

Orature at the Service of Environmental Sustainability: A Discourse on Bafut and Kom Proverbs

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Abstract

The role of indigenous languages expressed through proverbs to sensitize a people of a community cannot be under estimated. This essay investigates the role played by the Bafut and Kom proverbs in the sustenance of the environment. Several attempts have been made to curb environmental problems through NGOs, World Bank, WWF, UN, etc. The authors of this paper feel that if this problem can be handled in a holistic manner based on literature, with emphasis being laid on the psychological, social, spiritual, educative language and human conditions; using the case of Bafut and Kom proverbs, then environmental consciousness and preservation will be become a reality. This investigation was guided by eco-criticism (theory) by Glotfelty (1996) and New Historicism of Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000). Data for this investigation was collected through oral performances on the said proverbs. These proverbs were first written in indigenous languages, which were later translated to English for better analysis. The results reveal that the society stands to gain much in our efforts to sustain our environments, if we go back to our cultures (which we have neglected) in general and dig deep into our oratures in particular as well as our indigenous languages to disseminate environmental information which can help to educate the masses

Key words: *Orature, Environment, Sustainability*

Introduction

Proverbs are one of the genres of oral literature equally referred to as orature. Thus, orature is a blend of two words, oral and literature. The Oxford online dictionary defines this term as “A body of poetry, tales etc preserved through oral transmission as part of a particular culture especially a preliterate one”. Although the definition limits orature to preliterate societies, its effects go beyond its mode of existence. It is within this definition that this work sets as an objective to see how these oral pieces affect both preliterate and literate societies and even move into contemporary modern scientifically sophisticated societies. Furthermore, this essay investigates the representations of environmental sites in the proverbs from Bafut and Kom. This is because pollution and deforestation are becoming endemic in Cameroon and are having adverse effects of the environment and

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the entire population of the country. In order to achieve this objective, the essay hopes to examine the role that proverbs from the Bafut and Kom fondoms can play in the sustenance of the environment in a contemporary Cameroonian setting.

Languages of the People under Study

The Bafut fondom falls under the group of people who speak the Ngemba languages and classifying these languages has never been an easy task. While earlier scholars say that Ngemba is a semi-Bantu language, researchers classify it under Bantu languages. The first researchers into this language were missionaries. Neba Divine Che in “The Form and Content of Bafut Dirges” (1995:26) adds that these missionaries’ “...goal was not authenticity in classification. The classification made by these missionaries was geared at aiding missionaries in the dissemination of the Christian doctrine.” This language grouping concerns villages like Akum, Alatening, Awing, Bafut, Bambili, Bambui, Mankon, Mbatu, Mendakwe, Mundum I (Mberewi), Mundum II (Ayang), Njong, Nkwen, Chomba, Songwa and Pinyin. This classification holds true because there is mutual intelligibility among its speakers and Nfonyam (1987) even holds to the fact that Ngemba is a language with dialects. But it is worthy to note that they are distinct languages with peculiar linguistic characteristics. Just like many other African languages,

The Bafut and the Kom languages are rich in proverbs wise and sayings especially among the elderly people. According to Nfonyam (1982:2) in “Tone in the Orthography of Bafut”, “Four major tones can be distinguished in Bafut: the high tone which is an unmarked tone, the rising tone, the falling tone and the low tone.” Nfonyam and a few Bafut people with the help of Societe Internationale d’Linguistique (SIL) have worked extensively to produce a working alphabet for the Bafut language. They have equally translated the Holy Bible in the Bafut language. A few documents exist already in this language like books on how to learn the language and others like *The Bafut Newsletter*, *The Bafut Diary*, *The Bafut Calendar* among others. It is worth noting that the Bafut language has regional dialects. This is because historically, most of the groups that make up the Bafut fondom migrated from other areas as already seen when a study of the history was made. Before coming, these people had their various languages and in the course of learning the Bafut language, they were not very perfect in speaking it. While the Kom language, “Itanjikom”, according to Kah Jick (2015:8) is a tone language and it is one of

the most widely spoken languages in the else while North West Province of Cameroon. He posits:

The language has a tremendous influence on the neighbouring languages. The language is rich in proverbs and wise sayings. The usages of these aspects vary according to age groups. The elders who have a mastery of the language distinguish themselves from the children in terms of perfect pronunciation and apt usage of the proverbs.

Just like many other African languages, Itanikom is largely oral though the Societe Internationale d’Linguistique (SIL) has successfully established a working alphabet for it. Jick (2015:9) again notes; “Before the coming of this institution, the Kom language was only oral thereby hindering the free flow of Kom literature beyond her geographical boundaries. The Kom people are now able to put myths, legends, folktales and proverbs into print.” He concludes that the tones used in Itanikom are indicated by the use of diacritic signs or accent signs which mostly indicate a falling tone, rising tone, falling-falling tone and glottal stops. He further asserts that the diacritics are also used only on the vowel sounds in the Kom alphabet.

Aims and Objective of this Paper

The paper is aimed at ascertaining the role of orature and language in sustaining or handling environmental issues in the contemporary Cameroonian setting. The paper also sets as its objectives to investigate the Bafut and Kom proverbs as an approach of moving from man to nature, and nature back to man. To demonstrate how Bafut and Kom proverbs look at environmental issues for sustainability. If we look at the environment holistically, that is involving man, nature and the spirits. and to demonstrate that the environment in the Bafut and Kom settings is not only the physical , but also the psychological and social state of man within the environment.

Problem Statement

Various mediums of communications for instance, radio and television programmes, activities of non-governmental organizations have used foreign languages (English and French) to sensitise populations on environmental issues in relation to humanity. But little or nothing has been achieved to this effect. The problem raised in this investigation is that the above measures do not meet the desired populations. That is why this paper took upon itself to use African proverbs in indigenous languages as means of presenting

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environmental sustainability in educating the people taking the cases of Kom and Bafut proverbs.

Hypotheses

This paper takes up as hypotheses that proverbs from Bafut and Kom, by their nature, could be read from the images, and setting represented as orality in transmitting information and values on environmental sustainability in Cameroon. Orature, with particular attention to proverbs and language, raise awareness on environmental issues which if the contemporary Cameroonian society can pay attention to, can better sustain our environmental problems. Using Kom and Bafut proverbs and their various indigenous languages will help fight environmental degradation.

Literature Review, Critical Approaches and Research Methodology

Looking at the review of literature as far as environmental studies are concerned, Hans Jonas (1984) argues that in ecological crisis nature is vulnerable to humanity. He further states that the essence of all living organism with humans inclusive is for survival given their precarious nature. But because of man's dominance, nature is vulnerable to man. He concludes that man should consider nature as another being on which his survival depends. This present paper in turn uses proverbs as a means to disseminate information to the locals about environmental sustainability.

Paul Warren Taylor (1986) on his part states that in as much as humanity wants to continue existing, there is that need for him to respect nature. This is because if man destroys nature, he is in turn destroying his own very existence. He insists that man must respect nature because nature's existence entails man's own existence.

Sama Festus Ambe (2013) looks at how man and the environment are presented in some selected poems mostly by African writers. Using some selected poems as the base of his argument, he states that man has the responsibility to take care of the environment for his own good. He concludes that man should double his efforts to preserve nature because it is inherently valuable to humanity.

In the literature review above, one discovers that Jonas and Taylor base their arguments on a general observation of how man interacts with nature negatively. Though Ambe also

works on poetry, his investigations are based on written poetry while this paper carries a more practical approach on proverbs which is a form of oral literature.

This write up is anchored on the New Historical literary criticism (Gallagher & Greenblatt 2000) and Ecocriticism will be used to evaluate some Bafut and Kom proverbs. Bafut and Kom oratures are informed by their histories and environments. New Historicism advocates on reflecting on the past of a people to reflect on contemporary and future issues. It also advocates for critics (especially those with Eurocentric views who argue that Africa has no history, literature or culture) to pay attention to “high” and “low” histories, “high” and “low” literatures and “high” and “low” cultures. The Bafut and Kom societies fall among the societies which (according to Eurocentrists) have “low” histories, literatures cultures. Just as New Historicism argues that attention should be paid to these “low” societies, our attempt in this write up is to valorise these “low” societies and their proverbs, to show how they can help in sustaining the environment of a whole nation, Cameroon.

According to Cheryl (1996) in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “Ecotricism is the study of the relations between literature and the physical environment.” These definitions run short of mentioning the social conditions that stand between literature and the physical environment. For the sake of this study, we can therefore contend that ecocriticism can be said to be dealing with analyzing how works of art (literature) raise moral concerns about human interactions with nature, both physical (natural) and spiritual (supernatural), while motivating audiences to live within a limit that will benefit their contemporary societies and generations to come.

Oral literature as well as spoken discourse have several methods of collection as they occur in its natural setting and natural occurring talk that is always realized through life performances in front of an audience(s) Kah Jick and Tata Ngeh speaking on the method of collecting oral literature state that: “However, the natural and probably, the most effective and appropriate method is field work.” (2015:53). Quoting Tala Kashim, they (Jick and Ngeh) agree with him that field work is the main means of collection in orature. They quote;

The observation and collection of orature as it occurs in its natural setting which in the case of Africa is in the village. It is often conducted in an alien environment

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and naturally gives rise to certain situations that the researcher must participate by preparing a range of possible responses. (2015:53)

Tala in his attempt to prescribe the manner of collection of oral literary pieces lays emphasis on “observation”. He instructs that the prospective field worker should expect unforeseen circumstances in the field. This idea does not recognize the evolution of oral literature, which now lives in our contemporary societies in many other forms. This data is also developed through the use of language. That is the reason why Quirk (1977: 42) reiterates this idea when he says, “Language in the abstract is our facility to talk to each other, and it is the facility of speech, which all human languages hold in common”. It is clear from this that we accept the fact that it is the facility to talk to each other, it therefore means that the word “talk” is not merely simple talk but rather it is a more sounding word like “communicate”, but also, more precise and more relevant to the nature of human interaction.

In the light of the above, one will analyse some proverbs recorded live and others from recorded sources written and published from the Bafut and Kom fondoms. In the course of the analysis, one will always be helped by some information on orature from many other sources including the internet. Also, the importance of the social contexts in which the proverbs are performed will be emphasized and linked to the broader Cameroonian context.

Proverbs at the Service of Environmental Sustainability in Contemporary Cameroon

This section is concerned with the application of Bafut and Kom proverbs to demonstrate that they have great relevance for contemporary Cameroon’s environmental sustainability in particular if we can exploit the potentials. As many scholars have contended, literature whether written or oral, reflects the culture of a people because it is that culture which informs literature. Jick confirms this idea when he states: “In other words, the relation between literature and society is reciprocal”. He goes ahead to say: “Tala Kashim ... submits that orature in pre-capitalist Africa, as elsewhere, derives its raw materials from the realities of society and is used as instruments for the examination of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society (2015:42). To throw more light on this idea, Harold Courlander (1975) opines:

Man in Africa, as elsewhere, has sought to relate his past to his present, and to tentatively explore the future so that he might not stand lonely and isolated in the great sweep of time, or intimately by the formidable earth and the vast stretch of surrounding seas...in his proverbs and sayings he capsulates the learnings of centuries about the human character and about the intricate balance between people and the world around them (1975:1).

The main reference of the preceding quotation is that the bond between the individual and the society constitute the main focus of orature in general and proverbs in particular with particular reference to this study. The events or occurrences in a society consequently can shape or determine the nature of literature and conversely, the literature, culture and language of the people can change the direction or ameliorate their lives for the better. This section therefore becomes relevant to this write up: "Orature at the Service of Environmental Sustainability: A Discourse on Bafut and Kom Proverbs".

In this section of the work, two things will be discussed: some selected proverbs and the various themes imbedded in them. Tala Kashim (1984) states: "When we study our oral tradition, we are in a sense studying ourselves. And knowing ourselves is still a challenge to the modern man." Proverbs in particular are not for entertaining the youth and feeble minds. They are always thought provoking and need broader or wiser minds to interpret them. Some proverbs exist in more than one language because people borrow them from different languages and cultures similar to theirs'. In this write up, we intend to demonstrate that proverbs were and are meant not only to entertain, but also at contributing to environmental sustainability in traditional societies. The study intends to expand these ideas (of traditional societies) to a wider context. Jick (2015) opines that:

In the contemporary situation, the traditional artist finds himself in what Tala Kashim refers to as "heterogeneous society with no unified body of norms and with no cut expectation from its members". What this means is that the present requires a new artistic sensibility and new medium. (43-44)

From the foregoing idea, one can therefore state that the traditional artist who was originally concerned with events in his village, and his ideas limited, interpreted and implemented only within the confines of his immediate environment, being his village, is now occupied with national issues because we all are aware of the fact that the world has become a global village.

To back up the idea that proverbs from Bafut and Kom are very beneficial and can be put at the service of environmental sustainability in contemporary Cameroon, we will pay

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 attention to some of the themes in these proverbs. The selected proverbs will bring out our mistakes, teach us to learn from these mistakes and correct our ills. The repertoire of Bafut and Kom proverbs is very vast and covers almost all aspects of the lives of these people. From our research, we have discovered that the proverbs' composition evolve with the evolution of humanity and their societies. But for purposes of this exercise, we will look at proverbs which dwell on commonly used themes that are related to environmental sustainability. Some of these themes are cooperation, communality, precaution, greed, love, pride, betrayal, determination, tact, generosity, peace among others.

Communality is the backbone of many African societies. African writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Fredinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, to mention these few have treated the theme of communality extensively in their works. This theme unveils the advantages of a people living together while bringing out the dangers and challenges that await those who attempt to lead solitude lives. These writers are inspired by the orature of their societies, which are transmitted in their works. Using Bafut and Kom proverbs, the authors discover that communality is a core value in sustaining the environment. Some examples are:

Bafut: "Ma tswi faa nloŋ mə bi'tswi faa."

Translation "I am here because we are here."

This proverb tells us that as individuals, we cannot live successfully. We need to come together as a community, share ideas, gifts and other things to live happily. Mostly, when the traditional Bafuts talk of "we", they mean the living and the living dead, (the ancestors) and the gods who all come together to make life good. When these people come together, they interact among themselves and with nature. The living usually commune with the ancestors and the spirits through the natural environment like through special rivers, shrines, patches of forest, trees, waterfalls, caves among others. So, the "we" here represents man, nature and the supernatural.

Kom: "Awo a mo' anlnkuli' ibu'."

Translation: "One hand does not tie a bundle." (Jick 2015)

As already mentioned, three facets make life in Africa; humanity, nature and the spirits. At this level, we discover that "three hands" come together to "tie the bundle" of life for

the happiness of humanity and the other forces. If one or two of these hands are hurt, then life is not worth living especially for humanity who is at the centre of life. So, we need to take care of each other in order to live in harmony.

Bafut: “Ka ambə abo yi furə wa’a nibu’u kwitə.”

Translation: “One hand cannot tie a bundle.”

Here we discover the Bafuts and the Koms have the same words with the same meaning. This brings out the universality of proverbs which need to be nationalized for the betterment of our environments.

The main idea here is that, just as one hand cannot fasten the strings of a parcel, in the same vein, people need others assistance to do things to benefit all. From these proverbs, one discovers that among the Bafuts and the Koms and Africans in general, the individual lives for the community and the community lives for the individual. Since the community or the environment is made up of man, nature and the spirits, they all live for each other and a smooth continuity of their living depends on the way they treat one another. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1972) corroborates this idea when he posits: “... in the African way, the community serves the individual, ... the individual finds the fullest development in his personality when he is working in and for the community as a whole”. (25). So, the individual deserves the community and the community in turn serves the individual. Therefore, individualism is highly discouraged among these people. The Bafut people have this to say:

Bafut: “Mbaa nɔɔ a ghɛɛ ni njo yi.”

Translation: “The one who hates a crowd will go with a curse”.

Some of the main things which stand against staging a good fight for environmental sustainability in contemporary Cameroon are pride, disunity and individualism. There are some groups of people who think that their ideas, ways and cultures are more superior to those of others. Thus, they think that only their own ideas can be put at the service of environmental sustainability to fight the already degrading environmental situation we are facing in the country. Tribalism, nepotism (to a greater extent) and individualism are major characteristics in Cameroon and many Cameroonians have gained appointments in high positions of policy making not because of merit, but because of tribal sentiments and nepotism. Cameroonians, (especially those in high positions) still need to come to terms to accept that we are “one and indivisible”. When proverbs convey messages of

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 communalism and living together as one people, it is because performers want to pass a message to the authorities that be and the society at large that individualism can not only delay environmental sustainability in Cameroon, it will go a long way to plunge the contemporary and future Cameroonian society into more misery.

This argument to unite and take ideas from all spheres of society to build a sustainable culture to ensure environmental sustainability in contemporary Cameroon is in line with the New Historicism theory, the idea of high and low cultures. Those in high places who wield power in Cameroon think that their ideas and culture are “high” and are the best to tackle any societal problem. But New Historicism, as already mentioned advises that we have to equally take into consideration ideas from “low” cultures if we want to make our societies a better place to live in.

In Africa, people come together in communion when one of theirs is either happy or in agony. At such moments, anyone who wilfully stays away from the communion is considered evil or a witch. Most often than not, these kinds of people are hardly “successful” in their societies. These kinds of people can be living in a society filled with a lot of things to be shared, but can still die in misery. This is explained by this Bafut proverb:

Bafut: “Ninḡḡ baḡə a Ɖkuu nsaa mbə ḡu ti ḡu a bwεε ni?”

Translation: “Plantains are rotting in Mankon, but can a person without a relative there pick them?”

This proverb means one can be living in a land of plenty and still die of starvation if he or she has no one to help him or her. This is a lesson for us that we need to share ideas, cooperate with nature and the spirits by treating them fairly in order not to die in misery when our ecosystem must have been destroyed by our individualism and greed.

From the foregoing discussion on the theme of communality in Kom and Bafut proverbs, one discovers that the proverbs bearing this theme implicitly express the idea of unity among the people of these communities. The Bafuts and the Koms have voiced their ideas on environmental sustainability in these proverbs by preaching a communal approach in tackling our environmental concerns rather than trying to handle them on tribal or cultural lines. If we really want to unite as a people, we need to love one another and interact in

harmony. The main lesson from these proverbs is that if Cameroon wants to make a head way in environmental sustainability, the divisions that exist between language groups, tribes, regions, religions among others must be put to an end.

Some Bafut and Kom proverbs are coined or designed to suit the idea of working together to achieve something good for the community as a whole.

Bafut: “Aboo asigə aa njii tsim mbəŋ ako.”

Translation: “Those who have gone out hunting must close in from all sides of the hill to be able to catch the game.”

This proverb advises us that in search of a something, or a solution to a problem, we should leave no stone unturned. Just as our environment has become a serious problem in contemporary Cameroon, in the search for ideas on how to sustain this environment, we need to tackle the problem from all angles. To add to this, the Koms advice that in the case of a problem, any good contribution is never too small as seen in the following proverb:

Kom: “Fin chya fi jeŋ fi nin laewi.”

Translation: “Spittle for hunger is never too small.” (Jick: 2015).

It is equally good that when a people come together to provide solutions to a problem, we need to listen to each other very keenly, no matter his/her social standing.

From these proverbs, one realises that in the struggle for environmental sustainability in contemporary Cameroon, the government and all the stake holders in this sector need to come together as one man including all the small communities because the task may be too much for the government alone. Then many ways should be exploited to involve everyone including these local communities and their activities and cultures in order to make environmental sustainability a reality in this country.

According to Africans, to be generous means showing acts of kindness to fellow man, nature and the spirits, (ancestors and the gods). This kindness goes along with treating each other well, giving freely and sacrificing. Africans in general and Bafut and Kom people in particular show generosity to fellow man by sharing ideas and items for the benefit of each other and the society. Some of the sacrifices are offered to protect the societies against witches and wizards, wild animals, torrential rains or droughts, (harsh weather conditions), which may destroy the natural environment or the ecosystem. This

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generosity among Bafuts and the Koms towards one another and Mother Nature is apparently in line with the Christian doctrine by which humans are called upon to love others as they love themselves and to be one another's keeper. The general believe in both societies is that when you share and sacrifice your property and riches with your neighbours, the needy, and the ancestors, (gods and spirits), the same generosity will be shown to you either through fellow human beings or by divine intervention. Sharing is a laudable practice and it is amplified in the following proverbs:

Bafut: "Kaa abo a si aatsi'Inko'ɔ lo ntsya ni mi nii."

Translation: "A hand cannot only move from inside the house to the door."

This proverb is line with the Biblical saying that: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Mathew 7:12). This proverb means that if you expect to receive, be prepared to give. If you want to be treated well, be prepared to treat other people well. This is a message to the contemporary Cameroonian society that if we want our environment to treat us well and be kind and friendly to us, we should be prepared to treat her well first. The Kom people on their part have this to say:

Kom: "A wo-a ninzi a ta kifi."

Translation: "A hand that gives receives more in return." Or
 "The hand comes in as it goes out." (Jick: 2015).

Through a careful observation of the ideas shared by the Bafut and Kom people, as shown in these proverbs, it is widely believed and experience has proven that the more one gives out, the more one receives.

Laziness is condemned in almost every human society including the Christendom where it is considered as one of the seven deadly sins. The Bible says: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat", (2nd Thessalonians 3:10). In like manner, among the Kom and Bafut people, laziness is attributed to wickedness and witchcraft. It is believed that lazy people are always punished by the gods with illnesses, ill luck, accidents, and even in worst cases with sudden death. On the other hand, hard work is a virtue which is highly encouraged because it is believed that it is rewarded with success and prosperity because of blessings from fellow man, nature and the spirits. For any society to achieve sustainability in any domain there must be hard work. People need to work hard in all domains of life in order to achieve a sustainable living environment. Consequently, the Bafut and Kom people are

encouraged to work hard to maintain certain life styles or better still improve upon themselves and their environment rather than remain lazy to depend on the charity and generosity of others and worst still receive punishment from the ancestors.

Any aspect that improves on man's wellbeing be it social, cultural, material, or environmental is achieved through hard work. One of the proverbs among the Bafuts which encourages hard work is:

Bafut: "Kaa agha'a nda ŋu asi ghu mbo sa'a."

Translation: "The distance of a person's house is never too far for him."

This proverb tells us that if you know the importance of something, you will spare no effort to do it or acquire it. No amount of difficulty will discourage you or make you complain.

To the Koms, they have this to say;

Kom: "Njuŋ nintò si ghâl."

Translation: "Nothing good comes easy."

Whatever thing that man does, success is achieved only through hard work. Thus, it is impossible to achieve anything in life without persistence and hard work.

At this level, one can say that the Kom and Bafut people encourage, appreciate, celebrate and exalt hard work and success while they condemn laziness and failure. These proverbs which show that Kom and Bafut people have the same views on humanity and society with hard work at the centre; "Suggest that hard working people are supposed to be praised for their efforts and lazy people are not supposed to enjoy the fruits of other people's labour." (Jick, 2015:65).

These proverbs which encourage hard work are sending a message to Cameroonians that to fully attain environmental sustainability, we need to make conscious efforts to work hard to preserve or improve on our natural environment. In order to do this, we have to work hard to improve on those aspects of our environment, which we have destroyed or are experiencing environmental degradation.

In order to achieve more from nature and the spirits, who always have in abundance, man equally needs to give back to them in the form of replanting trees cut down, taking care

Orature at the Service of Environmental Sustainability: A Discourse on Bafut and Kom Proverbs of water shades, taking care of our environment in order to sustain it for the betterment of humanity. Thus, the Bafut people have this advice to give:

Bafut: “Ndzoo yoŋa adʒi mə’ɔ.”

Translation: “Things follow others.”

This proverb means that property only comes to those who already have it, and it is in line with the Biblical saying that: “For to him who has more will be added”. (Mathew 13:12, 25:29). This is an advice to the contemporary Cameroonian society that we should not think that because nature and the environment already have in abundance, we only need to collect from them in the forms of cutting down trees for timber and wood, hunting and poaching, burning of hills to prepare for better grazing land among other activities. If we collectively give more to our environment by joining hands to work with the government, fall back to our folklore to get some advice from proverbs and other aspects of orature, revive our old cultural practices among others and give more to nature, she will multiply whatever we have given, and give it back to us and our country will be a better place to live in.

Here, we will be looking at proverbs that advise us on taking preventive measures in order not to fall in unpleasant situations in life. Others will be those checking on excesses in the society. For any society to enjoy environmental sustainability precautions must be taken and excesses of individuals and the community as a whole must be checked. Proverbs as oral literature or any other literature always caution individuals and societies on how to behave and what to do and what not to do to keep lives of individuals and the society intact.

Bafut: “Kaa aba’asə nɪkɔŋ asi kə’ə.”

Translation: “A spear shield is never too small.”

This proverb comes from the field of war and it advises us that we should never minimize a preventive measure.

The Kom people on their part have this to say:

Kom: “Wanadu’ziwul mɪnaŋ wana ma’ tɪfɪ tɪ yum a wuchfi ikuyn.”

Translation: “If you are in company with a crafty fellow throw dry leaves in front of your bed.”

These two proverbs advise us to be precautionary because life is a journey in which we encounter a lot of obstacles and we don't know exactly when trouble will come. So, we should better be cautious.

Looking at our environment in contemporary Cameroon, one discovers that we are suffering from a lot of pollution because we have not been cautious with our household and industrial waste disposal. We suffer from erosion and landslides because we have not heeded to the advice of agricultural technicians on our farming methods. We suffer from landslides and floods because we defile orders of our councils and town planning agents in the course of constructing our houses. In effect, we are suffering from a lot of natural disasters which have been caused by man because we have been reckless in our behaviours. We have not been precautionary. If we heed to the advice of these Bafut and Kom proverbs, then we will be able to sustain our environment in contemporary Cameroon.

The Bafut people have this to say to condemn over zealousness:

Bafut: "Mbu kətə boo shi'i aa ih ko ŋgoo yi."

Translation: "When a dog hunts too much it catches a porcupine."

A porcupine is an animal with spikes and a dog cannot catch it. When a dog catches it, its spines hurt the dog a lot because the spines prick it. This is to tell us that if we are not precautionary in our dealings with nature and the environment, we will one day "catch porcupines" and nature will deal with us badly.

To the Koms, they say:

Kom: "Tch+ f+ntoy ŋlum chwofi a wube'H."

Translation: "When the mouth of a clay pot gets too hot, it breaks." (Jick: 2015).

These proverbs reflect the English proverb which says: "Too much of a thing is a disease". These proverbs condemn the monotony or exaggeration of certain human actions that may have negative consequences on our environment to the detriment of mankind. We all understand that we depend on our natural environment a lot for survival. But when we exploit it without precaution and restrain, they will go extinct and it is man that will suffer. A good example can be a sacred tree which acts like shelter and food for man, animals and birds and dwelling place for the gods. If out of man's carelessness and lack of self-control, this tree is cut down for wood or timber, man will suffer because he will lack

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food and shelter, the birds and animals will disappear. By this, the whole of the ecosystem will be affected. These are some of man's careless activities which have caused environmental degradation leading to global warming which is affecting the entire human race.

Conclusion

This write up has tried to express the view that the selected proverbs to tackle environmental discourse are a reflection of the Bafut and Kom people's beliefs, their psyche as individuals and as a community and their thoughts, which are greatly influenced by their environment and happenings around them. This revelation brings the Bafut and Kom oral literatures to the rank of African and other world literatures because they share the same characteristics. We have argued that because of the educational and advisory role of the proverbs discussed above, they therefore have a great impact on the sustainability of the environment in contemporary Cameroon. Also in the course of the study, we have noticed that Bafut and Kom proverbs are very similar to those of other languages and cultures with a few of them being purely local, especially as they emanate from their traditional societies. It has also been noticed that some of the proverbs with the same ideas exist in the two languages in different words. This can be attributed to the proximity of both communities to each other or the universality of the ideas raised in the proverbs.

Although environmental sustainability is a national or global issue, it needs to be situated to a specific community or society before being nationalized or globalized. The Bafut and Kom proverbs under study have manifested these qualities and therefore can effectively be put at the service of environmental sustainability both nationally and internationally. If the ideas raised in these proverbs can be followed, they will not serve only contemporary Cameroon, they will serve future generations. The essential point here is that we need to go back and trace the origin or the causes of our environmental problems. Atoh (2012: 192) posits that of all human attributes, language is perhaps the most remarkable. Through language, humans can share experiences, formulate values, exchange ideas, transmit knowledge, manage conflict and sustain cultures and of course environmental degradation. Indeed, language is vital to thinking itself and for this reason,

language plays a vital function in society, in the sense that it is the medium through which a society can be influenced, conditioned and manipulated as communication is concerned. We have discovered that these proverbs embody all other genres of orature because they bring out the complete thought and belief system of the Bafut and Kom people. Since these groups are just two among a host of other ethnic groups which make up the Cameroonian society, the government of Cameroon must encourage the various cultural aspects of the different ethnic groups in the country if she really hopes to effectively engage in a fight to sustain the environment which is “Crying for salvation”, (Prince Afo a Kom). For the government to succeed in this aspect of “cultural revival”, orature needs to be part of the curriculum at all levels of education in Cameroon. To make the fight of environmental sustainability a reality and a success story, researchers can equally work on other genres of orature and see how they can be put at the service of environmental sustainability not only in contemporary Cameroon, but globally.

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