

HISTORICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONSUMPTION OF FOODSTUFF IN ADAMAWA AND WESTERN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

A foodstuff is an element that originates from plants or animals consumed by human beings, to acquire energy and nutriment. In our society, this foodstuff has cosmetic, sanitary and ritual dimensions. The use of foodstuff depends on customs and the ages of the inhabitants of the same society. Should we encourage this multidimensional usage? In fact, foodstuffs play a role on the body and spirit of human beings and even on souls of ancestors. Few research works have been carried out on this subject, historically, anthropologically, sociologically and geographically. Changes are observed in nutritional behavior due to many factors. Our research works have contributed to Cameroon's historiography in general and those of the Bamileke's and Gbaya's in particular. Foodstuff is presented as an identity and a cultural support in the historical and anthropological perspectives. The value according to a foodstuff is brought from the prism of innovation. As such, the different functions of foodstuff and its contribution to the long lasting development have been identified.

KEYWORDS: Bamileke, Culture, Ethnology, Foodstuff, Gbaya, History.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Paleolithic era, man sought foodstuff to satisfy his vital desires. Progressively, man began the domestication of certain plants and animals species. Several researchers, including specialists in food, nutritionists and dieticians have considerably raised the issue of foodstuffs, but the multidisciplinary angle is almost absent, especially in the Adamawa and western localities in Cameroon where foodstuffs perform several functions. Foodstuff is destined for nutrition, economic purposes, for medical and cosmetic cares. Foodstuff is symbolism and is also part of what is sought in the sacrifices practiced during certain rituals. The aim here is to choose some food products of plant and animal origin in order to show their multiple functions in these two regions of Cameroon taken as a case study. A better dosage through various usage of foodstuff would avoid post-harvest losses and would give the food an added value. The particularity of the regions under study stems from the following observation: due to its temperate climate and luxuriant vegetation, Adamawa is favorable to the production of many plants and animals species and is also one of the most important agricultural, pastoral and hunting area in Cameroon in

particular through its people (Gbaya hunters) who are the focus of this study. West region meanwhile, is the breadbasket of Central Africa with a high starch production, fruits and vegetables, which supply the sub-region. For study's reasons, the choice is focused specifically on Bamena and Bangou among the Bamileke ethnic groups, which is a fairly homogeneous tribe throughout, sharing the same culture. This is the case of Bamileke and Gbaya groups which, in their history, have developed expertise in the field of gastronomy through the culinary art that conveys messages that only insiders are able to decode the contents. In the current context of modernism, this knowledge is less known hence the need to study for better preservation.

In question, we should select nutritional products which originate from plants and animals so as to show their multiple functions, in these two Cameroonian regions taken as case studies. Any valorization of food products in these zones will lead to the improvement of exportation towards the other consumption. Some foodstuff's behavior depends on ages, social status and gender. Woman has other specificities linked to her pro-creation role mainly when she is pregnant, after giving birth and during breast feeding. Do habits linked to foodstuff valorization will lead to the well-being of the population? At the historical point of view, we can observe changing in the feeding habits due to modern life style.

Some authors have already studied these zones. Mohamadou Eldridge (1970) has carried out studies on the traditions of the West and North-Cameroon. Tardits Claude (1980) and Dongmo Jean Louis (1980) emphasized on Bamileke's dynamism, highlighting the cultural tradition of this people in various domain of life. A particular light has been laid on history and geography of the West of Cameroon that deal with agricultural activities in this locality. Kapseu and al. (2008) carried out the diversity of agricultural resources of the central Africa Sub-region with accent in Adamawa and West region where various foodstuffs are studied; those full of lipid (Canarium, Karity, Palm oil), of sugar (fruits). Roulon-Doko (1998) analyzed Gbaya Gbode of Central Africa, their organization, customs, way of life and all about their foodstuff. Gbaya Gbode has the similar tradition with Gbaya of Cameroon considered as their cousins. Atoukam Liliane (2008) mentioned the use of some foodstuff resources in bamileke's habits and source of foodstuff are used as element of exchange in cases of birth, wedding and funeral ceremonies. Hamadou Adama (1999) analyzed the cultural diversity of the

people of North-Cameroon under Islam, an element that lead to various uses of feeding habit.

The realization of this work is multidisciplinary; it takes into account the history, geography, sociology and anthropology. It combines the oral, written, graphic and electronic references. The technique of participative observation has enabled to assist and participate in the valorization of some food products. Information collected from the patriarchs and

those in charge of cultural affairs constitute one of the important aspects of our research concerning various uses of foodstuff.

The geographical area on which we are studying belongs to what is called high-land of Cameroon. In fact, as wherever West and Adamawa have each other feeding practice almost identical.

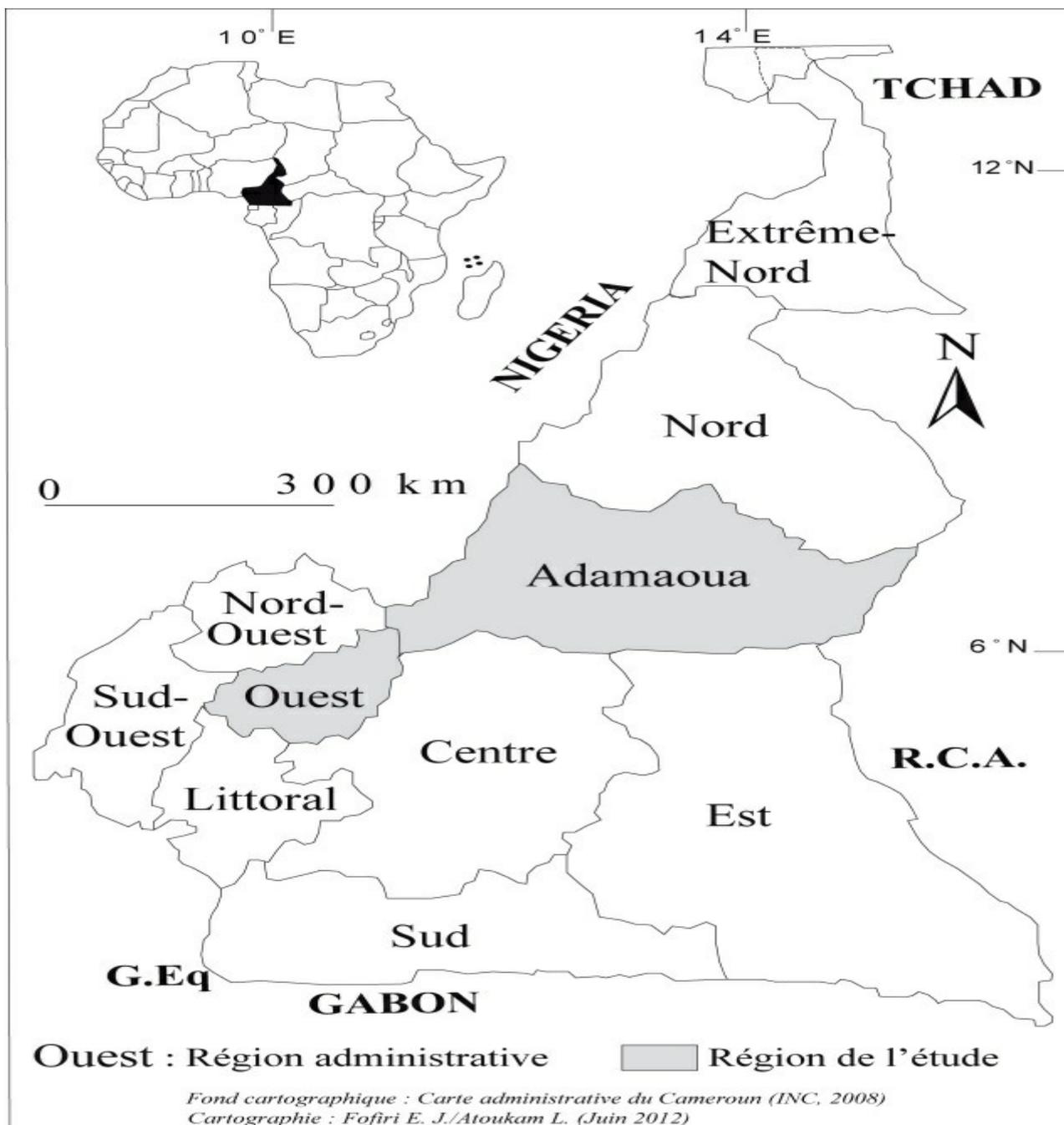


Fig 1: Localization of the studied zones : Adamawa (*Adamaoua*) and Western (*Ovest*) regions of Cameroon

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON PEOPLES AND FEEDING HABITS IN THE HIGHLANDS OF WEST AND ADAMAWA

Adamawa region is situated between savanna and forest. It is a mountainous zone which constitutes the frontier between Southern forest and Northern Savanna of Cameroon. It is situated between the 6th and 8th Northern parallel and has the following five divisions: Djerem, Faro and Deo, Mayo-

Banyo, Mbere and Vina. It has an attitude of 1.100 meters high. It has a mixed vegetation of savanna and little forest. There are also some small mountains like Mount Ngaoundere, Tchabal and Nganha.

The origin of Gbaya remains controversial. One hypothesis assigns a Sudanese origin, in a region between Lake Chad and the Benoue. To this is between the proponents of a southern home located beyond the Sangha (Boutrais, 1994). However,

the belief in a strong Eastern origin is rooted in the collective mentality of Gbaya. While many stories of origin referred to basin Nana in the Central area. In any event, the archaeological data corroborated oral sources help identify an original habitat situated next to the lower and middle valleys Lobaye, with an extension to the north-west to the Lower Nana. Gbaya say the natives of this region appear to have lived for more than four centuries. In the nineteenth century, they face the Fulani when they are not yet stabilized territorially in Adamawa. Their way of life based on hunting and gathering allowed high mobility in space over distances longer or shorter depending on the circumstances. It is recognized their considerable expertise in these areas, because they are able to kill wild beasts like buffaloes and elephants (Dogo, 1997). The Gbaya belong to "segmentary" societies, that is to say, devoid of central institutionalized power. They do not know the traditional authorities holders of permanent well-defined powers. They have a patrician or extended family whose head is called "*naked Gasa duk*", that is to say, the spokesman for his community with other local clans. The staple food in Gbaya consist mainly cassava grown and cooked in many forms. Gbaya people are amongst the various tribes of the Adamawa. In Cameroon, we meet them also in the East region. Finally they occupy a large territory at the West part of Central African Republic and are considered as Cameroonian because they have the same culture (Roulon-Doko, 1998). In Adamawa, we meet *Gbaya Yagoue, Gboke, Gboya, Gbogani, Gbougoi, Gboforo, Gbolati, Lobo, Gbotana, Gbolwale, Gbowar, Gbanbong* (Atoukam, 2003).

The Bamileke country meanwhile is located between the latitudes 4 and the 6 degrees North and longitudes 9 and 10 degrees. It is a vast quadrilateral high rolling hill, bordered to the north by the Tikar Plain, to the east through the valley of Nun, to the south-west by the collapse of the Mbo plain (Santchou), to the area south-east by the Diboum depression and to the south by the headwaters of the Makombe. The Bamileke country participates in complex mountainous western Cameroon and offers a varied terrain including plateaus, deep valleys that correspond to areas of depression. The climate is Tropical Mountain. It varied from 14° to 23° in Dschang for example and annual rainfall of 1500 to 2000 mm (Moby Etia, 1979).

Geologic studies of the Western Cameroon revealed that the zone is made up of crystalline soils sometimes covered with young soils of resulting from recent volcanic eruptions (Barbier, 1981) which make the area particularly fertile. With regards to its forest flora, it is substituted by a grassy savanna composed of reeds and graminous plants (*Pennisetum purpureum* and *Impereta cylindrica*). Afforestation with fruit trees like the cola tree (*Cola acuminata*), safou trees (*Dacryodes edulis*), African elemi or "ailé" (*Canarium, schweinfurthii Engl.*) and of non fruit-trees like eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus saligna*), raffia (*Raphia farinifera*) and of various fig species which provides fruits and saw logs for the population. (Nizesete, 1992).

The Bamiléké country counts today 150 chieftains, including 106 first degree and second degree chiefs (Njache Nzefa, 1994) and about fifty third degree chiefs. About the origin of Bamiléké, all the sources agree and locate their place of origin from the Tikar plains in currents of successive migratory waves provoked in the seventeenth century by the Bamoun, themselves pushed back by the people coming from Adamawa

(Mohammadou Eldridge, 1971) today they consist of several villages and well organized chieftains. They belong to hierarchical societies that means equipped with centralized power structures. The head or the chief called "Fo" is the supreme authority at the head of the chieftain. He is assisted by his notables and holds permanent well defined powers. The food base varies according to the different divisions but, the various traditional dishes are common in all the chieftains. However, in the Bamboutos, emphasis is laid on a mixture of corn with beans (*Ngeussang meuneuk*). In the Haut-Nkam, churned banana (*tapsi banana*) and grated coco yams pudding (*Kouaa koukou*). In the "Hauts Plateaux", the people consume corn cake (*Tchaap*) whereas pounded coco yams accompanied with fried vegetables (*Kouaa nzap*) remains the dishes cherished best in Menoua. In Mifi, preference is given to the corn balls accompanied by a soup called "Nkui" (*Mseing pfu*), while in the Nde, the choice is centered on a cake of bean or koki (*Vigna unguiculata*) and finally in the Nkoung-khi crushed beans with the starchy foods (*Tchou mkoo*). It is worth noting that "in all the agrarian communities in Africa, the basic food in general is a representation of the dominant plants or crops in the agricultural system" (Garine Eric de, 1996). The Adamawa and the West regions thus each dispose of this alimentary character, of the agricultural produce and specific animals reared. These regions are favorable for the cultivation of several types of foodstuff and varied species of animals.

Agricultural Products

In the West region precisely, the agricultural produce are varied. Many trees provide fruits and wood to the population (Nizésété, 1992). Some trees like *Pterocarpusosun, Dracaena deistelana* and *Sframomum sp*, are useful in ceremonies like twins exhibition and for their mothers. The climate is favorable for the cultivation of plantains (*Musa sapientum var paradisiaca*), banana (*Musa sapientum*), coco yams (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), taro (*Colocasia esculentum*), manioc (*Maniot esculenta*), sweet potatoe (*Ipomoea batatas*), two varieties of yams, *dioscorea cayenensis* (yellow), *Dioscorea alata* (white), Irish potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*), corn (*Zea mays*), groundnuts (*Arachis hypogae*) Bambara Groundnuts (*Voandzou subterranea*), "nkui" (*Triumfetta pentandra*), okra (*Hibiscus eschulentus*) and several variety of vegetables and beans among which are cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*). That constitutes basically food of Bamileke and their qualities influence health and ritual practices (Atoukam, 2008).

Livestock Products

Unlike the West region, the Adamawa is a great land of pastoral tradition especially of livestock (cattle). However, in both regions, small ruminants (goats and sheep), birds in the backyard (chickens, ducks), which are regularly shuttered for meat, alongside leaf vegetables, okra or Mushrooms, are the ingredient of the most popular sauces. The recent development of fish farming provides fresh fish to the populations; eaten roasted, as stews or "hot pot". It is worth noting that the meat of domestic animals which is present in all villages is mostly consumed only during festive occasions which accompany weddings and funerals, while the table

birds constitute important food elements reserved for the entertainment of important guests.

FOODSTUFFS IN BAMILEKE AND GBAYA SOCIETIES (Foodstuffs in the Bamileke and Gbaya communities)

In Bamileke and Gbaya communities, various foodstuffs are involved in culinary art and in rites. We can name food coming from animals (goat, hen), those from vegetable (banana, plantain, corn, cassava), fruits like sweet cadamum, cola nuts and drink such as palm wine and fat materials such as palm oil. Those foods link Bamileke and Gbaya's people to their ancestors and their divinities.

ANIMALS FOODSTUFF

A goat

A goat (*Capra hircus*) is an important animal in ritual manifestations like funerals, offerings, marriages and enthronization in the Bamileke community. The goat (*Nzoueh*) plays a social and cultural role in the diet and also appears as a reflection of the cultural identity of the Bamileke people. It symbolizes justice and peace in family conflicts. These conflicts are generally settled in the presence of the head of the household. In the past, the person who was found guilty of a crime had to give a goat as a sign of peace offering before

being forgiven. This animal is considered as an element of reconciliation of the parties in conflict.

The goat is offered in sacrifices, with palm oil. It is also used in traditional medicine. According to many references, the traditional healer cannot operate without the blood of a goat (Hakou, 2009). It appears that this animal is important for daily life. Goat is thus the center of various events characterizing the religious or traditional feasts, traditional judgment and also alliances ceremonies. Goat meat usually cooked with palm oil, plantain and spices. It is then better to notice that in Menoua and Bamboutos divisions they eat more pig coming from different phases of life like birth, marriage or death ceremonies. It has the same role as the goat in Bangoua and Bamera localities.

According to the Gbaya tradition, the goat's kid (*Dùà*) plays an important role in rituals ceremonies. In fact, when a young woman loses simultaneously two children, a kid is sacrificed and eaten by paternal aunts and able fathers of the wife (Roulon-Doko, 2001). They cook it with sesame paste and a bucket of *Cytopogon gigantus*. The blood of the animal is used after to do a feature trails on the body of the young woman; it is put on her chest, her forehead and her arm.

Kids come equally in ancestral offering. In the past in Gbaya communities at the beginning of the dry season, before the first fire hunting party, an elder was asked to make a speech calling on the ancestors to protect the well-being for all the community. A kid was sacrificed in order to ensure the fertility in the whole village.



Photo 1: A Goat: Source of Wealth

It was consumed by son in-law while the villagers were eating termites or dry mushrooms with sesame paste dish containing cassava, a piece of meat and sesame paste was put under a tree where they did their prayers for ancestors (Roulon-Doko, 2001).

A chicken

Over the fact that it is a nutritive meat, Chicken plays a considerable role in Bamileke and Gbaya cultural life. With

the Bamileke, chicken is used for rituals in favors of youth as well as elders. The hen is preferred for divinities sacrifice. It can be given alive as offering to ancestors or killed on an altar. The eggs can also play the same role. In fact, Bamileke used to consult divinity when seeking for solutions to problems like health, sterility and other things (Atoukam, 2009); and chickens are often given for sacrifices. In current use, the gizzard and the heart of chicken are exclusively reserved for the head of family.



Photo 2: A Chicken: Alliance Symbol

In Gbaya community, the chicken stands for alliance symbol. It permits the assurance of couple and fertility for young girls. It is in the same sense that Roulon-Doko (2001) has written that in case of first marriage, when linking relationship between a young girl and young boy, the boy's father in-law has to accept the chicken introducing alliance.

Later, the day the bride is led to her husband's village, a "chicken of separation" is given to the father in law. The two chickens are cooked in the same way. In the morning, the son in law kills the chicken and cooks it himself. Salt and pepper are added into it and also some sesame paste and a bucket of *Cybopogon gigantus*. This ritual food is eaten publicly by the father in law and all his brothers. The two chickens cooked by the son in-law are forbidden to young girls and women because eating it would mean eating their own fertility, which means losing it. Then receiving his father in law, the young boy has to offer him a cooked chicken prepared by him. He does not taste it and he makes sure that the following parts are there: gizzards, paws, neck and back. The absence of one of these parts is considered as an insult to the father-in law. In individual offer, the head of the family has to sacrifice a chicken once a year to his ancestors. The chicken is cooked with *fufu* (cassava) and place on ancestral altar near the house. This is done to insure protection from the ancestors. To ensure protection, Gbaya hunters always offer chicken to the ancestors when they have a great hunt (Azimi Hamat, 2011).

VEGETABLE FOODSTUFF

Vegetable resources that play nutritional, ritual and therapeutic roles in the west region are banana, plantain, corn, fruits such as *ndidieb* (*Sframomum sp.*), kola nut (*Cola acuminata*) and lipid like palm oil. In Gbaya locality, cassava and sesame paste are the basic kind of meal.

A banana (*Kebouh*)

Generally it is called *pig banana* or *wild banana*, its scientific name is *Musa sapientum*. It has a particular value for Bamileke people. Its agricultural potential depends on the fertility of the land that constitute a source of wealth for them due to its feeding, commercial and therapeutic character.

The banana tree comes also in the fertility rituals, due to its reproduction ability. The different variety of banana was used for fertility rituals in the past. This symbolize life cycle which is the beginning of things because as soon as the banana mother tree dies, the suckers replace it and so on. Banana foodstuff is the basic of all traditional ceremonies and is eaten in various forms (pounded with vegetables or beans mixed with palm oil, salt and pepper, standing for a complement to *koki*, vegetable, frying beans and various types of soups).

The *Kebouh* has a therapeutic dimension in cases it fights against poison, belly ache, diabetics, and hypertension. In this way, it is recommended to eat two ripe of this banana before reaching any ceremonial gathering.

Then, any poison swallow will come out in the next minutes. In case of stomach ache, you need to burn the skin and mixed it with palm oil. You obtain a paste which you will lick the whole day. The banana can also be roasted with palm oil. The traditional banana is on the basis of matrimonial alliances.

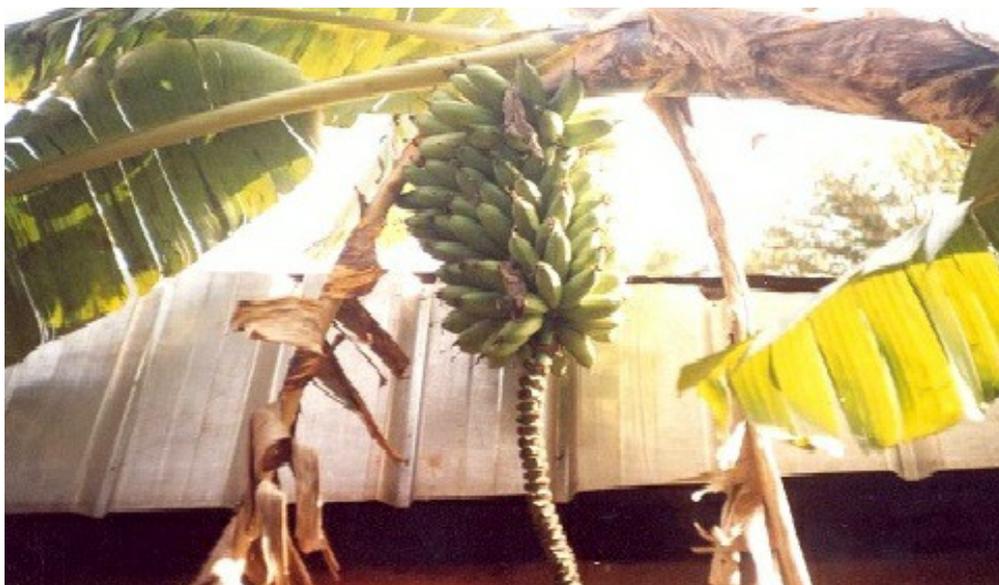


Photo 3: Bunch of *Musa sapientum*, symbol of fertility © Hakou Diane, 2007

A plantain (*Kelok*)

Plantain is often used in marriage, funerals and offering or ancestral ceremonies. It is mainly eaten with goat meat. The event of a new born baby is an exceptional one. They also used plantains mixed with palm oil. Sometimes it is found in the

compound a pierced banana tree supported with a bamboo which indicates where the umbilical of the baby has been buried. Plantain is also a sign of longevity, life and fertility. In the past the Bamileke people were planting two plantain suckers for baby boys and two banana suckers for baby girls after their birth (Hakou, 2009).

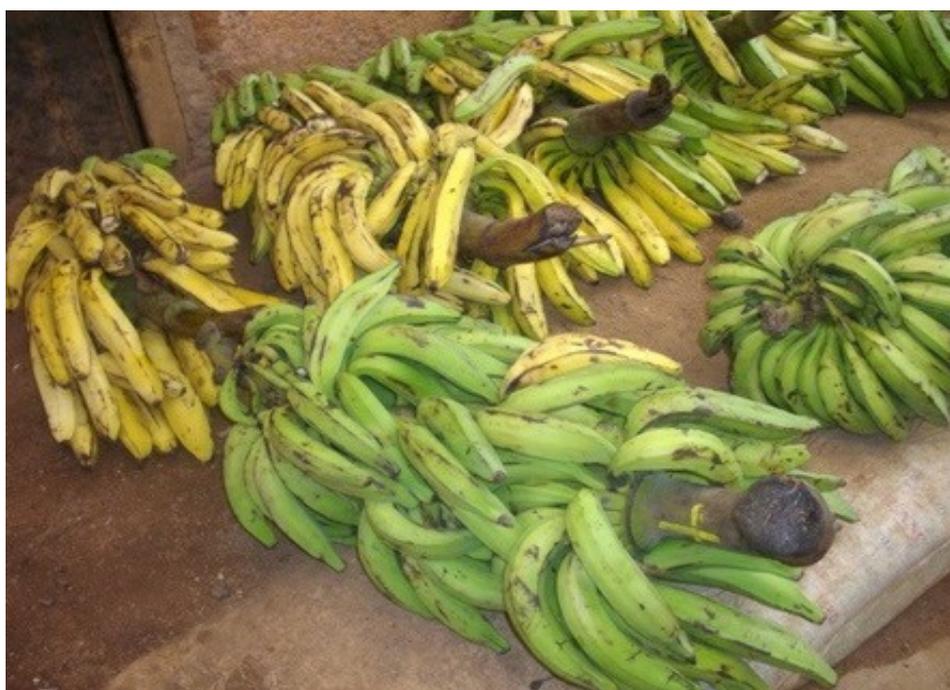


Photo 4: Plantain: Sign of Longevity, Life and Fertility

A corn (*Goffi*)

Corn (*Zea mays*) is an important element in ritual practices in Bamileke clan. They need it dry or fresh. It is mainly use for cooking. Dry, it is grind and the flour is mixed up with water, salt and pepper. The paste then is wrapped using banana leaves. After cooking these two ingredients, vegetables and palm oil are added and the whole is pounded in a mortar. This meal is called *taha*, and according to many villagers, it was the favorite meal of the ancestors; thus

nowadays in Bangou's tradition, no funerals as well as in the family circle, can take place without the presence of this meal. A small quantity is given out to the ancestors by putting it on the floor in order to implore their favors. It has the same value as *achu* (pounded cocoyam) reserved for dignities, notables and members of traditional Kingdoms.



Photo 5: *Taha*: Funeral meal from Bangou people

Corn flour is used to cook *fufu* (cassava) accompanied by *nkwi* (*Triumfetta pentandra*). This meal is recommended to women who have just delivered, breastfeeding mothers and elders persons. It symbolizes birth because it enables the woman's milk production to increase, gives beauty and strength to the woman who has just delivered. Children and adults also need it for its digestive and therapeutic values. In fact, *nkwi* and *yellow soups* (*naa pow*) analysis shows proteins, glucose, calcium, magnesium, phosphor and oxalic acid (Tchiégang & al., 2005). Cooking those soups need traditional knowledge of western Cameroon people. Full of protein and lipid, this meal is recommended to women who have just given birth to a child

in order to allow them to recover their women element of beauty and feminism commonly observed with Bamileke (Atoukam, 2009).

Cassava and Sesame

Gbaya are known in Cameroon as great consumers of Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). Everyday, they really feel satisfied after eating *fufu cassava*. Cassava is base of almost all the meal of Gbaya people. It is used mostly in their ritual meals, mainly for women who come to give birth and the rituals for ancestral offering.



Photo 6: Woman cooking *fufu cassava*

In Gbaya society, Sesame (*Sesamus indicus*) comes mainly in the installation ceremonies of a young wife into her husband's

house after having their first baby. For the first care, the husband's mother cooks on this occasion *sesame* and *fufu*

cassava called *Kànàsùnù* (Roulon-Doko, 2001). This is consumed respectively by the husband's father at first and after by all members of the family. Regarding the member of the family, a member of the wife's family cooks the sesame and makes it sticky while the woman belonging to the husband family cooks the cassava leaves with sesame paste.

Palmnuts

The nuts of palm oil are good product got from palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*). This is done mostly in local cooking used

mostly with plantain, *achu* and *yellow soup*, corn and *koki*. It is at the basic of all cooking meals except *nkwi*. Over its nutritional and commercial value, palm oil contributes strongly in Bamileke's rituals practices.

This oil is used in ancestral ceremonies, distributed to the whole community during birth ceremonies, given as symbol in wedding ceremonies and used as therapy. Palm oil is also used for body care. It softens the skin and protects it from insect's bites. Progressively it has been supplanted by palmist oil.



Photo 7: Palm Oil

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the various foodstuff sources analyzed plays a fundamental role in the societies we have studied. The studied of animals and vegetable resources come from the background we considered here and are linked to feeding habits of Bamileke and Gbaya people. As many other African people elsewhere, Bamileke and Gbaya have diversity for their fundamental aspect of their culture. As well as animal or vegetable food stuff, there are well classified and each one comes in a precise domain: health, food, financial, symbolic and therapeutic. They constituted an important element of production at local and national level which needs to be encouraged in order to give them an added value and fight effectively against poverty.

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