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CONTRIBUTIONS OF TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEMS TO SPECIES CONSERVATION IN MOUNT CAMEROON AREA, SOUTHWEST CAMEROON

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Abstract

Taboos, totems and ritualsas belief systems have been very instrumental in conserving species in different African communities.This studywas therefore carried out to assess how these belief systemscontribute to species conservation in Mount Cameroon Area. An interviewer-administered questionnaire, focus group discussions, and in-depth interview sessions were conducted in 8 of the 41 villages within the Mount Cameroon Area in 2017. The study found outthat 50% of the respondents still perceive taboos, and totem practices as key traditional practices contributingto the conservation of animal, tree and bird species including endangered species like the African Elephant and Nigeria Cameroon Chimpanzee. Though contributing to natural resources conservation, these belief systems are not cherished and respected by the younger generation and an increasing number of community members due to the adoption of Western culture and Christianity, as well as urbanization. The study therefore recommendsthat a detailed study be carried out on the effectiveness of incorporating traditional belief systems into law enforcement mechanisms for the conservation of natural resources to understand the complementarities of traditional belief systems and law enforcement in the achievement of conservation goals.

Key Words: ***Belief systems, traditional knowledge, biodiversity conservation, totems, taboos***

1. INTRODUCTION

African communities have since creation,developed various belief systems including taboos, rituals and totems that ensured the effective management of natural resources in the continent (Appiah-Opoku, 2007).These belief systems ascribes much powerto some natural resources and species within the community (Rim-Rukeh et al. 2013). In many African communities, animals are seen as the totems of people or communities and are therefore protected since killing them may lead to the death of an individual in the community or the person who did the killing (Etiendem et al., 2011). The people of the Besali, Bechati, Fossimondi, and Bamumbu villages in the Lebialem Division, South West Region of Cameroon, for instance see gorillas as human totems (Etiendem et al. 2011; Adam et al. 2015). They believe that if the totemic gorilla is killed, the human counterpart also dies unless he/sheseeks immediate disconnection from the soul of the deceased totem by treatment from a traditional healer (Etiendem et al., 2011; Adam et al., 2015). Some people in these communities belief that the strayed Cross River gorilla killed in Pinyin in Northwest Cameroon in March 2013 was the totem of the Fon of Bamumbu, reason why he died few months after death of the gorilla (Adam *et al*., 2015).There is a similar belief with chimpanzee totem by some adjacent communities to the Korup National, Southwest Cameroon. Ngoufo et al. (2014) the people of Mgbegati community around the Korup National Park see chimpanzees as their 'emblem or totem' and belief that "killing a chimpanzee is synonymous to killing the owner of the totem"At Useifrun and Ujevwu communities in Ughelli South and Udu Local Government Areas of Nigeria respectively, the python is seen as a totem (Rim-Rukeh et al. 2013). It is believed in these communities that during inter - tribal wars; the python goes after the people and erases their footprint so that enemies would not identify the pathway of the people. In these communities therefore, the python is regarded as "the god of wisdom, earthly bliss and benefaction" and is thus abominable for anyone to kill it. This same belief in python totems is shared by the Sankana community in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The people believe that the python transformed into a log and helped their forefathers/ancestors cross a large river when they were running away from their enemies for safety (Diawuo &Issifu, 2015). Thus, the people consider the python as asaviour and a helper, hence, their totemic animal and anyone, who kills or eats a python will transfigure into a python and probably die. In a related story, the people of the Sankana community believed that a frog once led their ancestors to a source of water during difficult times in their migratory times, and therefore tabooed the killing and eating of frog as they record it as their totem (Diawuo & Issifu 2015). More so, the Tongo-Tengzuk communities in Ghana hold the belief that crocodiles are human beings. It is therefore a taboo for anyone to kill or injure a sacred crocodile as it is tantamount to killing a human being from within them (Diawuo&Issifu, 2015).Diawuo&Issifu (2015) maintain that taboos and totems are key indigenous methods used for conserving biodiversity species in Ghana. The Mount Cameroon Area is host to the Mount Cameroon National Park with a

great number of species , which are fast disappearing due to anthropogenic factors like illegal hunting and exploitation (Mononoo*et al*., 2016). This is further compounded by the increasing adoption of Western culture and Christianity by community members. Despite a call by the 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for the recognition of ancestral domains, spiritual values and their incorporation into conservation efforts, Christianity,Western cultureand urbanisation seem to have eaten deep into communities in the Mount Cameroon Area that some hitherto natural sacred sites have become extinct. This is further compounded by the increasing adoption of Western culture and Christianity by community members. Though efforts are being made by the Mount Cameroon Park Service, NGOs, and researchers to conserve the biodiversity species of this area, traditional belief systems are often side-lined in species conservation efforts.This studyseeks to assess how traditional belief systems contribute to species conservation in the Mount Cameroon Area and how they can be incorporated into conservation strategies in the area.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Area

The Mount Cameroon Area is located in the Fako and Meme Divisions, South West Region between latitudes 4.055° - 4.378° N and longitudes 9.031°- 9.294° E of the Greenwich Meridian. It covers an area of 58,178 ha and shares external boundaries of 128.73 km in length with five Sub-divisions: Buea(46.79 km), Limbe, Muyuka, IdenauandMbonge(MINFOF, 2014).This area cuts across some 41 villages with a250,000 ha area Park, the Mount Cameroon National Park (MINFOF 2014).

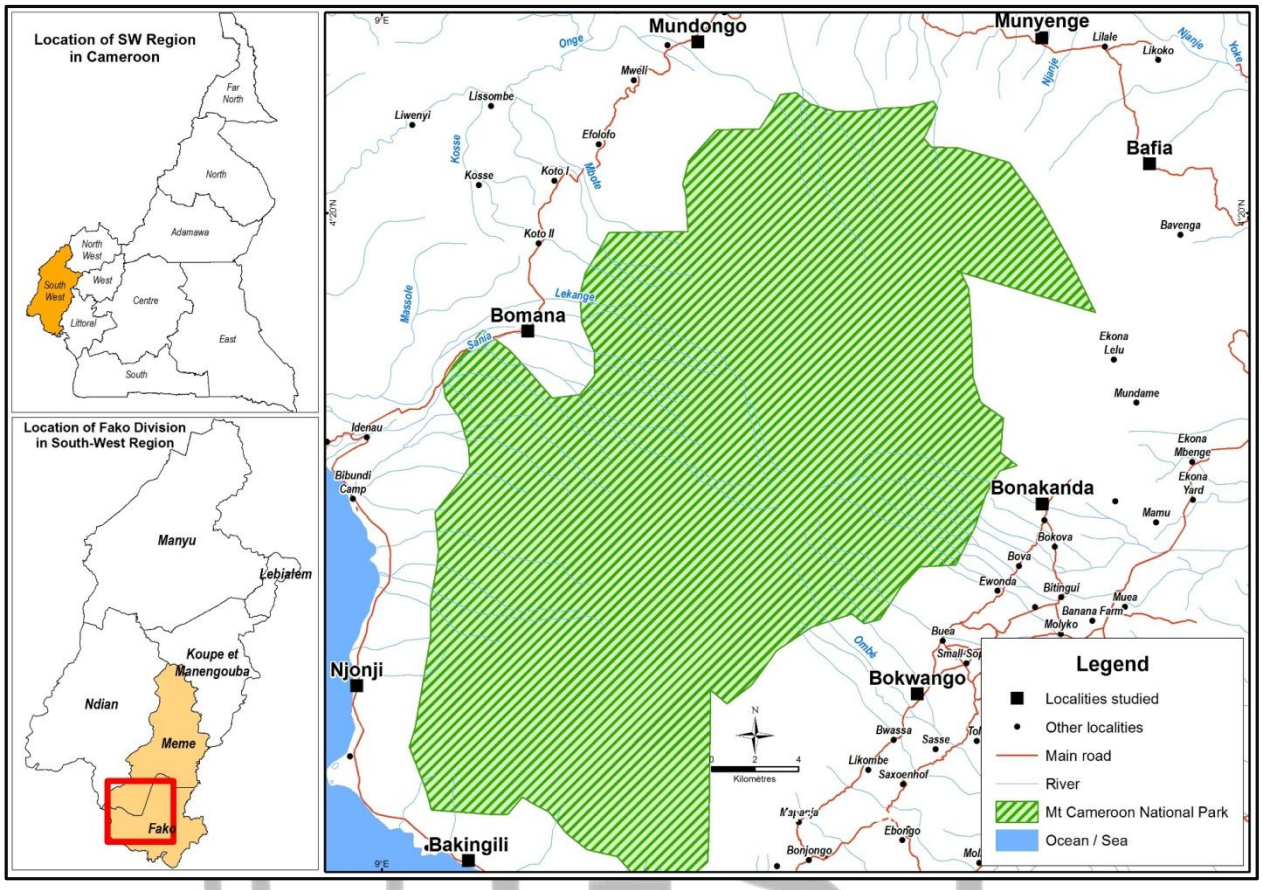

Figure 1: Map of Study Area

The western slope of the Mount Cameroon is the most diverse and richest area of the mountain and the only area in West and Central Africa where there is an unbroken vegetation gradient from evergreen lowland rainforest at sea-level, through montane forest, to montane grassland and alpine grassland near its summit (MINFOF, 2014). This link between ecosystems largely accounts for the biological diversity of the region. Past surveys of plant species had led to the identification of 6 main vegetation types. There is the Lowland rainforest extending from 0 – 800 m above sea level (a.s.l.) rich in species with an evergreen forest and tall continuous canopy. Then the sub-montane forest, which continues from 800 – 1,600ma.s.l.frequentlycoveredby cloud and rich in bryophytes, ferns and vascular epiphytes. After the submontane, we have the Montane forest which ranges from 1,600 – 1,800ma.s.l.closely followed by the montane scrub from 1,800 – 2,400ma.s.l.and then the Montane grassland ranging from 2,000 – 3,000ma.s.l..From here, we have the Sub-alpine grassland up towards the summit that is from 3,000 – 4,100ma.s.l.. This highest vegetation is poor in species and dominated by short tussock grasses, with isolated patches of dwarf and gnarled shrubby trees and thick crust foliose and fruticoselichen(MINFOF 2014).

Soil in some parts is principally of recent origin,mostly on young volcanic rocks and are fertile. On other parts it is mostly older Tertiary lavaor composed of a mean texture of sandy clay dominated by sand. The north-east flank of the mountain is characterised by metamorphic volcanic formations and deep soils, favourable for growth of gregarious flowering plants(MINFOF 2014).The Mount Cameroon National Park is home to 86 reptile species, 210 bird species, 35 fish species, 70 insect species and ten (10) species of large mammals including elephant *(Loxodontacyclotis),* chimpanzee *(Pan troglodytes),* red river hog *(Potamochoerusporcus),* bushbuck *(Tragelaphusscriptus),* bay duiker *(Cephalophusdorsalis),* blue duiker *(Cephalophusmonticola),* yellow-backed duiker *(Cephalophussylvicultor)* some of which are endemic to the area. A total of 70 species of butterfly (including 3 endemic species) have also been recorded in this area (MINFOF, 2014)

The park hasover 2,435 plant speciesin more than 800 genera and210 families, 49 strictly endemic and 50 near endemic plant species. It has a wide range of habitats including lowlandevergreen rainforest, mangrove, coastal vegetation,swampforest, sub-montane forest, montane forest, grassland (MINFOF, 2014) Mount Cameroon Area has an estimated population of over 450,000people (MINFOF, 2014). About 75 % of this populationis dependent on exploitation of land and forest resources for their livelihood.

2.2 Sampling and Data collection

Eight villages wererandomly selected from the 41 villages of the Mount Cameroon Area with two village selected per each of the four clusters of the area. A total of72 questionnaires were administered, with at least 7 per sampled village, to get communities perception of belief systems that contribute to species conservation and their respect for these beliefs. Five focus group discussionswere held with Traditional Council members, sacred society members, youth and women leaders,and interview sessions conducted with village Chiefs to ascertain biodiversity species which traditional belief systems are contributing to their conservation. Discussions and interviews were mainly in Pidgin English, which were recorded. Data were collected in the months of September and October, 2017, after obtaining permission from the Mount Cameroon National Park Service and village Chiefs.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

As shown in Table 1, majority of the sample population were men (79.2%) while 20.8 % were female. The obvious reason for this is because many women shied away given that the sacred societies are restricted to men. Most of those who participated in the study were older than 45 years (69.4). Over half of the population (59.7%) had attended primary school while a small proportion (6.9%)had higher education. A vast majority (75%) of those who participated in the study were Christians while very few Muslims(2.8%) were part of the study. Mostly farmers (63.3%) were involved in the study. The indigenes of villages within the study area constituted

a majority of those who took part in this study (65.3 %). A greater proportion of the sample population (37.5%) have lived in the study area for at least 16 years (Table1).

Table 1: Demographic information of sample population

Demographic Variables		N	Percentage
Gender of respondents	male	57	79.2
	female	15	20.8
	Total	72	100.0
Age of respondents	25-34	4	5.6
	35-44	18	25.0
	45-54	20	27.8
	55-64	8	11.1
	65-74	10	13.9
	6.00	12	16.7
	Total	72	100.0
Religion of respondents	Traditional	16	22.2
	Christianity	54	75.0
	Islamism	2	2.8
	Total	72	100.0
Level of Education	Primary	43	59.7
	Secondary	24	33.3
	Higher Education	5	6.9
	Total	72	100.0
Profession of respondents	famer	47	65.3
	teacher	4	5.6
	herbalist	1	1.4
	fishing	6	8.3
	others	14	19.4
	Total	72	100.0
Ethnic origin	Indigene	47	65.3
	None indigene	25	34.7
	Total	72	100.0

Demographic Variables		N	Percentage
Longevity in the village	0-15years	9	12.5
	16-29years	27	37.5
	30-49years	18	25.0
	50+years	18	25.0
	Total	72	100.0
Position of respondent	Quarter head	4	5.6
	youth leader	7	9.7
	women leader	9	12.5
	chief	7	9.7
	sacred society member	9	12.5
	traditional council member	36	50.0
	Total	72	100.0

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3.2: Perception Towards Pro Conservation Traditional Belief Systems

In the first place, we analysed the perception of community members towards the existence of traditional belief systems conserving species in the Mount Cameroon Area. Half (50%) of the population agreed that there are norms/customs that restrict people from visiting particular natural resources sites (taboo), and that the killing of particular animals or birds is tantamount to killing someone who has transformed into the animal(s) or bird(s) (totem).The rest of the

study population acknowledged the practice of at least one of the above traditional belief systems.

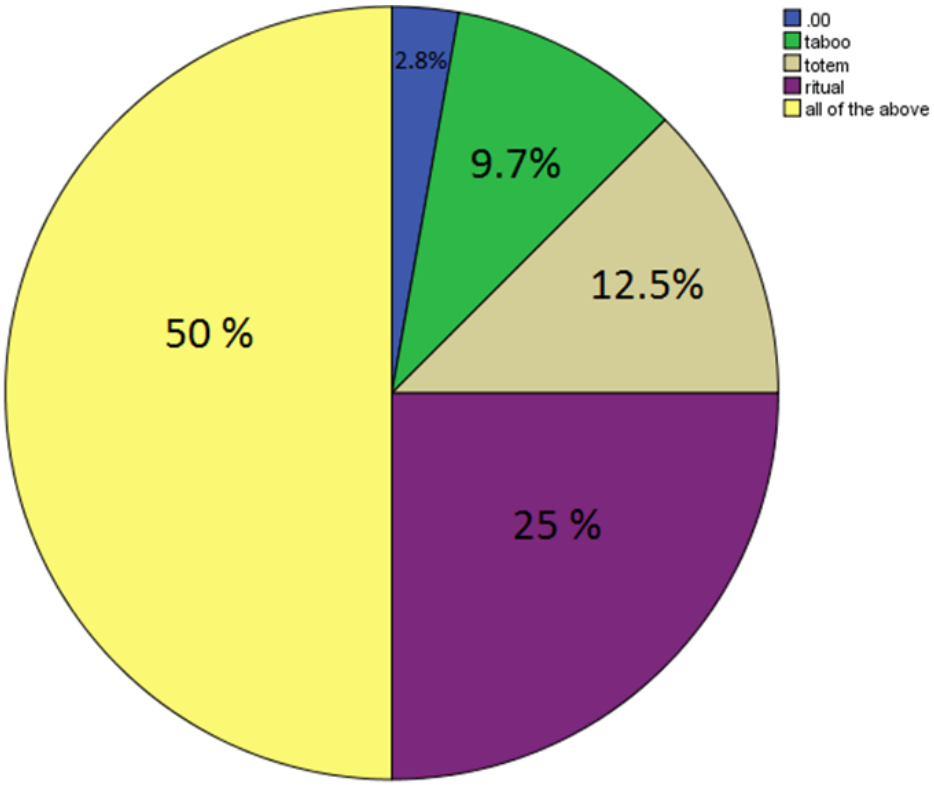

Figure 2: Perceived practice of traditional belief systems like taboo and totem

3.3: Implementation of traditional belief systems that contribute to species conservation

The majority of respondents (79.2%) said in a bid to ensure the respect of the traditional norms and customs of the village the traditional council and or sacred society educate the villagers on the consequences of disrespecting as well as punish defaulters. Other respondents (12.5%) hold that these the village traditional council and or sacred society only punish defaulters without educating while a few of them (8.3%) belief that these structures rather only educate and does not punish defaulters

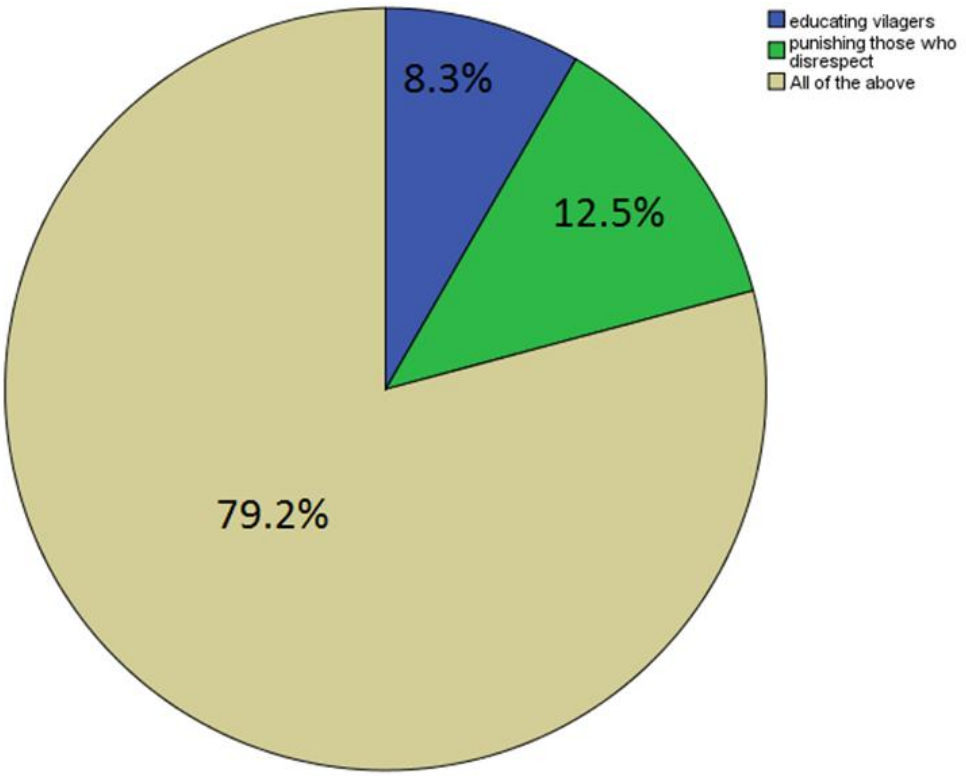

Figure 3: Measures put in place to ensure respect for traditional norms and customs

3.4: Respect for traditional belief systems that contribute to species conservation by age

Majority of the respondents (93.06%) of the respondents affirmed that the greatest respecter of traditional customs and norms within the Mount Cameroon Area is the old that is 50 years and above. Over half of these respondents (59.7%) attributed the respect of traditional customs and norms by the old to fear of punishment from the ancestors and to the fact that they love and identify themselves with traditional customs and norms. Over half of these respondents (59.7%) attributed the respect of traditional customs and norms by the old to fear of punishment from the ancestors and to the fact that they love and identify themselves with traditional customs and norms (Table 8).

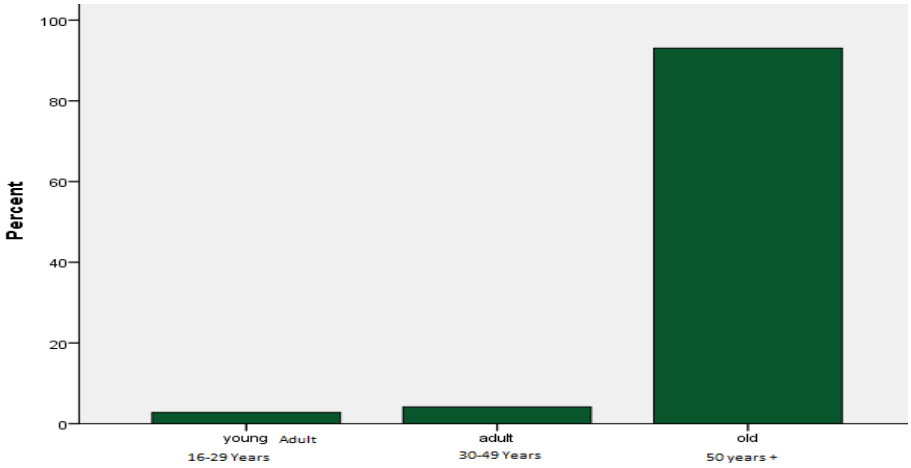

Figure 4:

Table 2: Reasons for respect of traditional customs and norms

Reasons	N	Percent
fear of punishment	14	19.4
love and identity	12	16.7
all of the above	43	59.7
others	3	4.2
Total	72	100.0

Most respondents (58.33%) were of the opinion that young adults, that is those within 16-29 years of age are the greatest category of people that disrespect traditional customs and norms of the village. Meanwhile 30.56 % of the respondents were of the opinion that adults, that is those within 30 and 49 years of age are those who mostly disrespect the traditional customs and norms of the village. Meanwhile over half of the respondents attributed the disrespect of the traditional customs and norms of the village to the advent of Christianity and western culture/civilization.

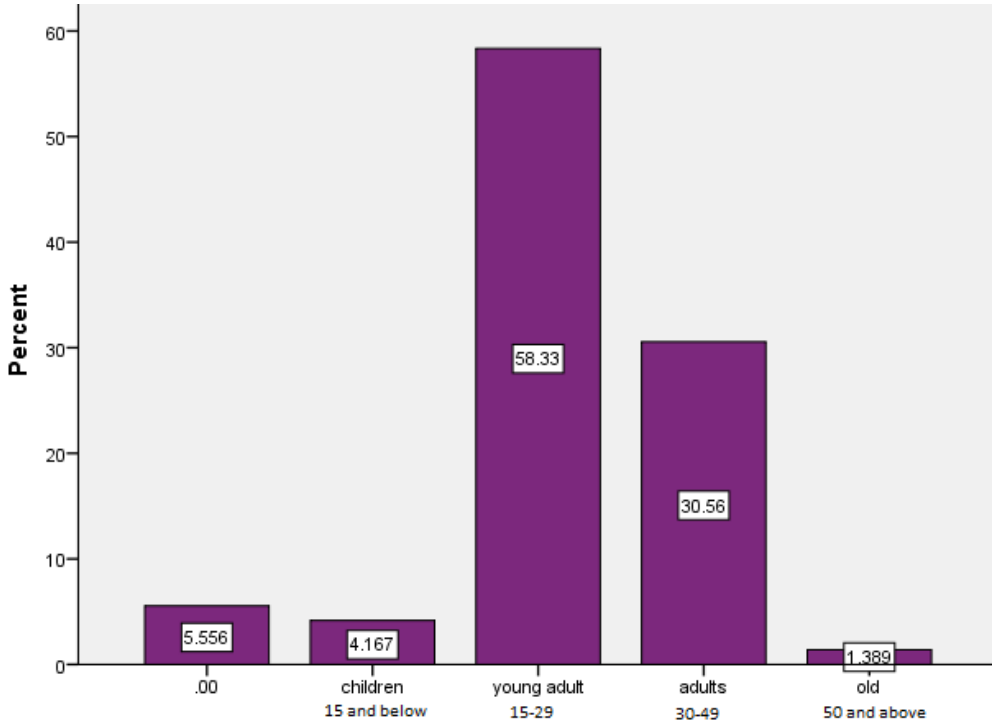

Figure 5 : Greatest non respecter of Traditional Norms in the Mount Cameroon Area by Age Group

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Table 3: Reasons disrespect of customs and tradition

Reasons for Disrespect	N	Percent
No response	2	2.8
advent of Christianity	10	13.9
Advent of western culture and tradition	14	19.4
Both advent of Christianity and western culture	39	54.2
Others	7	9.7
Total	72	100.0

3.5: Contribution of Traditional Beliefs to the Conservation of Animal Species

As summerised in Table 3, 3 animal species (forest elephant, chimpanzee and monkey) were believed to be the totem of some community members that is animals hosting the spirit of

some members and killing any of such animals is tantamount to killing the animal owner.All these three species are classified as endangered on the IUCN Red List. Three other species (Bush pig, duiker and porcupine) were conserved by the belief in taboo. Community members attributed the taboos to the sacred nature of the animals and interpret their killing as bad omen on the killer.

Table 4: Animal species that traditional belief systems are contributing to their conservation in the Mount Cameroon Area

Common	**Scientific Name**	**Conservation Status**	**Belief System Conserving species**
Elephant	*Loxodontacyclotis*	Endangered	Totem
Chimpanzee (Nigeria Cameroon Chimpanzee)	*Pan troglodytes ssp. ellioti*	Endangered	Totem
Bush Pigs	*Potamochoeruslarvatus*	Least Concern	Taboo
Monkey;			Totem
-White nose Monkey	*Cercopithecusnictitans*	Least concern	
-Preuss Monkey	*Allochrocebuspreussi*	Endangered	
Duiker; OgilbyDuiker	*Cephalophusogilbyi*	Least concern	
Blue Duiker	*Philantombamonticola*	Least concern	Taboo
Porcupine	*Cercopithecusnictitans*	Least concern	Taboo

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3.6: Contribution of Traditional Beliefs to the Conservation of Bird Species in the Mount Cameroon Area

According to Table 4, 9 birds were indentified to have been conserved by traditional belief systems.One was conserved by the belief that it is the totem of community members, who are considered to be witches or wizards, and the killing of such bird will mean the killing of a possible member of the communities. Eight others were conserved by the belief in taboo with reasons for the taboo including the fact that the birds are consideredas‘sacred’or the fact thattheyaremessengers of good news and are thus, prohibited from being killed. Most of the birds (5) were classified by IUCN Red List as least concern.

Table 5:Bird species that traditional belief systems are contributing to their conservation in the Mount Cameroon Area

Common/Local Name	Scientific Name	Conservation Status	Belief conserving species
Owl	*Jubulalettii*	Data deficient	Totem
Tiger Bird	*Laniustigrinus*	Least Concern	Taboo
Francolin	*Francolinuscamerunensis*	Endangered	Taboo
Weaver birds	*Ploceusphilipinus*	Least concern	Taboo
Parrot	*Psittacuserithacus*	Endangered	Taboo
King Fisher	*Alcedoatthis*	Least concern	Taboo
Picatartes	*Picathartesgymnocephalus*	Vulnerable	Taboo
Kite	*Elanuscaeruleus*	Least concern	Taboo
Blue Turaco Eagle	*Aetomylaeuscaeruleofasciatus*	Least concern	Taboo
			Taboo

3.7: Contribution of Traditional Beliefs to the Conservation of Tree Species in the Mount Cameroon Area

As summerised in Table 5, information gathered from informants in the 8 sampled villages revealed some 7 trees species in the Mount Cameroon Area, are protected based on the taboo traditional belief systems. The general reasons attributed to the taboos include the fact that most of the trees have great medicinal values and magical powers. Two other trees are conserved based on totemic beliefs. They believed that such trees inhabit human spirits and cutting them may instigate the dead of a community member. Three of such trees were classified as vulnerable by the IUCN Red List, one as 'least concern', and one as near threatened. Three of the species could only be recalled by the informants in their traditional languages.

Table 6: Tree species that traditional belief systems are contributing to their conservation in the Mount Cameroon Area

Common/Local Name	Scientific Name	Conservation Status	Belief Conserving Species
Iroko	*Miliciaexcela*	Near Threatened	Taboo
Pygeum	*Prunusafricana*	Vulnerable	Taboo
Ebony	*Diopyrostessellaria*	Vulnerable	Taboo
Camwood	*Baphianitida*	Least concern	Taboo
Mahogany	*Swieteniamacrophylla*	Vulnerable	Taboo
Boma	*Ceibapentandra*	-	Totem
'Linyinge'	-	-	Taboo
'Moendede'	-	-	Taboo
'Wotolongo'	-	-	Totem

4.0 Discussion

Taboo and totem are two main belief systems practiced in communities in the Mount Cameroon Area that contribute to species conservation. Each of the sampled villages prohibited people from eating specific animals and birds (taboo). The people believe that their forefathers, who died have their spirits residing in birds and animals. These villages also had some particular animals, birds and even trees considered as human emblem (totem) and the killing of that particular animals/birds or cutting down of a tree is tantamount to killing someone who has transformed into the animal(s), bird(s) (totem) or tree. It is a similar belief held by the people of the Besali, Bechati, Fossimondi, and Bamumbu villages in the Lebialem Division, South West Region of Cameroon, who even concluded that the strayed Cross River gorilla killed in Pinyin in Northwest Cameroon in March 2013 was the totem of the Fon of Bamumbu, reason why he died few months after death of the gorilla (Etiendem*et al*., 2011; Adam *et al*., 2015).

To ensure that these belief systems are respected, it was discovered that sacred society and village council members/village chiefs educate their respective communities on the adverse effect of disrespect as well as punish defaulters. The punishment varies with communities, magnitude of defaulting and the sacred society in question but generally involves payment of fines in cash and kind. However, with the advent of western civilisation and Christianity, the love and respect for these belief systems are diminishing among the younger generation. Mostly the old (50 years and above) still love and identify themselves with the norms and customs of the village.Many young people are adopting the western culture thanks to their exposure to the social media and other information and communication technologies. This is indeed posing a serious threat to the sustainability of the African traditional belief system, including those aiding in the conservation of natural sites and natural resources.Corroborating

this discovery, Adams (2003), asserts that Western Culture and Christianity is greatly contributing to the depletion of the African Traditional Belief System.

The researcher found out that the belief in totems in the Mount Cameroon Area has contributed to the conservation ofelephants, chimpanzees, and monkeys. The people hold that the killing of these animals is tantamount to killing the totem owner, who could be a family member.Though no particular punishment is melted, such a person is regarded as a killer and 'bad luck man'. The fear of this is therefore instrumental in the conservation of these species.This reinforces Monono*et al* (2016) and Kwekudee (2014) 's assertions that theBakweriand Bomboko people have totemic ties with the montaneelephants,known as *'njoku'*,and members of the '*maley'* group are believed to transform into elephants to do many spiritual manipulationsand protections. Though thisbelief system make them to protect the species, it was however, noted that the Western civilisation, urbanisation and Christianity are eroding the traditional beliefs and some community members are indulging in indiscriminate harvesting.This has brought about a decline in the population of these species to an extend that these species (elephant, chimpanzee, and preuss's monkey) have been classified as endangered in the IUCN Red. There is thus needfor serious law enforcement to compliment this belief system.

Meanwhile taboo was discovered as contributing to the conservation of porcupines, bush pig, duikers as they are simply considered sacred animals and killing them amounts to picking up bad luck.The researcher also noted that , besides the traditional belief systems of the people, law enforcement and sensitisation by the Mount Cameroon National Park equally play a great role in the conservation of these species in the Mount Cameroon Area.

It was again discovered that the belief in totem was the major factor contributing to the conservation of a bird species like Owl (*Jubulalettii).* This bird is considered a *"witch bird"* because it is believed to inhabit the spirit of witches and wizards and the killing of such bird will mean the killing of a possible member of the communities. Other bird species like the Parrot, Weaver birds, King Fisher, Picatartes, Kite, Blue Turacoand Eagle are been conserved thanks to taboos put in place by the village people. Parrot is regarded as a messenger of good news. The people don't kill or eat parrot because they belief parrot guided their fore fathers during the first world war, giving vital information to escape from the enemy. This view was particularly expressed in Mundongo. Weaver bird, king fisher and kite were regarded as sacred birds and it is thus, believed thatanybody who kills them will be bewitched. This is a similar belief held in the Anafobisi community in Ghana where birds like falcon, raven, and parrot are considered as relatives, or ancestors (Aniah*et al*., 2014). No matter the reasons advanced, one very important thing is that the birds are conserved. It was also discovered that two of the birds (francolin and parrot) conserved traditionally were classified as endangered on the IUCN Red List. Meaning more than just traditional belief systems are needed to ensure the conservation of such species and prevent them from becoming extinct. It was again

discovered at this level that law enforcement and sensitization campaign by the Mount Cameroon National Park is equally aiding in the conservation of bird species especially those classified as endangered by the IUCN Red List.

The results of this study equally revealed that cutting down of specific tree species like Iroko, Pygeum, Ebony, Cam wood, Boma, Mahogany, '*Lyninge' 'Moendede' and 'Wotolongo'* have been restricted (tabooed) by the traditional belief systems of the Mount Cameroon Area. In Bonakanda, a'*Lyninge'* tree at the Fon's palace, said to have been in existence for over 50 years, is used as the '*Bandu'* shrine. Here sacrifices are offered every year to appease the gods and the cutting of such tree will be a total sacrilege. The people believe that some of the trees a medicinal while others hold that the spirit of gods and goddesses and other individuals in the village reside in trees. For example it is belief in Mundongo and Bomana village that bomatree (*Ceibapentandra)* and*wotolong* are totemic trees that is inhabiting human spirit. These trees are restricted from being cut or burnt but if any one must do, an announcement needs to be made so that those whose spirit reside in that particular tree can transfer their spirit to another tree. This is helping a great deal in conserving natural resources especially given that a species like Irokois already near threatened by IUCN Red List and Prunus, Mahogany and Ebony, vulnerable. This aligns withIssifu&Diawuo (2015)'s conclusion that despite threats from modernity and Christianity, tree species are still being conserved on the basis that they have the spirit of a "lesser god".

5. Conclusion

Villages in the Mount Cameroon Area, which are apparently governed by the Bomboko and Bakweri tribal cultures, have traditional belief systems like taboos, and totem linked to birds, trees and animal species. These traditional belief systems, are contributing to the conservation of some 6 animal species (including the endangered forest elephant, preuss' monkey and chimpanzee), 9 bird species (including the endangered francolin and parrot), 7 tree species and 11 forest patches. Though contributing to species conservation, these belief systems are not cherished and respected by the younger generation and an increasing number of community members due to the adoption of Western culture and Christianity, as well as urbanization.

6. Recommendation

After going through this study, it could be recommended that a detailed study be carried out on the effectiveness of incorporating traditional belief systems into law enforcement mechanisms in the conservation of natural resources to understand the complementarity of traditional belief systems and law enforcement in species conservation. .

A detailed assessment of the effect of Biblical teachings of conservation on behavioural change for species conservation will be important to understand how community members, increasingly embracing Christianity, can also be engaged in biodiversity conservation.

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