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The Laimbwe *Ih'neem* Ritual/Ceremony, Food Crisis, and Sustainability in Cameroon

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Abstract

This article examines rituals and ceremonies associated with food sustainability, sufficiency, and/or insufficiency among the Laimbwe people of Boyo and Menchum Divisions of northwest Cameroon from earliest times to the 21st century. Food is important to sustainable livelihood in many rural communities in Cameroon and explains the organization of elaborate food-related ceremonies and rituals. Cameroon's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has recognized the importance of food and has recently embarked on the modernization of farming techniques and practices throughout the country in its "Second Generation" agriculture program. The population is mobilized annually through an official launching of the farming season in a chosen locality in the country. This annual event has brought together different stakeholders in the agricultural and related sectors. Government's effort in the promotion of food self-sufficiency complements those of villages including Laimbwe. The Laimbwe people have performed rituals and ceremonies to increase food production. Among their several farming related ceremonies is the *Ih'neem*. It is performed by the *zhehfuai* or Queen Mother in the company of other elderly women during the start of the dry season farming. Through focus group discussions, personal interviews, conversations, observation, and written documents this ceremony/ritual is examined in relation to food production to solve the problem of food crisis. The study concludes that an important ritual like the *Ih'neem* has generally declined in importance. It should be valorized and made to complement government's efforts at increasing food production for sustainable livelihood.

Introduction: Rituals, Food Production, and Sustainability

In different parts of the world people perform rituals. These traditional rituals generally focus on governance, values or belief systems, survival, and sustenance. The several other topics of discussion include fertility, procreation, food production, and sustainable livelihood. In performing these rituals, sacrifices took and still take place among some communities (Orelle, 2008, p. 74) including Africans communities. Blood is sometimes used for purification or cleansing purposes. There are also rainmaking and thanksgiving rituals in Africa like elsewhere in the world.¹ Based on apparent risks involved in these rituals and/or ceremonies, ecofeminists are arguing that the spiritual and ideological content of rituals should respect women's attachment to the environment (Resurreccion, 2000, p. 3) and probably food production too. In spite of the rituals of food production, climate change is a challenge to food production and agriculture in Africa thereby undermining rituals performed to increase crop yield. In addition, frequent drought and increasing temperatures have affected food crop yields, and livestock quantity and quality in several parts of Africa (Mushita & Thompson, 2013, p. 1). This is a problem as far as food availability at present and the future of the continent is concerned. Conscious of these changes in climate and weather conditions, Ghanaian government officials supported and encouraged urban agriculture to make up for the deficit (Obosu-Mensah, 2002, p. 19). Similarly, the Abaha we Atsbaha of Ethiopia successfully developed and implemented extensive adaptation strategies to these changing climatic conditions. Through effective adaptation strategies, they have reduced vulnerability to climatic variability and climate change (Reda, 2014, p. 113). In doing so, they have sustained adequate food production for sustainable living. In addition, several villages of the Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania have developed various economic reform measures to improve farming behavior in the area (Bee, Ngailo, & Yoshida, 1997, p. 59). These measures in Ghana, Ethiopia, and Tanzania have the potential to further increase food production and contribute to sustainable livelihood among the people involved.

The advent of Christianity, Islam, and other religions on the African continent affected the practice of rituals among some farming communities. Some of these rituals have been modified and others abandoned altogether. Some rituals associated with the fertility of the soil, procreation, and the fertility of the womb have survived. The reason for the organization of fertility rituals in Africa like elsewhere in the world is to appease God through the spirits and deities. It is also to ensure food self-sufficiency and eradicate or reduce poverty among the predominantly agricultural populations of rural areas of the world. Many of them survive by tilling the soil and exploiting other natural resources. Some of the rituals are also still being performed in urban areas in spite of the fact that these areas are cosmopolitan in nature. This is the case in several urban areas in South Africa (Mugabane, 1998).

¹ Land and Spirituality in Africa. Retrieved from <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/echoes-16-05.html>.

Apart from rituals of fertility of the soil for greater crop yields among different ethnic groups, some countries like Cameroon have started to organize ceremonies annually to mark the start of a new farming season. Relevant government services are mobilized for the occasion aimed at valorizing agricultural productivity. The government also uses the inauguration of the farming season to present a balance sheet of its investments in the food sector. Through the second generation agriculture policy, the government has taken the launch of the farming season to create greater awareness among the population to invest in agriculture. This ceremony brings together stakeholders in the agricultural sector in Cameroon.

The new agriculture policy of the country which was prepared in 1990 is based on development of the country's enormous production and marketing potential. Among the five objectives of this new agriculture policy are the modernization of the production apparatus, food security, export promotion and diversification, the development of agricultural product processing, and balance of the production sectors (Ajongakou, 2015; Bainkong, 2015; Cameroon, 2008, p. 4; Esong, 2015; Ntariyike, Jr., 2012). The annual launching of the farming season in keeping with the policy of second generation agriculture could be considered more or less Cameroon's official ritual ceremony to increase food output and sustain many lives. This ceremony is intended to boost agricultural productivity through the improvement of the soil and the provision of farming equipment. The government of Cameroon claims that this makes the difference and is creating more awareness for the need to increase the production of goods and services in the country (Bainkong, 2015). This study focused on the Laimbwe through a historiography of rituals around food production.

Significance, Methodology, and Objectives of the Study

This study is not only significant in the historiography of ritual performances, food production, and sustainable livelihoods in Cameroon but also Africa and the world. The study seeks to call the attention of the government to urgently see the need to reverse the trend of huge importation of rice from other countries notably Thailand, China, and Pakistan. Although a bread basket in the Central African sub region (Gur, Kimengsi, Senjo, & Awambeng, 2015), Cameroon also sadly imports other commodities like maize, onion, tomatoes, milk, and poultry in huge quantities (The Right to Adequate Food, 2011, p. 7). This negative trend can be reversed through greater investment in the agricultural sector. It was based on this thinking that the effort of the Cameroon government to transform the agricultural sector was intensified. The launching of an aggressive campaign against the importation of frozen chicken in 2006 was hailed by the population. It has resulted in the development of a viable local poultry sector in the country employing thousands of Cameroonians. It has also increased the protein intake of the people. The poultry sector has thus turned things around contributing immeasurably towards livelihood sustainability of many families.

In this study, I have shown the importance of preserving the right of access and ownership of land by small-scale farmers and the rituals they perform. The present

large-scale displacement of small-scale farmers in the name of large-scale agro-industry meant essentially for export in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general (Simo, 2011) is detrimental to greater output in food production and the survival of many families. When a large-scale displacement of whole communities on land takes place as is the case in several parts of Cameroon today, this is a disservice to food crop production in place of cash crops meant for export. There is need for government to reconsider the rampant cases of land grabbing because of the negative effect this has on the availability of land and the production of food crops which has a large internal market in the country. Failure to recognize the ignominy of this problem will only lead to galloping prices for basic necessities in the towns and cities and the attendant consequences which include protests. This was the case in 2008 when a strike called by the inter-urban transporters snowballed into a general protest against soaring food prices and a rising cost of living.

Furthermore, this study is relevant in the sense that any country willing to create opportunities for employment and bountiful agricultural production cannot neglect farming and the rituals or ceremonies associated with it. Ghanaians failed to have quickly learned this lesson in their history and the result was a heavy reliance on food aid from the United States with all the attendant consequences. The United States used the food aid to exert influence on aspects of the country's political and economic decision-making processes (Essuman-Johnson, 1991, p. 45). Such an influence was not good for the image of the country and for its inability to guarantee the food needs of its people. Greater output of food through the effort of the government and the different ethnic groups will likely prevent another country from meddling in its internal affairs in the name of food aid. While Cameroon has understood this and now launches the farming season annually, it still needs to encourage the different villages to complement this with a ritual ceremony in honor of food self-sufficiency.

In addition, Cameroonian farmers believe that they are guardians and stewards of the land which has been entrusted to them by God (Ngwainmbi, 2000, pp. 99, 102). The significance of this lies in the fact that Cameroonian farmers are life sustaining thanks to the link they claim exist between their ancestors and the Supreme Being. The annual sacred rituals of planting and harvesting should therefore not be taken lightly in the search for effective ways of mobilizing the population towards greater food crop production. The Moghamo of the grasslands of Cameroon for example consider food as synonymous with life and the lack of it signifies death. This belief about food among the Moghamo like other ethnic groups encourages them to work hard and survive. The importance of food is more so because it is an integral part of all family celebrations and used to create family bonds between parents and their children (Teboh, 2012, p. 20). The overriding importance of food in Cameroon and other parts of Africa is that it is used for cultural expression, history, and nationalism. For this reason, modern governments should understand and promote the use of several kinds of rituals in planting, harvesting, and thanksgiving to the Supreme Being.

This study is also important because the sacred nature of land makes it the source of most if not all wealth. The Iowa farmers of the United States, for example,

talk about the sacred symbol related to land. It must therefore be revered in the form of rituals and other ceremonies to avert a calamity. These farmers also fervently believe that land is a responsibility given to them by a higher power to be held with great care. To further show its importance, they say that the “soil is the great terrestrial connector of life, death, and new life, the very medium of resurrection” that helps to facilitate the “wheel of life” (Gardner, 2012, pp. 19-20). The Iowa farmers like the Moghamo farmers of northwest Cameroon consider life and death as associated with the soil. This clearly points to the fact that among the communities of the world, the soil and farming are given great attention because these are life giving and sustaining. Governments should recognize this and encourage in various ways the communities to continue celebrating rituals of planting, harvesting, and thanksgiving. This might make them to better appropriate government efforts in promoting farming and sustainable livelihoods.

The methodology employed in this study was diverse with the aim of collecting a lot of information about rituals in the life of the Laimbwe in general and the *Ih'neem* ritual/ceremony in particular. I therefore relied on focus group discussions of six members each consisting of a young boy, a young girl, two women, and two men. This was because I wanted to get the different opinions of the age groups and sexes about ritual activities in the Laimbwe ethnic group in general. I consciously selected two men and women each because they are knowledgeable in the *Ih'neem* having participated in it as kids and as grown-ups. There were three main focus groups from the three villages of Laimbwe. The three focus groups totaled 18 people.

Apart from the methodology of focus group discussions, I also engaged in free discussion with men, women, and children in popular places such as in the market, the church, drinking spots, and social clubs during the traditional resting days and Sundays. This was done over a long period to finally ascertain those things that were associated with the *Ih'neem* ritual. This method proved very effective because people recounted their experiences during the *Ih'neem* ritual and festival that accompanied it. Men spoke about what they usually did to their mothers-in-law, sisters, and mothers, and women talked about how the ritual made them turn to their husbands and more importantly sons-in-law for assistance and prestige. Young people recounted the feasting and happiness that accompanied this ritual ceremony.

I also relied on semi-structured interviews to talk to the more enlightened members of the Laimbwe who could clearly tell us what they understood to have been the importance of the *Ih'neem* as far as food production and sustainable livelihoods were concerned. Some of them also spoke with nostalgia about what they referred to as the “good old days” when people were proud to take to agriculture as a way of life and to feed the teeming population of young people. This was contrasted with the rural-urban exodus today among young people who spend their time in the big cities like Yaounde and Douala building “castles in the air.” Many of them instead of staying back home and investing in agriculture and surviving from it have taken to a hand to mouth life in the cities hawking a few items of trade. Since the ethnic group is largely under-studied I was only able to get a few secondary sources for background information and to understand how other

people have handled rituals and food production in other parts of the world. This was to draw inspiration from these other experiences.

In terms of the objectives of this study, I examined the importance of the *Ih'neem* ritual to greater food production and sustainable livelihood in the Laimbwe ethnic group. I also examined the unity of purpose among families and the village due to this ritual. Above all, this study has examined the nature of the ritual and accompanying celebrations that follow it to mark the start of the dry season farming. A lot has been written about farming and ritual celebrations from different and complementary angles.

The Literature in Context

In Cameroon, Africa, and other regions of the world there are several fertility rituals associated with farming and food production. Some of them have survived from generation to generation with little or no significant modifications. Others have not and are now extinct. In the different communities in Cameroon there are still rituals associated with agriculture, land, and food. These rituals are performed prior to the planting or harvesting of crops like corn, beans, yams, and cocoyams, among others. Others are performed when the crops have already been planted. The first ritual usually performed before the planting season asks God through the deities, ancestors, and spirits for a good crop yield and harvest. Many Cameroonian ethnic groups believe that a good harvest is the handiwork of the Supreme Being through the intercession of the ancestors (Ngwainmbi, 2000). The post-harvest ritual is often a mark of gratitude by farmers for a bountiful harvest. A bad harvest also calls for a ritual sacrifice to appease the Supreme Being who might have been angry with the way land was “treated” by the population (Ngwainmbi, 2000, pp. 102-103).

The fendom of Kom in the northwest Region of Cameroon has a history rich in rituals of farming and agricultural activities. The three major rituals of the fendom include the *azhea*, *ntul*, and *fuchuo*. These are performed in the palace by the fon for the general welfare of the Kom people. The rituals are also extended to the villages that constitute the fendom and are performed by the village heads and their close collaborators. There are also family rituals which are performed by women on behalf of their children and their close uterine kin. In the different ritual activities, the Kom people demonstrate the three Kom hands of *Ghu wu Kom tual* namely *ghu wain* (child), *afuo iyini* (food crops), and *nyam ngvin* (bush meat). These seek to protect the people against the *muuso* which is a mystical power believed to extract the goodness from the crops and then emaciate human beings to death. The *fuchuo* ritual is performed to inaugurate the planting season in the fendom. The rite which involves an offering of guinea-corn porridge, oil, salt, and wine is followed by a libation rite performed by the fon. The performances of these rituals in the Kom fendom at its capital Laikom are followed by the distribution of apotropaic medicine believed to protect sprouting corn and compounds against maleficent spirits (Nkwi, 1973, p. 55-57).

Many other crop-related rituals are performed by the Kom people. One of these is the *aghoi* (hail stones) ritual, performed to protect crops from destruction by hail

stones. The *azhia* ritual ensures sufficient sunshine and a good harvest. The *ntul* ritual which is limited to the state capital Laikom is performed to ensure peace and fertility of Kom women and the need for continuity of the lineage. Members of the *ndo-ntul* are also called upon to protect crops and trees, plantains, bananas, and boundary stems. The people who uproot these crops are liable to a fine of a goat (Nkwi, 1973, p. 58). The several ritual ceremonies in Kom, like elsewhere in the grassfields of Cameroon, point to the seriousness with which rituals are considered important in promoting food production and sustainability. The rituals are a conscious effort by the people to take all necessary precautions to ensure sufficient food for the family all year round. Famine is usually seen as an ill-omen and explains why many other rituals are performed to appease the spirits of the land.

In Kedjom Keku, a neighboring fondom to Kom there are also farming, fertility, crop yield, and other related rituals. Mothers, grandmothers, and female siblings or co-wives in the Kedjom Keku fondom perform rites which are rich in symbolism of the farm, the body, and female fertility. The people generally believe that if members of the fondom medicine houses do not perform these rites, crops are likely not to do well in the land. The organization of these rites is to forestall any problems coming from tornadoes. These tornadoes often flatten young crops in the early rainy season every year. In Kedjom Keku, like elsewhere in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, clearing and hoeing of farmland will not start until rituals are performed on the farms on behalf of the population. Women are always essential to these rites (Diduk, 2004, pp. 37-38) because of their important role in crop production for sustainable livelihood. Focus groups generally agree that there is a decline in the performance of these rites, people still have a nostalgic feeling about some of them in the northwest Region of Cameroon.

Similarly, the Massa people of the Logone Valley in the Far North Region of Cameroon perform agriculturally related rituals or rites annually. As an agricultural, livestock, and fishing community, the Massa people look up to the land master to lead these rituals. He is commonly called *Boum Nagata* in Massa territory. The people perform all the necessary sacrifices needed on land so that they can have a bountiful production or harvest (Ahidjo, 2012, p. 4). This strong belief in rituals as a means of having a bountiful harvest among the Massa, a rural farming community, has been emphasized by Ahidjo (2012) in his writing. Such a belief among the Massa would have contributed to instill hard work on the farms and in livestock farming and fishing, common economic activities among the ethnic group.

Discussion: Significant Rituals in Laimbweland

Like the examples discussed above, the Laimbwe people of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas perform several family and village rituals. Each ritual serves a particular purpose within the community. A common ritual is performed by people who were absent when a family member died. They do this to appease the ancestors and seek their protection. Like the Luo of Kenya, the ritual to honor the dead also provides the Laimbwe people with an occasion to express their pains and deep grief for the loss of a dear one (Shiino, 1997, p. 227). For women, the eldest member of the

family carries a calabash of water to the grave of the deceased and invites the woman or young girl to the grave of the deceased. She pours water on her palms three times representing an important traditional motto of the Laimbwe people, that is, *wuai, kesiazheh, nyengui* meaning, the child, food, and bush meat. For each of the three times, the woman or young girl standing on the grave washes the face and splashes the remainder on the legs. As the elderly woman pours the water, she mutters some words calling on the deceased to intercede on behalf of the daughter who had come home to “cry” for him or her. The old woman also mentions the names of ancestors calling on them to guard and guide those left behind against the plans of the evil one. After this brief ritual on the grave, the woman or girl follows the elderly mother and other women to the hearth, and throws a few coins on the ground as her own contribution to the funeral that took place in her absence. The money is distributed among the elderly women present. In some cases, the ritual is also performed by the woman elder on a young school boy who returns home after the death of a family member (personal communications, December 26 2015). The ritual of death celebration it should be noted is the most important ritual/festival of the grassfields of Cameroon (Jindra, 1997, p. 3).

For men or boys who return home for the same reason, the family and villagers gather to witness the ritual of honoring the dead. The elderly mother and uncle of the family together with other family members, male and female, gather on the grave of the deceased, the mother holding a basket (*kekungheh*) or a dish with maize and the uncle holding a cock for the ritual ceremony. The mother begins the incantation ritual with the maize. She throws a few grains to the ground three times. For each of the times she mutters some words to announce the coming of the man or boy to celebrate the funeral of the one who passed on in his absence. She also calls out names of family ancestors pleading for forgiveness and protection of family members still alive. Thereafter, the uncle takes his turn and removing each time a feather from the fowl (it is done three times) and also muttering words, he complements what the grandmother said.

Following this short ceremony, everyone returns to the house where the fowl is roasted and corn fufu made out of maize flour prepared for those gathered to eat. Some oil is put in the roasted fowl, salt, and sometimes pepper in some appreciable quantity to taste. The fowl is eaten by men using banana leaves. Women are given tilapia fish or meat which they prepare and also eat with corn fufu. People who join them may be offered a pot or pots of corn beer, wine, and whisky for their entertainment. The people gathered shower encomiums on the man or boy and wish him well in what he does in the city. At the end of the eating, the person gathers all the banana leaves and throws them away as a sign of having performed the ritual (personal communications, July 24 2009).

This ceremony for the dead and accompanying rituals is important on several counts. It re-establishes the link between the living and the dead who are considered the living-dead. It also re-incarnates the importance of fertility because the ancestors are called upon to bless the family and to make the girl or woman and the boy or man fertile and deliver a child to replace the one who has died. It is also a call to hard work on the part of family members still alive to emulate what the dead

person was able to do while alive. Without food the ritual ceremony of honoring the dead would not attract people and give them the opportunity to share ideas about how they can continue to pay allegiance to the family and contribute to its upkeep. This ceremony emphasizes sustainability of the lineage or family and food which should feed the members of the family. This has deeper meaning because the Laimbwe have a saying that children are walking sticks for the old and this ritual ceremony brings this out clearly. They must continue to work hard and to produce food so that the proceeds may take care of the needs of the family members and the larger community.

There are other rituals that are centrally organized under the leadership of the ritual leader and fon or chief in charge of food, land, and fertility (*fuafuazheh*). One of these is the *beisaghekeh* organized at the start of the dry season in the Laimbwe polities of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas. It is a technical gathering of the village head, notables, and family heads to discuss a wide range of issues including administration, the health and fertility of the people, and the soil. The major reason for the *beisaghekeh* is always to mitigate the effects of the dry season illnesses like coughs and skin rashes, among others so that the people can plant crops during this season. A concoction of medicine is prepared and given to men, women, and children. Some of the medicines are burned in a fire place designed for that purpose. Everyone goes there, coughs into the fireplace, and inhales the smoke as a preventive against an attack of epidemics during the dry season. Since children are vulnerable to airborne and other diseases, as a preventive measure they are led to the *beisaghekeh* to cough into the fireplace. In the past, the children were also bathed with ritual water collected from a sacred forest, the *kezheh* grove, by a priest of the Ukwoazheh family in the case of Bu. A concoction of some creeping plants, barks of trees, and faeces is also prepared and administered to the villagers to prevent epidemics from attacking them (Kah, 2015a, pp. 187-188; Kah, 2015b, p. 141; personal communications, January 9, 2009). The *beisaghekeh* has survived succeeding generations of the Laimbwe although not everyone now subscribes to it in the name of discarding tradition. Many people still adhere to its curative effect. The ritual is relevant to agriculture in the sense that it ensures healthy living and farming to feed the growing population.

Other food related rituals of the Laimbwe people of Cameroon include the ritual of *ngwei* (bush), *ke'em*, *esei*, and *ngaang*. The *ngwei* (*ngui*) ritual involves fowls and other local concoctions meant to bless the land and make it fertile for the planting and harvest of crops like maize. There is also the ritual ceremony of *ke'em* which is a mortuary ritual associated with healing and cleansing of land following the death of somebody under mysterious circumstances like suicide. The mortuary and cleansing ritual is performed to cleanse the land of any misfortune such as infertility and barrenness of the soil. The *esei* ritual is performed only in Baisso, one of the Laimbwe villages. During the ritual, children are bathed with water mixed with a concoction of herbs to prevent ailments and keep them healthy for food security through greater production of crops (Kah, 2015b, p. 148). This ritual though similar to *beisaghekeh* is uniquely for bathing of children unlike the *beisaghekeh* where children are given a ritual bath, among other things done. The

ritual of *ngaang* (Fig. 1) involves the erection of shrines at road crossings leading to the farms and also at the entrance and exit of the villages. This ritual is meant to protect maize from the destructive effects of tornadoes and other evil spirits brought to the land by wizards and witches. It also prevents people having evil intentions of causing harm to crops (personal communications, December 28, 2014). There is generally the use of goats, pigs, and fowls to sanction the several rituals performed in the Laimbwe villages (Kah, 2011b, p. 64). The *Ih'neem* ritual is an old ritual performed during the *teh'ndjouii* or dry season planting of maize.

This is a traditional fertility shrine known locally among the Laimbwe people as the *Ipham*. It is mounted at important road junctions leading to the farms, different quarters, and villages. A typical ritual in the shrine consists of the sprinkling of herbs across the road, an elongated fruit which is supported by sticks and on this fruit are feathers of a fowl killed for sacrifices and other sharp pointed instruments like the quills of porcupines locally known as *fei'tehngum*. The head of a fowl is also placed in the shrine and the *kenghe* or peace plant is planted around the shrine. The shrine repels evil forces and makes secure the crops as they grow.

Figure 1: The *Ipham*: A Traditional Fertility Shrine



Source: Photograph by the author, 2015.

The *Ih'neem* Ritual and Significance in Farming/Food History of the Laimbwe

The *Ih'neem* ritual among the Laimbwe of the Northwest Region of Cameroon is one of the important farming related rituals which aims to promote farming and increase output of agricultural products. This ritual is carried out in October annually to officially mark the planting of dry season maize, a crop which is very important in the socio-cultural, economic, and political life of the Laimbwe and other Tikar speaking fondoms of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. The dry season planting is locally known as the *teh'ndjouii*. The farms are first cleared and kept clean through bush burning or raking. Men play a very important role in the clearing and cleaning of the farms for the planting of maize. They are assisted by young boys in the process. Women without male members to help clean their farms will hire labor to do the clearing and cleaning for them. Others will do the clearing themselves assisted by their female children (Kah, 2011a). When the farms have been cleaned, women get set for the ritual ceremony of *Ih'neem*.

The preparation for the *Ih'neem* ritual involves support from the sons-in-law to their mothers-in-law. The support is in the form of tins of oil and dry meat. Fathers and uncles do the same for their wives, sisters, and mothers. The women and their female children get their planting baskets repaired and ready for planting of maize. On the eve of the *Ih'neem* ritual, food is prepared in great quantity some of which is carried to the farms by little girls and some left at home to be eaten after the planting of the first maize. The food usually consists of a staple, corn fufu made out of corn flour and the sauce is palm oil mixed with water, salt, limestone, pepper, and meat or fish to produce a yellowish soup called *kanwa* soup. Vegetables are also prepared and added to the *kanwa* soup (personal communications, December 26, 2011). Considering the importance of the ritual ceremony towards guaranteeing a good harvest for sustainable food management in Laimbwe land, almost every person is mobilized. This is to encourage or motivate the women to plant crops in many more farms during the harsh dry season.

The provision of material support to mothers-in-law by their sons-in-law during the preparation for the *Ih'neem* ritual ceremony earns them great respect from the in-laws' families and the larger community. This practice was taken seriously in the past because sons-in-law competed with one another for recognition and appreciation from their mothers- and fathers-in-law. The women were respected for their agricultural activities which led to adequate food for the family and the community (personal communications, December 29, 2015). The Laimbwe people pay much attention and ritualize the dry season because it is a season of extreme heat, water scarcity, and hunger. They perform farm or fertility rituals to cushion the negative effects of the dry season and appease the spirits against hunger. The *Ih'neem* like other rituals performed during the dry season pleads for the intercession of the ancestors on behalf of the living for a generous harvest of maize, a staple crop in Laimbweland.

Apart from material contribution from sons-in-law to mothers-in-law, other men also contribute to the preparation for the *Ih'neem* ritual. Husbands also hunt or

buy meat and fish or buy fish which they share to their wives, sisters, and mothers. Apart from fathers, the brothers also give material assistance to their sisters and sisters' children to encourage them to prepare well for the ritual ceremony. The traditional edible *ketschughe*, harvested from the barks of dead or fallen trees in the forest (Kom-Wum Forest) and other secondary forests (personal communications, March 10, 2010), is what the women actually look out for to prepare the sauce to be consumed during the ritual planting of corn. This *ketschughe* was an important delicacy that was never absent from the menu of the *Ih'neem* ritual in Laimbweland. Women valued it more than meat and fish. Men or women will harvest them several months before the ritual, dry and preserve them for use in October when the *Ih'neem* ritual takes place. It was also prepared fresh. The *ketschughe* is dried on the *uta'ahghe* (Fig. 2), a structure mounted above a fireplace to facilitate drying of fresh things like meat and corn, among others.

This *uta'ahghe* is directly over the fireplace and on it fresh meat, corn, and fish, among others, are dried. Other things preserved here include salt, *kekuughe tunghe*, and *ketschughe*, which are used in preparing food.

The drying of some *ketschughe* was because the excess that was harvested fresh was preserved in a thatched roof, the *uta'ahghe*, in the kitchen where it was seasoned under fire. The *ketschughe* in fact was more important than meat and was preferred to meat in the *Ih'neem* ritual ceremony. Another edible delicacy that grows on the barks of dead or fallen trees was the *kekuughe tunghe*. Some men in bringing other items to their wives, sisters, and mothers-in-law usually included these edible delicacies. This made their wives, sisters, and mothers-in-law happy with them and they prepare for the *Ih'neem* ritual with joy. The more they prepared well for the *Ih'neem*, the greater the confidence that they would cultivate many farms and fight against food scarcity. The abundance of food is also used by men for initiation into the *kuiifuai* regulatory society or the *tschong* friction drum society. When many farms were cultivated during the dry season, this led to availability of food all year round.

The *Ih'neem* ritual is performed by the *zhehfuai* or Queen Mother. On the day of the *Ih'neem*, usually in October every year, Laimbwe women rise up early with their female children. They carry their baskets, hoes, maize, and food to the farms to join the *zhehfuai* for the ritual. Soon after the *zhehfuai* makes the first bed and plants the first maize together with other elderly women, the other women in different farms begin planting. If the soil on which the ritual planting takes place is soft, the *zhehfuai* does not make a mound but simply takes grains of corn and plant them on it. A lot of importance is attached to the ritual of opening the planting season in the different Laimbwe villages. The ritual takes place in the morning and is very solemn as other women watch *zhehfuai* perform it (personal communications, December 24 2014).

The ritual planting of the first maize by the *zhehfuai* is immediately followed by loud shrills to communicate to the rest of the women in different parts of the valley that planting should start in earnest. Different families also perform the ritual with the grandmother planting the first maize seeds and thereafter the rest of the children and grandchildren join in the planting exercise. Families with many people

are able to plant as many farms as is possible for that day. When they finish planting one farm, they move to the next one with joyous songs. This is an important day because there is a massive mobilization of women to action with the moral support of men. When the planting is over or when the women farmers take a break, they usually gather in one person's farm within the same valley bringing together their food for a common meal. The ritual therefore espouses the importance of communalism in food consumption and sharing which has remained a key cultural value of the Laimbwe people from the pre-colonial era to the present.

Figure 2: *Uta'ahghe* for Drying and Preservation of Food in a Laimbwe Kitchen



Source: Photograph by the author, 2015.

After planting, women return home in groups. As the women move back home in a long line, they sing songs of joy and appreciation that the planting has come and gone without any major incident. They also thank the *zhehfuai* for personally presiding over the ritual ceremony paving the way for the planting of dry season maize. As they sing loudly, young boys and girls gather to watch them return home joyously. The feasting that started in the farms continues at home with the food that was left behind in the morning. Men and children join the happy women in the evening meal after the ritual planting. As the women look back at the ceremony, they appreciate the *zhehfuai* and priestess of the *Ih'neem* ritual for exemplary

leadership. The feasting continues late into the night and the following day women continue the planting exercise (personal communications, December 28, 2014).

Once the dry season planting is over, it comes time to appreciate those who made it a success. Mothers-in-law prepare food and carry it to their sons-in-law in appreciation of the material support they gave them. Other men like husbands and brothers are also entertained with food and corn beer. The ritual therefore does not only focus on how well a people mobilize to increase food production and make it available all year round but it also provides an opportunity for inter and intra family union and reunion which is all geared towards supporting sustainable livelihood in the Laimbwe speaking polities of the northwest region of Cameroon. The *Ih'neem* ritual also provides people with time to feast together and valorize the importance of communal living where everyone is the other's keeper (personal communications, February 23, 2011).

The emphasis on collective support for the *Ih'neem* ritual and planting of maize is based also on the importance of food to the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. Food is used to nourish the body and to sustain life among the people. The availability of food is also an indication that the ancestors and intermediary spirits are happy with the people and will always intercede on their behalf to the Supreme Being for blessings and abundant harvest. Food is also used in rituals of death and initiation into important village clubs and societies like the *tschong*, *kuiifuai*, *kefa'a*, and *mekuun*. Without food therefore, initiation rituals, an important part of the Laimbwe people and a marker of status and respect will not be performed. The availability of food has always been associated with important rituals bringing people together in the villages and espousing the unity of purpose among them. The Laimbwe people believe that failure to perform these rituals in due season is likely to anger the spirits and ancestors to the point of bringing hunger on the land with unbearable consequences.

A thriving fertility and food production ritual which was performed with socio-cultural and economic importance has unfortunately declined into oblivion in Bu village, one of the principal villages of the Laimbwe people of northwest Cameroon. One of the major factors that has accounted for this state of affairs is the contestation for leadership in this fendom since 1981 when Fon Chu Mbonghekang passed on. His death unleashed a venomous struggle for leadership to the extent that many of the cultural values of the people have been contested and re-contested by rival groups (Kah, 2008). Other factors have been rural-urban exodus, and the advent of Christianity and education that continuously take away young people from concentrating on farming. In the midst of all these, the center seems not to be holding. The ritual has therefore been affected because of the division unleashed by this chieftaincy brawl and the other factors. The *zhehfuai* whose leadership has not been contested is however still despised by some women. This has contributed to weaken the institution of queenship in Bu with the negative impact on the *Ih'neem* ritual and food production. The other Laimbwe villages of Baisso and Mbengkas have been faithful to this ritual because of a greater sense of unity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have situated the culture and practice of rituals of fertility for the sustainable growth and management of the crops after harvest. Many communities in the world perform rituals to fight against famine and ensure a good harvest so that livelihoods can be sustained. While this practice has drastically declined in some communities, in others, it has simply been modified and fused into the modern scheme of things. While there are objectives for many of these rituals, some of the practices that sanction them are diverse involving different instruments, actors, and actresses. I was able to discuss the significance of this study in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa. Many governments especially the Cameroon government through the second generation agriculture agenda have recognized the importance of farming to the extent that every year there is an official launching of the farming season with the aim of mobilizing farmers and other stakeholders towards contributing towards greater crop yield for the benefit of individuals, farming groups, government, and for export to earn hard currency.

The article also analyzed some other rituals of the Laimbwe people and then focused on the *Ih'neem* ritual, which is an agricultural based ritual that is carried out at the start of the dry season. There is serious preparation and mobilization of resources and the population prior to the ritual proper. The farms are cleared and kept clean, the maize readied for planting, food prepared in huge quantities, and the entire population mobilized through gift exchange. I then discussed the ritual of the *zhehfuai* making the first bed and planting the first maize before the rest of the women-folk join to perform the same in their individual farms. This important ritual among the Laimbwe people of Menchum and Boyo Divisions of northwest Cameroon has unfortunately declined in importance especially in Bu, the largest of the Laimbwe fondoms due to the contestation for leadership and the argument among some Christians that these rituals are no longer important because God provides to all without discrimination. One interesting thing about the people of Bu is that although Christianity was received by the local elders in 1926 and the Basel Mission given a place on which to build a church, in later years a rift developed between tradition and Christianity in the sense that those who belong to the church are expected not to belong to traditional institutions and defend the culture of the people like the *Ih'neem* ritual. Women who form the bulk of the Christians have adhered to this.

Generally speaking, this study has revealed the importance of rituals in promoting food self-sufficiency. It has also shown that modern governments can borrow a lift from traditional farming practices and incorporate them into the culture of farming. The Cameroon government is more and more involving the people in the process of increasing food production in the country but is not tapping into these rich cultural and ritual practices to succeed more. Many of the farming related rituals in the different ethnic groups like the *Ih'neem* need to be popularized and encouraged through radio and television programs and receive financial assistance so that the people can be mobilized into farming for greater output and food

availability. In this way, food crises can be avoided and the country becomes self-sufficient in food production.

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