEO introduced some of these activities to the local communities they work with to divert their attention from forest exploitation to forest conservation through the introduction of income-generating activities like ecotourism, mushroom cultivation and provide support to community agricultural projects like yam, plantains, and other non-timber products cultivation in communities like Bova, Bokwango, Likoko Membea, Bonakanda, and Muea. She also

provided enormous support to the local communities in conserving the environment, alleviating poverty and enhancing self-employment in Buea Sub-Division by identifying and transforming hunters into potters, guides, guards and patrols for Mt. Cameroon forest as part of the inclusive approach to forest management.

Pro Climate International, a Non - Governmental Organization based in Buea Sub-Division, has introduced community livelihood activities which today stand out as having been very beneficial to the communities in and around Buea Sub - Division. Firstly, they transform hunters and illegal timber exploiters into porters and guides for mountain tours which is an income-generating activity for the youths involved; they supply improved cooking stoves for the communities around the mountain slopes to reduce forest wood consumption and indoor air pollution; they also created some activities to help people manage the forest resources by enhancing self-employment to alleviate poverty and increase living standards through;

- Trekking tours;
- Community-based tourism activities;
- The wonderful bag project realized to reduce the rate of indoor biodegradable waste;
- Sensitization projects like basketball development for environmental and health problems introduced in schools in and around the communities.

Traditional authorities/ Local Communities

Community involvement in the management was satisfactory as participants so agreed. Collaborative management should give more consideration as requested by the community members. Communities were however well involved in ecotourism activities, but they received very little benefits from stakeholders as only a minority so agreed. Local communities have signed Conservation Development Agreements with Park Service and are now actively collaborating in the protection and management of Parks, at the same time receiving development support in agriculture and infrastructure. Thus over 60 eco-guards, potters and guides to the mountain are currently working in the protected areas to ensure forest resource management as stipulated by the 1994 forestry laws.

The communities have developed joint control (control involving MINEF and wildlife management committees) in checking illegal hunters out of the system in some areas even though poaching still remains a problem. Joint control operations have succeeded greatly in reducing poaching and even stopping it in their community. These Communities were invited to plan and participate in activities such as:

- Park boundary opening
- Wildlife monitoring
- Joint Patrols
- Inventories for non-timber products such as Prunus which are carried out jointly by the community members together with the Mt.Cameroon National Park**.** (EbenEbai Samuel, SWRD MINFOF Conservation Echoes, Issue No.01/April-June 2014).

"The interest of the communities around the slope of Mt. Cameroon whose livelihood depends solely on the mountain is given adequate consideration by these laws. The 1981 Forestry Law which excluded Community Forest Participation was later revised on the 20th of January 1994 creating Forestry law No.94/1, 1994 which partnered the Participatory Forest Management with Local Communities to manage their community forest and the Mt. Cameroon forest for biodiversity conservation. On the other hand, the Mt. Cameroon National Park adopted a

Collaborative Management Approach in line with the vision of the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife to ensure the preservation, conservation and sustainability of the Mt. Cameroon fragile ecosystem with the following elements:

- Facilitates the organization and functioning of Village forest Management Committees
- Facilitates the organization and functioning of Cluster Platforms to participate in the planning, implementation and monitoring of park management activities and
- Support the elaboration of Conservation Development. Agreement and implementation of agreed measures."(Bidima Antoine, Focal Point Person for MINFOF).

Community forests do exist in some communities, notably in Bwiteva and Bojongo and are managed by the traditional authorities and other community leaders.

Community based organizations were encouraged and set up to work in collaboration with NGOs to manage the forest resources sustainably. For instance, the Mt. Cameroon Prunus Harvesters Organization (MUCAP) in collaboration with Mt.CEO ensures that the exploitation of Prunus by various communities around the Mt. slope is done in a controllable and more sustainable manner for income generation to help out their communities. Also, the Bonakanda – Bova Bee farmers Common Initiative Group was created and encouraged. It stands out today as one of the outstanding alternative income-generating activity contributors to the wellbeing of the inhabitants who are involved in these communities and other neighbouring communities.

Plate 4: Researcher at Community Based CIG/ Organization Sign Posts



Source: Field work, 2026

Government Institutions

Other strategies used by Government to manage the forest include promoting livelihood activities (38.5%), facilitating community-based organization (24.2%), promoting self-employment (22.5%) and giving allowances (14.3%).

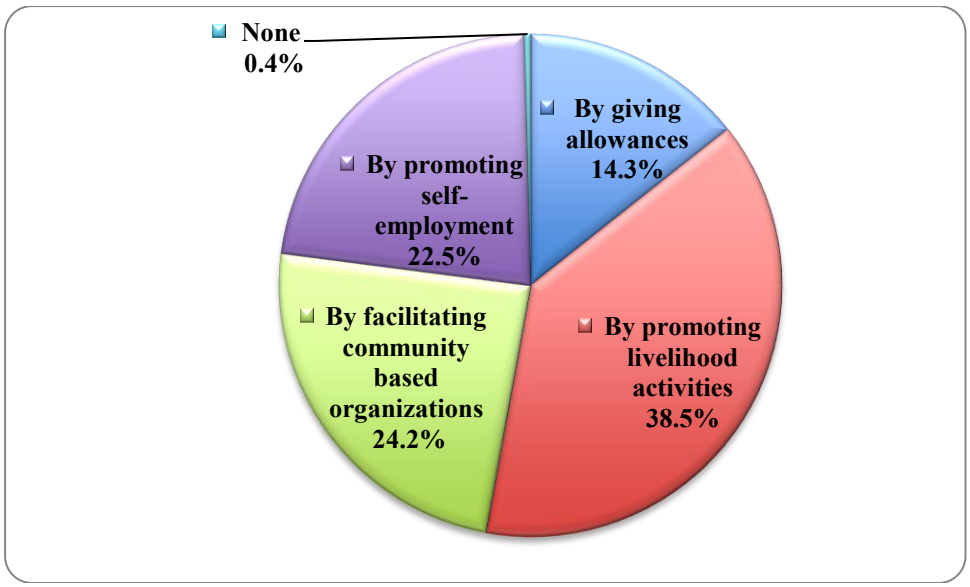


Figure 1: Strategies to Enhance Forest Management

N=165

Government and NGOs used the above-mentioned strategies to conserve biodiversity, alleviate poverty 98 (36.3%), conserve the environment 99 (36.7%), enhance self-employment 41 (15.2%), and increase standard of living 32 (11.9%). Community members were generally not very satisfied with these strategies as only 66 (40.0%) assessed them to be adequate. The local population considered NGOs as important partners as they are generally very receptive to them 144 (89.4%). Community members collaborate with Government and NGOs in several ways: assisting in the activities, attending sensitization meetings and seminars, conserving the environment by planting trees or keeping a small forest in one's land, educating household members and other members of the community, going for exploitation permit, checking hunting, and serving as volunteers for NGOs. As for those who did not participate, the reasons were: they had never met with the stakeholders, they found it difficult to answer questions asked through a questionnaire during seminars or surveys, they were not aware of the management policies or were just not interested, they were never contacted, they lacked finances, and absence of awareness. The dominant reason was disagreement with the policies.

CONCLUSION

The management of forest resources around Mount Cameroon has been shaped by historical, cultural and political transformations, particularly colonial intervention and the subsequent introduction of state-controlled conservation policies. During the colonial period, substantial portions of land in Buea Sub-Division, Southwest Cameroon, were appropriated for plantation agriculture and the establishment of protected areas (BLCC, 2006). These interventions disrupted customary landownership and traditional resource-management systems, undermining local livelihoods and weakening community authority over ancestral territories. Colonial exploitation also encouraged extractive practices, including commercial hunting and the exploitation of timber and other natural resources, contributing to biodiversity loss across Africa (Transparency International, 2003). The introduction of restrictive conservation policies further complicated relations between local communities and forest-management authorities. Restrictions on customary access and resource utilisation generated dissatisfaction among indigenous populations, particularly where traditional rights and cultural practices were insufficiently recognised (Nana, 2007).

Amungwa (2011) argues that the exclusion of local spiritual beliefs, particularly those associated with the Bakweri deity, *Ihvarza Mote*, from formal forest-management arrangements has undermined community cooperation and conservation efforts. Consequently, the historical separation of indigenous institutions from formal conservation structures has contributed to tensions among communities, government agencies and other stakeholders. Before colonial intervention, traditional institutions played important roles in regulating access to natural resources, resolving disputes and maintaining ecological relationships. Among the Bakweri, these institutions are organised around chiefs, elders and community councils, which traditionally exercised authority over cultural affairs and community resources. Their management practices were informed by accumulated ecological knowledge, customary regulations, spiritual beliefs and intergenerational experiences. Such institutions provided mechanisms for maintaining social order and regulating the sustainable use of forest resources (Agrawal et al., 2008).

Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) constitutes an important foundation for understanding the relationship between the Bakweri people and the Mount Cameroon forest. Developed through generations of interaction with the natural environment, this knowledge encompasses understandings of biodiversity, resource availability, seasonal changes, ecological relationships and customary conservation practices. Nazarea (2005) observes that local knowledge has long been central to anthropological inquiry, particularly in understanding how communities interpret and respond to their environments. Gold and Gujar (2002) similarly highlight the importance of recognising indigenous knowledge as a valuable resource for culturally appropriate development and environmental management. Among the Bakweri, the relationship between the forest and ancestral spirituality extends beyond material livelihood needs. Mount Cameroon, known locally as Mount Fako, represents an important ancestral landscape in which particular forest sites, plants and animals are associated with traditional beliefs and ritual practices. Certain locations are reserved for spiritual activities, while customary restrictions regulate the exploitation of particular resources. Traditional practices, including rituals and libations before felling trees or killing animals, historically required individuals to justify their actions within established cultural and spiritual frameworks. Such practices demonstrate how indigenous beliefs could function as informal mechanisms for regulating resource utilisation and protecting ecologically significant sites.

Although the Bakweri have experienced considerable social and cultural transformation, including modernisation and widespread Christianisation, elements of their ancestral organisation and traditional ecological knowledge persist. Each village continues to recognise traditional leadership structures headed by chiefs and supported by community councils. These institutions remain important in cultural affairs, conflict resolution and community identity. However, the growing influence of Christianity, Western education and external cultural practices has contributed to the weakening of some traditional beliefs and customary environmental regulations. The increasing marginalisation of indigenous spirituality has consequently raised concerns about cultural erosion and the loss of traditional conservation knowledge (Ardener, 1996). The significance of indigenous knowledge extends beyond cultural preservation. Charles et al. (2020) emphasise that traditional ecological knowledge represents accumulated environmental experience that can contribute to biodiversity conservation, livelihood security and ecological resilience. Indigenous management systems often support resource diversity and provide alternative livelihood opportunities during seasonal shortages and periods of economic difficulty. Recognising these contributions is therefore essential to developing conservation strategies that accommodate both ecological sustainability and community well-being.

The establishment of formal protected areas and the increasing involvement of government agencies, non-governmental organisations and environmental institutions introduced new approaches to forest governance around Mount Cameroon. Community-based and

collaborative forest management emerged as important strategies for encouraging local participation and sharing conservation responsibilities. These approaches recognise that communities living close to forest resources possess valuable ecological knowledge and have a direct interest in their sustainable management. Nevertheless, the relationship between formal conservation institutions and traditional authorities has remained complicated. Although collaborative management is intended to promote participation, its effectiveness is undermined when indigenous beliefs, customary rights and traditional decision-making structures are inadequately incorporated. Many Bakweri communities perceive existing arrangements as restrictive because they are often expected to comply with conservation regulations without having meaningful authority in decisions affecting their ancestral territories. This has contributed to dissatisfaction, concealed conflicts and declining cooperation with conservation authorities. The challenge is therefore not simply to encourage community participation but to recognise traditional institutions as legitimate decision-making partners. Effective conservation requires a framework that combines scientific approaches with indigenous knowledge, customary regulations and local livelihood priorities. Agrawal et al. (2008) highlight the importance of community institutions in sustainable resource governance, while Charles et al. (2020) demonstrate the value of integrating multiple knowledge systems into environmental decision-making.

This study adopted an ethnographic case study approach to investigate the relationship between Bakweri traditional institutions, indigenous beliefs and forest-resource management around Mount Cameroon. The approach enabled direct engagement with community members and provided an opportunity to examine customary practices, institutional responsibilities and changing perceptions of environmental conservation within their sociocultural contexts. Primary and secondary sources were used complementarily. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and direct and participant observation. Interviews involved traditional rulers, village elders, community leaders, men, women, youths and individuals with knowledge of traditional institutions and forest-resource management. Particular attention was given to the roles of traditional authorities, gender relations, indigenous conservation practices and the effects of modernisation on customary institutions. Household and individual interviews were conducted in participants' homes to encourage open discussion, particularly on culturally sensitive issues. Semi-structured interview guides provided direction while allowing respondents sufficient freedom to explain their experiences and perspectives. Probing and clarification were used to obtain additional information and address inconsistencies where necessary.

Three focus group discussions, comprising four to six participants each, were organised separately around men, women and youths. These discussions facilitated comparisons of experiences and perceptions across different social groups, particularly regarding traditional authority, cultural continuity and community participation in forest conservation. Direct and participant observations complemented the interviews and discussions. These enabled the researcher to document traditional institutional activities, ritual practices and forest-management initiatives involving government agencies, local communities, non-governmental organisations and research institutions. Photographs, audio recordings, notebooks and interview guides were used to document and preserve field information. Secondary information was obtained from published and unpublished books, academic articles, institutional reports, historical documents, library collections, archival materials and relevant electronic publications. These materials provided historical and theoretical perspectives for interpreting the primary field evidence. The collected information was examined through qualitative content analysis, supported by a deductive approach guided by the study objectives and theoretical perspectives. Interview accounts, focus group discussions, observational records and documentary materials were compared to identify recurring issues concerning traditional institutions, indigenous beliefs, forest-resource utilisation and conservation governance.

The study was guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Cultural Ecology theories. Traditional Ecological Knowledge provides a framework for understanding how indigenous communities develop, preserve and transmit environmental knowledge through prolonged interaction with their surroundings. It emphasises the relationship between ecological understanding, cultural practices, spirituality and sustainable resource utilisation. In the context of Mount Cameroon, TEK helps explain how Bakweri customary institutions, ritual practices and indigenous beliefs have historically regulated relationships between communities and forest resources. Cultural Ecology theory complements this perspective by examining how cultural beliefs, institutional arrangements and livelihood practices shape human interactions with the natural environment. It recognises that communities develop distinct environmental practices according to their historical experiences, cultural values and ecological circumstances. Applied to the Bakweri, the theory provides insight into how traditional authority, ancestral beliefs and customary regulations influence forest-resource management and how external interventions have transformed these relationships. Together, the two theoretical perspectives provide an analytical foundation for understanding the relationship between cultural continuity, indigenous knowledge, livelihood security and environmental conservation.

Ultimately, sustainable management of the Mount Cameroon forest requires a balanced relationship between biodiversity conservation, social justice and indigenous rights. Anthropological perspectives can contribute to this process by examining the sociocultural consequences of conservation interventions and facilitating dialogue between indigenous communities, government institutions and other stakeholders. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge with scientific approaches offers an opportunity to develop more equitable, culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable conservation strategies.

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