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Symbolism of place and cultural identity in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Each society on earth uses essential symbols which resemble the key ideas, attitudes and values that unite its members. Places are key symbols of many cultures around the world that shape the social, economic, religious, political and psychological aspects of a people's world view. Its study, therefore, is of primary significance in the systematic reconstruction of a people's cultural and spiritual experience and provides us with a reliable means of information about different subcultural zones of many a tradition. Oceans, mountains, forests, grasslands, deserts, lakes and rivers form the world's generalized natural areas. Cameroon is one of the few countries in Africa that has been blessed with all the five broad symbolic places. It is this ecological endowment that must have influenced the authorities to refer to Cameroon as 'Africa in miniature'. In other words, Cameroon is a microcosm of Africa. Since the life and spirit of Cameroonians are invariably affected by the contrasts in the ecosystems, we intend in this article to demonstrate how a place like mountains can provide an indispensable resonance of symbolization in the cultural evolution of Cameroonians and how the influence of a particular ecosystem like the mountain can be used to establish, consolidate and propagate cultural identity in Cameroon. We shall examine the symbology of each of the major ecosystems briefly before concentrating on that of the mountain.

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Introduction

I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land(Thabo Mbeki in a speech at the adoption of the Republic of South Africa Constitutional Bill on May 8, 1996 in Cape Town)

In his article 'Cameroon: A country united by ethnic ambition and difference', Francis Nyamnjoh uses sociopolitical arguments to support the point that 'the only thing that unites Cameroon is a common sense of ethnic ambition and difference, and the need to pursue this under the patronage of the godfather state' (Nyamnjoh, 1999, p. 118). The thrust of Nyamnjoh's argument is that the politics of regional and ethnic balance, the chronic lack of vision as a country, the lack of real commitment to democracy, the propensity to

vacillate on most issues of collective interest, together with an infinite ability to develop survival strategies, have acted to counter all meaningful attempts to pursue common interests and aspirations. It is however, worth noting that, since the colonial era and even after Independence and reunification of the two Cameroons, the conflicts in Cameroon have been ethnic, religious, political and even cultural. The forced cohabitation of the different parts of Cameroon without the people having a say in this led to a lot of distrust and suspicion, especially among leaders of the different ethnic, religious, regional and political groups in the country. Mbock as quoted by Tetchiada (2006) voices similar sentiments that ‘... the elites of Cameroon ... instigate or worsen inter-ethnic divisions for personal gain. The public powers clearly draw an advantage from the disorder provoked by the elites, to the extent that ethnic manipulation has become a business for most politicians and senior government officials’. What many Cameroonians fail to understand is that, the construction of national unity counts for the most in the eyes of the state. Cameroonians must behave as citizens and no longer as ‘natives’ of this or that tribe, political party or religion. Our duty is to protect Cameroonians and give equal opportunities to all.

Despite the above observation, Cameroon is a land of unity in diversity. The high mountain ranges, vast seas, large plains lands, countless rivers and streams, dark forests, sandy deserts, all these have adorned Cameroon with an exceptional diversity. Among the people there are numerous races, ethnic groups, religions and languages. Towards the vast forest zone, on the western plateau and in the coastal region, live the pygmies and Bantu people. The pygmies are believed to be the oldest settlers in Cameroon. Efforts by government and NGOs to ‘modernise’ the pygmies in contemporary times have considerably changed the dynamics of their forest dwelling. The north is characterized by the ‘Kirdis’ (meaning non-moslem) population as well as other descendants of the Sao civilization. From the north down south ends up in hills and plateaus at the foot of which live the Fulbe. The modern Cameroon civilization has been nourished and developed by multi-ethnic contributions. Following the different traditions and cultures which diverse societies in Cameroon have developed, there lies a sense of unity which keeps the people of Cameroon bonded together. In this article, I wish to look at the question of unity from a different perspective. I feel that just as Cameroon is trying to conserve its biodiversity so too with a little more effort it can transform its cultural diversity into a cultural identity. I intend to use the symbolism of place to make my point.

Carl Gustav Jung, one of the greatest proponents of symbolism, felt that place was one of the central elements in the history of cultures and nations. He believed that ‘the nature of the earth itself had a profound influence on the character of the people born and bred on it’. He used, as an example, the German national character which according to him developed as it did because of the dark nature of the soil of Germany. The implication of Jung’s argument is that certain distinct symbolic elements have come to be associated with certain cultures and nations. Consequently, when a story is set in a particular nation, certain assumptions are made by the audience before any action takes place. For example, the African continent symbolizes in European thought and imagination, darkness and man’s primitive nature. Thus, when Kurtz, the main protagonist in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1990) wanted to relate to his primitive nature, that is to go back to a distant time, he had to travel from Europe to Africa. Since then, Africa has served and continues to serve as a symbolic context for these ‘return’ types of stories. In the light of the above, one can conclude that symbolism of place has developed through history and exists all around us in our modern world.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Symbolism is the basis of human communication, for, by nature, 'man is a *homo symbolicus*, a symbolizing, conceptualizing and meaning-seeking animal' (Ejizu, 1986, p. 1). He is therefore capable of using one thing to stand for or represent another. Hence, within this broad frame, language may be viewed as the most important form of universal human process of symbolization. Words stand for other things and language itself is 'a vast symbolic system, as it is basically a cluster of ideas, acts, relationships or linguistic formations woven in some sort of ordered whole' (Ejizu, 1986, p. 1). Symbols in this wide context of man's innate process denote many things, take many forms and have many functions.

The meaning content which the 'symbol' at any given time attracts to its orbits is determined by the perspective from which a given scholar chooses to look at it, his predisposition to the use of the word and the purpose for which the word is being employed. Cuddon (1994, p. 650) defines a symbol as follows:

[It is] an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else. A literary symbol combines an image with a concept like words (which are a kind of symbol). Concrete images are used as symbols to represent a general or universal world of which the real world is a shadow. The symbol then may be public or private, local or universal.

This definition ties in with my initial perception of place symbolism in Cameroon. However, in their book *Structuring your Novel*, Meredith and Fitzgerald (1983) make an interesting observation about symbols when they say that the 'symbol is like a metaphor that has lost its bond with something close and searches to bond itself to many other words' (Meredith & Fitzgerald, 1983, p. 9). It is from the above perspectives that a place like the mountain is regarded as one of the greatest symbols because it bonds with a number of words representing key abstract qualities and phenomena which have the greatest emotional and psychic influence on individuals. Thus, places like mountains, forests and oceans, through their symbolic qualities, offer the best method for expressing psychic states in our stories-oral narratives (within the perspective of oral literature).

From the theoretical perspective, this article is written against the background of the symbolist theory which falls under the cognitionist tradition headed by Ernest Cassirer. This approach focuses purely on the interpretation of symbols and mythical language. Here, symbols cannot be studied systematically as symbols but have to be translated into reasoned concepts for an adequate portrayal of reality and representation of human consciousness. Consequently, I believe that meaning is not apparent since it is coded and concealed, and that by sustained attention and through the interplay between the hypotheses of interpretation and the testing of their fruitfulness it is possible to illuminate meaning.

Place symbolism

For many Africans, all the natural places are filled with symbolism. Madu (1992, p. 8) in *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths: The Hermeneutics of Destiny* observes that, for many Africans, 'nature is never "only natural"; it is always fraught with a religious value'. The earth was to early man a divine creation of the gods and the gods manifested the 'different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena'. The manifestation of the earth's different 'modalities' and the 'religious value' attached to these made the world one great and vast symbol. Every natural place and phenomena had a particular 'transparency'

about it and ancient man saw through this transparency. Places represented something else beyond the world, something from the gods.

Oceans, mountains, forests, grasslands, deserts, lakes and rivers form the world's generalized natural areas. But for the purposes of this article, I limit myself to five major symbolic regions or ecosystems of the world: oceans, mountains, forests, grassland and deserts. Cameroon is one of the few countries in Africa that has been blessed with all the five broad symbolic places. It is this ecological endowment that must have influenced the authorities to refer to Cameroon as 'Africa in miniature'. In other words, Cameroon is a microcosm of Africa. Since the life and spirit of Cameroonians are invariably affected by the contrasts in the ecosystems, I demonstrate in this article how an ecosystem like a mountain can provide an indispensable resonance of symbolization in the cultural evolution of Cameroonians and how the influence of a particular ecosystem like the mountain can be used to establish, consolidate and propagate cultural identity in Cameroon. I examine the symbology of each of the major ecosystems briefly before concentrating on that of the mountain.

Oceans

Cameroon is located on the Western coast of Africa and is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the Southwest. The country has a 402-km coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. The principal rivers of Cameroon like the Sanaga, Wouri and Nyong flow west to the Atlantic Ocean. Oceans have a certain boundary symbolism in stories, in the sense that they are portrayed as places to be crossed, rather than places to be inhabited. Many of the stories with an ocean background describe situations that test the courage and endurance of characters that cross them. The deepest places in the world are found within oceans. Consequently, the closest one can get to the centre of the earth is the bottom of ocean. It is also worthy of note that the place symbolism of 'below' and 'under' is associated with hell, which the devil inhabits. The *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* are stories about crossing oceans. Many of the Joseph Conrad stories have an ocean background but I am not aware of any work in African literature in which the author has explored the place symbolism of the ocean.

In another symbolic sense, oceans have a symbolism associated with the space aspect of place symbolism. No topographic map of Earth can be drawn unless there is some kind of base line from which to measure depths and heights. This base line has always been taken as the level of the sea. Whereas mountains are associated with the place symbolism of 'above', 'up' and 'height', oceans are associated with the symbolism of 'below', 'down' and 'depth'. Ocean surfaces and sea-level is symbolically the boundary line between height and depth. Within oceans are the deepest places in the world. Within their depths, they hold the oldest forms of life on earth. And the bottoms of oceans are the closest man can get to the centre of the earth. Most of the stories of the coastal tribes like Duala, Bassa and the Batanga people of Cameroon explore the mythological nature of the Atlantic Ocean since they live close to it. The two most essential aspects of the ocean, according to Cirlot, is its ceaseless movement and the formlessness of its waters. 'It is a symbol of dynamic forces and of transitional states between the stable (solids) and the formless (air or gas)'. The ocean as a whole, as opposed to the concept of the drop of water, is a symbol of universal life as opposed to the particular. It is regarded traditionally as the source of the generation of all life.

Rivers

Cameroon has four patterns of drainage. According to Neba (1987, p. 20), in the south, the principal rivers flow southwestward or westward directly to the Gulf of Guinea; the Wouri, and lesser Dibamba, Bimbina and Mungo to the Cameroon estuary near Douala; Sanaga, Nyong and Ntem further south along the coast; Akwayafe and Manyu (which joins Nigerian Cross River), and the lesser Ndian and Meme in the north of the coast. The Dja and Kadeï, however, drain southeastward into the Congo River. In northern Cameroon, the Benoué River (Benue) runs north and west, eventually into the Niger, while the Logone River flows northward into Lake Chad.

Rivers and streams are important features of the natural world that are held in high esteem in many cultures for various reasons. Beyond their practical aspects, rivers and streams in human imagination have always been powerful symbols. Although some scholars consider their symbolism to be somewhat ambivalent. Cirlot notes that river symbolism 'corresponds to the creative power of nature and time. On the one hand it signifies fertility and the progressive irrigation of the soil; and on the other, it stands for the irreversible passage of time and, in consequence, for a sense of loss and oblivion' (Cirlot, 2002, p. 274). In addition to the above observation by Cirlot, there seem to be a symbolic relationship between human beings and rivers, in the sense that our human blood is a river in itself. The river passing from the spring in the mountain to the final emptying into the ocean has come to be a metaphor of life from birth to death. Thus, as a metaphor, the source of the Sanaga River, for example, is a symbol of birth, the mouth symbolizes our reabsorption into another world while the direction of the flow being the natural path of life. It can also be likened to an esoteric symbol of life's force. As the river flows, it reminds us how cosmic currents also flow through our physical body. Put simply, the river is a symbol of our journey through our lives. In this connection, if ocean symbolism is based primarily around water in a relatively unmoving form, river symbolism is based around water in movement. Rivers figure prominently in the mythologies of most Cameroonian tribes.

Forests

Tropical rain forests are the world's richest areas in plant and animal life. These great rain forests occur only in regions close to the equator. Cameroon is fortunate to be located in this region. This dense equatorial forest covers most of Cameroon's Coastal Lowlands and the southern part of the Southern Plateau. Neba (1987, p. 30) subdivides the dense equatorial forest in Cameroon into two types: the mangrove forest and the rain forest. The mangrove forest, according to Neba, occupies the two swampy regions at the coast – the region around Rio-del-Rey and the Douala Basin. The Rain Forest is variously known as the Equatorial Rain Forest, the Tropical Rain Forest or the Wet Evergreen Forest. This Evergreen Forest, according to Neba, 'lies inland just after the Mangrove Forest. It is situated between altitudes 200 m and 800 m and covers a very large part of Southern Plateau'.

Forests offer shelter to people who, lacking any knowledge of agriculture, have existed as hunters and gatherers. They used only stones and wooden weapons such as bows and arrows to kill their animal prey and collected berries and other fruits from their surroundings. The Pygmies of East Cameroon are an example of these forest dwellers.

The variety of cultural values and symbolic functions ascribed to the forests are as numerous and diverse as the communities and cultures of the different regions of Cameroon. Physically and mystically, forests have defined the environment of communities in different parts of the country. Tangibly and intangibly, forests feature in all aspects of culture: language, history, art, religion, medicine, politics and even social structure itself. Forest trees may house the spirits of ancestors as well as those of the new born. And forests are viewed in both positive and negative lights as sources of evil as well as power and munificence, as providers for, and hindrances to, development. The mystical qualities of specific forest resources often play a crucial role in traditional healing practices in many tribes. Forests provide the venue for religious, social and healing ceremonies. Forest products such as tam-tams and forest foods such as palm wine are used in many ceremonies. Assessing the myriad of symbolic and cultural values of forests goes far beyond the scope of this paper. However, this does not diminish their importance in terms of the value Cameroonians place on forests and forest resources.

Forest trees, the links between the sky and earth, often symbolize links between the spiritual world of ancestors and people. Rituals and ceremonies which draw on forest symbols often serve to link people with their cultural heritage, as well as their ancestral past (Calame-Griaule, 1980).

In an extremely interesting study, Calame-Griaule uses traditional stories and myths to analyse the symbolic function of trees in African oral tradition. The tree features in many myths and tales. It consistently reflects a few important symbolic images. The tree stands between heaven and earth and is associated with creation as well as the underworld ('cosmic' tree). The tree is a maternal symbol: a protector and provider who gives fruits, other foods and medicines, provides a reservoir for water, protects against the elements and evil spirits. The tree often symbolizes human fecundity. It may also be a phallic and paternal symbol, symbolically linking people with their ancestors while being a symbol of political unity.

Finally, the deciduous characteristic of the tree gives it an ambiguous image which reflects the tree's power to give life and rebirth as well as to bring about death. In many Cameroon myths and stories, the tree is portrayed as an ancestral symbol of wisdom, authority and custom, providing a bond between the dead and the living (Studstill, 1980, p. 21). Similarly, in other stories, Gorog-Karady (1980, p. 35) relates that the tree is often a symbol of a mediator and judge.

Trees play a role in all facets and periods of Cameroon peoples' lives. The Fang and the Eton of Southern Cameroon plant a tree in the bush for a new-born child. For female children, a fast-growing profuse fruiter is planted. The child's development is linked to the growth of the tree. If tree growth declines, people fear for the health of the child and a healer is called upon. When the child is sick, it is brought to the tree for treatment. When the tree begins to bear fruits, the time will have come for the child to marry. Throughout a person's life, gifts are occasionally left for the tree. When someone dies, their spirit goes to reside in their personal 'birthright' tree (Vergiat, 1989, p. 7).

The Forest also provide the venue for many cultural events. In many parts of Cameroon, forest areas and specific trees are protected and valued for particular cultural occasions and as historic symbols. Each community has its own traditions associated with sacred areas and, as a result, the species that are found in them vary greatly.

In an analysis of traditional African political institutions, Niangoran-Bouah (1993, p. 9) notes that there are two traditional sacred locations for reunion: sacred groves and 'arbres

a palabre'. The 'arbre a palabre' is the venue for political and social meetings: the location where 'elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree'. It is the location where political, judicial and social decisions are made. Visser (1985) notes that among the Bassa of Coastal Cameroon, there are specific tree species which serve as 'arbres a palabre' such as *Microdesmis* sp., *Blighia sapida* (also a symbol of fecundity), *Cordia millenii* and *Bombax buonopozense*. Although forest symbolism is complex, Cirlot (2002) notes that it is connected 'at all levels with the symbolism of the female principle or of the Great mother'. He goes on to say that

The forest is a place where vegetable life thrives and luxuriates, free from any control or cultivation. And since its foliage obscures the light of the sun, it is therefore regarded as opposed to the sun's power and as a symbol of the earth ... Since the female principle is identified with the unconsciousness in man, it follows that the forest is also a symbol of the unconsciousness. (Cirlot, 2002, p. 112)

Thus, the forests have a strong association with the unconscious and serve as places where the actions of myths and folktales take place.

The forest is a place of testing and initiation, of unknown and perils and darkness. Cooper (1987, p. 6) notes:

Entering the Dark Forest or the Enchanted Forest is a threshold symbol: the soul entering the perils of the unknown; the realm of death; the secret of nature, or the spiritual world which man must penetrate to find meaning. Retreat into the forest therefore is symbolic death before initiatory rebirth.

Betthelheim (2010, p. 81) on his part, emphasizes the importance of the forest in oral tales. According to him,

Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near impenetrable world of our unconscious. If we lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet underdeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity.

Based on Betthelheim's (2010) view, it can be said that physically and mystically, the forest defines the Cameroon environment since a very large part of Cameroon is still occupied by primary, equatorial forests. These forests and the trees in them have since time immemorial provided and continue to provide food for many Cameroonians. The trees in the forests were used and are still being used today for food, fuel, shelter, clothing fences, medicinal herbs, lances and spears, and some are transformed into many more usable objects. Over time, the forest and individual species of trees have come to represent different concepts in the creative imagination of the Cameroon populations (ethnic groups) living in different geographical locations within the Cameroon triangle.

One of the major contributions to our understanding of forest symbolism is that of Harrison (1993) in his book *Forests: Shadow of Civilization*. The book is a wide-ranging exploration of knowledge, from the tree of life to the tree of memory; forests have provided an indispensable resonance of symbolization in the cultural evolution of mankind. Harrison points out that most of the places of human habitation were, at some time in the past, densely forested. In this sense, they have served the symbolic of human civilisation. He remarks that forest symbolism has represented 'an outlying realm of opacity which has allowed that representations of the head are found in nearly all decorated ceremonial and utilitarian objects civilization estrange itself, enchant itself ... [in order to] project into the forest shadows its secrets and innermost anxieties' (Harrison, 1993, p. 224). Thus, the darkness

of the forest stands in opposition to the light of God which comes from above. Harrison notes that 'where divinity (God) has been identified with the sky or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with heaven, the forests became monstrous, for they hide the prospect of God' (Harrison, 1993, p. 228). At the end of his book, Harrison offers a very interesting argument in contemporary ecological movements: more than any other place in the world, it is the forest that is being destroyed; thus, he concerns himself with what it means to the human imagination not to possess this place any longer. There is no longer any circumference in the world because with the loss of forests, 'the center is now everywhere and the circumference nowhere' (Harrison, 1993, p. 229).

Grasslands

Grasslands, otherwise known as grassfields or the Savannah, are a type of mid-point between forests and deserts. They probably developed wherever rainfall was too low to support forests and too high to result in semi-arid regions. The Grasslands is a large cultural area located in the west of Cameroon inhabited by a number of related peoples including the Bamoum, the Bamileke and the Bamenda Tikar. In other words, the north-west and western regions of Cameroon cover what is called the Western grassfield.

Animal imagery abound in the art and stories from the grassfields, most likely because the people live their lives in close proximity to the animals that share their land. The buffalo and the elephant, representing strength and stamina, are found on Bamoum masks. The Bamileke incorporate the spider into their elegantly carved beds and stools. Living underground, the spider also provides an important link to the deceased ancestors and is thus doubly venerated. Leopards, lizards, birds and a few lively but unidentifiable animals are portrayed on a wide array of bright, beaded objects on display.

The tradition of storytelling is one of the most ancient in the cultures of the grassfields. This tradition is rich with many folktales, myths, legends and proverbs. Many of the stories such as 'How did the leopard get its spots?' or 'How was the goat domesticated?' explain the appearance, behaviour or origin of certain animals. Some of the more popular animals in tales from the grassfields include the spider, the antelope and the tortoise. In many of the folktales, grasslands often symbolize the 'promised land' where farms and new homes can be established and crops can be grown in the rich soil.

Deserts

Deserts are found in Cameroon in the far north and north regions. The deserts are hot and sandy; they lack moisture for most of the year. Thus, the symbolism of deserts offers a counterpoint to the symbolism of forests. Forests – as I pointed out earlier – are places where life and vegetation flourish. Deserts, on the other hand, are places without vegetation and life is difficult. In her book *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins (1993, p. 54) highlights the uniqueness of deserts in juxtaposition to forests:

When a man works or rides into a forest, he is lost among the trees, can't see ahead, and doesn't know what might be lurking there. The forest surrounds him, obscures him with shadows confuses itself with him by its vertical composition and competitive detail. But when a horseman appears on the desert plain, he dominates it instantly, his view extends as far as his eye can see, and enemies are expressed in his gaze. The desert flatters the human figure by making it seem

dominant and unique, dark against the light, vertical against horizontal, solid against blackness There is nothing to stop the horseman's free movement across the terrain ... Distance made palpable through exposure and infinitely prolonged by the absence of obstacles, offers unlimited room to move. The man can go in my direction, as far as he can go. The possibilities are infinite.

The desert has served as background for folktales, myths and legends in the region. Stories set against a desert background usually puts the characters against the forces of nature, which, for the most part, are heat and lack of water. Since the desert is a place where life is difficult, it follows logically that the challenges of fictional characters in this background are how to survive.

Symbolically, the desert is related to purification and, like the mountain, has a strong connection with the Bible (King James Version). It is also the most propitious place for divine revelation. Burning drought is the climate of pure, ascetic spirituality, of the consuming of the body for the salvation of the soul.

Mountains

As mentioned earlier in this article, Cameroon's rich ecological landscape and its strategic geographical position in the Gulf of Guinea are unique and enable the country to stand out over others and assert its cultural unity within. Its vast natural places like mountains, forests, oceans, grassland, deserts and rivers as well as the presence of major ethnic groups with a myriad of languages and religions both traditional and modern have led many scholars to refer to Cameroon as 'Africa in miniature'. Of all these ecological features, the one which is dominant and which is often identified with Cameroon is the mountain, as Cameroon is predominantly a mountainous country. Cameroon has a chain of mountains that originates from the volcanic islands of the Gulf of Guinea, Bioko (formerly Fernando Po) and Sao Tomé, and extends for about 1800 km into the north-east. The mountainous chain rises in the Littoral and South West and West Regions and extends to Mora in the North. It is interrupted by the Benue basin near Garoua. This mountainous chain includes Mount Cameroon (4095 m), the Muanenguba (2050 m), the Bamboutos (2680 m), the Bamiléké Plateau (2100 m), the Mount Kupe, the Bamoum massive as well as the Mandara and Atlantika Mountains. The mountainous chain gradually diminishes into the Lake Chad basin.

'The "mountain" as an impressive natural phenomenon and as a symbol among other symbols in nature, does not only attract the attention of geographers and geologists, but has also drawn the curiosity of literary scholars' (Sone, 2011, p. 7). There are no clear definitions of mountains. Perhaps this will always be so, because mountains with different altitudes and specific patterns of ecosystems are found on every continent. Since scholars tend to define the 'mountain' from the perspective of their various disciplines, it follows naturally that we narrow the definitions in an attempt to arrive at a working definition. For an initial definition, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 15 (2004, p. 929) holds that '[a] mountain properly connotes a natural elevation of the earth's surface superior to that of a hill, but the distinction often depends on the prominence of a given elevation to its surrounding'. This definition brings into play another related term – 'hill'. However, there is no exact distinction between a mountain and a hill, because what is considered a mountain in one area may be called a hill in another. The *New Standard Encyclopaedia* vol. 8, (1967, p. 5010) defines a mountain as 'a land form rising prominently above the surrounding land or bordering sea. Mountains

generally occur in groups called ranges, which in turn form chains.' This definition can be geographically accepted since it mentions the significant aspect of a mountain as a piece of land that rises prominently above a given area. However, it is necessary to go beyond the above geographical definition, to its contribution to understanding the literature of a people through the symbolic function of the mountain, its power of discovery and revelation. For the purposes of this article, a mountain is defined as an impressive natural and concrete image which is a book, a mirror and a picture that one can look at, read, understand and interpret. This is because, to a large extent, a mountain is a mountain because of the part it plays in the popular and creative imagination of the people around it. Thus, oral artists in Cameroon and elsewhere use the mountain as a medium of artistic communication which they exploit by poetic licence to transmit truths, realities and concerns about life in disguise in Cameroon society in particular and human society in general.

For many people around the world, mountains have a particularly evocative nature. According to Bernbaum (1999, p. 326), the evocative power of mountains highlights basic cultural and spiritual values and beliefs that deeply influence how people view and treat the world. These values and beliefs determine to a great extent which resources people are willing to exploit and which features of the environment they feel motivated to protect.

Mountains provide the backdrop of many key events in the Bible (King James Version). Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. God called on Abraham to sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal before Israel on Mount Carmel. Jesus preached his most profound recorded sermon and his most famous prophecy of the end of times on the mountain of Olives. Paul gave his address about the unknown God on Mars Hill in Athens. The final and most crucial events of Jesus' life and death are centred on hills and mountains. His crucifixion took place on the hilltop of Mount Calvary or Golgotha. According to *The Glorious Qur'an* (1872), Islam began on Mount Hira when the Prophet Mohammed hears the first words of the Qur'an and sees the Angel Gabriel. Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley experienced mountains as symbols of the infinite from which they drew poetic inspiration.

In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), we are told that 'salvation shall come from the hills'. Mountains have also provided refuge to truth seekers, hermits. Their beauty, mystery and transcendence have helped to uplift the lives of men above the grime and dirt associated with the plains below. Till today, to conquer a mountain is seen as a human feat. When we are saddened by the transient nature of our earthly existence, mountains through their sheer lasting quality can challenge us to look beyond ourselves and to hope for unending life.

Most mountains in Cameroon are associated with central values, practices, beliefs and identities of different ethnic groups as well as their cultures and traditions throughout the country. The physical and symbolic geography of these mountains has inspired people for many years with feelings of awe and wonder, as well as with fear and trepidation. These experiences have sparked creativity in the realms of both religious discourse and practice. Sone's (2011) typology of mountains among the Bakossi of Cameroon indicates how they are perceived and revered in sacred and literary texts, rituals and practices as markers of both transcendence and immanence of spiritual power: they are identified as gods; they serve as temples or places of worship; they house the ancestors and the dead; and they are a source of inspiration, cultural pride, and local, collective and national identity. As a source of inspiration, it becomes a place where peace reigns, thus standing for the most suitable

place for meditation, or spiritual transformation. Lastly, mountains are a source of water, food, life, fertility, peace and prosperity. As links between nature and culture, mountains occupy a prominent place in the history of different tribal cultures and religions.

No peak in Cameroon more beautifully embodies the spirit of a nation as does Mount Cameroon (also called Mount Fako), as it represents Cameroon in the eyes of the world. Although Mount Cameroon's recent eruptions (1989, 1992, 1999 and 2000) have brought destruction and death to the people of Cameroon, through the centuries it has also created a beautiful landscape of forests and lakes that surrounds it like the garden of an earthly paradise.

Despite the above portrayal of the mountain as an inspiration and a place of hope, it is also a symbol of our problems and, therefore, an obstacle to human progress. Most of the people that go to the mountains either as tourists or climbers face different problems and challenges. There is, therefore, a similarity between the physical mountain and some problems we pass through in life. First, a mountain is that great obstacle that defies every human effort, a great hindrance to progress. Symbolically, a mountain is that long-standing, demon-inspired challenge that comes whenever one is beginning to make progress. It can be a sickness, disease or problem that defies every form of medication, be it orthodox or unorthodox. A spiritual mountain symbolizes a problem that has come to constitute in our life an obstacle to full experience of joy, pleasure, peace and hope. These problems make us look helpless and hopeless and, at the end, we resign ourselves or choose to live with it. Lastly, physical mountains like Mount Cameroon are formed either through an earthquake, that is through the ejection of lava into the earth's surface or the gradual wearing away of the softer rocks, leaving behind the hard core. The problems that we experience in life tend to divide along those lines. Some erupt like an earthquake, bringing about some sudden changes in our lives and causing some calamities to stand before us like a volcanic mountain; others are caused by a gradual but steady wearing away or loss of our health, success, progress, peace and faith.

However, many mountains in Cameroon (including Mounts Kupe and Muanenguba as well as Mount Cameroon) have lost much of the sanctity they once possessed as living embodiments of divine power. Most of the tribes that used to venerate them as the actual abodes of deities and ancestral spirits have turned away to worship the gods of Christianity and modernization. Peaks such as Mounts Cameroon, Kupe, Muanenguba, the Oku and Mandara have become places of pilgrimage for foreign climbers and tourists seeking spiritual challenge and the inspiration of the heights. And yet, although many Cameroonians in particular and Africans in general do not voice many of their old beliefs, the mountains still remain to them an unspoken presence. Customs may die as they have with the Bakossi and Mount Kupe, the Bakweri and Mount Cameroon; rituals may lose their power as with the Kupe and the Muanenguba Mountains and the Bakossi tribe and Mount Cameroon and the Bakweri tribe; but certain rituals such as looking at the mountain and the quiet act of facing it still remain. Although the particular visions that the mountains in Cameroon inspire among Cameroonians may have changed, the mountains continue to awaken a sense of the sacred that for many years has nourished the spirit of Cameroonians and put them in harmony with the world in which they live. Finally, it is worth noting that the above beliefs on mountains in different regions of Cameroon are interpreted in myths, and myths about mountains are still recited in different parts of Cameroon today.

The issue of cultural identity

'Identity' may be defined as the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. According to Rummens (1993, pp. 157–159), 'the term comes from the French word *identité* which finds its linguistic roots in the Latin noun *identitas*, -*tatis*, itself a derivation of the Latin adjective *idem* meaning "the same"'. Consequently, identity is that which makes an individual what he or she is and which distinguishes him or her from others. It constitutes all the features of which one can differ from others. When we talk about an identity card, we mean 'a document which describes the features specific to an individual, and which enables us to distinguish him/her easily from all other individuals' (Mveng, 1985, p. 65). The above definition of identity stresses not similarity but uniqueness. It neither confuses nor simplifies man's features. On the contrary, it highlights their originality. A cultural identity, therefore, is in the first place the cultural and ecological heritage of a people, a country, a nation, in all its riches, poverty, variety, originality, in what precisely makes it different from the cultural heritage of other peoples. Consequently, to speak of cultural unity is also to speak of creativity, dynamism and fertility of a people's imagination, as well as of its productivity in every area insofar as this productivity expresses its human factors in its historical development. It is also worthy to note that, for Cameroonians, cultural identity is neither cultural uniformity nor the formation of the culture of the majority over that of the minority. Individual cultures are considered as belonging to a definable collectivity or the nation.

The Cameroon cultural identity and heritage which enables the country to stand out over others asserts itself even more within the country. Cameroon's privileged geographical situation in the Gulf of Guinea gives her the opportunity to embody the whole continent, with its turbulent river banks, its tumultuous mountain volcanoes, its virgin forests and its burning deserts. All the great ethnic groups of the African continent can be found in Cameroon, including the Bantu-lords of the forest, the Sudan mixture of mountain shepherds and the peasants – all the mixtures, all the racial intermarriages, the languages, the religions, both ancient and modern, as well as all the variations of climate, landscape and humanity. It is literally Africa in miniature.

It is also the history of Africa in miniature. Nowhere else do the Sahara desert and the Equatorial forest meet as in Cameroon's Adamawa stretch; nowhere else in Africa have colonial powers succeeded each other with such rapidity as in Cameroon. Nowhere else on our continent have we seen a country that was divided by colonization and by French and English language barriers reunite and transform itself into a meeting place where all Africans feel at home. This privileged situation has given Cameroon its incomparable cultural wealth.

Because of its linguistic wealth, Cameroon has produced one of the richest and most varied oral literatures of the continent. In the North, myths of the mountain peasants exist side by side with the loquacity of the Fulbe or Fulani witch doctors; in the South, in addition to the lyrical abundance of songs and legends, the *Mvet*¹ players use epic majesty to reach the highest summit of Black African inspiration. Because of its bilingual nature (use of English and French as its official languages), Cameroonians also produce an abundant contemporary literature in both French and English, which is at the forefront of Black African post-colonial literature. Cameroon contemporary music and dance have conquered the African public. The *Makossa*,² the *Assiko*,³ the *Mangambo*⁴ and the *Bikutsi*⁵ have crossed the frontiers and entered into the entire African cultural heritage.

In religion, the Cameroonian identity shows examples of an astonishing maturity, moderation, tolerance and a spiritual dynamism in which the Africanization of religious values and their expression knows neither demagoguery nor sectarianism. Cameroon Islam, until recently, was noted for its moderation and its pragmatism.

Traditional religions in Cameroon, facing the challenge of modernity, examine their own basis without fanaticism. Cameroon Christianity is in the avant-garde both of theological thinking and the cultural adaptation of the liturgy and the arts.

The singularity of the Cameroon destiny lies in its multiplicity, diversity and unity, multiple in its land and ecological endowment, its men, its languages, its cultures and its religions.

Conclusion

I began this article by showing how the life and spirit of Cameroonians are invariably affected by contrasts in the ecosystems. I went further to demonstrate how a 'place' like the mountain can provide an indispensable resonance of symbolization in the cultural evolution of Cameroonians and how the ecosystem can be used to establish, consolidate and propagate cultural identity. The article has also shown how mankind has used images which are relevant to the world of today and which can be used to resolve the problems of tomorrow. The images capture issues relevant to man's life, his creative instinct, social and political experiences, and religious and moral practices. Cameroonians do appreciate the beauty of the natural environment and the richness of their history. These elements contribute to an understanding and collective sense of Cameroon's national identity as well as a shared sense of pride. They unify them as a people, yet express their national diversity. Cameroonians share this heritage with each other and welcome others to value, respect and learn about it.

Place symbols contribute to Cameroonian identity in many ways. They depict a diversity of cultures and natural environments. They are national and cultural symbols, yet they are located in many parts of the country – urban, rural and remote. They are also tangible links not only with the past and the present but with the future. These symbolic places and heritage provide a window to the world and showcase our global responsibilities in ensuring continued protection and presentation of a heritage that has both national and international significance.

Notes

1. The *Mvet* is an African stick zither found in Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the northern Republic of Congo and the western Central African Republic. Traditionally, the *Mvet* was made from a raffia stick from which five strings were cut from the peel and were stretched over a short notched bridge, effectively doubling the number of pitches. A gourd resonator was attached to the stick opposite to the bridge. The term *Mvet* also refers to many arts associated with the instrument such as narrative singing, storytelling, dance and mime. The *Mvet* player must go through a long and intense initiation and training and holds a special place in the society. The spoken and sung narratives include epic stories that maintain the moral values, history, legends and ancestral lines of the tribal group.
2. *Makossa* is a popular Cameroon musical style. It uses strong electric bass rhythms and prominent brass. '*Makossa*', which means 'dance' in the Duala language (language spoken by the Duala people, a coastal Bantu group in the Littoral region of Cameroon) originated from a Duala dance called *Kossa*. Emmanuel Nèle Eyom started using the refrain '*kossa kossa*' in his songs with his group Los Calvinos. The style began to take shape in the 1950s. Artists such as Eboa Lotin, Misse

Ngoh and especially Manu Dibango, who popularized Makossa throughout the world with his song 'Soul Makossa' in the early 1970s. The chant from the song, '*mamako, mamsa, maka makossa*', was later used by the late Michael Jackson in 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'. Many other performers followed suit. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa also brought Makossa to the international stage as Shakira sampled the Golden Sounds' popular song 'Zamina mina' (Zangalewa). (www.en.wikipedia/wiki/Makossa).

3. The *Assiko* is a popular dance from the South of Cameroon. Originally based in the Bassa country, this rhythmized dance takes its name from two words: *Isi* changed into *Assi*, which means earth or ground, and *Koo* meaning foot. The *Assiko* is a type of dance where the dancers dress in a simple T-shirt and a full skirt with a pronounced, billowing waistline that emphasizes hip movement. The choreographies of *Assiko* use several lopsided walks, successive small close walks that the dancers make at different heights, standing up or crouching, which suggests that they float on the stage. The *Assiko* is also a musical style. The band usually consists of a singer accompanied with a guitar, and a percussionist playing the pulsating rhythm of *Assiko* with metal knives and forks on an empty bottle.
4. *Mangambo* is a type of music which is very popular in the Western Region of Cameroon, particularly among the Bamileke (a semi-Bantu group that occupies most of the Western Highlands of Cameroon).
5. *Bikutsi* is another musical genre from Cameroon, although not as popular as *Makossa*. It developed from the traditional styles of the Beti or Ewondo people, who live around the city of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon.

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