

# Traditional African religions and their influences on the worldviews of Bangwa people of Cameroon:

## Expanding the cultural horizons of study abroad students and professionals

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### **Abstract:**

This essay explores the traditional African religious beliefs and practices of the people of Bangwa in the Southwestern region of Cameroon in order to uncover how those beliefs influence their thought processes and worldviews. In the course of rethinking and re-examining their belief systems and their traditional religious practices, the following themes emerged: religious sacrifices, observance of the Sabbath, belief system, incontrovertible belief in God, sorcery and divine retribution, the dead and the living, inequality and class divide, dreams and interpretation, names and religious identity. The implication of the essay is that study abroad should encompass religious studies that help study abroad students learn ways of thinking and knowing of their host countries.

### **Introduction**

Given that traditional African religious beliefs have had tremendous influence on Africans' thought processes, it would be of considerable service to Western students and faculty interested in a study abroad program in Africa to be cognizant of such influence so as to have a high-quality educational experience abroad. When American students are planning to study abroad, the staff of international programs in the university would organize orientation workshops to prepare students on the etiquette of the host country's culture (Stackowski, 1999). The topic of religion, if it comes up at all, is often glossed over and tends to deal with the sacrosanctity and respect of the religious values of the host country and the host families. Little attention has been paid to how African peoples' ways of life can be interpreted from a fundamental religious axiology.

In the era of burgeoning Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa, traditional African religions have been under relentless assault and bastardization. While the state of Cameroon and many other countries across Africa have upheld secularism in place of a state religion, their populations have remained steadfastly faithful to their traditional religions and, in some cases, in conjunction with other foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity. To gauge Africans' religiosity, one just needs to take a cursory look at an African's graduation announcement on social media and one would marvel at the number of God-praising comments that follow it. Interestingly, more than half of those giving thanks to God for someone's academic success do not belong to any organized Western-influenced religion. They are neither agnostic nor atheist because they believe in God following the teachings of traditional religions bequeathed to them by their ancestors. Therefore,

there is an inescapable embeddedness of traditional African religions in people's ways of thinking and knowing to a point that it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself from it without strong feelings of stripping off a major part of one's cultural identity. In other words, Africans are first and foremost members of traditional religions before any other religion. It is within this backdrop that a foreigner can begin to learn about Africans and their cultures. Any attempt at learning about the African peoples and their cultures without considering religions, the bedrock of those cultures, would be shallow and futile. It is within this context that the author of this paper seeks to examine the Bangwa ways of thinking and knowing as influenced by its traditional religions to the rest of the world. Bangwa is a semi-Bantu ethnic group in the South West region of Cameroon. The author of this paper is a member of this ethnic group. Hence, this essay is grounded on the author's immersive socialization in one of the traditional African religions in the Bangwa ethnic grassland region of South Western Cameroon.

This essay can help study abroad educators prepare their students for study abroad in Africa, in general, and in Cameroon, in particular. The overarching research question is: How have traditional African religions influenced the way a contemporary African thinks and how would understanding the African thought process benefit those interested in learning about Africa and its culture, including study abroad students? This paper further explores the ways in which these traditional religions have influenced the Bangwa people's thoughts, by extension African thoughts in their understanding of the universe, gender equality, crime and punishment, class divide, Western churches, religious sacrifices, the concept of life after death. Without a thorough examination of the influences of traditional religions on African people's worldviews, their perspectives on important diplomatic, economic, political, and social issues could be easily misinterpreted and overlooked. Lastly, the religiosity of African people judging from the affirming religious meanings of a myriad of their first and last names will also be discussed. Students worldwide stand to benefit enormously from this paper because traditional African religions in the Bangwa land are extremely under-researched and very little has been published about them.

Given that religion is inextricably linked to culture, especially in the African context, any attempt at studying African peoples and cultures that does not involve a meticulous examination of traditional African religions would be incomplete. Traditional religions have had tremendous influence on Africans in their thought processes, belief systems, and worldviews. Since the traditional African religions do not have a sacred text with prescribed doctrines, to study them requires living with the people who believe and practice the religions and reading essays like this one about them. Cameroon happens to be one of the African countries in which traditional religions remain firmly engrained in its people's thinking and ways of life. Cameroon is a secular state that is blessed with over 250 ethnicities and 250 languages (Ethnologue, 2016), and many religious groups including Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions. Given that cultural diversity is inherent in this type of multiethnic society, it would be an unrealistic undertaking for a researcher to lump the ethnicities together. However, given the similarities inherent in these diverse cultures in Cameroon in particular, and in Sub-Saharan Africa generally, knowledge appropriated about one of the cultures can serve as a lens in interpreting other traditional African religious beliefs and cultures. Having been born and raised in the Bangwa land, the author of this paper has accumulated several years of his life practicing traditional African religions in conjunction with Catholicism. Thus, he is in a unique position as a Bangwa person teaching in a U.S. higher education system to provide a fresh

perspective to students, scholars, and study abroad officials on ways to uncover and discover African epistemology. Traditional African religions refer to the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the people of Africa that includes worship, consultation of priests, rituals, symbols, cosmology, arts, practices, society (Olupona, 2007).

## Literature

There is a fallacious conventional wisdom that holds that Africa did not know God prior to its Arab incursion and European colonialism (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). It is believed that traditional African religions have been around since the beginning of humanity. Although there are varieties of traditional African religions, they share more similarities than differences in their practices (Stinton, 2004). One observable commonality is that most of them do not have a written Holy text for references. Therefore, it is difficult for any Westerner and non-African to have an in-depth knowledge about them because their beliefs and practices have not been canonized as was the case with the Bible when the Council of Nicaea met under the auspices of the Roman Emperor Constantine I to initiate the writing of the Scriptures. It is also difficult for Africans living in the diaspora to bequeath the religious traditions to their offspring due to the lack of their own scriptures. Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) argue that one major feature of traditional African religion is that religion is a way of life for Africans. Africans' *modi operandi* are inextricably intertwined with their religions. The only slight distinction one can notice is between the more religious and the less religious individuals in terms of the frequency of their visits to the shrines and temples, or lack thereof, to consult with the diviners, perform rituals, or transmit messages to the ancestors. Of several definitions of traditional African religion that exist, the most suitable for this study is the one that defines it as, "the observance of rules of conduct in the way the individual conducts his or her daily life, the practice of rituals, and the recognition of the ever presence of the living-dead (ancestors) to allow the person to coexist in harmony with other members of the community in order to please God." (Kamara, 2000, p.503). In a nutshell, traditional African religion is part and parcel of culture in Africa. As Mbiti (1970) states, it starts before birth and does not end after death. Whether Africans are part of the modern organized religion today or not, they invoke God in their everyday conversations. In fact, the word "God" and its derivatives in various African languages is one of the most uttered words in their daily conversations.

Morality is highly associated with God. Thus, if one does not want to invite God's wrath onto himself/herself, he/she must not indulge in any evil deed. So men and women are taught right at birth to eschew immoral acts. In Nigeria, a Yoruba refers to a well-educated person as *molumabi*, which means somebody who was created in the image of God and should therefore be appreciated and trusted (Omolewa, 2007). The fact that the Yoruba would use a qualifying adjective that is comparable to God to describe a well-educated person underscores the value of a Creator in the traditional African society. Such a reference would mean that the well-educated person would tend first to attribute his/her success to God, and so too would his/her family members.

According to the Pew Research Center (2010), traditional African religions are still prevalent in most of the African countries surveyed in spite of centuries of Christian and Islamic dominance. It states, "Large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believe in witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions." In South Africa, Tanzania, Senegal, and Mali, more than

50% of the survey respondents affirmed that making sacrifices to ancestors can boost their Divine protection against physical harm. On exploring the modes of traditional African religious practices, the following themes emerged: religious sacrifices, observance of the Sabbath, Bangwa belief systems, incontrovertible belief in God, sorcery and divine retribution, the dead and the living, inequality and class divide, dreams and interpretation, names and religious identity.

### Traditional African religious influences on the church and the Bible

It is worth noting that Cameroonians ferociously resisted foreign religions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to maintain their traditional religions when Christianity entered Cameroon (Betoto, 2012). The Catholics, like other denominations, figured out ways to coerce many Africans to convert to Christianity without directly attacking their traditional religious values. Cameroonians were adamantly opposed to Christian groups that were hostile to their traditional religions. Until lately, the Pentecostal churches found it very difficult to attract adherents because they advocated the destruction of traditional religious symbols. Until the mid-2000s, any Bangwa person who joined the “Born Again” denomination was ostracized by his/her entire family. The Catholics chose to tread a fine line by embracing some of the African cultural and religious practices that did not markedly deviate from their Western church’s own canons. This explains why mass service in many parts of Africa is practiced a lot differently from the way it is practiced in Europe or in North America. There is a glaring adoption of African religious and cultural practices in the Catholic churches in Cameroon generally without which many Cameroonians might have been deterred from joining the church. For example, in the Bangwa land where the author of this paper grew up, traditional African religion influenced some of the rituals that occurred in church. Some of the African-derived practices in some Western churches in Africa include: harvest thanksgiving, tithing in cash and in kind, choral music, twin-dance procession with a green leafy peace tree whose stems are often cut off and used as a symbol of peace during a church choir. There is a cultural and religious symbolism of this peace tree known in Nweh (a language spoken by the Bangwa) as “*nkeng*”. Using it in a church choral procession and in decorating the altar makes the church more appealing to skeptics of European Christianity. The in-kind tithing with kola nuts, fruits, and other edible items instead of money is reminiscent of the African traditional religion in which an elder takes the best harvest to the shrine to make sacrifices to God. Meanwhile the food brought in place of cash for tithe is either auctioned after mass service or given to the needy. Western students on a study abroad trip to Africa may find this form of in-kind tithe strange but it is a practice that not only predates the Bible but is also encouraged in the Bible.

### Religious sacrifices

One notable aspect of traditional African religion is the practice of offering sacrifices and prayers to God through their ancestors, otherwise called gods. According to Mircea Eliade’s *Deus otiosus* theory, the practice of praying to God through ancestors is premised on the belief that God, upon creating the world, retired in heaven delegating the responsibility of taking care of humanity and the world to the hands of disciple gods otherwise called ancestors (Ukpong, 1983). The mediumistic theory of Evans-Pritchard supports the *Deus otiosus* theory by contending that the ancestors and gods serve as the intermediaries between human beings and God. Therefore, the sacrifices and prayers they receive are ultimately received by God. Broadly analyzed, these two theories are not completely off base in the sense that the theorists at least recognized the

preponderance of belief in God and gods in West Africa in particular. However, the theories are flawed in the sense that African traditional religious beliefs and practices encompass invoking both the gods and God. They pray directly to God as well as to the gods in the hope that the latter will relay their message to the Creator.

It is very likely that visitors from European countries in which Christianity is the dominant religion would find some of the traditional African religious rites repulsive. It is, however, advisable not to leap to conclusions, especially when such conclusions are intended to denigrate the unfamiliar religious practices of some people. The religious traditions and customs in the Bible are more in sync with the traditional African religions than with the modern religious practices in the Christian churches in Europe and North America. It has been an established historical and scientific fact that Africa is the birthplace of humanity (Wayman, 2011; Tattersall, 1997), so it could also be the birthplace of religion owing to the similarities of practice. The hallmark of traditional African religions which encompass prophecy, sacrifices, priests, ancestral worship, initiation, communion, temple, singing, dancing, reincarnation are not only referenced in the Bible, Quran, and other Holy texts, but they are or had been part of routine religious practices. African religions could appear exotic and strange because they are foreign and one is not familiar with them, but judging them from a relativistic, and not absolutist, standpoint, one would realize that the anthropological nomenclature typically employed in describing traditional African religious practices could be contributing to the condescension.

Leviticus 1.2-5 discusses sacrificial rites at the temple in great detail. The biblical passage below illustrates the value of animal sacrifice as a way to seek salvation by appeasing God. Considering African religions predates the Bible, it is important to underscore that the tradition of animal sacrifice which began where humanity originated, is inscribed in the Bible and if Christians, unlike Moslems, have chosen not to continue with it, they should not find what is practiced in the Bible strange.

When anyone offers an animal sacrifice, it may be one of his cattle or one of his sheep or goats. If he is offering one of his cattle as a burnt offering, he must bring a bull without any defects. He must present it at the entrance of the Tent of the LORD's presence so that the LORD will accept him. The man shall put his hand on its head, and it will be accepted as a sacrifice to take away his sins. He shall kill the bull there, and the Aaronite priests shall present the blood to the LORD and then throw it against all four sides of the altar (Leviticus 1. 2-5).

Similarly, a rooster or a goat that is being offered as a sacrifice to God to wash away somebody's sins in traditional Bangwa religion would be taken to the shrine and the person on whose name the sacrifice is being made is required to be holding or touching the rooster or the goat as its leg or the throat is being cut for blood to flow. While the cutting of the throat is happening, a speech exhorting God's forgiveness and blessings is being made by an elder on behalf of the donors.

While the religious sacrifices and tithing may be taken for granted, it has a far-reaching impact on people's psyches. The gesture extends beyond the confines of the worship houses to the community at large because it is applied learning. As a result of learning to give by giving, the donors become more generous. Therefore, when a Bangwa person, by extension any Cameroonian,

offers to take someone to a restaurant or a bar, they are willing and ready to pay for that person's food or drinks. The invitee may end up offering a round of drinks too or side dishes but it is generally not expected. It is culturally and morally unacceptable when the guest is expected to split the bill with the person who initiated the invitation to eat or drink. Many newly arrived African immigrants in the United States have run into problems with their American blue-collar co-workers when an invitation to go to lunch together is interpreted as an offer of free lunch.

### Observance of Sabbath

Furthermore, the double-observance of Sabbath is another traditional African religious practice that has influenced the extent to which Bangwa people, and Cameroonians in general, observe religious holidays. In the traditional Bangwa society, a week is eight days long; seven of which are workdays and the eighth day is consecrated for worship and offering sacrifices to God and their ancestors. Sabbath is the eighth day of the week. It is recognized as a day of rest and worship in the Bangwa traditional religion. The Sabbath varies from kingdom to kingdom. It is strictly respected because there are also fines enforced by the traditional council under the auspices of the king for any violations. Another deterrent for people not to disrespect the Sabbath is the fear of divine retribution. If someone were to hurt himself/herself while working on the Sabbath, it would be viewed as punishment from God. The traditional African Sabbaths are different from Christian Sabbath which is on Sunday. The Bangwa Sabbath is strictly respected by everyone living in that community. Following the arrival of Christianity, the Bangwa people now observe Sunday in addition to their original Sabbath. So, they now have about eight days of Sabbath every month. The following activities must not occur on the traditional Sabbath: farming, drumming, mourning, and any form of outdoor festivities. Office-related work does not count toward restricted economic activities because prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most economic activities were labor-intensive and agrarian in nature. So, the ancestors never factor the clerical work into the list of banned activities on the Sabbath since it did not exist. Sabbath observance in the Bangwa community is very much in line with the Sabbath recommended in the Bible by Exodus 20:8-11 which states:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

The degree of similarities in Sabbath observance is striking considering that the traditional African religion does not have a Holy text like the Bible yet its practice has lasted for thousands of years. It would benefit study abroad students to understand the degree of religious diversity in the country in order to better appreciate the extent to which Cameroonians, in general, are welcoming of religious views that are different from their own. American students, in particular, would be taken aback by the extent to which Sunday as a Christian Sabbath day is strictly observed in Cameroon far more than in the United States where people still do yard work on Sunday. The fact that the people already observe another Sabbath in their traditional religions may contribute to their respect of Sunday as an additional Sabbath day regardless of whether they are Christians or not.

### Bangwa belief systems

As Allport (1958) postulated, people's individual philosophies tend to be predicated on their value systems. In other words, their values determine what is and is not important in life. For example, the Bangwa's belief in a God in conjunction with their belief in the existence of evil spirits, demons, witchcraft, and sorcery shape their modern thought process in terms of what they expect of a church and a shrine. Given their firm belief in God and His miracles, African Christians expect much more than an assurance of life after death. Since they believe in the existence of evil spirits and sorcery, they tend to seek sanctuary in the shrines and churches supplicating for Gods' protection against sorcery and spiritual attacks. There is still a very strong belief among Africans that people under the age of 60 do not die of natural causes. So, there is the tendency to look for the cause of death through traditional religious rites and through diviners. When the cause of death is ascertained, sacrifices may be made in the shrine to cleanse the family of the misfortune. The belief systems of the people of Bangwa and Cameroon in most cases influence their thought processes on how they pray, what they fear while having a walk at night, marrying someone from another ethnicity, and participating in some traditional rites. Here is an example of a Nigerian praying which is very similar to how a Bangwa person will pray:

We prophesy over this marriage. We curse every evil eye and persons who do not want this marriage to succeed. O Lord, release your glory in childbirth. May your Spirit deal with all the negative powers around this marriage that... this union will stand as a testimony to the power of your holy name, which is above every name; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007).

The quote above illustrates the point about the African belief systems influencing how they read the world. The belief that nothing unpleasant happens without a mystical reason behind it may explain why the author of the prayer seems to blame the evil spirits for a troubled marriage and impotence. This demon-chasing prayer is commonplace in traditional African religion. It is also a common but hidden practice in the Catholic churches in particular (Href & Libraw, 2012).

### Incontrovertible belief in God

There is strong belief that something fortunate or unfortunate happens to someone for a reason; and if we have strong faith in God fortunate and not unfortunate events would abound. As a result, there is a constant quest to unearth the cause of a mishap. If it was a fortunate occurrence, then it is a good cause to celebrate with the living through a party with family, friends, neighbors, and well-wishers, and to celebrate with the ancestors through sacrifices and prayers. When the author of this article organized a graduation party in the United States when his Ph.D. was conferred, a similar event was simultaneously organized by his parents in his rural hometown of Alou, in the Bangwa land in Cameroon. The event in the United States attracted several friends and family members from all over the national territory. There was an opening prayer followed by speeches, dining, wining, and dancing.

Meanwhile in his native Bangwa land back in Cameroon, the celebration was preceded by traditional religious rites in his paternal grandfather's compound where all the ancestral skulls are located. The skulls, aligned in order of generations in the shrine and covered in half-broken clay pots, are those of his grandparents, great grandparents, and great great grandparents. Given that it is the oldest person in the family who plays the role of the chief priest, it was the author's father who performed the rites. He flipped off the half-broken clay pots to render the skulls visible and then

began the prayer. The prayer praised the ancestors for their continuous protection of the family against misfortunes and for their gift of cognitive skills to their son to complete his studies successfully. The prayer was being addressed to the ancestors because there is a strong belief that they have the power to answer prayer and that they are also closer to Almighty God and they can intercede between Him and the living. At the end of the prayer, his father and other elders in the family proceeded to the next stage of the religious rite which entails sacrifices. Grilled goat meat chopped into miniscule pieces and mixed in palm oil was added to fried ground pumpkin seeds and sprinkled on the skulls together with drops of blood from the leg of a rooster as a prayer requesting more divine blessings. As in most religions throughout the world, traditional African religion prays for school success, long life, high farming yields, and protection against misfortunes. When a misfortune occurs, they go to the shrine or temple to pray against future misfortunes and then offer gifts to God for cleansing. For example, when the cause of somebody's death is ruled accidental, a religious rite, called *kala* in the local *Nweh* language, is performed a few days following the burial to avert a similar mishap in the family.

The incontrovertible belief in God influences people's thoughts about what questions to ask when somebody is sick; when somebody dies; and when somebody experiences a spectacular failure in an entrepreneurial venture, in a way that some cultures may never imagine or, at the very least, would consider such questions to be very invasive. Yet, the questions would just be mundane to many Africans. The reasons for scrutinizing the cause(s) of sickness or death is to take steps to embark on corrective measures if need be. Non-Africans may find one of the questions such as, what is the cause of his sickness or death, deeply offensive.

### Sorcery and Divine retribution

In traditional African religion, the unwavering belief in the existence of sorcery has had immense influence on people's thought processes. Given their devotion to religion, a good number of Bangwa people believe that there is no such thing as accidental death. Whether somebody dies of a road accident, AIDS, cancer, diabetes, suicide, or food poisoning, the more conservative members of the traditional religion would insist on performing a traditional post-mortem to determine the cause of death. Upon examining the internal organs of the deceased, the traditional medical examiners would emerge from the graveyard with a statement about the cause of death. If the autopsy's verbal report is inconclusive, the oracles are consulted. The oracles' report may be disputed if the cause of death is being blamed on somebody. When the accused refutes the allegation, the last step is to revisit the deceased's grave and take an oath invoking the deceased, the ancestors, and God by declaring conditionally that if he/she was responsible for the deceased person's death, God should punish him/her by taking away his/her own life within days after the oath. In some instances, people who have taken such oaths have mysteriously passed away just a few days after. As a result, the propensity to hold these traditional religious beliefs remains engrained in people's psyches because they view the death of an older family member following that of a younger person in the family as Divine retribution for having committed homicide through sorcery.

The belief in Divine retribution in Cameroon, in general, has contributed to an endemic use of uncoerced sworn declarations in day-to-day conversations to assure interlocutors that one is speaking the truth. So, oaths like: "I swear to God," "if I am lying, God should punish me," or "I should not wake up from my sleep this night," or "If I am the one who did it, a car should crush me



down when I go to the road.” In a society that has not yet made major in-roads in modern science and technology, the people would revert to their religious instincts and traditional beliefs to find solutions to complicated problems.

Traditional African religions, like many other religions, view Divine retribution as the optimal solution to evil deeds in this world. Their faithful believe very strongly in it and practice it more than many other religious groups. This belief in divine justice has withstood the test of Western imposed judiciary and penitentiary systems since the advent of European colonization and decolonization. A sizable number of people in the Bangwa land in Cameroon, in particular, and in the rest of the country, in general, would settle their disagreements, at the very least, through oath-taking and, at most, through customary courts which use all the traditional religious ways to resolve the differences between the two parties. For instance, in many cases of defrauding with no legally binding contract between the disputing parties, the victim would curse the defrauder and let him or her go if the accused is not willing to own up to the misdeed. Most of the time, if the accused also has strong traditional religious influences, he/she would return the defrauded item because he/she does not want to be visited by God’s wrath. Considering that at any given time everyone would experience a misfortune of varying degree and, considering that no one wants to invite any form of tragedy to his/her family, most Bangwa people with strong beliefs in traditional religion tend to be very honest people. They would offer to pay off loans owed by a living or deceased family members to avoid Divine retribution on the family.

Furthermore, it is believed in Bangwa traditional religions that if someone commits homicide, the victim’s blood goes into the murderer’s mind, thereby incapacitating his full mental faculty. Therefore, they do not punish by death. So, they view capital punishment as a foreign concept and it is strongly condemned. Suicide is an abomination not only to the family but to the entire community. When it does occur, serious cleansing rituals are organized to make sure such a taboo act never repeats itself again. Auto accidents, from a religious lens, are viewed as examples of Divine retributions and thus require the elders to seek answers from the oracles in order to settle whatever debt the affected individual and his/her family may be owing to God, ancestors, or to living individuals. Having a good understanding of the notion of divine justice in African society in general may help explain why the indigenous population of the continent eschews lawsuits geared at seeking reparation and retribution. On the contrary, it is much easier to seek court actions on an infraction or a crime committed against someone when one does not believe in Divine justice from a traditional religious standpoint.

### The dead and the living

There is an unwavering belief in life after death in traditional African religions with some even believing in reincarnation which holds that anyone who dies on this Earth is reborn to another mother sooner or later. There used to be weeks of mourning when somebody died in Bangwa culture. It has been slashed to a few days depending on the age, family size, and social status of the deceased person. The more affluent the family, the more expensive the casket and general funeral expenses would be. Nonetheless, some people upon dying state categorically how they would like to be buried. The author’s mother wrote in her will that she would like to be buried seated in an armchair in her porch facing the road. She said the coffin would close her eyes to the world and she would not be able to watch over her children and grandchildren. Her will was respected. On the day

of her funeral, she was given a bath, dressed up, seated on an armchair and then covered with a brand new blanket before covering her with the ground. Her case is not an outlier. There are many similar cases in the Bangwa community that the author of this article has witnessed in person. So, none of these stories is strange to anyone from this region. The will of the dead has to be respected because there is a strong belief that they are going to become ancestors, otherwise called angels. Hence, people don't want to mess with the dead because they are not considered dead and gone forever. They are believed to be in heaven watching over the living. Although it is believed that it is the soul that rises to heaven, the body is still supposed to be treated with maximum respect. Consequently, a lot of money is spent in constructing the grave with marble, cement, tiles; and sometimes a roof is put on the grave so that it does not rain on the dead.

If the foregoing description is anything to go by, one should come away with the conclusion that cremation as another type of funeral rite may never see the light of day in this part of Africa. Cremation would be considered torture. The skulls of the deceased upon which sacrifices are made would forever be lost through cremation. In light of this discussion, Western students who attend funerals in these Sub-Saharan regions of Africa would understand why there are a series of funeral rites during the burial; why there is a mourning phase and a celebration phase to bid farewell to the departed. They would also understand why Africans not only honor and take care of the elderly when they are dead but also when they are alive because they are seen as future ancestors. The concept of the dead still watching the living should not be a complicated concept to assimilate irrespective of one's country of origin because many people around the world consciously or subconsciously believe in the dead watching over the living. This can be exemplified by the growing number of people who cremate the bodies of their loved ones and keep their ashes in their bedrooms. Another example would be soccer players dedicating their goals scored to their departed loved ones by pointing to the sky as they celebrate.

### Inequality and class divide

In traditional African religions, it is believed that people are born with different talents and gifts from God. Some people are born progenies, psychics, diviners, etc. Soothsayers are considered God-sent; they are endowed with extraordinary foresight to intercede between mankind and God. Consequently, they are often consulted on past, current, and future events. They also possess strong healing powers in traditional medicine.

The belief that people are not born equal influences the hierarchical social order in which African society is stratified especially in terms of gender and social class. Just as it is the case in many parts of the world, young women and children play very minimal roles in traditional African religions. They are not expected to pour libations. This hierarchical power dynamic has perennially and unquestionably been accepted by women. At least for male children, they would step in when they are older. The subservient roles that women, in particular, play in traditional African religions is further exacerbated by encroaching Western Christian and Islamic values which to a varying degree do not view women as equal partners. Most Christian churches forbid women from joining the priesthood, yet they can all go to church and sit on the same bench to worship the same God. In Islam, women are hardly seen praying in the same mosque with men, and even when they do, they are relegated to the less prominent corner of the mosque. This kind of discriminatory behavior toward women does not end in church, mosque, or temple where such practices are commonplace,

but they extend to other sectors of the society where men, in high posts of responsibility, act on their early socialization belief system by consciously or subconsciously favoring men over women in economic opportunities. Stereotypical gendered roles which began in the antiquities and are reinforced in religious teachings have had tremendous adverse impact on the quality of lives of women and the children they raise. Study abroad students would need to be versed in the fact that gendered hegemony is real in Africa and generally accepted by women, especially the ones with less formal education. After all, if people have been taught to believe that God is male and that Jesus and Mohammed were both male, then it goes without saying that women, with limited exposure to critical literacy education, would believe in patriarchy in society.

Nobility in traditional Bangwa religions is another contributing factor to class divide. It is revered in the African culture. Kings are the chief priests of traditional religions who are believed to be empowered by the ancestors to protect the population. As such, they are believed to possess some innate supernatural powers to communicate with the ancestors. There are documented and oral narratives about miracles surrounding their births. Some are reported to have come out their mothers' wombs with their legs first. Spring water is reported to have streamed out in the kitchen floor of the mother of one of the kings for days when he was born. Such narratives fortify kings' image and credibility as a God-sent infallible conveyor of the living's message to the ancestors while also disqualifying any potential contestant to the throne who does not have any documented narrative of extraordinary happenings surrounding his birth. Because kings in Bangwa land are believed to possess supernatural powers, they are venerated. They are greeted with a bow and three hand claps and never with a handshake. They only sit on an armchair that is specially decorated with royal fabric and symbols. They can be criticized but not insulted. It is still believed that one can be afflicted with a swollen eye for insulting a king even if nobody hears it. A physical assault on the king would attract not only an ancestral curse to the assailant but also to his/her entire family. Kings are never expected to die of a road accident since they are the chief priests and custodians of traditional religion who intercede with the ancestors regularly to protect the masses from accidents. In other words, as the gods' messengers, they are not supposed to die of accidents because of their supernatural powers and foresight. If a king dies of an auto accident, there would be wide speculation as to the cause that could plunge the kingdom into total pandemonium. Most importantly, the Bangwa people believe that their kings do not die, they only disappear. This explains why the burial of a king in this region of Cameroon is shrouded in secrecy. To enhance this secrecy, the King is buried in one of the rooms in his palace. The room is accessible only to his inner circle and the next king.

Nobility in African culture is of paramount importance because it is strongly intertwined with traditional religions. One major impact of nobility on Bangwa people is humility and respect for seniority. People of this region tend to be assiduous, hardworking, and respectful of hierarchy wherever they go because they tend to view their relationship with their bosses within the prism of master-servant relationship. Although the master-servant relationship is a terminology that is frowned upon in more democratic countries like the United States, the philosophy undergirding that practice is still prevalent with a more acceptable terminology like loyalty. This master-servant mindset is encapsulated in a popular Bangwa saying which states that, "If somebody is above you, carry his/her bag." This basically means that seniority in every sphere of life and profession should be highly respected by the subordinate workers.

Considering that Africans had organized their own nations differently from the nation-state concept until the continent was colonized by the Europeans in the 1800s, extending their kingship reverence to the presidency of a multiethnic society has been a mixed bag. The reverence of a king because of his supernatural endowments and historical intricacies is not easily transferrable to the occupant of a presidency whose rise to power has been brought about by majority votes or by a coup and not by supernatural power. Thus, the president is neither viewed as the custodian of the ancestral skulls nor as the chief priest endowed with the Divine powers to carry out sacrificial religious rites to protect the country from evil spirits, famine, and other scourges. Nonetheless, the president of a country still benefits from the loyalty predisposition of its citizens vis-à-vis nobility and people in leadership positions. Although a president, unlike a king, is still held accountable for his/her campaign promises and public policies, the level of accountability expected of him/her is significantly low and worrisome as compared to that of Western powers. The kingship reverence and nobility stratification are equally engrained in the psyches of people in elected positions in ways that have influenced how they perceive with disdain limits to term of office. They and their supporters have the propensity to equate their presidencies with kingship in which the term of office is elastic even when the kings are not very popular.

Western students doing their study abroad in an African country with a long-serving president may have a hard time fathoming why citizens of any given country would want to re-elect an elderly person who has been heading the country for 20 years or more. They would need to re-examine their assumptions and beliefs about Africa in order to understand the traditional religious and cultural implications underlying their thought process related to the presidency as a service to the country and not the other way round. In a presidential election, an African elite may base his/her voting criteria, among many others, on the qualifications, track records, respect for the rule of law and term of office, and the political platform of a candidate which may include social, economic, welfare policies as well as an anti-corruption plan. Meanwhile, a proletariat who survives on subsistent farming in a village with no electricity, no running water, and no paved roads has a hard time attaching any value to the role of government because it does very little for the people. Thus, the proletariat who had never known any leader other than their local chief or king may never see a term limit and anti-corruption plan as important electoral issues because their king does not have a term of office and sometimes raises money to support local investment in the absence of government investment. They would judge the leadership of the president of the country from the lens of governance in their local kingdom which is predominantly autocratic, religious budget-less, zero-taxation, zero-investment, indeterminate and elastic. Outsiders wonder why citizens of a country can keep renewing a president's mandate when he/she is doing very little for them. The answer is simple, if the election is being transparently won by the incumbent, it is because the yardstick with which the presidential candidate's policy is being gauged is predicated on kingship governance style. If they don't have to organize local elections in their kingdom and they do not have to hold their king accountable, how dare someone suggest that they should hold a rich individual commanding the military and the police accountable?

### Dreams and interpretation

In traditional Bangwa religion it is believed that ancestors communicate with the living through dreams, omens, and divinations. Purists of traditional religions operate under the dictates of dreams, divinations, and omens. They would even alter their travel plans in case a premonition considered

serious is received in a dream or from a soothsayer prior to their departure date. For example, if on one's way (on foot) to sell goods, one accidentally kicks a half-buried rock in the middle of the road with a left foot, it could be a bad or good omen depending on which foot is believed to represent one's fortune. It is believed that if omens are properly respected, one could steer clear of some unfortunate occurrences like plane crashes, car accidents, and stock market losses. This would mean that if out of respect for an omen, a dream or a divination, a player chose not to fly with the other Brazilian teammates whose plane later crashed killing all 71 players as happened in 2016 (Solis & Bacon, 2016), he/she would never cease to believe in the power of dreams and omens even if it was a pure coincidence and not the work of ancestors and God. It is from this perspective that people should examine the thought process behind these beliefs.

On a related matter, some people have reported that whenever they find themselves dancing in a dream, there is a high probability that they will receive a gift of money, a reimbursement of a debt, or some form of monetary transaction that would benefit them. And they have found the dancing omen in the dream to be true. In like manner they may come to believe that a snake in a dream is a sign of ill omen for at least one undertaking that one embarks on the following day. Such beliefs tie into divination and prophesy which are canons of traditional religions. It is obvious that with the surge in global knowledge production in science, more Africans will begin to use science to explain phenomena and not religion.

### Names and religious identity

Atheism is such a far-fetched foreign concept in most traditional sub-Saharan African societies because the nomenclature related to God is so prevalent in almost every African language and culture that it is very difficult to have a conversation that questions the existence of God. Direct and indirect messages of God's existence abound in Cameroon to the point that questioning His existence is calling on people to question one's own sanity. People bear first and last names that are pregnant with religious messages predating Western Christianity. There is no gain in saying that first names like Paul, Mary, Elizabeth, James, Jean (John), Moise (Moses), Joseph are recent names born out of European colonial influence in Africa. Those names do not necessarily mean that their bearers are Christians. Although they were initially assigned only after baptism, colonial influences in the civil status registry centers led to the proliferation of European first names in the start of 19<sup>th</sup> century. First names became synonymous with Christian names, English names, or French names depending on which European country was the colonial master in one's country. Hence, in the Christian-dominant South of Cameroon, one would not determine somebody's faith based on their first name because not everyone named Paul or Mary is a Christian. On the other hand, the name Paul or Mary also defines the bearers of the names as non-Muslims. Some of the English or biblical names individuals bear today, while they originate from Christianity and European-controlled civil status registries during the colonial era, have been inherited from their Christian aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, family friends, and European historical figures. After all, it is still safe to make educated guesses on people's religious backgrounds based on Arabic and European first names in Cameroon. Nonetheless, if one wants to understand the in-depth philosophical and religious thoughts of Africans, drill down to the meaning of their last names and, in some cases, their first names. The Bangwa ethnic group in Cameroon has a repertoire of philosophically enriching religious names that predate European colonialism. This means the Europeans or the Arabs who

came to African on evangelization mission were not the trailblazers in religion. On the contrary, they came to share their own version of the religion which owes its roots to Africa.

## Conclusion

In this essay, traditional African religions are explored in light of their influences in the thought process of Bangwa people in particular and Africans in general. The religions are multiple because the practices vary from place to place but their general characteristics and belief systems are very similar throughout Sub-Saharan Africa as the survey of Pew Research Center (2010) showed. More studies would need to be carried out about other African religions to demonstrate the commonalities in traditional African religions and their impact on modern man's thought processes. Although the goal of this paper is not to generalize its analysis, the trends can, however, be extrapolated to many parts of Africa and the thought processes will be similar.

The level of inter-traditional religious tolerance in Africa is worth celebrating. The degree of tolerance has gone a long way to impact how Africans view interfaith relationships. Unlike in the United States where it is still a problem for Catholics, Baptists, and other faiths to intermarry, Cameroonian Christians of all faiths intermarry with little or no debate over the issue.

Christians of Western churches who have tried to dissociate themselves from traditional African religion are still heavily influenced by the belief systems because it is extremely difficult to separate religion from culture. The reasons Africans are increasingly going to Pentecostal churches may be completely different from the reasons Americans go to Christian churches. It is much easier to convince an African to join an organized religion because their firm belief in God is inextricably embedded in their culture. They are more predisposed to believe in an organized religion because they are all born into a culture where everyone believes unquestionably in God. Nevertheless, the two main things that encourage Africans to attend church are their strong belief in a Supreme Being and their belief in the ability of evil spirits to do and undo depending on one's faith in God. Some unscrupulous Pentecostal pastors take advantage of African's predisposition to believe in God's miracles to expand their churches and extort money from their loyal and gullible faithful as they promise them cures to their illnesses as well as economic prosperity.

To effectively prepare Western students for a study abroad program in Africa is generally a daunting task because it entails unlearning the negative stereotypes of the continent that students have been fed by the media and in some deficit-prone books. The topic of religion tends to be glossed over because it is assumed that the citizens of the host country are either Christians, Muslims, or atheists. Very little is known about their traditional religions which not only co-exist alongside these "foreign religions" but have profoundly influenced how the latter are practiced. Even if one's trip to Africa is mainly for touristic purposes and not formally educational, as is the case for study abroad programs, there is still a need to learn about indigenous religions in order to make sense of some of the symbols, activities, and structures of the traditional religions one may come across. In a traditional African society, the notion of atheism is quasi-nonexistent because nearly everyone believes in God. A large number of senior citizens may not be part of the organized Western religion due to its incompatibility with some aspects of their African culture and religion, but they play pivotal roles in their traditional African religions.

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