

THE RAFFIA PALM: A NEGLECTED ECONOMIC TREE CROP OF THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the centrality of the raffia palm in the economic and socio-political evolution of the North West Region of Cameroon. The advent of colonialism and the introduction of colonial “cash crops” in the region led to academic neglect of indigenous crops such as the raffia palm. Employing primary sources, (oral interviews, archival materials, personal observations), and secondary sources, this article, in a historical perspective, argues that, contrary to claims by some agriculturalists in the province, and tacitly endorsed by some scholars, the raffia palm, through a number of informal activities, has significantly contributed to the economic and socio-political wellbeing of the people. Using the synchronic and diachronic method of historical analysis, it shows the resilience of the raffia based “informal” economic sector even in the face of international economic shocks.

Keywords: Raffia palm, tree crop, economic and socio-political development, North West Region, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

The North West region is one of the ten regions that make up the Republic of Cameroon. It is part of former Southern Cameroons that was administered from Nigeria by the British as a League of Nations Mandated territory and later a UN Trust Territory. This area is popularly and broadly referred to as the Western Grassfields. The term Grassfields dates back to the German times. It was used to designate that part of the hinterlands that was characterized by its high altitude and grassy nature. Dankler describes it as the “sea of grass which stretches for hundreds of kilometers, providing one of the most magnificent panoramas on earth (Nkwi, 1987). However, the vegetation of this region is not limited to savannah grassland. Cameroon generally has a rich diversity of varied plant species (FAO, 2000). Amid this variety are raffia palms which are most often found growing in wet lands. The raffia palm is part of the natural vegetation of this predominantly Sudan Savannah vegetation of the North West region. As Dennis Johnson (1998) has rightly observed, palms are among the most common plants in tropical countries, where they often dominate the rural landscape. Johnson’s observation has been corroborated by Obahiagbon (2009) by asserting that, “the raffia palm is a tropical tree crop, which requires for adequate growth, high rainfall, high temperature, high relative humidity and prolonged sunshine hours”. Scientific reports and investigations on raffia palms have shown that its origin is traceable to West Africa, particularly along the swampy area of the tropical forest (Obahiagbon, 2009).

From all accounts, the plant is indigenous to the area but realizing its economic importance, the inhabitants helped to propagate it. Being indigenous to the region, palms have also been part of the people’s economic, social and cultural life for centuries. Their long existence in the area explains why raffia palm products are an integral part of the culture, traditions and

values of the Bamunka people of the region (Mphoweh et al, 2015), just like it is for most of the rest of the population in the region. Recognizing the centrality of palms in general to mankind, Soetatwo Hadiwigeno and David Harcharik observe that, since ancient times, mankind has derived an impressive assortment of products from palm trees for food, construction, fiber and fuel. In terms of utility of the products derived from them, the palm family ranks third in the world (after the Gramineae and Leguminosae families), and its role is even more obvious when focusing on the tropical regions (Hadiwigeno and Harcharik, 1998). This assertion is even truer of the North West region of Cameroon where an indigene described the raffia palm as “the tree of life” (Timothy Ambo, 1997). This description, which was expressed in the local *Engwo* language, simply underlines the importance of this tree crop to the local people of Ngwo in particular and the North West region in general. The raffia palm could not and may still not be easily separated from the daily life of the Grassfields people. Valentin (1970) has observed that, in addition to the palm wine which is boiled prior to consumption, (sic) the raffia tree supplies the raw materials for house construction, for the fabrication of furniture, musical instruments, baskets, fish traps, mats and bags. Definitely, the list of uses of the raffia in the Western Grassfields could not have been completely exhausted by Valentin, nor any other researcher, for its uses remained innumerable. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the raffia palm was part of the Grassfielder’s everyday life and his activities revolved around the crop before, during and after the colonial period. Drummond-Hay captured the centrality of the raffia palm in the lives of the people of the region when he stated of Ndop that:

From the native point of view, the most important tree in their country is the raphia palm (*Raphia vinifera*). To them this is a *multum in parvo* for its uses are countless. The palm supplies the wine drunk in this country (no oil palm wine is drunk); it is used in the making of household furniture, in the building of their houses almost to the exclusion of other timber, for making mats, bags, fish traps, ropes, and touches; for bridging small streams, for the making of raft-like canoe, and an infinity of other useful articles (Drummond-Hay, 1927).

As exhaustive as the list may seem to appear, Drummond-Hay did not pretend to have exhausted the list of important and daily uses to which the palm was put. He therefore admitted that there was an infinity of other useful articles that were produced from the raffia palm. E.G. Hawkesworth made a similar and complementary remark of the tree crop when he noted in Bafut that;

The false raphia palm is found in large quantities and plays a most important part in the lives of these peoples. They are entirely dependent upon it for building material and its plenty has produced better housing conditions than elsewhere. It is also used for the manufacture of beds and stools while large supplies of palm-wine are obtained from it (Hawkesworth, 1926).

The above observations leave us without any doubt that during the pre-colonial and colonial years in this region, the raffia palm did not only provide material for the manufacture of the basic utilities of daily life, but also provided them with palm wine and trading articles such as the raffia bags in Meta chiefdoms and Bamessing. The importance of this tree plant has not diminished in the region since the end of colonialism. But rather, the raffia palm has acquired more economic and socio-cultural importance since the end of the colonial period. This paper sets to demonstrate that the raffia palm constitutes the lynchpin of a resilient traditional economy or what many may prefer to call an informal economy, which survived colonialism and runs from the rural areas to the city centers.

The Raffia Palm in the Informal Sector (Economy)

In an attempt to define the informal sector, Grey-Johnson concedes to its definitional difficulties, stating that;

Most attempts to define the informal sector despair even before beginning to do so. They start by referring to it as “elusive”, “indistinct” a “fuzzy” concept, fraught with too many “grey areas” etc. This may be so because the informal sector does not seem to fit properly into the conceptual slots of development economies (Grey-Johnson, 1992).

He rather finds the informal sector easier to describe than to define. Drawing from the ILO Kenya employment report of 1972, he uses the following characteristics to describe or qualify an informal economy;

- Ease of entry
- Reliance on indigenous resources
- Family ownership of enterprises
- Small scale of operation
- Labor intensive and adopted technology
- Skills acquired outside the formal school system
- Unregulated and competitive markets.

Keith Hart opines that, “the distinction between formal and informal income opportunities is based essentially on that between wage-earning and self-employment. The key variable is the degree of rationalization of work – that is to say, whether or not labor is recruited on a permanent and regular basis for fixed rewards” (Hart, 1973). However it may be, difficulties over defining formal and informal economic activities in Africa arise essentially over the attempt to clone western economic models in Africa without taking into consideration, local realities. As Grey-Johnson (1992) has opined, “what is certain is that any attempt to define the informal sector within the traditional parameters of economics will engender imprecision and confusion.” To King, because the majority of Africans are “informal sectorities”, the term “informal” might be a misnomer; it would be more appropriate to refer to it as the “ordinary” sector or stick to the old Lewisian terms of “traditional” sector which categorizes into one, everything that does not fall within the confines of the modern formal sector (King, 1989). Most of the activities discussed in this work come close to or fit the descriptive frames of Grey-Johnson and Keith Hart for an informal sector. I therefore consider this paper as an examination of a raffia palm driven “informal” or traditional economy in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Types and Ownership

The North West Region of Cameroon is host to two main species of raffia known locally as Mbu- raffia palm and the *Nka*-raffia palm in the *Mu ngaka* language. The two have been identified scientifically to be *raphia farinifera* and *raphia vinifera Beauvois* though this scientific classification is still being contested (Knöpfli, 2001). The Mbu-raffia palm is predominant in Batibo Subdivision and parts of Widekum and Njikwa Subdivisions while the *nka*-raffia palm predominates in the rest of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. Raffia palm groves in the region are owned by individual families, a tenureship that is historically entrenched in the culture of the people. However, because of the economic importance of the raffia in this region, individuals grew up to plant their own plantations while others bought and owned personal groves. With the demise of the owner, the grove was inherited by his children (mostly male children). Some family members faced with financial difficulties could

also pawn raffia palm groves for a specific period of time or indefinitely.ⁱ The numerous economic activities supported by the raffia (tapping, weaving, roofing, furniture etc.) did not require much formal training but traditional apprenticeship as the children grew up with the parents especially the male children. Much capital was not and is still not required to begin life as a palm wine tapper, a maker of raffia furniture, or a weaver of raffia bags and baskets. Many families could easily earn a living from the raffia especially given the fact that each family at least owned a grove. Arguably, and historically speaking, the raffia palm has supported the largest informal economy in this region.

The Problem or (Colonial Impact)

Colonialism however came with the introduction of new crops (colonial cash crops) and new sources of livelihood in the region like elsewhere in Africa. The region witnessed the introduction of new food crops during the European era such as Irish potato, rice, yams, amongst others. In 1923, the coffee crop was introduced into the province haven been brought in from the adjoining French administered East Cameroon (Kengo, 2007). For most of Cameroon's colonial history, emphasis was placed on the encouragement of crops for export (Delancey, 1980). Pre- existing economic crops of the North West region like the raffia palms, cola nut and oil palms did not receive any scientific attention. Postcolonial scholarship on the region's economy has continued on the same colonial lines and placed an undue preference and importance on these "colonial cash crops"ⁱⁱ to the neglect of pre-existing ones like the raffia palm, which contributed and continues to contribute very significantly to the socio-economic development of the people of this region in very diverse ways. Such an approach to indigenous economies only helps to give credence to the Eurocentric perspective which depicts African economies as a *tabula rasa* before colonialism. As O.N. Njoku has opined, autocentric and enduring economic recovery must begin with a rediscovery and re-ennoblement, within limits, of the traditional system. He further states that, the *tabula rasa* mentality in Africa modernization model has been shown to be destructive and dangerous (Njoku, 2001). Hans Knöpfli acknowledges this neglect of the raffia palm when he observed that;

Now the problem is that apparently not much scientific work has been done on raphia palms in the Republic of Cameroon. Consequently I found it almost impossible to get reliable economic and scientific information about them. One of the many agricultural officers I consulted said, "You know, we only deal with plants with a profit value (Knöpfli, 2001).

The conclusion one immediately draws from the above statement is that the raffia palm has been perceived as a crop or a plant without an economic value by some agricultural officers in Cameroon for long. While there is the obvious absence of scientific work on palms in Cameroon as pointed out by Knöpfli, the above response from an agricultural officer concerning palms epitomizes the attitude of the government for which he worked, and even

ⁱ This practice is quite old and common in the province. It also underlines the economic value of palms for them to be easily pawned. Many groves that were pawned were eventually claimed permanently because the debtor could not redeem them.

ⁱⁱ Some of the works that have examined these colonial "cash crops" are; Emmanuel E. Kengo, "coffee in the Economy of the North West Region of Cameroon, Canute Ambe Ngwa, " The Upper Nun Valley Development Authority in the Social and Economic Development of the Ndop area of Cameroon since 1970" (PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1998). Marcus A. Anyi, "Cash Cropping and Changes in Traditional Agriculture: The Case of the Coffee Village of Ngwo" (B.A. diss., Department of Geography, University of Sierra Leone, 1981). Blaise Ban, "Coffee Production and Commercialization in Mezam Division: Post Independence Era" (ENS, University of Yaounde, 1981).

some scholars towards the raffia palm. The raffia palm according to this agricultural officer and even some uninformed scholars has no profit value. In other words, the raffia palm has no economic and social significance and so requires no scientific attention. Such reasoning or logic is quite exemplified in the Ndop plain where the activities of the Upper Nun Valley Development Agency (UNVDA) , that emphasizes and encourages rice cultivation, are known to have added value to the economy of this region but the fate of raffia bushes coupled with their ecological values and functions were severely compromised or hampered (Mphoweh, 20015). The Bamunka people are said to have lost interest in managing raffia palm bushes in favor of rice production which was economically more viable in the short run. The neglect of the raffia palms by agriculturalists and general scholars has persisted, decades after independence, in spite of the significant economic and socio-cultural importance of the raffia palm to the economy of the North West region in particular and Cameroon as a whole. Going by the logic of the above agricultural officer, the raffia palm is not a plant with an economic value like coffee, cocoa or banana and so deserves no scientific or scholarly attention. This largely explains its neglect by policy makers and researchers.

Probably due to lack of awareness and recognition or education, Earth Communication raised the alarm that “raffia palms are currently experiencing a high rate of destruction in favor of other activities” (Earth Communications WWF, 1998). This paper contends that the raffia palm is an economic crop *par excellence* from which the people have earned cash through a chain of informal economic activities stretching from the rural areas to the cities. It has also contributed to the cultural and socio-economic development of the people. Unfortunately, the raffia has not received the attention it deserves from scholars probably due to a narrow definition and conceptualization of what an economic or a cash crop is. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a cash crop as a crop that is grown mainly to be sold, rather than used by the people who grew it or those living in the area it is grown in. According to the Wikipedia, a cash crop or profit crop is an agricultural crop which is grown for sale to return a profit. It further explains that, the term is used to differentiate marketed crops from subsistence crops, which are those fed to the producer’s own livestock or grown as food for the producer’s family. This researcher thinks that such definitions are circumscribed and do not longer reflect twenty first century realities of rural agricultural practices especially in developing economies. There are crops or plants which are as good as export crops as they are subsistence. Such crops and their by-products are sold externally as much as they are consumed locally. The raffia palm is one of such which supports a traditional economy and also provides for export. So, they serve both as cash crops as well as they may also meet the subsistence needs of the producer with the same magnitude. The raffia palm has been able to meet both the cash and subsistence needs of the people of the North West region of Cameroon for several decades. It is the failure to properly identify and redefine such crops in their contemporary economic and social functions that partly explains the unsung economic and social importance of the raffia palms in the North West region of Cameroon.

Using the diachronic and synchronic methods of historical analysis, this paper intends to evaluate the economic and social significance of the raffia palms in the history of the people of the North West Region of Cameroon through a number of informal activities. It intends to demonstrate that the raffia palm is a crop with a very high economic value even more than some of the cash crops that have been emphasized in Cameroon since independence and requires scholarly attention.

The Colonial Epoch and Economic Developments

In addition to introducing new crops in Cameroon in general and the North West in particular, the colonialists did quite much to record the economic activities of the people of this region

as they met themⁱⁱⁱ. The recording of these economic activities was not void of prejudices though. In this regard, much was recorded about the food crops and some sylvan crops such as the cola nut tree and the oil palm trees which were abundant only in some parts of the region. However, this colonial literature also shows the abundance of raffia palms in the whole province and its multiple utilities. A number of them (mostly colonial assessment reports) have already been cited above and it may be needless going back to them. The acknowledged uses of the raffia palm by the colonialists ranged from; the provision of building materials, materials for furniture, palm wine, baskets etc. In spite of colonial hypocrisy to conceal indigenous developments and initiative, G.J.A. Gregg found it difficult to hide his admiration for one of the local industries in Meta, Momo Division, which depended almost entirely on the raffia palm. This was the weaving industry. Amazed at what he saw of this industry, he reported of it in glowing terms stating that;

For workmanship and strength, the native basket is as good as those made in England. The design is not queer and could be used without comments in our own streets. The native will cover a bottle or a ten gallon water jar with exquisite wicker work quite equal to those seen in luncheon baskets in the English shops. Very beautiful bags are made by the Metas, extremely soft, and coloured red with a camwood dye, or many coloured by the numerous native vegetable dyes which the native knows how to prepare (Gregg, 1924).

The Meta weaving industry was certainly an industry par excellence during the colonial period. This has remained so up to this day. This was, and has continued to be possible thanks to the availability and abundance of raffia palms. The raffia stems and fiber remained the main materials used in this industry. Raffia bag weaving was equally well developed in the Ndop district especially in Bamessing. Here, it was given a rare touch of beauty and value. It was also popular and advanced in Ngwo, Bafut, Nkambe, and Bansa. Each village or community produced its own raffia bags in a unique and intrinsic way and they all met the different needs of the people.

The exploitation of the raffia palm in the Bamenda Grassfields exemplified man's inventive response to economic necessity in his environment. Villages or communities that were not endowed with raffia palms to be able to weave their own bags and baskets got into trading relations for those items with producing communities (Kengo, 1998). The availability and none availability of the raffia palm in some communities during the colonial period, also became a source of conflict in times of need. For example, during the construction of the Bali-Nyonga station by the Germans, the search for raffia bamboo poles compelled Bali-Nyonga subjects to steal them from neighbouring villages, which ended up in hostilities (Mbah, 2013). This only helps to highlight the importance or the sacrosanct nature of the raffia palm in pre-colonial and colonial architecture.

However, some of the sacred and social uses of the raffia were hardly realized by the colonial social anthropologists. Raffia stems, commonly referred to in the province as bamboos, and equally had some sacred uses amongst some of the Grass fields' people. In some of the Tikar group of people in the region, the raffia stems were used for the fabrication of special stools, used in religious societies such as the *Nfuh* Society in Ndu. The *Nfuh* Society was the military arm of traditional administration in Ndu and it was customary for them to use special stools

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example, E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, Traditional Bamenda, the Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields (Buea : Ministry of Primary Education and Social Welfare, and West Cameroon Antiquities Commission, 1968), P.M. Kaberry, Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons (London: HMSO, 1952).

made of raffia stems during their meeting sessions (Nyadi, 2018). The Nso had a similar practice to that of the Ndu where the seats in secret society venues were fabricated from raffia stems. Amongst the Ngwo, Oshie Meta and the rest of Momo people, raffia stems were used for the fabrication of special coffins in which notables and in some instances, royalties were buried. The efflorescent of a raffia palm was of huge cultural significance and symbolism. It was used to symbolize danger, to place injunctions on disputed lands, to signal the meeting of a secret society (*Ngomba, Aken* etc). They were also used for decoration on special occasions. A whole lot of artisanal industries depended on the raffia palm for raw materials.

One of the most important products of the raffia palm during the colonial period remained the raffia palm wine. It was the main source of alcohol or liquor for most of the indigenes. As Susan Diduk (1993) has rightly pointed out, indigenous beer production in the Bamenda Grassfields included locally tapped raffia wine as well as corn and guinea corn beer. Such drinks were generally used as a source of largesse and gift – giving at celebrating events. The strong presence and influence of European alcohol in Cameroon during the colonial period does not seem to have displaced the socio economic influence and importance of local liquors such as raffia palm wine in the Bamenda Grassfields. Palm wine joints are said to have been more than double the number of regular beer parlors in the Ndu municipality to the extent that an area was reserved only for palm wine and corn beer joints (Nyadi, 20018). As Awasom has amply demonstrated, the popularity of raffia palm wine in the North West region during the colonial period was evident in the popularity of palm wine joints. He compares palm wine joints in Bamenda town, the capital city of the region, in the years running to independence, to Paris cafes and salons during the period of the French Revolution. Awasom observes that:

Palm wine joints served as informal media centers in a society where newspapers were extremely difficult to come by until the early 1960s. Frequenting the palm wine leisure joint was a regular practice of urbanities, not just for drinking but for the simple reason that they had to meet there to be informed about the latest socio-political events in town. There was always a story teller, a philosopher king, or a distinguished individual who would engage people in conversation on a variety of topics or simply entertain people with stories. Keeping away from palm wine joints was missing a lot in town and appearing backward. The best source of information on the latest in town was therefore the version from the palm wine joint (Awosom, 2008).

Realizing the socio-cultural importance of such public spaces, politicians of the independence struggle in southern Cameroons appropriated and instrumentalized palm wine joints in Bamenda for political campaigns or gains. This important role of the raffia palm wine in the politics of independence is hardly highlighted in the political history of Cameroon. In spite of the acknowledged socio-economic significance of the raffia palm in this region by the colonialists, nothing was done to research on the raffia palm or to encourage its planting and conservation. Rather, colonial crops (coffee, Irish potatoes, rice) took central stage in terms of attention.

The Post-colonial Period

The years following independence did not witness any improved academic interest in the raffia palm either. This was so even as the raffia palm continued to play a greater economic and social significance in the lives of the people. This attitude is partly explained by the fact that, Cameroon's post-colonial agricultural policy was largely a continuation of colonial agricultural policies (Delancey, 1980), which emphasized and paid particular attention to

colonial cash crops production, to the neglect of some of the indigenous staple crops. Agricultural research and extension remained limited and concentrated on export crops (Green, 1969).

In 1973, on the occasion of a National Agricultural Show in Buea, the then President of Cameroon El Hadj Ahmadou Ahidjo declared that the country was to embark on a Green Revolution, “to deploy all means capable of promoting the development of the potential of Cameroon’s rural production by eliminating anachronistic forms of constraint for the small holder and by creating conditions for a modern agricultural economy” (Delancey, 1980). To achieve the optimistic goals of the “Green Revolution”, a large number of organizations or parastatals were created to promote the attainment of these goals. This was in addition to those organizations that had been created before this time to promote agricultural and rural development.

In the North West Region, the older organizations included the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA) and the Upper Nun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA).^{iv} New organizations created were the National Fund for Rural Development (FONADER), created in 1973 to provide financial support for the Revolution through the provision of credit adapted to rural conditions. There was also the North West Development Authority (NWDA) created in August 1981 and charged with rural development in the province. Interestingly, though these bodies were all involved with agricultural improvement and rural development in the region in one way or the other, none of them had the raffia palm as one of the plants or crops to be encouraged or propagated. Rather, as stated earlier, wetland rice cultivation was achieved by the UNVDA in the Ndop plain at the cost of raffia palm groves that were being cut down to make way for rice cultivation (Mphoweh et al., 20015). The North West Development Authority as an agency that adopted the holistic approach to the economic development of the region, did not include the raffia palm as one of the crops to be encouraged in its mission statement. This in no small way shows how even the post-colonial regime failed to recognize the economic and social importance of the raffia palm to the socio-economic development of the province.

The challenges and neglect notwithstanding, the post-independence years also provided the raffia palm industry with some new avenues and economic opportunities indirectly. One of the most important developments after independence that seems to have elevated the economic relevance of the raffia palm was the creation of Prescraft in the Bafut fendom in 1961. Prescraft is the acronym for the Presbyterian Handicraft Center and run by the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Prescraft provided an incentive to raffia related crafts in the region. It reorganized the craft industry, coordinated its activities and also provided a market for its products. One of such changes took place among the basket weavers in the Meta village of Njah-Etu (Knöpfli, 2001). Prescraft organized the basket weavers of this community into a small well organized weavers’ cooperative and because of the beauty and practicality of their baskets, Prescraft was able to find a constant demand for these baskets both at home and abroad. Njah-Etu baskets were made almost exclusively from raffia and oil palm leaves. With time, Prescraft was able to open more centers in Bali Nyonga and Nsei in Ndop ((Knöpfli, 2001). This provided an impetus to art works in general and the weaving industry in particular because Prescraft was able to market their products both at home and

^{iv} WADA was created in 1965 with German aid as a rural development agency aimed at training youths in agricultural activities such as rice and maize cultivation. To attain its objective, it opened trial and demonstration centers for the cultivation of these crops. It also trained youths in technical and artisanal skills such as carpentry and masonry. UNVDA was also engaged in wetland rice cultivation in the Ndop plain. UNVDA was created in 1970 to develop rice and fish production.

abroad. Bag weaving from raffia fibers also grew in prominence not just because of the influence of Prescraft, but also because of an increase in domestic use especially during coffee harvest (Kengo, 1988). A variety of domestic furniture made from raffia bamboos or stems were also in vogue especially right up to the early eighties as Knöpfli has adequately illustrated in his work. By and large, the raffia palm remained very central in the economic and social life of the people of this region after independence and this was more so in the rural areas where most of the art works were made from the raffia palm.

It has been suggested that the introduction of coffee in this region led to increased financial earnings and a drop in palm wine consumption in favor of bottled beer in rural areas after independence. Those who hold this view, have added that this was especially so when farmers received their pay from the cooperatives (Sabum, 2003 & Angwantu, 2003). Though there are no statistics to back up such claims, granted that such was the case, then the fall in the demand for palm wine was only seasonal and short-lived as coffee itself is a seasonal crop produced just once a year.

There is no doubt that the post-colonial period has witnessed a growing importance of the raffia palms to the people of the Bamenda Grassfields. It was this growing importance that inspired Knöpfli to posit that; these raffia palms have so many uses that they are probably the most versatile and economically valuable plants in the Western Grasslands – even more so than the oil palm. He goes further to add that, their uses seem, indeed, limitless, so we can only show the major examples of how they support life and culture. Arguably, one of the major ways by which raffia palms have supported life and culture in the postcolonial economy of the Bamenda Grassfields has been through weaving and basketry. The importance of weaved raffia bags and baskets in the postcolonial economy of the region only exemplify the growing importance of raffia palms to the people. After independence, raffia bags and baskets were not only marketed in the province, they were also exported to other provinces in the country, Europe and North America. Basket making was no longer a craft which produced useful objects only for home use or the local market. As Knöpfli has posited, basketry became an important source of independent income for many women, strengthening their sense of identity and their self-reliance. In addition to baskets and raffia bags, chairs and decorative articles made from raffia (frames) were also encouraged and marketed by the Prescraft and individual hawkers.

The Economic Crises of the 1980s – 90s and the Raffia Palm industry in the North West Region of Cameroon

Beginning in 1986, Cameroon like most African countries south of the Sahara was hard hit by an economic crisis (Takougang, 1993). This crisis was characterized by a fall in the price of primary commodities in the world market, especially coffee on which a majority of the rural population in the North West region had depended for foreign income earnings. For example, the price of coffee in the province dropped from 550 francs CFA in 1986 to 250francs CFA in 1990. This was due to a corresponding fall in the price of coffee in the world market. The fall in the price of coffee in the world market meant a reduced income to a majority of the people who were farmers. However, the crises did not only affect farmers, but also civil servants. There was devaluation of the francs CFA followed by a 50% slash in the salary of civil servants in Cameroon. In addition, the government of Cameroon could no longer subsidize most of the organizations or parastatals it had created to champion agricultural and rural development in the country. For example, the economic crises affected the activities of the U.N.V.D.A. to near bankruptcy but areas transformed into rice fields continued to exist and were taken over by local farmers (Mphoweh et al., 2015). These developments had an interesting turn of events in favor of the raffia palm industry especially the palm wine sector.

As a way of adjusting to the falling incomes, many people in the province switched from consuming bottled beer to consuming palm wine given that raffia palm wine was relatively far cheaper than bottled beer. While bottled beer sold for 300 francs CFA in most rural villages in the province, the same quantity of palm wine sold for 50 francs CFA and even less. Youths generally and students in particular who before now took pride in drinking bottled beer in village squares, were compelled by the crisis to switch to drinking raffia palm wine^v. In a popular palm wine drinking joint, a university student got up in a boisterous manner and told his friends and drinking mates that, “President Paul Biya in his end of year speech had advised that Cameroonians should fight the crises in their own individual ways” and that “switching from drinking beer to palm wine is our own way of fighting and coping with the economic crisis”^{vi}. Civil servants were not also spared by the crisis and as a coping strategy with their drastically reduced incomes, a majority switched to drinking raffia palm wine because it was cheaper and more affordable. This may also be in line with Susan Diduk’s view that, “bottled beer consumption both puts many rural households at risk economically (because it simply costs too much) and complicates the emerging rural class structure (Diduk,1993).

The increase in the consumption of raffia palm wine as a result of the crises was even more evident in townships than in the rural areas. Incidentally, the period of the crisis also coincided with the advent of multi-party politics in Cameroon. The first opposition party in the country, the Social Democratic Front (S.D.F.) was launched in Bamenda, the regional headquarter on 26th of May, 1990 against tight security and military confrontations. Bamenda became the political hot bed of the nation in the 1990s. Palm wine joints became the centers for the discussion and exchange of political ideas. All the politically conscious minds congregated in different palm wine joints after working hours to share in political gossips. The unemployed graduates, retired civil servants, those retrenched as a result of the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) by the Cameroon government, all found some solace in political gossips in palm wine bars.

If, as Awasom has observed, “the palm wine leisure joints in Bamenda Township in Cameroon stood out as an equivalent of French cafes in some respects with an equally interesting historical role in impacting public opinion and the political orientation of Cameroon’s independence path” (Awasom, 2008), then it was even more so in the 1990s following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon. With the advent of the economic crises, coupled with the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Cameroon, palm wine bars gained ascendancy in Bamenda town in particular and the North West region in general. The economic and political contribution of the raffia palm wine in such difficult economic and political circumstances was paramount but remains largely unrecognized. The raffia palm as the lynchpin of a chain of informal activities became a main source of income to many families both in the urban and rural areas. Grey-Johnson has rightly observed that during the decade of structural adjustment of the 1980s, the qualities of the informal sector came out in bold relief to the extent that none could question its importance in the African economy (Grey-Johnson, 1992). The raffia related traditional or informal sector really showed resilience during the period of the crisis.

^v Interview with Serika Marcus, Former palm wine retailer, Nkun Market square 23-8-2015. He admitted selling up to 9 jugs of palm wine on village market days. Kengo Bridget, another palm wine retailer in Ngwo said she could sell up to six jugs of palm wine on market days during that period and three jugs on ordinary days.

^{vi} Paul Nkonda, who was a student in the University of Yaounde was addressing his drinking mates, most of whom were students, in a palm wine joint at the Nkun market square in Ngwo, Momo Division in August 1993.

As I have argued elsewhere, with the fall in the price of coffee in the world market as a result of the World Economic Crisis beginning in the mid-1980s, farmers responded in Njikwa and Batibo Sub-Divisions of the region by emphasizing the planting and tapping of raffia palms as a source of income. This was because palm wine was consumed locally and so had a domestic market as opposed to coffee that was only sold externally. Raffia palm wine became the main source of income to the men in these areas who hitherto depended on coffee production for foreign income earnings (Kengo, 2007). Though, traditionally, raffia palm wine tapping for commercial purpose has a greater historical depth among the Moghamo in Batibo Sub-division, there is no doubt that it received an extra boost from the early nineties as a result of the economic crisis and the reintroduction of multi-party politics.

The economic importance of the raffia palm and the resilience of the raffia based informal sector during the crisis was not only evident in the palm wine sector but also in the craft sector. Raffia crafts such as baskets, bags and chairs became an important source of supplementary income. The Meta bag and basket weavers took weaving as a full time profession. Raffia craft in the Ndop plain and the Bafut Fondom also received more attention as an income earning activity. Prescraft was quite instrumental in the promotion of these raffia related craft works during the crisis period. His Royal Highness Fon Aboumbi II of Bafut admitted the importance of Prescraft in surviving the crisis during a farewell dinner to Prescraft staff in 1993. In his address, he acknowledged that:

Besides their work on the farm, his wives were able to earn the badly needed money to maintain the entire Palace household by their relations with Prescraft. Most especially in the kind of political and economic crisis Cameroon was experiencing in 1993, they were able to survive in the Palace thanks to Prescraft supplementing farm produce income by his wives' cash earnings from basket weaving (Knöpfl, 2001).

A number of years have elapsed since the apparent easing of the crisis in Cameroon. However, the raffia palm continues to remain a major source of income earning in the North West Region of the country through its multiple uses and functions that merit it to be called a cash crop. The economy of Batibo Sub-Division continues to lean heavily on palm wine tapping. Batibo and its catchment area of Moghamo have been referred to as the palm wine capital of Cameroon. Some 10,000 liters of palm wine are said to be produced from the village daily, the highest amount produced anywhere in Cameroon which is why it has been dubbed Cameroon's palm wine capital.^{vii} Most families in the village depend entirely on palm wine for their income. It therefore helps them send their children to school, treat them when they are sick, and dowry wives for their sons when they are old enough to leave home. The mayor of Batibo is quoted to have termed palm wine as "a unifying factor in Batibo," and that all birth ceremonies, marriages, religious and death celebrations, among others, must always have jugs of palm wine present (IROKO AFRICA, Accessed 29-9-2017). By and large, Batibo palm wine locally called *fitchuk* was not only consumed in the Batibo municipality. Before the outbreak of the Anglophone Crises, daily, some was taken to the nation's capital Yaounde and the economic capital, Douala situated some 700km from Batibo. However, the highest market for Batibo palm wine was and still remains Bamenda, the metropolitan headquarter of the region. The numerous palm wine joints in Bamenda city were supplied from Batibo where dozens of truck drivers and bike transporters went every day to get supplies not just for Bamenda city, but also to other parts of Cameroon.

Another mayor of Batibo, Mayor Thomas Mbatifuh Mbachek admitted that in terms of real figures, palm wine was the third highest income earner for the municipality since transporters

^{vii} IROKO AFRICA: African News, Views and Comments. Accessed on 26 – 09 - 2017

had to pay taxes to transport the wine for sale to other areas of Cameroon (Niba, 2002). The mayor acknowledged palm wine as a major industry in Batibo and that palm wine selling and retailing was the most popular business in the area. Palm wine in Batibo is however, not only important commercially it also has a great historical depth in the culture and symbolism of the people. During traditional marriage ceremonies, the marriage is considered null and void if the bride and the groom did not exchange a traditional cup of palm wine. This exchange of wine is said to symbolize an oath of acceptance and faithfulness between the bride and the groom. Family members present are also expected to drink from the same cup in testimony of the event and also, as a symbol of having consented to the marriage. No other drink can substitute palm wine in this traditional ceremony. Mayor Frederick Tanjoh is noted to have said, “life in the village (Batibo) as we know it will come to an end if there is no palm wine” (IROKO AFRICA, 2017). The mayor might have overstated the point but it simply underscores the importance of the raffia palm, its wine and the numerous socio economic activities it supports in this society. Strongly stated as it may appear to be, the mayor’s view is not quite different from that of Timothy Ambo of Ngwo in Njikwa, who termed the raffia palm as “the tree of life”.

We would have however, told only part of the story of the raffia palm in Batibo just like elsewhere in the region, if we only focus on its role in providing palm wine. Beyond providing palm wine, the indigenes are very cognizant of the importance of the plant to their social and economic wellbeing; past and present. Commenting on the role of the raffia palm in the housing development of the Batibo man in the past, Pa Njei Thomas Mbah noted:

The construction of houses in those days was carried out with 100% local materials. The walls consisted of a matrix of sticks, bamboos and mud. The ceiling was usually raffia bamboo...The roof frames were raffia bamboos and sticks held together by ropes peeled from the bark of fresh raffia stems. The roof was usually covered by thatches (carefully woven raffia leaves). The rapid degradation of thatches meant that the roof was renewed regularly especially at the beginning of every rainy season. The door shutters were made of raffia stems.... Typical household equipment consisted of bamboo beds and bamboo chairs (Timah, 2001).

A casual observation of architecture in Batibo today still reveals the strong presence and influence of the raffia in housing, furniture, and articles of everyday use.

Bamunka is another village in the North West region that can be used to illustrate the economic and social importance of the raffia palm through its wine tapping. Palm wine tapping in this village engaged 27 percent of the local population with 10 percent involved in the activity on full time basis. “On average, over 3700 liters of wine was produced daily from this village and an estimated \$10 US (5000 FCFA) could be generated by each full time wine tapper” (Mphoweh et.al, 2004). A further number was employed in the retailing service where about 150 palm wine drinking retail spots existed. In Bamunka, like elsewhere in the province, palm wine was and is still used in ceremonies such as death celebrations and marriages. It is also used as an ingredient in the preparation of traditional medication and a symbol and medium of communicating with ancestors, according to local believes (Mphoweh et.al, 2015).

In Njikwa Subdivision, another locality with a substantial production and a local market for raffia palm wine, social life in the weekly market is known to revolve around palm wine bars. Social engagements are made in palm wine bars and business deals are mainly struck in palm

wine bars in the eighth day weekly market days.^{viii} Palm wine bars are centers for social gossips in the village. The local market was known to close earlier when there was not enough palm wine in the market to sustain the villagers in the market long enough. The culture of the villages of Ngwo, Oshie, Ekweri, Konda and Banya is closely linked with palm wine. Cultural celebrations such as marriages, death and birth ceremonies, rituals, libations, disputes settlement etc. cannot be concluded without palm wine.^{ix} The traditional architecture and furniture is also closely tied to the raffia palm since historically, human habitat has always been adapted to the environment.

Ndu Subdivision also provides a case for the economic and social importance of the raffia palm which is similar and comparable to Batibo Subdivision. In Ndu Subdivision, Donga-Mantung Division, and raffia palm wine is an industry on its own involving a number of informal sectors; tappers, transporters or middlemen and retailers. The tappers were mainly men while the retailers were both men and women who owned palm wine joints in village squares. More than sixty percent of the men across villages in Ndu Subdivision were reportedly involved in palm wine tapping (Nyadi, 2018). Another proportion of the population was gainfully employed in ancillary sectors of the raffia palm industry such as furniture, weaving, basketry and architecture. The palm weevil is not only a source of protein to the people, but also an important commercial item. The raffia fruits locally called koup nka, were harvested and sold by students during holidays since it is widely consumed in the region (Nyadi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The raffia palm beyond all doubts has been a tree crop of great economic, social and cultural significance in the historical development of the North West region of Cameroon. This tree crop provided and continuous to provide the bases for a chain of “informal” economic activities stretching from the rural areas to the cities. It provided materials for the construction of homes, for furniture, household utensils, weaving and basketry, construction of bridges, firewood, fences, toys, etc. From the raffia, the people also harvested the palm weevil, a source of protein and a delicacy among the people. Above all, raffia wine can be considered as an industry within the raffia palm industry in the North West Region of Cameroon, involving many other services and employing a greater percentage of the rural population in different ways. The raffia palm can rightly be considered as the lynchpin of the traditional economy of the North West region, from the colonial period right up to the present date and exemplifies the resilience of that sector. However, the centrality of this crop in the historical development of the region would seem not to have been fully recognized or appreciated. This lack of academic recognition has been due to colonialism and the introduction of new crops in the region such as Irish potatoes, rice, and coffee. With the introduction of these new crops, both colonial and postcolonial agricultural policies were more focused on improving their cultivation while neglecting indigenous crops like the raffia palm. The raffia palm was hardly seen as a cash crop or a crop of any great economic importance because of a narrow definition and conceptualization of a cash crop. Because of the lack of scientific interest in the plant, there is no conservation policy. This has led to wanton exploitation and degradation of the raffia groves in the region. There is therefore the need for more scientific studies on the raffia palm to enlighten the people of this region in particular and Cameroon in general on sustainable exploitation and conservation of the raffia palm.

^{viii} The research has personally observed this phenomenon over a long period of time growing up in this village.

^{ix} Pa Marcus Mfor Ambo, village notable aged: 83 years, Nkun, Ngwo 2006. Interviewed

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