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Review Article

Myths, Ritual Cosmologies and Mortuary Practices in Mbum Society of the Bamenda Grasslands, Cameroon

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Abstract: This paper examines the mythologies and ritual practices surrounding death and burial among the Mbum people of Cameroon, situating these customs within broader African traditional understandings of 'good' and 'bad' death. In Mbum-land, as in many African societies, burial in one's ancestral homeland is viewed as sacred and essential for maintaining lineage continuity and ancestral connection. Perceptions of death are shaped by the deceased's social standing, age, cause of death, and the moral judgment of their life's conduct. The study employs a qualitative methodology, relying on both primary and secondary sources. Data was collected through oral interviews with traditional authorities, title holders, and community members, as well as researchers' observations during funeral ceremonies. These primary accounts are complemented by a critical review of existing literature, including works by scholars such as J.S. Mbiti, Victor Turner, Tanto Talla and Arnold van Gennep. Drawing on this interdisciplinary approach, the paper argues that funeral mythologies in Mbum society are not merely ceremonial but constitute a crucial expression of indigenous epistemology, social cohesion, and moral order. These traditions, though increasingly impacted by Christian influences and Westernization, remain foundational to the Mbum cultural identity.
Keywords: Mythologies, Ritual Cosmologies, Mortuary Practices, Mbum-land and Bamenda Grassland.

INTRODUCTION

Death, as both a biological certainty and a deeply symbolic event, holds profound significance within African traditional societies. Far beyond the cessation of life, it involves a complex interplay of ritual, cosmology, and cultural meaning. In the Mbum society of the Bamenda Grasslands in Cameroon, mortuary practices are not merely acts of disposal, but integral expressions of worldview embodying spiritual continuity, ancestral veneration, and communal identity [1]. These practices are shaped and sustained by a rich corpus of mythologies and ritual cosmologies that govern how death is interpreted, managed, and socially embedded.

The Mbum people, like many indigenous African groups, locate the deceased within a cosmological order that sees the dead as active members of the extended lineage and what is often referred to as the 'living-dead'. Burial within ancestral land is not only a sacred duty but a necessary rite that ensures the dead are properly integrated into the spiritual community of ancestors [2]. The conditions surrounding one's death such as age, manner of dying, and social status are crucial determinants of the ritual treatment of the body, and they often frame death as either 'good' (socially acceptable) or 'bad' (ritually problematic) [3]. These classifications

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[1] J. S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990) and I. Kopytoff. *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[2] M. Fortes, & G. Dieterlen, (Eds.). *African Systems of Thought.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
[3] T. Metz, "Death in African Philosophy," in *The Ethics of Death: Religious and Philosophical Perspectives in Dialogue*, ed. F. Combs and M. Cholbi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134-150.

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reflect and reinforce a broader mythological structure that links death to moral, spiritual, and social order [4].

This paper critically examines the mythologies, ritual cosmologies, and mortuary practices of the Mbum, situating them within the larger context of African indigenous religious systems. It seeks to unveil how these death-related customs embody cultural values, articulate spiritual beliefs, and sustain collective memory and identity. The analysis demonstrates that mortuary practices in Mbum-land are not peripheral rites but are central to the maintenance of social cohesion and cosmological balance [5]. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional African societies theorize death and negotiate its meanings through ritual and myth.

Literature Exploration
The study of funeral practices and their underlying mythologies in African traditional societies has received considerable attention in anthropological and religious scholarship. Foundational to this discourse is the recognition that death in African cosmologies is not an end but a transition and an initiation into ancestral status within a metaphysical continuum. Scholars such as John Mbiti argue that African notions of personhood extend beyond biological life; the dead remain active within the community as ancestors, shaping and guiding the living [6]. In this framework, mortuary rites serve both to honor the dead and to maintain the cosmological balance between the visible and invisible worlds.

Victor Turner's theory of *liminality* provides another key analytical lens. Turner contends that rituals surrounding death involve a transitional phase in which the deceased and mourners are symbolically "betwixt and between," neither fully part of the living world nor the spiritual realm [7]. Similarly, van Gennep's seminal work, *The Rites of Passage*, introduces a tripartite model involving separation, liminality, and reintegration that remains foundational to understanding the ritual logic of African funerals [8].

More specific to the African context, Ray's work on indigenous religions highlights how myth and ritual converge to preserve communal memory and moral codes [9]. Mythologies associated with death often explain the origins of mortality, prescribe ritual conduct, and legitimize the authority of elders or ritual specialists. In many societies, including those of the Central African region, the nature of death (violent, premature, natural) significantly affects the ritual protocol and communal response [10]. Metz further explores the ethical dimension of African funerary traditions, arguing that they are grounded in a moral metaphysics that sees community cohesion and respect for elders as spiritually consequential [11].

However, localized studies on specific ethnic groups like the Mbum remain limited in the broader literature. While regional ethnographies of the Bamenda Grasslands exist, they often focus on more dominant groups or general political systems [12]. As such, this study contributes to filling a significant gap by focusing on the Mbum people's mortuary mythologies tracing how ritual and belief shape cultural identity, spiritual continuity, and social memory within their ancestral landscape.

Brief History and Traditional Administration of the Mbum
The Mbum people inhabit a significant portion of the Nkambe Plateau in Cameroon's North West Region. The ethnic group is traditionally structured into three primary clans: the Ya, Tang, and Warr. These clans are further subdivided into several Fondoms or village units, each led by a traditional ruler known as a *Fon* [13]. The Ya Clan, whose administrative center is Ndu, comprises the Fondoms of Wowo, Sehn, Nseh-Makop, Njimkang, Konchep, Luh, Mbipgo, Ndu, Nguvlu, and Njilah. The *Fon* of Ndu holds the status of clan head and exercises authority over the constituent Fondoms. The Tang Clan, based in Talla, includes Binka, Bih, Bongom, Kup, Ngarum, Ntundip, Sina, Taku, Tabenken, and Talla [14]. The Warr Clan, with its center at Mbot, consists of Binshua, Chup, Nkambe, Kungi, Njap, Njirong,

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4 B. C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976).
5 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Originally published 1909.
6 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).
7 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).
8 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Originally published 1909.
9 B. C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976).
10 M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen, eds., *African Systems of Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

11 T. Metz, "Death in African Philosophy," in *The Ethics of Death: Religious and Philosophical Perspectives in Dialogue*, ed. F. Combs and M. Cholbi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134-150.
12 I. Kopytoff, *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
13 Richard Tanto Talla, Indigenous Culture and Western Christianity: An Assessment of Wimbum Experience with the Baptist Mission 1927-2008. *International Journal of Culture and Religious Studies*, vol.2, issue no.1, 2021, 24.
14 Talla Richard Tanto, Indigenous Settlement Types Among the Mbum of the Nkambe Plateau of Cameroon: Continuity and Change. *International Journal of*

Ntumbaw, Nwangri, Mbaa, Mbot, Saah, Sop, and Wat [15]. These Fondoms are geographically situated within the administrative boundaries of the Ndu and Nkambe Sub-Divisions.

The Mbum trace their origins to Kimi, located in present-day Adamawa Region of Cameroon. Historical accounts indicate that their initial settlement occurred at Ntem, from where they migrated to the Nkambe Plateau in three distinct waves during the latter half of the seventeenth century [16]. Despite migrating along different routes, these groups eventually established themselves within the same geographic area. This spatial proximity fostered the development of shared cultural traditions and socio-political institutions [17]. The Mbum speak *Limbum*, their indigenous language, which is commonly understood across all clans, albeit with minor variations in pronunciation.

The Mbum community maintained a well-structured and centralized system of governance. At its apex stood the *Fon*, known locally as *Nkfu*, who wielded significant political and spiritual authority [18]. The *Fon* was not elected, rather, he was selected either by his predecessor or by a council of kingmakers, and formally enthroned through elaborate traditional rites. His status was visibly marked on the day of coronation through a display of regalia, including a finely crafted royal throne, a ceremonial cap, a staff of authority, a sash adorned with cowries, and an ancestral cup. The royal throne, often draped with the hides of powerful animals such as lions, tigers, pythons, or leopards, symbolised strength, legitimacy, and continuity [19]. Following his enthronement, the *Fon* was ritually fortified in sacred shrines, empowering him to govern the affairs of the community. He possessed the authority to declare war, make key decisions for collective welfare, and ensure peace and order within the Fondom [20].

The *Fon* was supported in his administrative duties by several key institutions and groups within the traditional political structure. Chief among these were the *Fais'*, a council of selected elders; the *Nfuh*, a warrior group; and the *Ngwarong*, a powerful secret society responsible for enforcing laws and ensuring strict adherence to communal norms and values. These bodies played both advisory and executive roles in maintaining order within the fondom [21]. The Ngiri, another significant group, also contributed to the governance process. The *Nfuh* held a crucial role as protectors of the community during times of conflict or crisis, whether physical or spiritual. Their presence underscored the integration of military, spiritual, and judicial functions within Mbum traditional governance [22].

Understanding the Divine in Mbum Religious Thought

The indigenous Mbum people hold a deep belief in the existence of a supreme supernatural being known as *Nyu*, regarded as the creator and overseer of all existence. Alongside *Nyu*, the Mbum also recognize a pantheon of lesser divinities, each associated with specific aspects of life and nature. Among these are *Nyu Mroh* (god of water), *Nyu Ngong* (god of fertility), and *Nyu Lah* (protector of the compound) [23]. These deities are understood to serve as intermediaries, facilitating communication between the human and spiritual realms. To maintain this connection, secret shrines such as the *Ndap Ngong* were carefully preserved and periodically rehabilitated. These sacred sites were essential to the religious life of the community, ensuring that the gods remained responsive to human needs. At the family level, households maintained their own shrines and small deities, which were invoked in times of crisis or uncertainty, particularly to consult the spirits of revered ancestors. These ancestral spirits were believed to possess the power to intervene in the lives of the living, provided they were properly venerated [24]. In Mbum

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[19] Stanley Yengong Nforba, The Paradox of Paramountcy in Bamenda Grasslands: Case of Mbum in the North West Region of Cameroon. *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education*, vol 6, issue 3, 2020, 459.

[20] Fon Ngwang Charles Kamanda, (Tang Clan Head,) Interviewed by author 16 August 2021.

[21] Ta Nformi Malvin Jatoh (A title holder in the Nfuh lodge), Interviewed by the author, Ndu, 22 September 2020.

[22] Lydia Museng Muchop, (a farmer), interviewed by researcher 28 December 2019.

[23] Richard Tanto Talla and Ignatius Womai Song, Endangered Indigenous Archives in Mbum land of Cameroon: Which Way Forward? *In International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE),* volume1, Issue 7, July 2014, 157.

[24] Bongmba Elias K, *African Witcraft and Otherness*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis in Theology, the Illif School of Theology and the University of Denver, 1995), 9-10.

cosmology, these lesser gods were not seen as rivals to the supreme deity but rather as auxiliaries, aiding *Nyu* in responding to the diverse and urgent needs of the people. This belief reflects a theological system in which the divine hierarchy mirrors the social and political structures of the community itself. With this spiritual framework in mind, the discussion now turns to an examination of traditional funeral practices in Mbum society specifically, the cultural definitions of a 'good' or 'bad' death, and how such deaths were ritually commemorated.

Mythologies Surrounding a 'Good Death' in Mbum Society

In traditional Mbum society, a 'good death' was understood as a peaceful and honorable passing, marked by reconciliation with others and the absence of violence, sudden accidents, or debilitating diseases [25]. A death was considered good when it occurred naturally typically at an advanced age after a life of fulfillment, social contribution, and personal integrity. Painful or prolonged suffering prior to death was viewed as a sign of unresolved spiritual or social discord, and thus, not characteristic of a good death. In Mbum society good death came after a well spent life with much accomplishment and was natural void of secondary factors [26]. This conception of good death transcended social classes and roles but was interpreted differently depending on one's status. The manner of burial and funeral rites varied accordingly. This section explores how the idea of a good death was understood and commemorated among various categories of people in Mbum-land, including *Fons*, titled holders, traditional healers, queen mothers, and ordinary citizens, shedding light on the intersection of status, spirituality, and cultural practice.

Upon enthronement, the *Nkfu* (*Fon*) in Mbum-land assumed the dual role of political leader and spiritual intermediary. Immediately after his installation, he was taken to sacred shrines where he underwent ritual fortification, imbuing him with spiritual powers necessary for governance. These rites symbolized not only his authority but also his transformation into a semi-divine figure, capable of mediating between the visible and invisible realms. As a consecrated leader, the Nkfu was believed to possess supernatural insight, enabling him to communicate with both the gods and the ancestral spirits [27]. This communication was central to his leadership, as it guided decision-making for the

prosperity and moral order of the community. The belief that the *Fon* received guidance from ancestors reflects a broader Mbum worldview that affirms the continuity of life after death and the enduring influence of ancestral wisdom in the affairs of the living.

During his reign, the *Fon* was tasked with the fundamental responsibility of preserving and promoting the unity and cohesion of the community. The indigenous population looked to him not only as a spiritual leader but also as a symbol of cultural identity and development. He was expected to uphold and advance the economic well-being of the village, safeguard cultural traditions, and protect ancestral and heritage sites that held historical and spiritual significance for the Mbum people. An essential aspect of his leadership involved sustaining and strengthening diplomatic ties established by his predecessors, particularly with neighboring villages and Fondoms [28]. Establishing new inter-clan relationships was equally important, especially with Fondom outside of the Fon's immediate lineage. A notable example is the case of the Tang clan's head Fondom, Talla, which had long lacked a reigning Fon. Recognizing the symbolic and cultural gap this created, the Fon of Ndu, head of the Ya clan, made deliberate efforts to restore leadership in Talla. Upon returning from a visit to the United States, the *Fon* of Ndu publicly declared the need for Talla to reinstate its traditional authority [29]. This declaration paved the way for the eventual enthronement of His Royal Highness Charles Kamanda, which helped restore Talla's dignity and reinforce its alliance with the Ndu Fondom.

The *Fon* was expected to embody the ideal of impartial and fatherly leadership in his governance of the people. Matters brought before him were to be addressed with fairness and integrity, particularly when his subordinate authorities had failed to resolve them. As the final arbiter in complex or sensitive disputes, the Fon's judgement was pivotal in maintaining justice, stability, and social cohesion within the Fondom. His ability to preserve unity, foster development, and uphold cultural values earned him the respect and admiration of the population, who viewed these accomplishments as the marks of a successful reign. It was also culturally anticipated that the *Fon* would outlive his predecessor, symbolizing longevity and continuity in leadership. Prior to his death, he was expected to designate his successor typically through a private will or instructions to prevent

25 Sjaak Van De Greest, Dying Peacefully: Considering Good Death and Bad Death in Kwahu- Tafo, Ghana. Social *Science and Medicine,* Medical Anthropology Units University of Amsterdam, 2004, 904.

26 Lydia Museng Muchop, (a farmer), interviewed by researcher 28 December 2019.

27 James Nsah, (He holds the title of Shey *Ngiri* in Mbot palace secret society), Interviewed by the author, Talla, 28 December 2023.

28 Stanley Yengong Nforba, Nuptial Customs and Royal Celebration in Mbum Land, North West Region of Cameroon. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social science,* volume v, issue 1, January 2021, 106.

29 Fai Ndiquanjoh, (He is a sub chief of Mbajeng people living in Talla.), Interviewed by the author, Ndangong, 28 December 2023.

succession disputes and ensure a smooth transition of power [30]. Because of these esteemed responsibilities and the symbolic weight of his role, the death of a *Fon* especially after a peaceful and accomplished reign was regarded as a 'good death'. His funeral was accordingly elaborate, distinct from that of ordinary citizens, and marked by ceremonial honors reflective of his sacred status and legacy.

In Mbum tradition, the funeral celebration of a 'missing *Fon*' (a euphemism for a deceased ruler), was marked by elaborate rituals and cultural propriety. This event not only honored the *Fon's* legacy but also served to strengthen diplomatic ties among various Fondoms. The announcement of his death was often delayed, kept secret during the preparatory phase, during which essential rites such as 'building the palace' - the process whereby kingmakers deliberated on the next successor, were quietly undertaken.

Key palace associations that supported the *Fon's* administration, notably the *Ngwarong*, *Ngiri*, and *Nfuh* societies, played an integral role in animating the funeral ceremonies. These groups provided both ritual authority and ceremonial vibrancy. For instance, during the funeral of the *Fon* of Tabenken in 1980, several neighboring Fondoms actively participated. Binka and Ngarum villages sent their *Ngwarong* and *Nfuh* societies, Ndu sent the *Manjong*, while Wat and Luh offered both *Ngwarong* and *Nfuh* delegations. Their collective participation was a symbolic confirmation that the Fon had died a good death, meriting full honors [31]. Funeral preparations also included contributions from within the Fondom itself: local quarters donated funds, and women collected foodstuffs to ensure a dignified and communal celebration [32]. The scale and quality of the ceremonies reflected the late *Fon's* relationship with his people; a grand and well-supported celebration signified a beloved ruler and a life well lived. In accordance with Mbum customs, a three-week mourning period was observed. During this time, all citizens both within and outside the Fondom shaved their heads as a sign of grief. Women, as a mark of solemn respect, dressed modestly with wrappers tied above the chest and refrained from wearing headscarves [33]. The widespread participation of traditional authorities and the observance of rituals by the entire community were regarded as definitive indicators that the *Fon* had passed honorably and peacefully.

Titled holders and notables, particularly those affiliated with secret societies often regarded as the executive arm of the Fondom were accorded dignified and ceremonially rich burials by members of their respective lodges. These individuals were celebrated not only for their elite status but also for their active roles in law enforcement, social regulation, and cultural preservation, all of which contributed to the prosperity and continuity of the community. Among the most esteemed groups was the *Ngwarong* sacred society, whose burial rites were especially distinctive for members who had attained the prestigious *Tanto* title (Head of the Palace), the society's apex rank. Such individuals were honored by being clothed in the traditional *Njap* fabric, a stencil-dyed cloth reserved for high-ranking elders bestowed upon them by the *Fon* himself [34]. They also wore black caps adorned with red feathers intricately woven from palm fronds, symbolizing status and authority.

During burial ceremonies, the presence of *Ngwarong* members at the deceased's compound was both symbolic and ceremonial. Their attendance, often extending to a week, was marked by elaborate masquerade performances, which functioned as spiritual send-offs and public affirmations of the deceased's honored legacy. These rites, however, were reserved for individuals whose contributions to community life had been publicly recognized and appreciated. The extent and grandeur of the burial rites often depended on the bereaved family's capacity to meet ritual requirements, which typically included offerings such as a cow's head, beef, a he-goat, and ample palm wine to sustain the rites and feasting [35].

This celebratory expression of cultural rites was not exclusive to the *Ngwarong* secret society. Other influential traditional groups such as the *Ngiri* and *Nfuh* also performed distinct ceremonial functions during funerals, particularly in cases of a "good death". Each society demonstrated its identity through ritual performances, traditional displays, and symbolic acts that honored the deceased's contribution to community life. In addition to titled figures, non-titled elders aged eighty and above were also accorded celebratory funerals. Attaining such an advanced age was regarded as a sign of divine favor and a life well-lived, thus qualifying the deceased for a dignified farewell. Conversely, certain types of death were perceived

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30 *Idem*.

31 *Ibid*, 107.

32 Veronica Mburli, (farmer), interviewed by author 20 December 2021.

33 Richard tanto Talla and Reymond Njingti Budi, Divided at Home, United Abroad: Assessing the Bases and Impacts of Intra-Mbum Integration in the Mambila Plateau of Nigeria. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS),* Volume IV, September 2020, 309.

34 Richard Tanto Talla, Indigenous Religion, Christianity and Identity Crisis Amongst the Mbum People of Cameroon. African Journal of Social Sciences, Volume 12, Number 2, 2021, 69.

35 James Nsah, (He holds the title of Shey *Ngiri* in Mbot palace secret society), Interviewed by the author, Talla, 28 December 2023.

negatively and not considered worthy of celebration. Deaths resulting from unnatural causes, social deviance, or unresolved conflict often fell into this category and were met with minimal or no ceremonial acknowledgment in accordance with Mbum customs.

Mythological and Ritual Understandings of 'Bad Death' among the Mbum

In traditional Mbum cosmology, the notion of a 'bad death' was laden with spiritual and cultural significance. Deaths that occurred under unnatural, tragic, or socially unacceptable circumstances were often considered taboo and surrounded by fear and silence. Such deaths included those resulting from accidents, suicide, violent conflict, certain diseases deemed abominable, or unresolved social transgressions. The belief was that these individuals had either broken spiritual laws, failed to reconcile with the community, or were victims of malevolent forces. Consequently, their funerals were subdued or restricted, with limited rites and sometimes exclusion from ancestral veneration, as their spirits were believed to lack rest or even pose harm to the living. These mythologies reinforced moral codes and helped regulate behavior within society.

Given that *Fons* in Mbum-land were regarded as supernatural intermediaries who maintained communion with the ancestors through sacred shrines, it was culturally unacceptable for a Fon to die or be declared 'missing' outside the confines of the palace. Such an occurrence was seen as spiritually disruptive, as it implied the absence of the final, vital communion between the Fon and the ancestral world, a disconnection that rendered the death spiritually incomplete and unworthy of celebration [36]. Similarly, not all titled holders received elaborate funeral honors. Those whose deaths were linked to behaviors that violated communal ethics or who engaged in acts considered morally reprehensible were excluded from full ceremonial recognition. Only individuals whose lives embodied the community's moral ideals, and whose conduct was deemed exemplary and worthy of emulation, were honored with full traditional rites. Their legacies were deliberately upheld and transmitted to future generations as cultural models.

In Mbum traditional society, leprosy was regarded as a spiritually and socially defiling illness, and individuals who succumbed to it were typically denied formal funerals. The disease was not merely seen as a medical condition but as a symbol of impurity and moral contamination [37]. Those afflicted were often isolated to designated settlements on the fringe of the community,

where they received care from family members in the hope of eventual recovery. The belief prevailed that a leprous individual must be healed before death in order to be considered spiritually acceptable and ritually clean [38]. If a person died while still afflicted, the death was regarded as polluting, and the deceased was not granted traditional funeral honors. Such individuals were often buried in remote forested areas, away from the communal land. Their passing was classified as a "bad death" and cleansing rituals were carried out to avert any spiritual contamination or misfortune that might affect the community. An illustrative case is found in the testimony of Massa, a local pastor, who recounted the burial of a Christian relative. Despite biblical prohibitions against indigenous rites, the family performed traditional cleansing ceremonies because the individual had died under circumstances deemed spiritually impure. This underscores the cultural weight of traditional cosmologies in determining burial practices even among those adhering to foreign religious frameworks. He testifies that:

The Christians converged at the compound of the deceased and there was a vigil characterized with singing. In the morning, I went back to the office to work on the sermon, program for the funeral and burial. When I came back to the bereaved compound things had changed in my absence. I saw Christians sitting on the grass at the far entrance to the compound. There was no singing and I could see by their faces that there were some psychological problems. One of the members told me that things had changed after I left. She whispered into his ear. *Mama a bibsi rkwi* 'grandma has spoiled the death'. As I tried to enter the house, I noticed a long spear at the door. The medicine men had occupied the house and were sitting around the dead body performing some traditional rituals. They could not allow everyone to enter the house but they allowed the preacher to enter because of his position in the church and society. The long spear indicated that people should back out or stay out of bounds. The body was swollen to an extent that it started craking. The coffin was too small for the body and the top of the coffin could not fit. The Pastor invited the Christians to come closer for a quick preaching and burial to avoid the corpse from further decomposition but everyone was scared. No one wanted to be involved in such a bad death to avoid what they called *bfaa* (defilement) [39].

Over time, this perception gradually shifted as the indigenous population began to recognize that diseases such as leprosy, like other natural illnesses, could lead to death without necessarily implying spiritual

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[36] Tantoh Ndukong, interviewed by author, 19 August 2019.

[37] Gabriel N. Massa, "Reversion and Syncretism Among the Wimbum Baptists of Cameroon, West Africa: A Missiological Problem" (PhD Dissertation, Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 168-169.

[38] Nfor Ezekiel, personal communication, 25 August 2020.

[39] Gabriel N. Massa, "Reversion and Syncretism Among the Wimbum Baptists of Cameroon, West Africa: A Missiological Problem" (PhD Dissertation, Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 168-169.

impurity or moral failing. This growing awareness led to a more compassionate and inclusive approach to such deaths, diminishing the rigid dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' deaths in certain cases. It reflected an evolving understanding of disease, influenced in part by modern medicine, religious teachings, and intercultural contact.

In traditional Mbum society, deaths resulting from accidents or suicides were deeply stigmatized and regarded as unnatural and impure. These deaths, perceived as involving violence or force inflicted upon the body, were seen as disrupting the spiritual and communal harmony required for a proper transition into the ancestral realm. As such, families were not permitted to organize solemn or elaborate funerals for victims of such deaths. Cultural food customs also reflected these beliefs. While cooked corn with groundnuts or beans was customary at typical funerals, it was strictly prohibited in cases of accidental deaths, where only fried corn was served, marking what was called a 'dry death' [40]. Similarly, suicide was treated as a profound taboo. The body of a person who died by hanging, for instance, was not buried in a proper grave but rather in a hastily dug pit beneath the tree where the act occurred. The rope was cut so the body would fall directly into the pit without contact from the living.

When such deaths occurred indoors, ritual purification rites were performed on both the space and the individuals involved in handling the body to protect them from spiritual harm or misfortune. Visitors to the bereaved family were also wary of eating or lingering, fearing contamination from the 'bad death'. Deaths involving open wounds were similarly rejected as unclean, and access to view such bodies was restricted to a few designated family members [41]. These practices underscore the profound connection between death, spiritual purity, and community norms in Mbum cosmology.

In traditional Mbum society, procreation was a central goal of marriage, valued both for expanding family networks and preserving ancestral lineage. This strong cultural emphasis on fertility and continuity contributed to the normalization of polygamy before the introduction of Christianity, which later imposed monogamous ideals on converts. Within this context, any disruption to the procreative process especially through abortion or maternal death was viewed as a moral and spiritual failure. Women who died while undergoing abortions were considered to have committed a grave transgression, and such deaths were classified as 'bad deaths', bringing shame to the individual and her family. These women were not afforded formal mourning or funeral honors. Likewise, the death of a woman during

childbirth, though often tragic, was treated with suspicion. The circumstances of her passing were scrutinized within traditional belief systems, which sometimes linked such outcomes to spiritual imbalances or unresolved ancestral issues. Mothers who died while nursing young, dependent infants were also categorized under unacceptable deaths, as they left behind vulnerable children without fulfilling their maternal role [42]. These beliefs illustrate how death was not only a biological event in Mbum society, but a deeply moral and spiritual moment evaluated against communal expectations and cosmological order.

CONCLUSION

The Mbum people's traditional funeral practices were deeply rooted in their cosmological worldview, where death was not merely a biological end but a spiritually significant transition. The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' death reflected not only moral judgments but also communal values, ritual expectations, and the desire to maintain social and cosmic harmony. Every phase of funeral rites from burial customs to mourning procedures was governed by strict norms aimed at protecting the living from misfortune and preserving the ancestral order. However, these deeply embedded cultural frameworks have undergone significant transformation. The arrival of Western influences, especially Christianity, introduced new religious paradigms that redefined attitudes toward death, morality, and ritual. As a result, many traditional Mbum funeral practices were either diluted or abandoned entirely and replaced by Christian liturgies and modern socio-religious practices. Despite this shift, the foundational beliefs about death's meaning and the importance of communal solidarity in the face of loss continue to echo in contemporary Mbum society, albeit in hybridized forms. This evolution underscores the dynamic nature of culture and the resilience of indigenous identities in the face of external change.

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40 Lydia Museng Muchop, (a farmer), interviewed by researcher 28 December 2019.

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