

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES--- Michael Kpughe Lang**

**The Role of Religion in Agriculture: Reflections from the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon since Pre-colonial Times**

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**Abstract**

The resilience of the relation between religion and development in the broadest sense has been ongoing since the inception of human societies. In societies across the world, there is evidence of the dynamic role of religion in an aura of developmental fields. Agriculture which is central to this study is among the economic spheres in which religious forces and institutions have played a momentous role. In the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa, Traditional Religion and Christianity have marked indelibly the agricultural sector. Based on a broadly secular and historical approach, this paper examines the role of religion as an agent of agricultural development in the Bamenda Grassfields. The first section examines how the concept of agriculture may be viewed through the prism of religion. This will be followed by a sketch presentation of the religious landscape of the Bamenda Grassfields. I will then move on to examine the dynamic role of Traditional Religion and Christianity in agriculture in the area. It is particularly appropriate to lay bare such issues not only because the region remains in need of agricultural development, but also because the potential of its religious and spiritual traditions for agricultural advancement has hardly been the subject of any scientific study. This paper asserts that the role of religion has been a significant factor in the development of agriculture in the Bamenda Grassfields.

**Keywords: Agriculture, Bamenda Grassfields, Traditional Religion, Christianity, rituals.**

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES--- Michael Kpughe Lang**

## **Introduction**

Religion and agriculture have functioned as natural bedfellows throughout recorded history. This is more evident in the manner in which religious traditions across the world have habitually shaped agricultural practice and development. Falvey (2005: 1) observes that the capacity of religions to affect agriculture in ways that are beneficial to the advancement of human societies is fed by the obvious reality that human knowledge is constrained in spiritual wisdom. This postulation ranks religion as an ever available human resource capable of enhancing the modernization of agriculture if brought on board by experts, governments and agencies involved in the sector. Interestingly enough, it was agriculture that created the potential for man's sedentarization which resulted in the codification of our religions. Historically speaking, people in all parts of the world have assimilated and adapted notions of agricultural development in the hope of improving their livelihood.

The Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa has had a longstanding reputation for farming and faith. Since the peopling of the area agriculture and religion have interacted together. The Tikar, Aghem, Chamba and Ngemba ethnic communities successfully brought their own ideas to notions of agricultural development and progress. These ideas were articulated in a religious idiom, perhaps, because the notions of agriculture and African Traditional Religion have so much in common. Throughout the region, it is common to find ways in which people's religious understanding of the world may have an influence on agriculture. Traditional food production in the region was perceived and understood in cultural and spiritual terms (Chilver & Kaberry 1967). With insights from their indigenous religious beliefs, the people developed agricultural technologies capable of ensuring food production that even exceeded required quantities and varieties. Across the region, agriculture became the most common means through which the people interacted with the terrestrial environment.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES--- Michael Kpughe Lang**

The imposition of colonial rule in the area in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of the introduction of notions of agricultural development that were originally conceived in Europe and exported through colonization and Christianity. Since this encounter with colonial rule, the Bamenda Grassfields has seen both intensive research into agriculture and related problems and considerable efforts at practical development. From the 1940s to the 1950s, this took the form of studies and projects initiated by the colonial agricultural department. The Santa Coffee Estate is an outstanding example. In the post-independence years, the impetus came more from projects such as the Upper Noun Valley Development Authority and the Wum Area Development Authority established by government and funded by multilateral donor agencies working through the Ministry of Agriculture (Wongibe 1983: 12). Interestingly, Christian missionary societies together with the churches that accrued from their ecclesiastical mould have been designing and implementing a variety of agricultural projects. Indeed missionary societies in Europe and North America began training missionaries that were capable and willing to lend a helping hand in all the great practical enterprises of this most practical age including agriculture. It becomes obvious that Christian missionaries engaged in the modernization of agriculture in societies where they evangelized. This was the context in which Christian missionaries to the Bamenda Grassfields started providing practical agricultural education.

Evidently, therefore, Traditional Religion and Christianity have marked indelibly the agricultural sector in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa. This chapter is therefore a critical examination of this inextricable entanglement of religion and agriculture in the Bamenda Grassfields. The manner in which religion and agriculture encountered through the act of farming in the region is the central plank of this work. It also represents an exercise in cross-religious comparison from the perspective of African Traditional Religion and Christianity. For clarity purposes, the study considers only the dimension of agriculture concerned with the cultivation of land in order to grow crops as a source of food or other useful products. It does not cover the raising of livestock.

**Theoretical Framework**

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

A plethora of approaches and theories have been developed within the disciplinary parameters of religious studies to explain the entanglement of religion and agriculture. This hinges on the commitment to arrive at scientifically valid explanations of persistent influence of religious traditions on agricultural patterns.

Some scholars of religion and development have postulated that agriculture is a religious act. A key feature in their scholarship is a link between religiosity and agricultural development (McCleary & Barro 2006). Davis (2013: 5), one of the leading advocates of this postulation argues that religion and nature encounter each other through the act of farming. This scholar insists that agriculture and religion intersect in a single shared space. After tracing the progression of agricultural and religious thought from the early medieval period of Western Europe to the emergence of the ecological crisis, Lynn White (1974) propounds that contemporary Christianity exploits the land as a matter of divine right. According to the scholar, this is exemplified by farmers who see agriculture as an aspect of religion. For instance, the Christians who bless their seeds in church before planting them in the fields seek to ‘bless’ themselves and others through a lifestyle based upon organic growth and consumption. This word ‘bless’, is particularly important as it suggests a sense of religiosity. In the Bamenda Grassfields just like elsewhere, followers of Traditional Religion and Christianity see farming as a religious act because of the belief that the Supreme Being has commanded them to till the earth and have dominion over it. These traditional farmers exercise control over land in conscious parallel to God’s influence over themselves as creations.

With no attention to whether agriculture is a religious act or not, other scholars have established a link between religion and economic development (Falvey 2005). In *The Protestant Ethic*, Max Weber (1930) viewed religiosity as an independent variable that could influence the economy including agriculture. In spite of this, Weber predicted that secularization was going to end religion’s influence of the economy. Arguing in support of Weber’s prediction, Haar and Ellis (2006: 351) submitted that secularization causes many people including experts and institutions to overlook the original connection between religion and the notion of development.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

This lack of attention to religion as a key factor in the development of agriculture accrued from secularism whose purpose was to limit the influence of religion in society. Irrespective of this, Haar and Ellis observed how religion constitutes an indispensable connection between Sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world. They have therefore underlined the need for the world-views of Africans to be taken seriously when fashioning development policies for the continent. This is a dire need because in societies across Africa including the Bamenda Grassfields, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam serve as forces that provide a powerful motivation for their practitioners to act in the ways they do. Fortunately, Berger's desecularization theory which contends that we are now living in a post-secular society marked by the significant influence of religion in every domain of life renders Weber's prediction untenable (1998: 1-18). Hence, McCleary and Barro (2006) observe that each of the major religions has some mechanism for promoting economic development, agriculture specifically. Einstein once adduced that religion without science is blind, and that science without religion is lame (cited by Falvey 2005: 12). This implies that the sciences of agriculture cannot be modernized if religion is relegated. Good enough all societies, as religionists confirm, have had some vestige of religion which has intertwined with agriculture throughout history.

It is with a blend of the foregoing theoretical approaches that we examine the unending entanglement of religion and agriculture in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. The paper explores agricultural development in the area as expressed in religious and spiritual understandings. The fact is that religion and agriculture have an unending relationship whose roots are traceable to the pioneer human societies. Apart from being a religious act, agriculture's potential to result in economic development is in part underpinned by religion. Evidently, agriculture is among the economic spheres in which religious forces and institutions have played a momentous role. This accounts for my submission that religious and spiritual resources in the Bamenda Grassfields produce a type of knowledge that is, or could be, relevant to agricultural development.

**The Religious Configuration of the Bamenda Grassfields**

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

The Bamenda Grassfields in Northwest Cameroon has a diversity of ecosystems, ranging from extensive mountain areas, savannah and dry land areas, to low lands, coastal plains and tropical forests. The area is littered with numerous ethnic communities that are broadly categorized under Tikar, Ngemba, Chamba, Munchi and Wimbum. The highly religious nature of these people resulted in an unending entanglement between religion and agriculture throughout the Bamenda Grassfields. The peopling of the area by these people placed the region on the path to becoming religiously diverse. As the various people migrated into the area and sedentarised thanks to their adoption of an agricultural culture, their indigenous religions took shape. These indigenous religions which were inbuilt in the culture resulted from the intellectual acumen and creative endeavours of the Bamenda Grassfields people. As associated element of culture, indigenous religious beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed evidences the people's creative capabilities in view of responding to their daily life including agriculture. As the people interacted with each other over time and circumstances, their indigenous religions intertwined, spread and absorbed new ingredients. Consequently, these traditional religions that have survived until today, though differing from each other, have always contained similar insights, such as has been expressed in belief in the Supreme Being, ritual practices and sacrifices. They are not limited to these practices, but affect all aspects of life, from farming to hunting, from travel to courtship. As I have argued elsewhere, the observance of these religions within their ethnic boundaries was communal and absolute prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity.

Of course, the introduction of faith traditions other than indigenous religion significantly diversified the religious landscape of the Bamenda Grassfields. The imposition of Islam in the northern region of Cameroon in the first half of the nineteenth century through an Islamic revolution that was linked to Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad marked the beginning of the entrance of Muslims into the Bamenda Grassfields. As Islam was gradually coming to the region, Western Christian missionary bodies (especially the Basel Mission, Sacred Heart Fathers, Mill Hill Mission and the American Baptist Mission) began planting Catholicism and Protestantism in the Bamenda Grassfields. This became a basis for the broadening of the religious landscape given that many practitioners of indigenous religion converted to Christianity. In his general

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

assessment of the impact of Christianity in Cameroon, Mbaku (2005: 59) observes that Christianity remains very attractive because it offers new answers to personal problems. He adds that Christian churches now address many problems that had been the purview of traditional religion.

This trend persisted throughout the successive German and British colonial rule in the area. In the 1950s, independent Christian churches emerged from the ecclesiastical mould of the mission boards. The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) emerged from the missionary service of the American Baptist Mission in 1954 while the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) gained independence from the Basel Mission in 1957. Similarly, the Catholic Mill Hill Mission contributed in planting the Roman Catholic Church in the area. Taken as a whole, the Bamenda Grassfields encompasses people who belong to different religious traditions: indigenous religion, Islam and the Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity. To these faith traditions should be added the Pentecostal Churches which resulted from ideological shifts within Protestantism. Indeed Pentecostal churches such as Full Gospel Mission and Apostolic Church have emerged and are increasingly challenging the other Christian traditions in the area (Forge 2009: 1). According to Akoko (2007), there are presently more than eighty of such churches in Cameroon. There is therefore a high possibility that many Catholics and Mainline Protestants have shifted loyalties to Pentecostal Protestantism. The foregoing are the religious traditions that intertwined with agriculture in the Bamenda Grassfields. In the following sections, the role of Traditional Religion and Christianity as agents of agricultural development in the Bamenda Grassfields is critically examined.

**Exploring Traditional Religion for Agricultural Development in the Bamenda Grassfields**

In societies across the Bamenda Grassfields, Traditional Religious practices had an influence on agriculture. Overall, the people engaged in their Traditional Religion in whatever they do whether it be farming, fishing or hunting. As a matter of fact, the Traditional Religion of the Bamenda Grassfields people was/is very wholistic since it impacts every area of their traditional life, whether in the city or village, the office or in the farm. According to Mbiti (1969: 10), the

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

African Traditional Religion has dominated the thinking of the African people to such an extent that it has shaped their economic activities including agriculture. In the Bamenda Grassfields, the people's intellectual acumen which was underpinned by their traditional religious beliefs enabled them to domesticate sorghum, millet, guinea corn, cassava, cocoyam, among many other food crops (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 29). This domestication together with the mastery of iron metallurgy made it possible for farming and herding to spread across the region.

But any talk of traditional religious influence on agricultural development in the Bamenda Grassfields has to consider the central importance of land. This is not only because many people depend on agriculture for a livelihood, but also because people's ideas about the proper use and ownership of land are often expressed in terms of religion. One of the common characteristics of the grassfields culture is the traditional religious belief that land (which is used for many purposes including farming) is the ownership of the Supreme Being. This explains why traditional functionaries such as *fons* and earth priests exercise spiritual control over the land. Seen this way, the land that is used for agricultural purposes is therefore sanctified by its possession by God and ancestral spirits. In all societies in the area, land has primarily a value linked to a tribe, its *fon* and the spirits of their ancestors. This is why the *fon* in every grassfields fendom is called 'owner of the land'. This ownership of the land by the *fon* is a result of his supposed connections with mythological founder-ancestors of his fendom. It is the ancestors who are believed to have chosen him and gave power and authority over his subjects. This explains why the *fons* are sacred and have divine authority linked to the farming land and the supernatural spirits that own it. Consequently decisions on the communal farmlands to be cultivated were taken by the *fon* of each fendom in consultation with earth priests.

Throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the principal method of farming in the grassfields was/is shifting cultivation. As Kaberry (2004) describes, villagers moved within a demarcated zone, clearing the grassland, farming for some years and moving on. The abundance of land was such that competition for farmland was almost absent. The agricultural cycle which was shaped by the seasons and religious observances covered an entire year. According to



**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

Kaberry (2004: 61), the dry season was devoted to the preparation of farm plots. Crops were planted following the onset of the rains in late March. From May to August, farmers were chiefly involved in weeding; and from August to November with harvest. As argued earlier, this agricultural cycle was underpinned by religious observances since farming was considered as a religious act. The entire farming cycle was marked by ritual practices which included sacrifice to, and appeasement of, the spirits or God; prayer and requests for communal intercession. In every community, there existed traditional religious specialists whose roles were connected with agriculture. They carried out religious observances throughout the year in an annual cycle of rituals intended to promote agriculture.

Among the Aghem, supernatural spirits were consulted and appeased by ritual specialists in the hope of enhancing agriculture. The Aghem like other Bamenda Grassfields people believed that drought, poor harvest and famine were evidences that the gods were inattentive to their needs because of man's disobedience to the norms. Their worldview holds that drought, famine and strong winds which negatively affect agriculture result from unseen irrational forces. Thus, the Aghem designed rituals for the fertility of crops as well as planting and harvesting. Chilver & Kaberry (1967: 96) write that the paramount Fon of Aghem, in his capacity as high-priest, presided over some annual agricultural rituals intended to ensure the fertility of the farmlands and a successful prosecution of agriculture. These rituals which took place in September started in the central ritual lodge (*etshuidigha*). In this lodge, the Fon of Aghem made a blood sacrifice over leaves and took omens from it. This was the moment when he invoked blessings on crops. Besides the agricultural rituals performed by the fon as high-priest, the *Kwife* secret society performed a farming ritual since it prepared the medicine required for the protection and promotion of crop growth. When the medicine was prepared, as Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 205) observe, it was distributed on farms and road junctions between April and August. During the same period, further sacrifices were conducted on the graves of the departed fons to further ensure good harvest. It was believed that these farming rituals could prevent drought, strong winds and guarantee good harvest.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

Farming rituals similar to those of the Aghem were observed among the Weh, Bali Nyonga, Nso and Wimbum. Among the Weh, the Fon's ritual functions enabled him to perform farming rituals on the highest level and was responsible for the protection of the fields and the unperturbed growth of crops (Geary 1973: 3). The Weh also have the *Ndau Kenyi* (*kenyi* is the name of the medicine that the experts produce) which is a cult specialized in performing farming rituals. The *Ndau Kenyi* is responsible for the growth of the plants, and on each Weh Saturday its medicine is distributed in the fields (Geary 1979: 66). *Ndau Kenyi* is in full session during the three months growing period (April through June/July) and meets then at regular intervals once a week. Considering the importance of rain to the growth of crops, the Weh had *Ndau Keze* (house of God) whose task was the procuring of rain during the growing season. The members perform rainmaking rituals only during this season. When the rituals commence, women must stay in the village for three days and are not allowed to work the fields (Geary 1979: 67). Generally, the correlation between water and agriculture caused rainmaking and rain stopping through traditional religious means to play a central role in the Bamenda Grassfields agricultural system. In all communities in the region, there exist cults in the example of the Weh *Ndau Keze* that are engaged in the art of rainmaking and rain stopping. This is because the dry and rain seasons control the farming cycle, and in many societies the change of the seasons is marked by farming-related religious rituals. Finally, the Weh have the *Ndau Asang* (house of guinea corn) whose sessions start at the beginning of the planting season. For three months, the members meet once a week and offer sacrifices to ancestral spirits. The cult also held emergency sessions on the *Fon's* request in times of severe famine.

In the Tikar fonom of Nso, planting and harvest were preceded by special rituals since agriculture is considered as a real religious experience. Indeed the religious tradition of blessing crops in the farmlands before harvest offers a glimpse into the longstanding relationship between agriculture and faith in Nso land. According to Banadzem (1996: 132) and Kaberry (2004: 33), the Fon of Nso performs farming rituals at the Kovifem sacred site and other alters spread across the fonom. At Kovifem, the Fon and his ritual associates performs the major sacrifice to his ancestors and to *Nyuy* (God) to ensure the fertility of all Nso land. Among the Nso, the link

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

between *Nyuy*, the earth, and the people who live on and cultivate the earth, is a close one and is expressed in moral and ritual terms (Kaberry 2004: 33). Evidently the rituals carried out at Kovifem and other alters in Nso by lineage heads who have control over farmlands are an expression of dependence on the supernatural and of appreciation for good harvest. In the Nso palace, there is a lodge called *fai shishwaa* in which apotropaic medicines are prepared at irregular intervals during the growth period. The medicines are often distributed at cross-roads and on some farms (Chilver & Kaberry 1967: 103). At the beginning of the farming season, women take their hoes to the *fai shishwaa* for blessing.

In the Wimbun communities of War, Wiya and Tang-Mbo, farming rituals were observed in the *ndamgang* (house of the country). Nkwi and Warnier (1982:164) record that ritual priests in these communities carry out farming rituals in the *ndamgang* in March and December every year. According to these Anthropologists, these ritual priests slaughter a fowl when the maize in the farms is about a foot high before the first weeding. Besides, fons in this area blessed women's hoes by placing them in the *ndap-ngon* (house of stones). In this ritual lodge, the leaves of special plants were macerated in palm wine and the hoes were sprinkled with it (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 164). In addition to this, an annual ritual ceremony intended to attract blessings on land and crops from the Supreme Being was conducted in the palaces. The Chamba of Bali Nyonga observe a *vomah* farming ceremony called *vomah naba*. The latter is an apotropaic rite in which the *vomah* trumpets are played and influences that are hostile to farming are displayed by the waving of red and white striped throwing knives. This ritual which was performed at the first sprouting of guinea-corn (now maize) was intended to protect these crops from evil doers. Other farming religious ceremonies abound in the Bamenda Grassfields, for example in Kom, Bafut, Mankon, among others. Throughout the region, the traditional farmers who see farming as a religious act see the crops from their farmlands not as mere material for food but as blessings accruing from God. By performing the traditional religious ceremonies, the ritual priests made a spiritual investment into farming. Interestingly, these farming rituals have remained with the Bamenda Grassfields people since pre-colonial times.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES--- Michael Kpughe Lang**

Although Traditional Religion has the potential to enhance agricultural development, some of its practices impede the sector. Some scholars have argued that African Traditional Religion has been unable to transform societies. For Ampadu, traditional religious beliefs and practices with various taboos and prohibitions constrain production and development of efficient processes (2009:263). In the Bamenda Grassfields, agricultural progress was/is stalled by taboos on the use of large tracts of land or forest considered to be sacred or inhabited by supernatural spirits. In some ethnic communities, traditional forms of landholding precluded women from ownership of land. There were/are also taboos placed on the ownership of agricultural implements by women, despite the key role they play in cultivation. Besides, Bamenda Grassfields indigenous religions have the potential of impeding technological advancement. Indeed the attribution of floods, drought and poor agricultural output to irrational forces (supernatural spirits) make the people not to reflect in the direction of finding scientific and technological solutions. For the followers of these religions, remedies to these problems plaguing the agriculture sector can be guaranteed by constantly appeasing the spirits. This kind of religious practice may be ranked among forces responsible for agricultural underdevelopment in the area. Chris Ampadu observes that the African worldview which is embedded in Traditional Religion sees man as a victim of nature or of fate. This pushed the author to conclude that Africans shift responsibility for their problems to the spirit realm, leaving individuals little hope or motivation for working towards a better future. This may explain why Africans engaged in Traditional Religious practices to solve problems plaguing their agriculture.

Irrespective of these shortcomings, it is important to highlight that governmental development agencies and Non Governmental Organisations involved in the agricultural sector in the Bamenda Grassfields have disrupted the role of Traditional Religion in the sector. Consequently, an understanding of Traditional Religion is critical in appreciating the agricultural problems of the Grassfields in particular and Cameroon in general. As argued earlier traditional religious and spiritual resources in the Bamenda Grassfields produce a type of knowledge that is, or could be, relevant to agricultural development. So, Traditional Religion should not be

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

regarded as a force destined to retreat from the development stage in the Bamenda Grassfields society that aspires to a high degree of agricultural modernisation.

**The Role of Christianity in Agriculture**

The Bamenda Grassfields has a longstanding reputation for Agriculture and Christianity. According to Haar and Ellis (2006: 354), Christians generally believe in the prospect of a new and perfect world. Typical of Christian religious thought and inherent in the modern idea of agricultural development is a related belief in the idea of progress (Nisbet 1980). As a matter of fact, the Bible is replete with scriptural references to agriculture. Falvey (2005: 49) observes that agriculture is a common theme in the Bible not because it is special, but because Biblical teachings were formulated in an era when agriculture was the major occupation of the people. Indeed, aspects of agriculture are inbuilt in such Biblical teachings as those concerned with land distribution, soil care, agronomic practices, the production of healthy agricultural produce, minimal interference with the natural environment, and off-farm community responsibilities (Banks & Stevens 1997: 401-404). Other Biblical references to agriculture are found in Isaiah 5:8, Genesis 2:15, Exodus 35:30-31, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

What emerges from the foregoing Biblical references is the inevitable conclusion that the Church is God's principally ordained agency for agricultural development. It is perhaps the single most important indigenous, sustainable institution in any community, with members in virtually every sphere of society. This is particularly true of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon where the population is largely Christian and many churches exist. Interestingly enough, agriculture has been the main economic activity of the Christian population in the area. The Roman Catholic Church and the two mainstream Protestant churches in the area (Cameroon Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon) inherited participation in agricultural development from their founding missionary societies. The latter (Mill Hill Mission, Basel Mission and American Baptist Mission) gave a priority place to agriculture in their missionary service in the Bamenda Grassfields. Their involvement in agricultural experiments and innovations accrued from the ideology of the "Bible and the plough" which was adopted by

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

secular humanitarians for the material regeneration of Africa (Betoto 2012: 54). Christian missionaries to the Bamenda Grassfields recommended agriculture to the indigenes partly in the hope of guaranteeing the availability of articles for the newly introduced legitimate trade. They believed that the trade could be employed as a tool with which to link indigenes with Christian Europe.

This was partly the context in which pioneer Basel missionaries to the area such as Revs. Schuler, Keller, Spellenberg, Adolph Vielhauer, Wilhelm Schneider, Hanselman, Bachman, etc. started introducing new agricultural methods and crops in the new Christian communities across the Bamenda Grassfields (Dah 2003). Similarly, the Mill Hill Catholic missionaries as well as the Baptists involved in the agricultural sector in the area upon their arrival. They started by opening gardens for themselves in mission stations such as Bali Nyonga, Shisong in Nso, Belo and Njinikom in Kom, Bafut and Weh. These were places where Catholic, Baptist and Basel white missionaries were stationed together with their families. In these gardens, they grew new crops like Bananas and cassava alongside fruit trees like paw-paw, oranges, lemon and a variety of vegetables. The pioneer Bamenda Grassfields Christians who were close to these missionaries were introduced to gardening in a gradual process. They received knowledge on new agricultural techniques like the production and application of compost manure and new dimensions of mix farming. Dah (2003: 68) records that Rev. Schneider, a German Basel missionary to Weh in the 1930s, was very much involved in agriculture. In 1937, Rev. Schneider brought seedlings of various crops and fruit trees from a colonial government nursery in Kumbo and planted in the station land. These seeds were later on distributed to the population in Weh and its environs (Dah 2003: 68). Considering that these missionaries were at the helm of mission schools they opened, agriculture was given a privileged status in the curriculum. In fact, school farms became agricultural training grounds for the pupils.

Overall, the missionaries operated the gardens and farms they opened through the principle of “grow, give and teach”. They welcomed all people to whom they distributed seedlings and offered training on agriculture. Atem (2011: 18) observes that Basel missionaries

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES--- Michael Kpughe Lang**

to the grassfields integrated gardening and farming into the school syllabus. This involvement of missionaries in the promotion of agriculture resulted in two marked changes in the cultigens repertoire of the Bamenda Grassfields. They promoted the formal agricultural development models that were introduced by the successive German and British colonial governments. It should be noted that these gardens and farms were also intended to bring people to the love of Christ. Since God calls upon Christians to feed the hungry and care for the orphans of society, the act of tilling the ground to bring forth nourishment to others which was encouraged by white missionaries in the area was deeply and inextricably religious. The Christian ministers we interviewed maintained that farming and faith literally go hand in hand. For them, white missionaries spread the love of God through their farms.

The mainstream Christian churches that emerged from the ecclesiastical moulds of the founding missions continued with the promotion of agriculture in the area. As regards the mainstream Protestants, the CBC and the PCC have since their inception in 1954 and 1957 respectively been involved in the agricultural sector. They mostly do this through their Christian women fellowships and by encouraging the opening of farms. In the early 1960s, the PCC opened the Presbyterian Rural Training Centre at Mfonta in Bafut with part of its duty being the modernization of agriculture. In this centre, Christians received training on new agricultural practices. The agricultural experts attached to the rural training centre regularly organized courses aimed not only at motivating Christians to accord importance to agriculture, but also to arm them with the much needed modern agricultural techniques. It was this dissemination of agricultural knowledge that enabled the PCC to involve in agriculture across the Bamenda Grassfields. In 1982, the PCC with the help of agricultural experts from the Mfonta Rural Training Centre opened a farm in Benakuma amounting to CFA 6.000.000 francs (Lang 2012). In this farm, various fruit trees and food crops were planted like cassava, cocoyam, plantain, mangoes, lemons and oil palms (Ngwa & Lang 2013: 110). Later in 2001, an oil palm plantation financed to the tune of CFA 19.000.000 francs was opened in Benakuma by the PCC and managed directly by the authorities of the present day Menchum Presbytery (Lang 2012). The plantation, in spite management constraints, offered the PCC an opportunity to modernize oil

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

palm cultivation in the entire Menchum Valley. As Lang & Ngwa (2013: 111) observe, the plantation served as a demonstration centre where the local population acquired knowledge on plantation agriculture. This encouraged many indigenes to adopt modern methods of oil palm cultivation resulting in the proliferation of such plantations in the area. There are similar plantations in the Mbembe Missionary Field. Besides, the Bui Presbytery involves in the cultivation and marketing of coffee with funds provided by her ecumenical partners, Mulheim Deanery specifically (Bongaatoh 2014: 20).

On their part, the Roman Catholic Church took measures to encourage the Christian faithful to involve in agriculture. This was the context in which the Bamenda Archdiocese initiated and implemented an agricultural project at Widikum known as the Co-owned Industrial Plantation (Ndi *et al.* 2014:120). Widikum was chosen because of its fertile soils that could aptly support the cultivation of oil palms. The *raison d'être* of this project was to assist young school leavers to own small land-holdings on which to grow oil palms in the hope of improving their wellbeing. A similar project whose focus was rice cultivation was initiated in Nso in 1970. This happened when the Assistant Priest in St. Theresia's Parish, Kumbo obtained from the Fon of Nso an area of nearly one thousand hectares in the fertile Mbo-Nso area. Later in 1972, several young families of school-leavers were settled there to grow rice and other crops (Ndi *et al.* 2014:120).

In addition to the opening of farms, the mainstream Christian churches usually organize planting and harvest festivals in their congregations not only to celebrate God's gifts, but also as a means of further educating the local population on appropriate agricultural practices. By therefore investing spiritually in their farming during planting and harvest, Christian farmers entered into a membership with creation – in which they fulfill the Biblical relationship between man and earth set forth in Genesis. The Christian farmers, just like their traditional religious counterparts, consider farming as a religious act. Take, for example, Peter Amah, who runs an oil palm plantation and food crop farms in the Ngie area. A Christian believer since 1984, Amah claims that agriculture for him is like salvation (Amah 2014 int.). With the increase of Catholic,



**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

Baptist and Presbyterian farmers like Amah in the Bamenda Grassfields who do not grow food simply to meet an economic necessity, the Christian religious experience of farming becomes more visible.

It is however relevant to point out that despite generations of Christian churches promotion of Western agricultural practices, decisions about agriculture in communities across the Bamenda Grassfields are still heavily based on the traditional religious agricultural systems. This is perhaps because the formal agricultural development models that were introduced by the colonial administration and promoted in religious ways by Christian missionaries were not intended to complement but to substitute traditional agricultural practices. Hence, the accruing of agricultural development from indigenous belief systems was lessened. In fact, the agriculture promoted by missionaries was based on knowledge transferred from the West to the region. Irrespective of this, the science of agriculture remains part of the message of modern Christianity and as such may offer a means of further integrating spiritual knowledge and agricultural modernization in the Bamenda Grassfields. But in the face of a stalled agricultural sector that may amount to hunger and poverty in years to come, much of the work of Pentecostal churches in the region continues to be confined to the area of spiritual things, especially in the areas of deliverance from the powers of devils and witchcraft, healing and saving of souls for heaven.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ways in which religion and agriculture encountered through the act of farming in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Since the inception of human societies in the area, Traditional Religion and Christianity have marked indelibly the agricultural sector. But in spite this resilience of the dynamic role of religion on farming, the stakeholders concerned with the development of the agricultural sector have separated spiritual aspects of agriculture from its science. As the study reveals, agricultural scientists have failed to exploit the potential of the Bamenda Grassfields religious and spiritual traditions for agricultural advancement. Indeed the agricultural scientists are uneducated about the agricultural dimension of religion and this has impeded the inextricable entanglement of religion and agriculture from amounting to the

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

modernization of agriculture in the region. Hence this study submits that for effective agricultural development to occur in the Bamenda Grassfields, it is necessary for the actors in the sector to take the people's own understanding of the world and religious attitude towards agriculture as a point of departure. It is disturbing that the potential of religious ideas in the development of agriculture has hardly been explored and considered by agricultural development agencies and institutions in the region.

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**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

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**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AGRICULTURE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE PRE-COLONIAL TIMES---** Michael Kpughe Lang

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