



## The 40th day funeral rite practice in Africa: A demonstration of protection, progress and cultural preservation. The case of the Bamoun Kingdom Western Region of Cameroon

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### ABSTRACT

Funeral rite in the Bamoun cultural universe is perceived as dole or charity on behalf of the departed member, which is an ancestral heritage emanating from traditional and religious acts, which aims at bringing a number of peoples to share, and contribute in the peaceful rest of the departed member. This article focuses on one of the most important funeral rite known as the "KPAGOUMLIEJEU" ('40th day). The kpagoumliejeu is a traditional memorial service, family gathering, ceremonies and rituals in memory of the departed member. The 40th day concludes the memorial period and has a major significance in tradition, which is believed that the soul of the departed remains wandering on earth during the period, coming back home, and visiting places. Despite all the significances this rite has in the Bamoun tradition, others still thought is a means or source of abuse to certain category of people? Others bring Furth questions if it is an innovation copied from other cultures or not? The objectives of this work are to identify, show, and analyze the different traditional processes related to protection, progress and preservation of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite. The problem is how is the 40th day perceived and valued within the Bamoun community in the Western region of Cameroon. Data was collected using documentary research, participant observation, which was done by participating in one of the most important aspect of the funeral rite (by distributing gifts after prayers), interviews and photography which help in the production of important images on the different stages and aspects of the rite and information's about the rite. The following results were obtained: the 40th day is perceived as a source of abuse to average and poor categories of people. 40th d.

**Keywords:** Bamoun, Kpagoumliejeu, culture, Rite, kingdom, funeral rite.

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### INTRODUCTION

The clash of civilization experienced by the African continent, especially through the introduction of traditional practices, is not without questioning the conscience of today's researcher in human and social sciences, to question both on the nature of social facts of endogenous origin now converted to their way of practicing their traditional rite related to death [1]. Funeral rites are the conscious cultural forms of one of the most ancient universal and unconscious impulses, the need to overcome the distress of death and dying; it is equally an event of ritual significance according to Sultan Njoya [2] performed on a special occasions. Frederick Cooper [3] states that, protection and change has helped to extend cultural practices. The 'kpagoumliejeu (40<sup>th</sup> day) funeral rite is also a cultural practice in the Bamoun Kingdom in the western region of Cameroon as mention by Claude Tardit[4]. The 'kpagoumliejeu (40<sup>th</sup> day) funeral rite' had led to the preservation of the Bamoun funeral rites. The 'kpagoumliejeu (40<sup>th</sup> day) refers to the 40th day after the death of a family member which is equally a traditional and religious memorial service, family gathering, ceremonies and rituals in memory of the departed. The 40<sup>th</sup> day concludes the 40<sup>th</sup> day memorial period and has a major significance in the tradition related to Anthony Giddens [5] point of view; Which is believed that the soul of the departed remains wandering on Earth during the 40-day period, coming back home, visiting places which will finally complete the journey in the world on that fortieth day. During that day, various activities are done on behalf of the death person. These rituals include prayers, predication, sharing, problems resolution and reconciliation.

### Background of study

The Bamoun, also called Bamum is found in the high western grasslands of Cameroon. The Noun division of the Westen Regon of Cameroon are those who make up the Bamoum kingdom. The seat of the sultan is in Fouban. It is from here that the Sultan known in the Bamoun language as *mfon* (*king*) commands the people. The position of the sultan is hereditary within one of the exogamous patrilineal lineages. According to the Bamoun, Kpagoumliejeu (40<sup>th</sup> day) is a Bamoun traditional cultural rite which is practiced after the death of a member within the Bamoun community especially

when the concern is a Muslim (the Bamoun practicing Islamic faith). The 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun kingdom originate from Islamic religious practices of the concept of sadikaa(charity).

This rite was introduced in the Bamoun kingdom because of the fact that the soul of the departed member remains wondering on earth, coming back and visiting places. The 40<sup>th</sup> day is a ritual introduced to give a final farewell to the deceased. Majority of the Bamoun community are Muslims so had to enculturate the Islamic belief into their culture. The Islamic faith says that it is on the 40<sup>th</sup> day that angels stop visiting the departed member, the soul of the deceased for 40 days wanders between heaven and earth, looking for shelter, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day she finally leaves the body and never returns. These acts were therefore seen capital to mark this day by practicing some rituals (especially traditional and religious) rituals in order to honor their departed members. This funeral rite is a public, traditional and symbolic means of expressing the people beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of their love ones. This goes in line with Yves Congar [6] who post that, the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite' practice is how social actors with their diverse motives and their diverse intentions make and transform the world which they live in.

### **Methodological approach**

This study uses the narrative design with qualitative research method. Different techniques were used for data collection: documentary research, participant observation, interview and photography which help in the production of important images on the different stages and aspects of the rite used to attain the objectives of this work. Interviews were used in order to obtain as much information as possible from key informants who were very informative because they have in-depth knowledge of cultural practices of the Bamoun tradition. Basically, non-directive interviews focused on the current situation of the culture and the future traditional rituals of the Bamoun.

The exploratory interviews allowed us to perceive the strengths and difficulties of the Bamoun traditional rite, this stage equally permitted me to define the directions to be given to my study, participant observation of the study environment has resulted in the extraction of information relevant to my research. The study of the 40<sup>th</sup> day by the Bamoun can be well explained with the help of the theory of functionalism of Robert King Merton and its social structure [7], who distinguishes between two types of functions within each social structure, manifest functions and latent functions that does not always serve a society positively like the case of the kpagoumliejeu. Louis-Vincent Thomas, [8] equally situates the concept of death as a concept crossing a plurality of anthropological fields reflecting the case of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun kingdom.

### **The role of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun Kingdom.**

The 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite plays the role of a symbolic activity that helps the community in bringing together families, friends and, express deepest thoughts and feelings about the life of the family members of the deceased life's and the community. The 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite is equally a religious, traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone loved.

Rich in history and rife with symbolism, the funeral rite helps acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the deceased, encourages the expression of grief in a way consistent with the cultural values, provides support to mourners, allows for the embracing of faith and beliefs about life and death, and offers continuity and hope for the living. Christraud Geary [9] affirms that people all over the world plays a role to honour their departed member through funeral rites which helps the survivors to heal emotionally.

The 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun kingdom play a role of expressing grief which help in healing the love ones of deceased family. This is because through the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite, the people who experience grief which hurts will have people around them to consult them. However, grief is part of the healing process that allows us to separate ourselves from the deceased person and go on with our lives. This rite equally plays the role of transition that is from one world to another.

Moreover, the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun kingdom is a way to send prayers to the deceased. This ritual is strongly not only recommended to the deceased family but also for the relatives and friends to send as many prayers as they could to the deceased. It will make their process to the hereafter easier. As narrated by Al-Thabrani in Al-Mu'jam (the book of mercy), "From Ibn Mas'ud radhiyallahu'anhhu, Rasululah shallallahu 'alaihi wasallam (peace and mercy of Allah (God) upon him).

Doing Shadaqah (dole) as Sunnahor prophet Mohammed tradition( his attitude and behavior etc) : Giving shadaqah for the sake of the deceased not only part of cultural tradition but it is also considered as sunnah. During the first to seventh days after death, the dead will be tested in the grave, and the sunnah will help them.

Giving hospitality to the Guest when the 40th day of death come, many people will come to the house of the deceased to send their condolence. The guests wish for them to stay healthy and strong during the hard times, so the family must give them the best hospitality as gratitude. A good time for the family to send prayers a dead person can no longer do any good deeds to lighten their test in the grave. The only person to help them is their family. When a person died, all their good deeds will be stopped unless for three things: amal jaariyah (his good deeds before), a useful knowledge, and children who don't stop sending prayers and doing good deeds for them. Time where the deceased is tested by Allah in the grave, the deceased will be tested for the sins he committed. Imam Thawus said: adied person will get test from Allah in his grave during several days. For that, they should (who are still alive) arrange banquets (shadaqah) or (dole) during those days. Ubaid bin Umair said: a believer and a hypocrite will face test together in the grave. For a believer will get test during seven days, while a hypocrite will get during forty days in the morning. (Al Hawi lil Fatawa as Suyuti)

Moreover, the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite remind the living of death. Through the ritual the living are made to prepare their minds that one day they shall equally die. That way they shall not be feared of death since eventually every living will be dead. Death is also not a last resort, but only a portal to the eternity. Every time death come to a person we know, it should be treated as a reminder that we will be dead someday. By remembering death, we will live better and do even more good deeds. Doing shadaqa that are done in the name of the death will be beneficial for him. "Indeed people who have died are defamed in the grave during days, then they (the companions of the Prophet) loved (shadaqah), served food as the replacement of them who have died in those days." (Imam Suyuthi in the book of Al Hawi lil Al Fatawi).

Also, the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite helps the people to gain blessing from the angels. When Muslims gather to do dhikr (remembrance) and recite Quran on the 40th days after death, Angels come around them. Not gather a people while doing dhikr to Allah , except they will be rounded by angels. Repentance from sins is another reason the Muslims in the Bamoun community do during the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite. So they used the opportunity to repent from the sins. "whoever read Yasin ( a verse in the Koran) only for searching Allah's blessings, he get forgiveness for his past sins. Because of that, you should read Yasin for people who have died between you." So all the above mentioned play a big role in the 40th day ritual after death in the Bamoun community. Indeed, every good Muslim will always remember death and committing many good deeds so that their way to the Hereafter will be fine and smooth.

### **Challenges of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite in the Bamoun Kingdom**

The challenges of the 40th day traditional rite practices are not exclusively physical; there are social, emotional and psychological that can reverberate within the Bamoun community. The practices done during the rite are intended to perpetuate a dominant position for the high social class and a subordinate position for the lower class of social actors [10]. This shows that, the kpagoumliejeu funeral rite situate average and poor families in to serious difficulties within the Bamoun Community after the death of a departed member because they have to do with unexpected expenditures. These difficulties faced by certain families have resulted to the problem of social cohesion (hatred among the family members, financial and social instability, dislodgement or displacement).

Another challenge mostly noticed in the Bamoun kingdom concerning the 40<sup>th</sup> day is the fact of not considering the social classes of social actors within the Bamoun community as highlighted by Motaze Akam [11] on social, development and perceptions others have for the rite, as being a cultural heritage that must be done nor matter the situation of the family.

Also, the fact that the 40<sup>th</sup> day is not unanimous to all the Bamoun is another pertinent challenge. This rite is mostly practice by the muslims in the Bamoun communities while the Christians of the community have their way of honoring their departed member, bringing in the idea of Bourdieu Piere [12] for a reflexive anthropology, hence bringing in discrimination within the Bamoun community, there by bringing in hatred, division and all negative aspects that can result from the non-understanding of each other.

### **Kpagoumliejeu rite and preservation of the Bamoun culture.**

The Kpagoumliejeu traditional rite is practiced mostly to preserve the Bamoun cultural tradition in relation to it protection and progress in order to preserve the Bamoun cultural heritage. This paragraph have as aim to bring out the different stages or the practice of the rite which shows how the Bamoun are attached to their cultural practices, which is done according to traditional and religious norms, the family engage in the rite has to prepare few or two things for the rituals (events) at the disposal of those that will assist on behalf of the deceased member. This part simply has as aim to show in details and explain how this funeral rite participate in the protection, progress and preservation of traditional rite by the Bamoun people in their cultural universe and equally to analyze all what is done. This is followed by a series or stages of traditional events which participate in the preservation of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite. The most important events or aspects include:

Preparative aspect made up of purchasing (buying), which comprises necessities like matches, sweets, biscuit, kola nut, groundnut, banana used during the Kpagoumliejeu funeral rite, which is shared to people immediately after prayers; another stage is the designation or appointment of the successor. Inheritance or succession in anthropology generally refers to the transfer of heritage of a death person called inheritance. We have to note that this part is optional, the family might decide to do it as well as they might not; we equally have Predication which is an act of proclaiming or preaching, as a religious phenomenon, liturgy represents a communal response and participation in the sacred through activities reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication or repentance. It forms a base for establishing a relationship with a divine agency, as well as with other participants in the liturgy, technically speaking, liturgy forms a subset of rituals; Prayer, usually done by religious representatives precisely by the Imam, who is the person leading or conducting the traditional rites when it concerns prayers. Prayers are done in other to ask the almighty to forgive all imperfections of the departed member and to recall all his good actions on earth, is equally done to plead the almighty to guide and help the family of the departed member. This is usually done by reading some Koran verses (sourates) like the case of sourat arahmann (mercy); sharing moment which is the second to the last step of the traditional funeral rite. This is the moment were people (relatives, friends etc.) Invited and family members share food. In the Bamoun culture, as mentioned by Joseph Tonda [13] the act of sharing symbolizes integration and cooperation among the people of a given locality which lead to the preservation of traditional funeral rite of the 40<sup>th</sup> day.



**Figure 1:** Prayers and predication  
**Source:** field work august 2019 by Nsangou

Figure 1 above shows the religious representatives preaching (predication) on how we have to behave with each other, on what we have to do when we are still alive in order to benefit from the mercy of the almighty. This figure equally shows social actors praying by pleading the mercy of the almighty upon the departed member hoping that the departed member will be forgiven on all what he has been doing consciously or unconsciously on earth.

### **The perception of kpagoumliejeu funeral rite in the Bamoun Kingdom**

The kpagoumliejeu funeral rite is perceived in various ways by the Bamoun. Perception is indeed what gives us access to something, to what it has, that is an opening to effectiveness, knowledge of existences. It can also be seen as the process which consists of a mental construction in which the sensations experienced are internalized and interpreted [14]. The individual organizes the perceived sensations, interprets them and completes them with images and memories. This cultural fact is perceived as: a moment of Social cohesion representing the aspect of protection and progress within the Bamoun cultural universe: the Bamoun like any other ethnic groups promotes integration of individuals, participation in social and cultural acts that brings a unique identity, that of being a Bamoun. Moreover, the social function of kpagoumliejeu avoids the crisis of social and cultural bonding; social and cultural failures among young people are in parallel with the rite, because new forms of social and cultural bonding must be established. Thus, the symbolism of this cultural fact means a spirit of discipline, respect for common values and norms. Moment of Reconciliation: The kpagoumliejeu is equally perceived or seen by the Bamoun as medium or means of reconciliation. In certain families, there exist people who do not have good relationship with others which might be because of their way of behaving with each other. The kpagoumliejeu implies various events which permit each and every one who was not in good terms to reconcile. Problems resolution: When we talk about problems resolution, we refer ourselves to a puzzle that requires logical thought to solve or a question rose for inquiry or solution. Encounter: an unpredicted moment of meeting or seeing old or new relatives in a given circumstances. It is usually an obligation for family members and some close relatives to take part in this funeral rite. The above analysis therefore shows how the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite is perceived by the Bamoun kingdom, hence demonstrating a sense of protection and progress within their community.



**Figure 2: Gifts for the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite.**  
**Source:** field work august 2019 by Nsangou

Figure 2 demonstrate or shows the gifts of the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite and the category of people transporting the gifts and equally how it is been distributed or shared to different individuals present during the funeral rite practice.

### **The outcomes of the practice of the kpagoumliejeu funeral rite to social actors within the Bamoun community**

In all African societies, there exist different socially classes within a given community, which is the case within the Bamoun community, concerning the practice of the kpagoumliejeu funeral rite, the following outcomes was brought out. The kpagoumliejeu is a traditional funeral rite which is practice according to traditional and religious norms Merton King [15] idea of a life of learning within a given community. Concerning the traditional aspect, this includes the preservation of the Bamoun cultural practices. Concerning the outcomes of the practice to social actors, the kpagoumliejeu rite in the western part of Cameroon, which include: mostly financial expenditure, which is obviously done to honour their departed member. This practice has been valued in such a way that when it is not done, the family is almost considered incapable of honoring their departed member in the Bamoun community and at a certain level considered as those against the protection, progress and preservation of the Kpagoumliejeu funeral rite; this has brought up a situation where families do not care about the negative outcomes of the rite. It is clear that the practice of this rite goes directly in advantage for the departed member. It is equally an evidence or proof that all what concerns regrouping social actors for funeral practices like the case of the 40<sup>th</sup> day rite especially, requires financial expenditures. In most cases, certain families are not financially stable but they found themselves force or involved to perform the rite for them to honor their departed member and to respect the tradition, which most of the cases usually ends up in a negative circumstances. After spending everything during this funeral traditional rite, they found themselves regretting, others even goes in to serious difficulties were they are usually force to relocate elsewhere due to financial instability since they can't meet with their basic needs, and for others having children still going to school, they end up leaving school very early due to the respect of this traditional act.

Following the outcomes resulted from the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite; we had to bring forth strategies to anticipate the negative outcomes of the rite. It is important nowadays to integrate political and social assistance to families that face such traditional practices, by respecting their social status within their particular society which can be done by traditional representatives of each community. Government has to take in consideration some funeral tradition which might be of negative effects for particular families. Religious representatives have to bring forth certain clarifications concerning funeral rite to anticipate negative aspects of the kpagoumliejeu. A particular attention has to be taken in to consideration for some families that are face to such practice. The desire to live in peace with another, that is humanity which is affirm by Jean Marc Ela by mentioning that ethnic is not a person, but essentially a self-conscience of an individual ( Ela, 1967,p67). Traditional practices have to be shaped in different geographical areas through conversations, helps,

contributions of all nature which could be of great help to families concerned or face to this funeral rite to ensure protection, progress and the preservation of their cultural heritage.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, cultural practices in the Western Region of Cameroon by the Bamoun, has been analyze as a medium of protection and progress or changes and cultural preservation of the tradition especially the Kpagoumliejeu which had led to major social and cultural crises within the Bamoun Kingdom, provoking social and physical violence in most of the cases as presented by Patrick Baudry [17] of our society being located in a critical phase because of its denial of death. The out comes as well as the proposed solutions to anticipate such crises have been mentioned, which is done from a fundamental anthropological (traditional and religious) angle through objectives and the outcomes of this practice link to cultural practices. Concerning the results of my analysis, I have come to the peak and realize that no matter the situation face, they will still be firmly attached to their traditional rites, as mentioned by Luc Mebenga Tamba [18], “my tradition before any other thing” which expresses a strong feeling for their cultural practices especially the 40<sup>th</sup> day funeral rite.

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