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Child Ritual and Cultural Significance among the
Indigenous People of Mbum-Land



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Child Ritual and Cultural Significance among the Indigenous People of Mbum-Land: Resilience and Changes within the Context of Christianity

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper explores rituals performed on children and the significance of these rituals understood within the context of Mbum indigenous society. These rituals which saw ancestors actively involved unveiled the Mbum world view that, ancestors never died but remained in the world beyond and constantly watch and participate in the day-to-day running of the community a practice criticized by Christianity.

Methodology: This researched relied on primary and authoritative secondary data to argue that the spread of Christianity to Mbum-land from 1913 attacked certain indigenous cultural practices. Converted Christians who were still engaged in these cultural practices debunked by the church were without an identity as they were neither bonafide Christians nor full practitioners of indigenous culture. Though, these rituals were attacked, they managed to survive as its constituted key cultural values of the Mbum people.

Findings: The study points out that, rituals performed on children was important as it promised family continuity which needed the efforts of the living and ancestors. Rituals were not just conducted for protection but it was a medium where babies were welcomed into the community and had a reunion with their ancestors who they were unable to meet physically.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The article's unique contribution lies on the complex relationships between cultural practices and Christian teachings in Mbum-land. The article contributes to issues on cultural identity and its adaptation in the face of external influences.

Keywords: *Child Rituals, Cultural Significance, Indigenous People, Mbum-land, Resilience and Christianity*

Introduction

Procreation in most African societies was seen as family lineage continuity considered indispensable. This assertion was supported when one of the reasons for marriage to be considered successful or fruitful within African societies was the ability to multiply.¹ Thus, the process of bearing children in Mbum-land had its foundations being marriage. Rituals performed on children after birth had a significant meaning on the cultural life of the people. Human life in Mbum-land was precious and the ability to protect it from harm and negativity saw the involvement of ancestors who played the spiritual role link to life guidance. The living involved in rituals physically served as contacts between ancestors who were of the spiritual world with the main aim of protecting the child from harm.²

Mbum ancestors were actively involved in the *yoo boo*, *nusi boo* and burn incense rituals as mediums to ensure the welfare and prosperity of the child. This was an aspect of the people's culture which was accepted and followed by many but was only threatened with the implantation of Christianity with divided thoughts as to how cases linked to rituals conducted on children should be handled. Rituals performed on children was deeply rooted in African culture and that already constituted a way of life of the people. Scholarly write ups brought forth different reasons while such rituals were performed on children. Beinempaka *et al.* examined those traditional practices, such oiling babies and using herbs were employed to treat common infant ailments.³ Ohaja and Anyim examined that, these practices were often accompanied by rituals, like the burial of the umbilical cord under a fertility tree, symbolizing the child's prosperity.⁴ The use of herbs and spiritual rituals during pregnancy and childbirth has been explored by of Aziato and Omenyo.⁵

Brief History and Traditional Administration of the Mbum

The Mbum people inhabit a significant portion of the Nkambe Plateau in Cameroon's North West Region. The ethnic group is traditionally structured into three primary clans: the Ya, Tang, and Warr. These clans are further subdivided into several Fondoms or village units, each led by a traditional ruler known as a *Fon*.⁶ The Ya Clan, whose administrative center is Ndu, comprises the

¹ Dr. C.N. Nwadiokwu, E.S Nwadiokwu, E.N Favour and M.E Okwuazun, "Rites of Passage African Traditional Religion", *International Journal of Education and Research*, Vol.4 No. 9 September 2016, 43.

² Elias K Bongmba, "African witchcraft and Otherness" (Thesis in Theology, The Illif School of Theology and the University of Denver 1995), 5-6.

³ Florence Beinempaka, Basil Tibanyendera, Fortunate Atwine, Teddy Kyomuhangi and Noni E MacDonald, "The Practice of Traditional Rituals and Customs in Newborns by Mothers in Selected Villages in Southwest Uganda", *Microresearch and global health in east Africa*, February 2014.

⁴ Magdalena Ohaja and Chinemerem Anyim, "Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices at the Beginning of Life: African Perspectives, Religions", 22 November 2021.

⁵ Lydia Aziato and Cephas N. Omenyo, "Initiation of Traditional Birth Attendants and their Traditional and Spiritual Practices during Pregnancy and Childbirth in Ghana", *BioMed Central*, 2018.

⁶ Richard Tanto Talla, "Indigenous Culture and Western Christianity: An Assessment of Wimbun Experience with the Baptist Mission 1927-2008". *International Journal of Culture and Religious Studies*, vol.2, issue no.1, 2021, 24.

Fondoms of Wowo, Sehn, Nseh-Makop, Njim kang, Konchep, Luh, Mbipgo, Ndu, Nguvlu, and Njilah. The *Fon* of Ndu holds the status of clan head and exercises authority over the constituent Fondoms. The Tang Clan Head, based in Talla, includes Binka, Bih, Bongom, Kup, Ngarum, Ntundip, Sina, Taku, Tabenken, and Talla.⁷ The Warr Clan, with its center at Mbot, consists of Binshua, Chup, Nkambe, Kungi, Njap, Njirong, Ntumbaw, Nwangri, Mbaa, Mbot, Saah, Sop, and Wat.⁸ These Fondoms are geographically situated within the administrative boundaries of the Ndu and Nkambe Sub-Divisions.

The Mbum trace their origins to Kimi, located in present-day Adamawa Region of Cameroon. Historical accounts indicate that their initial settlement occurred at Ntem, from where they migrated to the Nkambe Plateau in three distinct waves during the latter half of the seventeenth century.⁹ Despite migrating along different routes, these groups eventually established themselves within the same geographic area. This spatial proximity fostered the development of shared cultural traditions and socio-political institutions.¹⁰ The Mbum speak *Limbum*, their indigenous language, which is commonly understood across all clans, though with minor variations in pronunciation.

The Mbum community maintained a well-structured and centralized system of governance. At its apex stood the *Fon*, known locally as *Nkfu*, who wielded significant political and spiritual authority.¹¹ The *Fon* was not elected, rather, he was selected either by his predecessor or by a council of kingmakers, and formally enthroned through elaborate traditional rites. His status was visibly marked on the day of coronation through a display of regalia, including a well-designed royal throne, a ceremonial cap, a staff of authority, a sash adorned with cowries, and an ancestral cup. The royal throne, often draped with the hides of powerful animals such as lions, tigers, pythons, or leopards, symbolised strength, legitimacy, and continuity.¹² Following his enthronement, the *Fon* was ritually fortified in sacred shrines, empowering him to govern the

⁷ Talla Richard Tanto, "Indigenous Settlement Types Among the Mbum of the Nkambe Plateau of Cameroon: Continuity and Change". *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, volume IV, issue VIII, August 2020, 679.

⁸ Stanley Yengong Nforba, "The Oral Traditions of Warr and Tang Clans Ancestry in Mbum Land, North West Region of Cameroon". *EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, volume 2, May-June 2020, 173.

⁹ Koyoh Nformi, *Drinking the Gospel in African Cups, Case Study-The Wimbun People*, (Cameroon Baptist Convention Printing Press, 2015), 89.

¹⁰ Richard T. Talla and Reymond Njingti Budi, "Colonialism, Ethnic Disintegration and Clan Based Politics Among the Mbum of the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon, 1916-1961". *South Asian Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, volume 2, issue 1, January -February 2020, 28.

¹¹ Bongmba Elias K, "African Witcraft and Otherness" (PhD Thesis in Theology, The Iliff school of Theology and the University of Denver, 1995), 4.

¹² Stanley Yengong Nforba, "The Paradox of Paramountcy in Bamenda Grasslands: Case of Mbum in the North West Region of Cameroon". *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education*, vol 6, issue 3, 2020, 459.

affairs of the community. He possessed the authority to declare war, make key decisions for collective welfare, and ensure peace and order within the Fondom.¹³

The *Fon* was aided in his administrative duties by several key institutions and groups within the traditional political structure. Chief among these were the *Fais*, a council of selected elders; the *Nfuh*, a warrior group; and the *Ngwarong*, a powerful secret society responsible for enforcing laws and ensuring strict adherence to communal norms and values.¹⁴ The *Ngiri*, another significant group, also contributed to the governance process. The *Nfuh* held a crucial role as protectors of the community during times of conflict or crisis, whether physical or spiritual. Their presence underscored the integration of military, spiritual, and judicial functions within Mbum traditional governance.¹⁵ Marriage as an institution in Mbum-land which was union that promoted procreation will be examined.

Marriage as an institution in Mbum-land

There was nothing in Mbum-land as important as marriage. Marriage accompanied with rituals were intended to happily bring families together. Marriage was a union between a man and wife or a man many wives was indispensable to the Mbum indigenous community. Marriage was known as *guu* which translated will literally mean “covenant”. *Guu* was effective when both families reached a consensus before their children could unite in marriage. *Guu* was an initiation covenant which formed the basic and sacred aspects of Mbum culture linked to marriage. Arranged marriage was common as it was the responsibility of a family to look for a wife for their child.

The main aim was to find a woman who could stand the test of time patterning to cultural practicalities of the Mbum society and who possessed acceptable moral values.¹⁶ The search could be done within villages who shared boundaries with Mbum-land. When this search was completed a cordial and warm relation between both families was established with each other family background checked. This family cross-examination was vital because both families wanted to avoid incestuous relationships. At this juncture, the groom’s family presented their objectives which were examined by the bride’s family. The bride’s family had an upper hand in these marriage talks as they were the ones who set out the terms and conditions to be fulfilled before their daughter could be sent out for marriage.

One of the features of marriage in Mbum-land was gift presentation. This was mostly done by the groom’s family and was intended to cajole and convince the bride’s family that their daughter would not suffer as she was moving into a generous family. Items given at this point

¹³ Fon Ngwang Charles Kamanda, (Tang Clan Head,) Interviewed by author 16 August 2021.

¹⁴ Ta Nformi Malvin Jatoh (A title holder in the Nfuh lodge), Interviewed by the author, Ndu, 22 September 2020.

¹⁵ Lydia Museng Muchop, (a farmer), interviewed by researcher 28 December 2019.

¹⁶ Koyoh Nformi, *Drinking the Gospel in African Cups, Case Study-The Wimbun People* (Cameroon Baptist Convention Printing Press, 2015), 188.

were not counted amongst what was to be presented in *Nje*. *Nje* was the composition of families with a family head or a subchief who came together to deliberate on how the *rcap* (bride price) was to be paid.¹⁷ At this point decision of the *nje* superseded or prevailed over that of the father to the intending bride. The model of gift presentation was that either the men or women of the bride's family were seen first or the two parties were seen simultaneously at their separate corners. Gift presentation and demands from these groups varied. Women at the time demanded three teens of red oil, two bags of salt and five cowries which was kept in their family savings bank. Men were given thirty to forty litres of palm wine and ten cowries though there has been an increment in the payment of bride price with the introduction of currencies.¹⁸ When this stage was successfully conducted it was followed by marriage rituals.

Before any ritual was performed, the entrance fee which enabled the ritual marriage palm wine to be brought in was paid.¹⁹ It was followed by oath affirmation conducted by the family head who took his traditional cup, poured palm wine into it to overflow which was a symbol of blessing and affluence. The bride was called up to drink and give to her husband who also drank from the cup. The cup was sent back to the family head with a token (money) determined by the groom. The family head made it clear that they do not drink the ritual marriage wine from a bride twice, meaning they could not conduct any marriage rite again in the name of the said bride.

When negotiations were done and method of payment settled, the bride wealth could be paid and thereafter the woman was officially handed to the groom's family. Before departure an elder from the bride's family drank palm wine from a traditional cup, gave to bride to drink and then finally to the husband. This was a sign of union and bonding of the families concerned. Selected women from the groom's side were delegated and charged with the responsibility of bringing the bride home. This activity took place at night and the groom's family prepared a special meal to welcome their wife. Upon arrival in the groom's compound, the bride was kept in the fattening room and adorned according to traditional Mbum cultural practice. Her hair was shaved which indicated that she begun a new life in a new family. This was a way to do away with ill luck if she brought any from her family. When this was done, some selected women were assigned to bath her, a practice which continued for at least three weeks. The fattening room was a dark corner in the kitchen. She stayed there with her face down, a sign of respect which Christianity also endorsed. At the fattening room, she was well fed and robbed with camwood. In Mbum land camwood symbolised fertility, peace, prosperity and means of moisturizing the skin which made the bride look more beautiful. The main reason for the application of camwood

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 195.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 196.

¹⁹ Anthony Yekfenyu (a welder), interviewed by the author, Wat, 26 February 2024.

was for procreation and peaceful coexistence in the family.²⁰ One of the aspects which made Mbum marriage viewed as successful was procreation. Childbirth was celebrated among indigenous people with songs and naming ceremonies.

Birth songs, a ceremonial experience

Birth brought a lot of euphoria among the indigenous population as it signified growth within the family and community. Procreation was one of the most important reasons for marriage in Mbum land. Families with many children were respected and the labor force of each family depended on the number of children they had. Songs were composed to welcome these babies and some of them included:

<i>Limbum</i>	English
<i>Bòn kete' muu-nè;</i>	A child is good
<i>Señ cè';</i>	Tie your wrapper
<i>Bòn kete' muu-nè;</i>	A child is good
<i>Señ cè';</i>	Tie your wrapper
<i>Ma mṅgwàṅ ma mṅḡr;</i>	My salt, my palm oil
<i>Señ cè';</i>	Tie your wrapper
<i>Ma mṅgwàṅ ma mṅḡr;</i>	My salt, my palm oil
<i>Señ cè.</i>	Tie your wrapper. ²¹

The commencement of the song indicates the joy in families blessed with a new born baby. The song captures the goodness of a child and its announcement was so pertinent that other women in the compound were dressed in loins as they received this good news. Since polygamy was practiced, those who sang this song were wives of the same husband expressing their happiness for the child, a thing compared only to precious oil and salt at the time.²²

<i>Limbum</i>	English
<i>Kaa yi ba mucàcàr;</i>	Even if it's not meager
<i>M ku koo a, m ku koo yaa yuu;</i>	I'll appreciate
<i>Kaa yi ba mucàcàr;</i>	Even if it's not meager
<i>M ku koo a, m ku koo yaa yuu;</i>	I'll appreciate
<i>O ghàsee;</i>	Search
<i>Ghàse ε, ghàsee nè mbo;</i>	Search with both hands
<i>O ghàsee;</i>	Search
<i>Ghàse ε, ghàsee nè mbo.</i>	Search with both hands. ²³

²⁰ Ta Nformi EK, Courtship, Family Introductions and the Marriage Ceremony in Mbum- Land, recorded on December 21, 2021, America 7:24, <https://sharevideo1.com/v/OWFIdUZmbGwUEk=?t=ytb&f=uh>.

²¹ Helensia Mambe, (farmer), Interviewed by the author, Jirt, 29 December 2023

²² *Idem.*

²³ Sonde Desmond Tamngwa, "Historical Interpretation of Folkloric Songs Among the Mbum of the Cameroon Grasslands C 1800-2018" (M.A. Dissertation, The University of Bamenda, 2021), 36.

The indigenous people who came to share in moments of joy with the newborn family asked the father, mother and other family members to offer any gift while a group of women sang and danced in the compound. Whatsoever that was given was happily received. They could not expect much from the family as it was their responsibility to animate the social gathering in the compound indicating their joy.²⁴ Other important aspects associated with birth celebration was naming ceremonies. The names had links to their ancestors or events which happened in the community at the time. The aspect of naming children was pertinent as it constituted Mbum cultural identity, religiosity, grievances, worldview and historical facts. Some children were named after family ancestors. Such names were carefully selected as it was believed that the child would grow up to be an expression of the moral and physical characteristics of the ancestor. Any name given to a child was a representative of circumstances which occurred in the community by the time of delivery or based on some sort of family history or experience.

Names had a lot of cultural meaning when a closer interrogation was made about them which was another ritual phase conducted on children. It was normal to hear a child named *njapshi* (food for the soil or complement for the soil). The reason behind that name was constant death of previous children that were born. This name was not intentional but was somewhat a way to pass a message that if God wanted to take away this child again, they had nothing to do.²⁵ A family with frequent deaths or strings of deaths of children could equally name a child *Nyamangong* (the meat for the society). Some children were named *Mungu* which literally meant “the child of locust”. This meant the child was born when the community was attacked by locust and their crops destroyed or named after someone who was born during that time. Naming ceremonies was another aspect of Mbum historical preservation. Rituals were conducted on these children to ensure they were protected from evil.

Child Ritual performance, meaning and significance in the Mbum context

Rituals involved the life cycle of individuals and was meant to ensure the prosperity and wellbeing of the people and children.²⁶ This practice was called *mshep* (medicine). The practice of rituals sometimes involved preparing medicines for members of the family (children included) when the family needed cleansing. Such practices required a fowl to be customary offered either to the gods

²⁴ Anester voche (farmer), interviewed by the author, Ntundip, 26 February 2024.

²⁵ Gabriel N. Massa, “Reversion and Syncretism Among the Wimbun Baptists of Cameroon, West Africa: A Missiological Problem” (PhD thesis, Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 18-21.

²⁶ Elias K Bongmba, “African witchcraft and Otherness” (PhD thesis in Theology, The Illif School of Theology and the University of Denver 1995), 10.

or ancestors and it was known as *kupse mshep* (fixing medicine). This activity was taken as a precaution against illness, bad cultural ceremonial manifestation and perceived danger.²⁷

Birth celebration in Mbum-land was accompanied by a ritual which was known as *yó boo* and *noosi boo*. This ritual was performed yearly and sometimes within weeks or months and it depended on the health situation of the child and the constant need to connect with their ancestors. *Yó boo* was a ritual which was conducted on children by a specialist who collected a combination of herbs, boiled them and rubbed on children to prevent them from diseases or attacks since they were considered fragile. Those who brought their children for such an activity to be performed were expected to pay a sum demanded by the herbalist. Common among what was demanded was a fowl and palm wine. The child in question was undressed and rubbed with these herbs and was expected not to bath for a period of three days so that the potency of this medication was not disturbed. This concoction of herbs boiled and applied on them was carefully selected such that each of them positively had meaning on the wellbeing of the child. The applied herbs by the herbalist on these children was followed by positive pronouncements and the names of good ancestors who positively impacted the family and the community mentioned. This ritual was intended to prevent them from bad spirits.²⁸ It was believed that, children who frequently cried at night or felt sick might not have passed through this ritual process which was vital. Children who grew and behaved abnormally without succumbing to the moral values which governed the community were considered those who never went through the process of *Yó boo* ritual properly. In such situations, calls were made for such a ritual to be conducted on them.²⁹

The *noosi boo* ritual was different from *yó boo*. It was conducted on an arranged day with the practitioner as he pulled out a snail shell (*ngoo tà'*) and some herbs known as *bwoo* mixed together with some three stones known as *longri*. Pounded cocoyam's and *egusi* soup were placed on a tray (*kér*) and clear pot respectively.³⁰ The child in question was fed with a portion of it and some thrown under the bed which was meant for the ancestors. The child being fed and some throw to the ancestors was already an indication that he/she was welcomed into the family/community and that could only be demonstrated through sharing a communal meal with the ancestors. This again speaks of Mbum cosmology link to death which they strongly believed that the deceased (ancestors) were somewhere and constantly watch over their day-to-day activities. The *ngoo* (snail

²⁷ Stanley Yengong Nforba, "Nuptial Customs and Royal Celebration in Mbum Land, North West Region of Cameroon", *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social science*, volume v, issue 1, (January 2021), 106.

²⁸ Chris Mbunwe, "Impressions People Have About Twins", *The Post*, No.02412 Monday, May 20, 2024, 2.

²⁹ John Nformi (a *Yó boo* herbalist and presbyterian Christian), Interviewed by the author, Talla, 11 June 2024

³⁰ Julius Nkeh, "Culture and Christianity: A Historical Assessment of Wimbun Experience Under the Baptist Mission, 1927-2008", (Master of Arts submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of Buea, May 2011), 76.

shell) was filled to the brim with fresh palm wine and was given to the child as he/she drank directly from it.

Twin children who never had this union with their ancestors were believed to hurt their parents through frequent sicknesses and ways which seemed to be different from those upheld in the society. Twines were not attributed or seen as witches with evil actions rather, the general belief was that twins were special children, who needed to be treated with care and could not be exempted from this crucial birth ritual rites. The issue of *nusi boo* encompassed newly born babies in Mbum-land.³¹ The indigenous population believed in such rituals and happily allowed their children for such rituals to be performed on them since the center of it was the welfare of their children.

Incense was believed to be one of the solutions which dealt with some of the problems linked to sickness, spiritual attacks and burial rights. Incense was gotten from a male *fir* (plum) tree whose dried powder substance burnt produced fragrance. This was often done at night. The Mbum people saw this plant from a medicinal end as it was used for the treatment of special cases in the community. Thus, incense was not just burnt for its sweet smell. Medically, incense was used as a remedy for cough and toxin spirits found in someone. The grind particles of this plant were placed in a clay pot light up with fire and the sick person was obliged to inhale as means of treatment. The people psychologically knew the community was not void of bad spirits thus it was pertinent for this plant to be burnt around compounds especially when new born babies were received in families as a means of protection. It was believed their spirituality was weak and could easily be attacked, thus, the purpose of burning incense at night was to scare away evil spirits which attacked these children mysteriously.³² These rituals performed on children constituted another important cultural aspect embodied within Mbum-land.

Impact of Christianity on child ritual practices

Culture contacts saw Mbum indigenous people had links with Christianity. Through the lenses of Fidessou, culture is what defines a human being and this is done based on the elements of nature that surrounds him or her given that his or her nature predisposes them to exploit the natural resources either for their survival, or for accommodation and comfort.³³ Christianity penetrated into the area through efforts of various missionary bodies affiliated to different Christian denominations. Missionary activities which greatly impacted Catholic penetration and

Ibid.

³² Ephesians Chirimbuh, (Member of the Talla Nwgarong secrete society), Interviewed by the researcher, 20th June 2024.

³³ Fidessou Sylvestre, "Désacralisation des lieux de purification dans la vallée du Logone : entre crises environnementales et mutations socio-culturelles", *Actes du Colloque International de l'ICESCO sur le patrimoine culturel : Mythes, croyances et sauvegarde des savoir-faire patrimoniaux dans le bassin du Lac Tchad*, Secteur de la Culture et de la Communication, Centre du Patrimoine dans le Monde Islamique (CPMI), Volume 1, 2021, 45.

evangelical works in the Bamenda Grasslands was related to the works of German Sacred Heart Fathers (GSHF) encouraged by the works of the German Pallottine who mostly concentrated in Edea. The French Sacred Heart Fathers (FSHF) came into the scene when the GSHF were expelled from Cameroon in 1915 as a result of the First World War. The Mill Hill Missionaries (MHM) came into play from 1922 as a result of the partition of Cameroon. The pioneer group of German Sacred Heart Fathers' mission took off for Cameroon on 9 November 1912 and arrived on 28 November 1912. These group of missionaries comprised of priests and brothers namely: Father Joseph Gerhad Thomas Lannartz, Father Johann Emonts, Father August Mannersdorfer, Father Robert Mannersdorfer, Brother Krispinus and Brother Felix Lennartz.³⁴

They sought advice from Bishop Henri before embarking on their journey to the Bamenda Grasslands. The Bishop with joy, proposed to the missionaries a companion in the name of Peter Wame from Bamungo who had served as interpreter to German officials in Bamenda and got interested in Catholic doctrines when he traveled with his masters to Yaounde, Douala and Kribi. He got baptized alongside his wife from Nso, Elizabeth Yadiy on 15 December 1912.³⁵ He accompanied the missionary body from Douala to Kumbo. These missionaries were granted a pass to Kumbo by the German administrator, Captain Adamets.³⁶ As they arrived Kumbo, they captured the interest of the *Fon* as he was greeted in *Lamnsa* and drank the palm wine presented to them.³⁷ Peter Wame acted as a translator between the two parties which ended up positively as the *Fon* offered them a piece of land for construction. The dreams of the missionaries came to fulfillment when they started the first mission station in Shisong on 1 January 1913.³⁸

The penetration of the Catholic Church from Kumbo to Mbum-land started on 13 March 1913 with the efforts of Father Emonts who was determined to know other areas surrounding Kumbo and extend evangelical teachings, therein. The journey was carried out by himself and assisted by John Nchari from Mbum-land and some carriers. Their journey to Ndu took them two days and were welcomed by the *Fon*, subchiefs and council of notables.³⁹ From Ndu the journey into the interior of Mbum-land continued this time around to Tabenken, the home village of John Nchari. It should be noted that John Nchari was born in Konchep. After the dead of his father, his mother moved with him to Tabenken.⁴⁰ From Tabenken, Father Emonts visited Mbot and continued his trek the next day to Chup village. He was well received by *Fons* in these villages and this made him have the notion that evangelical works shall be positive in these areas if the

³⁴ Centenary of the Catholic Church in Cameroon (1890-1990), Some Historical Notes on the Diocese of Kumbo, 1.

³⁵ Victor Julius Ngoh, *History of Cameroon Since 1800* (Pressbook, Limbe: 1996), 93.

³⁶ Joseph Lon Nfi, *The Catholic Church and Anglophone Subnationalism in Cameroon*, (Galda Verlag: Glienicke, 2022), 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 22.

³⁸ Hermann Gufler, *A Short History of the Catholic Church in Kumbo Diocese, 1913-1940* (Sabongari, 1988), 3.

³⁹

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 4.

Catholic Church spread its mission tentacles there. He got assurance from the *Fons* of Ndu, Mbot and Tabenken that their children shall be sent to the school in Shisong. They were followed by the Baptist Faith, brought to the area by Joseph Mamadou Ngong, who was a member of the Victoria Baptist church.⁴¹ Mamadou, filled with enthusiasm of spreading the gospel, accelerated by his later achievements in Bum, had another opportunity to open a prayer cell in Mbensakfu (Mbum-land) by 1927 in present day Ndu and from here the Faith spread its tentacles to other Mbum communities.⁴² Another Christian denomination which followed was the Presbyterian church through missionary works of Thomas Fe, who left the Basel Mission Station in Bali for evangelical works in Mbum-land in 1930.⁴³ The teachings of the church debunked child rituals as a means of protection.

Converted Christians sometimes because of pressure in handling life challenging issues got involved in child ritual practices to remedy the situation they found themselves in. The church during dedication ceremonies officiated by the pastor cautioned parents about their given responsibility to raise children in the fear of the Lord. This was to be done through daily prayers and their exemplary life as Christians. They were charged with the responsibility to give their children biblical teachings when they were old enough to understand. This was strictly for parents who were converted Christians. During the ceremony, questions were asked as the father, considered to be head of the family held the child while facing the officiating pastor. The question in the Baptist practice was, do you promise to bring up this child in the fear and knowledge of the Lord?⁴⁴ The response given always was yes. The later involvement of parents in child ritual practices in hiding was against the Child dedication covenant they took which made them not to be seen as Mbum cultural practitioners nor those of the Christian faith. In 2013, Pa David Kiloh who dedicated his child in the Ndongong Baptist church and promised never to *noosi* the child contradicted himself after service when he said he can take his child to do such rituals when the pressure on him became unbearable. He could not allow his child to take chances during illness of which he knew what was expected of him as the head of the family.⁴⁵ This only got Christians perplex as many converted Christians went ahead to conduct some cultural practices that were debunked by the church secretly as many saw such Christians to be without an identity.

Culture contacts between Mbum indigenous cultural practices linked to child ritual and Christian teachings brought tension especially in cases Christianity outrightly challenged indigenous cultural practices. In such cases, Christians who were practitioners of such rituals were

⁴¹ Gabriel N. Massa, "Reversion and Syncretism Among the Wimbun Baptists of Cameroon, West Africa: A Missiological Problem" (PhD thesis, Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 12.

⁴² Ibid. 12.

⁴³ Werner Keller, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon* (Umiken: Switzerland, April 1968), 63.

⁴⁴ Cameroon Baptist Convention, *Church Hand Book*. (Bamenda: Neba Publishers, November 2017), 127.

⁴⁵ David Kiloh, (He is an elder in Nchic-o- Doh quarter and adviser to the Fai who governed the area), Interviewed by the author, 12 June 2024.

asked to stop which was difficult. Pa John Nformi also known as Pa *Yó boo* was a Presbyterian Christian who was still engaged in this cultural practice debunked by the church.⁴⁶ He made it clear that Christians came to him to rescue their children by performing the ritual. He could not allow children suffer when he could alleviate their plight even though Christians criticised it. Problems of this nature left Mbum converted Christians at a point of confusion and tension as they could not respect gospel norms but still called themselves faithful Christians.

The church as means of encouraging coexistence parceled the gospel in a manner which could be understood in *Limbum* language though any other cultural means that could enhance the spreading of the gospel was employed. The used of traditional instrumentals such as wooden drums, rattle and gong were elements which supplemented worship. This gave the church the opportunity to easily take some traditional rhythms to church. Though *Njuh* in Baptist church composed gospel songs as a means of passing the message of Christ, the rhythm that accompanied such songs were that of a typical Mbum traditional *Njuh*. The church wanted to attract non-converts who could still worship God through their culture. The inculturation of these instruments was common among the Baptist, Catholics and the Presbyterians. *Nkeng* (peace plant) known as peace plant was evergreen and was used for special purposes in Mbum-land. The action of placing or planting *nkeng* designated special attention in Mbum-land especially in secret places. The population knew the plant was used for cultural indispensable events. When churches were constructed, the local population who were converted Christians saw *nkeng* as one of its decorative tools though they knew the cultural value of this plant in the community. The church gave reasons that this plant represented peace which automatically transferred pieces of information that the church was out for peace. This was seen as a means through which Christianity could be transmitted through Mbum culture.

Conclusion

The study highlights the cultural importance of ritual practices on children in Mbum-land. Before this was delve into, an examination of Mbum administration was looked at, proceeded by the foundations of procreation which was marriage. The various stages of marriage were assessed and birth was seen to be one of the reasons for marriage. This was followed by ceremonial songs linked to birth rituals performed on children accompanied with the significance of such a ritual understood within the cosmological beliefs of the Mbum indigenous people. From the study it was revealed that rituals conducted on children was to welcome them in the community as a means of reunion with their fallen ancestors who guided and protected the living. This ritual which constituted a way of life of the Mbum people maintained it valued but was castigated when the community had contacts with Christianity. Despite these challenges, the ritual has survived

⁴⁶ John Nformi (a *Yó boo* herbalist and presbyterian Christian), Interviewed by the author, Talla, 11 June 2024

external cultural influence. Though this ritual was attacked by the church, there were areas of Mbum culture incorporated into Christian worship.

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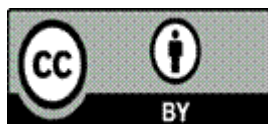
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