



## Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West Region of Cameroon

## Ehzele Laimbwe et les rituels de l'eau dans la région du Nord-Ouest du Cameroun

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Volume 4, Number 1, 2025

Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture  
Les femmes et l'eau : le flux des systèmes matriculturels

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117489ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60676/zamkm551>

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Publisher(s)

International Network for Training, Education, and Research on Culture

ISSN

2563-3392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Article abstract

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### Cite this article

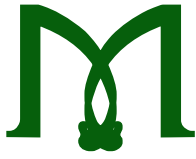
Kah, H. (2025). Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West Region of Cameroon. *Matrix*, 4(1), 122–146. <https://doi.org/10.60676/zamkm551>

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## ***Ehzele Laimbwe and Water Rituals in the North West Region of Cameroon***

**HENRY KAM KAH**

### **Abstract**

*Water rituals are part of daily life in Cameroon's Western Grassfields in general and Laimbweland in particular. Women are connected with these rituals, which play an important role in fecundity and procreation, pacification of the living-dead, dissipation of malevolent spirits, witches and wizards, and treatment of ailments. In this article, I claim that water rituals of Ehzele Laimbwe in North West Cameroon serve vital socio-cultural and cosmological purposes by preserving culture, forestalling looming disaster, and cleansing the community of subverting evil spirits. Regrettably, the advent of Christianity and Western education, among other external influences, diminished participation, with only a portion of the population continuing to subscribe to these rituals cultural practices of old. Rituals are performed during crab and tadpole fishing, for birth and death, at the start of the dry season, during masquerade performances at funerals, and when there is imminent calamity. Employing the methodology of critical observation, discussion, oral interviews and analyzing available documents, I surmise that Ehzele Laimbwe rituals in Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas (Laimbwe villages) aptly serve these socio-cultural and cosmological*



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**Keywords:** Cameroon, Laimbwe, ritual, performance, culture

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## Résumé

*Les rituels de l'eau font partie de la vie quotidienne dans les prairies occidentales du Cameroun en général et dans les terres de Laimbwe en particulier. Les femmes sont liées à ces rituels qui jouent un rôle important dans la fécondité et la procréation, la pacification des morts-vivants, la dissipation des esprits malveillants, des sorcières et sorciers et le traitement des maladies. Dans cet article, nous affirmons que les rituels de l'eau des Ehzele Laimbwe (les femmes) dans le nord-ouest du Cameroun ont servi des objectifs socioculturels et cosmologiques vitaux en préservant leur culture, en prévenant les catastrophes éventuelles et en nettoyant la communauté des mauvais esprits. Malheureusement, l'avènement du christianisme et de l'éducation occidentale, entre autres influences extérieures, ont rendu ces rituels superflus, seule une partie de la population adhérant à cette pratique culturelle ancienne. Des rituels étaient exécutés lors de la pêche au crabe et aux têtards, lors de la mort, de la naissance, du début de la saison sèche, durant des spectacles de mascarade lors des funérailles et en cas de calamité imminente. En employant la méthodologie de l'observation critique, de la discussion, des entretiens oraux et de l'analyse des documents disponibles, nous supposons que les rituels Ehzele Laimbwe à Baisoo, Bu et Mbengkas (villages Laimbwe) ont bien servi ces objectifs socioculturels et cosmologiques. Les défis socioculturels auxquels les gens sont confrontés aujourd'hui sont dus en partie au fait qu'ils ne respectent plus ces rituels et n'y participent plus.*

**Mots-clés :** Cameroun, Laimbwe, rituel, performance, culture

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## Introduction

This article analyses water-related rituals associated with the lives of women among the little-known matrilineal Laimbwe ethnic group of the North West Region of Cameroon.<sup>1</sup> The paper approaches this topic through a matricultural lens by portraying the cultural system of the Laimbwe as it is perceived, constructed, and lived by its women and understood by the people and other matricultural societies in the world.<sup>2</sup> The paper shows how, historically, such rituals served several socio-cultural and cosmological purposes in Laimbwe, most centrally as a means of achieving and maintaining social cohesion. Specifically, the rituals were associated with: increasing fecundity and reproduction, pacifying the spirits of the ancestors or the living-dead, dissipating malevolent spirits, confronting witchcraft, healing the sick, and preserving culture.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I argue that the advent of the Basel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic Missions in Laimbweland in the early twentieth century, as well as other changes such as Western education, negatively impacted adherence to these rituals as realistic solutions to people's problems. However, while the rituals have become less appealing to some Laimbwe people, many do still practice them today. Therefore, there is a need to theorize about them in a new, more complex context where they have to co-exist with competing Christian cosmologies. Such debates have been recorded elsewhere in rural Africa.<sup>4</sup> By using a matricultural lens, which foregrounds the perspective of women, to analyze these rituals in Laimbwe society, my research brings fresh insights to two key debates in studies of African rural society: first, the emergence of hybrid cosmologies and their significance for ritual practices in the present<sup>5</sup> and, second, the changing role of women in these

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1 Henry Kam Kah, "Women as Makers of History: The Kelu Women Movement in Bu, North West Cameroon 1957-59," *Castalia: Ibadan Journal of Multidisciplinary and Multi-Cultural Studies* 17, 1 (2004): 12-40; Henry Kam Kah, "Leadership Fuss in Bu Fondom, North West Province, Cameroon, 1942- 2001," *Epasa Moto: A Bilingual Journal of Letters and the Humanities*, 3:2 (2008): 161-186; Ndo Muam, *Traditional Structures and Political Evolution: A Case Study of Bu Chieftdom* (Bamenda: Quality Printers, 2001).

2 Irene Wiens Friesen Wolfstone, *ReMembering Matricultures: Historiography of Subjugated Knowledges, An Independent Study*, Unpublished paper. <https://www.academia.edu/37336416/>; Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Introduction," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, 1 (2020): 3-7.

3 The living-dead are deceased members of the family who are known to continue living after death in order to protect the people always.

4 Mario I. Aguilar, "African Conversion from a World Religion: Religious Diversification by the Waso Boorana in Kenya," *Africa* 65, 4 (1995): 525-544; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman," *CrossCurrents* 47, 4 (1997-1998): 493-504.

5 Sven Ouzman, "Cosmology of the African San People," *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin, 644-650 (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2008).

cultures.<sup>6</sup> These fresh insights centralize the commanding power of women in performative rituals, despite vying cosmologies and manipulative activities by witches and wizards; this power shows the resilience of a cultural practice transforming rural society.

In order to prove that women-related rituals in Laimbweland serve an important socio-cultural and cosmological significance, my methodology centres upon discussions with the women and men who personally perform and live the experience of these water-based rituals. Interviews were also conducted with adherents of the Christian religion who oppose the use of these rituals as a means of addressing the socio-cultural and cosmological needs of Laimbwe people. The observation method was also employed, especially in Bu village, the largest and principal; Bu village has experienced external influences more than Baisso and Mbengkas, which are situated mainly within the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve.<sup>7</sup> The discussions, observations, and interviews spanned several years. The first period was intermittently between 2007 and 2008 during field research for my PhD thesis on gender and matrilineality among the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. Other discussion sessions followed in 2016 and 2023. Due to the prevailing Anglophone Crisis (also known as the Ambazonia War) in Cameroon since 2016, some of the discussions were through phone conversations because of the risk of travelling to the field. I also relied on a research assistant throughout the period of research.

During research, I consulted primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, gleaned specifically to understand the functioning of the Laimbwe matrilineal system and accompanying rituals, included archival documents, discussions, and interviews with individuals focusing on the importance of rituals in their daily lives. These sources provide a wealth of information that was useful in understanding the importance of rituals in the socio-cultural and cosmological life of the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. The target of my secondary sources was information about the nature and functions of the matrilineal kinship system as it operates in other parts of Africa and the world. These sources were also selected to explore the importance of ritual in the lives of people across the world. The aim was to establish similarities with the Laimbwe matrilineal system in terms of functions and challenges and to learn how ritual shapes several aspects of people's lives in different parts of the world. Rituals are relevant in the world today just like in the past; as with other societies, the Laimbwe people believe in the power of their rituals.

A brief exposition of ritual is merited here. Due to the importance of rituals in socio-cultural and political domains, this has led to the establishment of ritual studies in

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6 Diedre L. Bádéjò, "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent," *Research in African Literatures* 29, 2 (1998): 94-111; Winifred Uche Obasi, *From Shrines to Prayer Houses: A Religious History of Igbo Women, 1900-1970* (PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 2013).

7 This reserve was created by the British colonial administration in 1951.

academic institutions across the world. A variety of ethnic groups in Africa perform rituals during festivals, circumcision, rites of passage, rainmaking, child birth, crop cultivation, harvesting, and masquerade performances. These are important because they create, maintain, and transform the worlds of human beings much more than has generally been assumed. Their actions speak to complex cultural and social processes which usually vary in intention, content, and context.<sup>8</sup> As a result, it is not always appropriate to generalize about them since they are complex and address issues that are also complex in nature.

The performance of rituals may lead to social cohesion, perhaps even bringing a peaceful reconciliation of quarrelling people. Among the Komijan of Iran, for example, when drought leads to a shortage in subsurface water, religio-symbolic water-sprinkling rituals are performed to appeal to Allah for a return to normalcy and the freshness of life.<sup>9</sup> Rituals may also strengthen systems of hierarchical order which express power relations between social classes, generations, and sexes, and this is the case with the *Ehzele* Laimbwe water rituals. On the other hand, ritual performances may also lead to questioning the cultural *status quo* or system that they embody.<sup>10</sup> This is because ritual activity is usually a monologue which does not give room for people to raise questions or doubts in the formal setting.

The Laimbwe ethnic group is based in three principal villages, namely, Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas, whose inhabitants speak Laimbwe, pidgin, and English languages. Some Laimbwe people moved to French-speaking regions of Cameroon; they also speak French but they are few in number. Bu is located in the Menchum Division of the English-speaking North West region of Cameroon, while Baisso and Mbengkas are located in Boyo Division of the same region. Prior to the creation of Boyo Division in 1992, all of Laimbwe was located in Menchum Division. In 1960s, at the time of the independence and reunification of Cameroon, the population of Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso was, respectively, 1118 people, 530 people, and 185 people; the total population of the ethnic group was 1833 people. By 1979, the population of Bu had risen to 6944 people and for Mbengkas it was 1978 people (statistics for 1979 Baisso are unavailable). The total population of Bu and Mbengkas that year was 8922 people, excluding Baisso. In 1993, the estimated population of Baisso was 685 -- 500 people more than at independence and reunification.<sup>11</sup> Current population

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8 Christoph Wulf, ed., "Introduction," *Ritual and Identity: The Staging and Performing of Rituals in the Lives of Young People*, trans. Alice Lagaay and Elizabeth Hamilton (London: The Tufnell Press, 2010), Vii.

9 Mohammad Aref and Vahid Golestan, "Morphology of Intact Rituals of Water-Sprinkling of Human on Nature and Human on Human in Iran," *American Journal of Scientific Research* 92 (2013): 38.

10 Ibid.

figures are unavailable, but the number of people has continued to rise dramatically, pointing to greater numbers in the future.

The Laimbwe kinship system is a matrilineal one. Although an uncommon kinship system when compared with patrilineal kinship systems, it still survives in all major regions of the world, and this is what obtains among the Laimbwe people, with some variation.<sup>11</sup> Their kinship system, like others similar to it, is built on consanguinity with a woman (blood relationships traceable to a woman).<sup>12</sup> Through blood ties, brothers and sisters of the same mother are consanguineous. Other people who form an integral part of this consanguineous relationship are the mothers' brothers and sisters, children of sisters, grandmothers, and grandmother's children's children. Every member of this kinship system pays allegiance to the women because of blood relationships. This blood relationship invariably binds kin members together as brothers and sisters, mother and children, mother's brothers, and sister's sons and daughters within a common destiny.

This paper is divided into five main parts, the first one being this introduction; here I have stated what this paper is about and how the research was conducted to support the argument. I also introduced some common characteristics of the Laimbwe people and the importance of rituals within academia. I briefly discussed the Laimbwe matrilineal system and the centrality of women to such a system. In the second part of the paper, the concept of ritual and its relevance to this article on *Ehzele* Laimbwe is shown. This is followed by a brief survey of women-centric and woman-related rituals in Cameroon, to provide the regional context, while the fourth section focuses on *Ehzele* Laimbwe and the importance of rituals in their socio-cultural and cosmological lives. The fifth and final section, apart from the conclusion, addresses challenges brought about by Christianity, Western education, and other external influences.

### **Understanding Matriculture as a Concept and in the Context of this Study**

Several studies have been carried out on the concept of matriculture as found in different cultures. Among the exponents of this concept is Irene Friesen Wolfstone, who contends that matricultures are societies centered on mothers and governed according to maternal

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11 Clare Janaki Holden, Rebecca Sear, and Ruth Mace, "Matriliny as Daughter-Biased Investment," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24 (2003): 100; Alexander Boyle, "Matrilineal Succession in the Pictish Monarchy," *The Scottish Historical Review* 56, 161 (1977): 1.

12 T.O. Beidelman, *The Kaguru: A Matrilineal People of East Africa* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Philip O. Nsugbe, *Ohaffia: A Matrilineal Ibo People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Karla O. Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia* (London: Academic Press, 1981); Joke Van Reenan, *Central Pillars of the House: Sisters, Wives and Mothers in a Rural Community in Minangkabau, West Sumatra* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, The Netherlands, 1996).

values, including care-taking and meeting needs. Such are the ethical principles which guide the actions of men and women, mothers and not-mothers. Wolfstone further argues that such societies are socially egalitarian and the mode of governance is by consensus. In cosmological narratives of these societies, the procreative and narrative abilities of women are interwoven in the thought and action of the people. There is usually an assumed reciprocal relationship between land and culture in what has come to be known as Harraway's concept of nature cultures.<sup>13</sup>

The concept has been further developed by Marie-Françoise Guédon. She argues that the term 'matricultural system' may be used to understand those parts or components of culture that help to sustain, express, and welcome the participation of women in the socio-cultural fabric, whether this is a matrilineal kinship system or not. She further argues that wherever the matricultural system is strong and womanhood plays a central role, or where all genders have a common enterprise, there is a matricultural society.<sup>14</sup>

Matriculture in the sense in which Wolfstone and Guédon have conceptualized it denotes a society where women's voices are part of the socio-cultural life of the people in a manner that cannot be dissociated or excluded from the functioning of the society. Although Wolfstone describes a matricultural society as egalitarian in nature, Guédon notes that this is not always the case.

Among the Laimbwe people, women have a lot of influence in socio-cultural activities such as the celebration of the dead, the organization of festivals, and the mobilization of families for larger cultural rituals which renew society and resolve lingering problems that can disturb the peace of the community. They are honoured for their connecting role between the worlds of the living and the living-dead through procreation, cleansing rituals, and agricultural activities. It is true that women and men in the Laimbwe ethnic group are involved in a common enterprise as presented by Guédon because they collaborate to keep alive the community's values of conviviality, socialization, support for one another, and protection of the culture of the people.

While the concept and practice of ritual has also received scholarly attention, there is, however, no general agreement on the meaning of ritual and research on it is fragmented. This is because each discipline is trying to stick to its own disciplinary boundaries rather than blur these boundaries to achieve a greater understanding of the concept. Although Leach argues that there is wide disagreement on how the word 'ritual' should be used and

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<sup>13</sup> Wolfstone, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Guédon, 6-7.



how its performance should be understood,<sup>15</sup> he surmises that the concept denotes all sets of behaviour that are culturally defined as such.<sup>16</sup> While Leach links ritual to culture, Zuesse asserts that ritual is a conscious and voluntary symbolic bodily action.<sup>17</sup> Gerholm, on the other hand, contends that ritual is the traditional expression and sustenance of a socially shared code or system.<sup>20</sup> In spite of differences in their conceptualization of ritual, all three authors are agreed that it involves some form of action and result. While Leach talks about sets of behaviour, Zuesse emphasizes form of action, and Gerholm relates ritual to expression and sustenance. In summary, it would be fair to say that ritual, as understood in the sense of these three scholars, is a purposefully repeated action with results that convince.

Water rituals that involve the *Ehzele* Laimbwe in Cameroon are conscious actions on people and the environment to heal, avert a calamity, resolve a problem, and preserve a cherished culture. The rituals are in the hearts of the people, while certain individuals and institutions are at the center of the action. There is always action from a number of stakeholders, both overt and covert.

Other authors like Olanrewaju Isiak Balogun reflect on the concept of ritual, contending that a ritual is a means of communication between the spirit and physical worlds.<sup>18</sup> Supporting this view, James W. Turner argues that the object of the ritual among the Kava people is to communicate with the supernatural.<sup>19</sup> These two scholars agree that ritual is communication between people and their supernatural environment. That is, the living perform physical actions which enable the spiritual to commune with the physical; the world of the living meets with that of the spirit, which gives meaning to ritual. Benjamin C. Ray adds to this view when he argues that ritual is “a way of communicating with the divine for the purpose of changing the human situation,”<sup>20</sup> Eliade further argues that ritual is a re-enactment of sacred prototypes, the repetition of the action of divine beings or mythical ancestors. The common denominator for these scholars is that ritual is communication to beings in different forms, including the divine or spiritual, mythical and supernatural.

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15 Barbara Boudewijnse, “The Conceptualization of Ritual: A History of its Problematic Aspects,” *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 11 (1995): 32.

16 Ibid., 33.

17 Ibid., 34.

18 Olanrewaju Isiak Balogun, “Exploring the Theatrical Elements of Lisabi Festival of the Egba People in Abeokuta, Nigeria,” *EDE: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, 2 (2020): 23.

19 James W. Turner, ““The Water of Life:” Kava Ritual and the Logic of Sacrifice,” *Ethnology* 25, 3 (1986).

20 Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religion: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 1976), 78.

Water rituals for and with the women (*Ehzele*) of Laimbwe are channels of communication involving the people, their environment, and supernatural and /or divine beings, enacted with the goals of promoting fecundity, valorizing culture, and dissipating malevolent spirits. Communication takes place between the Priest(ess), the spiritual world, and the family of those calling for the organization of the ritual; communication of traditional knowledge also occurs among members of the matrilineage, including children. Various verbal and non-verbal communications take place, disseminating information as appropriate for every member of the family or community.

Discussions around rituals have also been grouped into the intellectualist and symbolist approaches. Intellectualists describe ritual as a type of rational behaviour that is based on explanatory principles. Symbolists, on the other hand, do not subscribe to this view of rational behaviour and explanatory principles. They argue that while some ritual performances involve rational speech, this speech might not necessarily be accompanied by an explanation but, rather, operate on the symbolic level. Frits Staal, meanwhile, condemns the arguments of pure intellectualists and symbolists both as not explaining rituals at all. According to him, rituals are expressive behaviour which communicate certain meanings, especially about social structure, coded in symbolic language.<sup>21</sup> This conceptual definition is the most accurately concerning *Ehzele* Laimbwe water-related rituals, as the use of symbolic language communicates and contributes to understanding the socio-cultural and cosmological life of the Laimbwe people. The Priest(ess) acts and speaks in such a way during ritual performance in order to address specific issues, such as promoting child-bearing or preventing evil spirits from causing the death of a newborn baby.

Generally speaking, these approaches and conceptual definitions of ritual are, in a certain sense, related to understanding the use of water in rituals which are related to women and - at times - men, among the Laimbwe people of Cameroon. Laimbwe rituals are culturally defined, with their own specificities, and this is partially in line with the postulation of Leach. Culturally speaking, therefore, rituals among the Laimbwe people are determined by custom and the traditions of the people, which explains why people attached significant meaning to them in the past, before the advent of the Christian religion in the area, and why some continue to do so.

Related to what Zuesse asserts, although rituals among the Laimbwe were mostly a voluntary and conscious exercise, some of them were not voluntary. That is, every

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21 Cited in Jesper Sorensen, "Ritual as Action and Symbolic Expression," in *Genre and Ritual: The Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals*, E. Ostrem, M.B Bruun, N.H Petersen and J. Fleischer (eds), 41. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005).

member of the family was bound by tradition to participate knowingly and / or unknowingly. The Laimbwe people also believed that rituals brought the physical and spiritual worlds into a symbiotic relationship. The place of ritual performance, the instruments used, and the incantations uttered - all provided room for perfect communion between these two worlds. When some people embraced other values and no longer saw the importance of these rituals, they withdrew their participation, but traditional rituals remain significant in the socio-cultural life of many Laimbwe people.

### Women and Water Rituals in Cameroon History

The importance of ritual in the socio-cultural life of a people is not limited to the Laimbwe people and this part of the paper demonstrates the importance of women-centered rituals for other ethnic groups of Cameroon. Among the Bomboko of Fako Division, for example, women perform a river ritual known as *Liwangi bakundu* around catchment areas. This ritual requests spiritual intervention to enhance fertility and childbirth. *Sango y a bando*, the leader of the ritual or mediator, talks directly to the spirits while women collect a white stone or Calabar chalk from the water catchment and rub their bodies with it as they walk along the water course at night.<sup>22</sup> This ritual is important in the socio-cultural life of the Bakweri people because procreation is important in the regeneration of society.

Still in Fako Division, this time among the Bakweri, another ritual performance involves pregnant women and water. After the *Nganga* or medicine man is paid for performing the ritual, the pregnant woman's mother pours water into a clay pot containing a knotted rope and the pregnant woman is asked to loosen these knots. Later on, both the pregnant woman and her mother place the pot on a fire. After removing this pot from the fire, the pregnant woman throws cold water on one of the three stones in the hearth before reusing them. This was the *lilale* or smashing ritual, performed for a woman when she is three months pregnant.<sup>23</sup> Since water is central to the completion of this ritual, it serves an important cultural value to the people, especially as far as procreation and survival are concerned.

Elsewhere, women play a cutting-edge role in rituals associated with water and or the use of it. In Mayo Kari in the Adamawa Plateau of Cameroon, a male circumcision ritual involves a filtered mixture of corn cob ashes with water.<sup>24</sup> Water is indispensable in this ritual activity because the corn cob ashes are mixed with water to perform the ritual. The

22 Ayonghe Akonwi Nebasifu and Ngoindong Majory Atong, "Discourses of Cultural Continuity among the Bakweri of Mount Cameroon National Park," *Culture and Local Governance/Culture et gouvernance locale* 6, 2 (2019): 116.

23 Babila Mutia, "Performer, Audience, and Performance Context of Bakweri Pregnancy Rituals and Incantations," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 177 (2005): 222-223.

importance of circumcision to the people is demonstrated by considering anyone who does not complete this ritual as an 'incomplete person,' so to speak. Elsewhere, during the fattening and seclusion period of a Yamba girl in the North West Region of Cameroon in preparation for marriage, she is given a bathe daily with water and rubbed with camwood.<sup>25</sup> This is to smoothen her skin and prepare her for her husband's acceptance of her as his wife. The people value marriage and do everything possible for women to go through this experience and happily get married.

Through water rituals like these, one can understand the agency of women in several Cameroon communities. This agency has not been given the attention that it deserves. African women help to stabilize communities during social strife between families through rituals, including water rituals. This was especially so because fecundity is very central to the African life-world, as it links families and ensures regeneration of society. Again, women's agency in ritual activities - especially those that are performed at the hearth - shows how powerful they are in controlling the hearth from where comes food to feed and sustain lives. The rituals performed on them or on behalf of them has a strong connecting link between the world of the living and that of the living-dead. Many ancestors reveal themselves to women due to the uniting role they play in families and communities. Water rituals do not only serve an important socio-cultural purpose among other ethnic groups but also among the Laimbwe people and the next section explores this closely.

### **Socio-Cultural and Cosmological Significance of Water Rituals among the Laimbwe**

In this part of article, I examine the socio-cultural and cosmological significance of water rituals among the Laimbwe of Cameroon. The choice of rituals examined is informed by the centrality of the matrilineal lineage in the day-to-day activities of the people, the relationship that these rituals create between lineages, and the protection of the village. These rituals are presented in the order of their importance to family reunion and community mobilization, with the most important noted first. They also reveal the level of collaboration between male and female genders, their support for one another, and the role water or bodies of water play in connecting the supernatural and natural forces of the Laimbwe world.

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24 Philip Leis, "Past Passages: Initiation Rites on the Adamawa Plateau (Cameroon)," *Ethnology* 50, 2 (2011): 172.

25 Hermann Gufler, "Yamba Marriage Systems: Spouses and Their Offspring between Protection and Affliction," *Anthropos* 90, 1/3 (1995): 94.

The ritual performed for the dead is to reunite them (the living-dead) with living members of the family. It provides an opportunity for the gathered family members to plead with deceased members for protection of the family, family regeneration through procreation, and the provision of food and bushmeat to wade off hunger. The ritual also brings together family members from far and near to renew their vows of belonging and commitment to the family. Often, the day fixed for this ritual is the traditional resting days of *Uto-oh Metscheh* for Bu village and *Uto-oh Iwei* for Mbengkas and Baisso villages. It is in rare cases that this ritual takes place on an ordinary day; this is to ensure that family members who do not live in the village have the time to arrive and perform this age-old tradition before returning to town. The ritual of *Itschugeh'pheh* (removal of feathers of the fowl or cock) and the washing of hands over the hearth or on the grave of the deceased are controlled by the *Zheh'abei* (male family head) and *Zheh'anduoh* (female head of the family, the mother of the family) of that family. Its solemnity and orderly performance are proof of the great attachment given to it by family members and onlookers. It reunites children, male, and female members of the family, reconciles those who have gone astray, and gives the family a sense of purpose and pride for the bond that exists between the living and the living-dead.

The funerary ritual involves male and female family members gathering on the grave early in the morning. The mourning period has spiritual relevance because it brings together the living and the living-dead. The *Zheh'anduoh* begins the ritual with either a *Kekungheh* in her hand (a bowl made of spear grass) or a *Bhuom* (calabash) containing grains of corn. From either the *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom*, she throws the grain on the grave three times and offers some words to the ancestors or the living-dead.<sup>26</sup> This direct communication to the living-dead intercedes with them on a number of issues, including family unity, procreation, and protection. After *Zheh'anduoh* throws the corn, the other female family members take turns to collect corn from the *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom* and throw it on the grave. The action of throwing grains of corn on the grave is to ensure regeneration of the family, for, when corn is planted, it decays before sprouting. The *Kekungheh* or *Bhuom* serves as a unifying presence because the Laimbwe people share food from them. In the *Kekungheh*, they gather corn flour from family members during funeral ceremonies, the leftover of which is shared among women at the end of the funeral. The *Bhuom*, on the other hand, is used to give water to people to drink and corn fufu (an important staple) is also prepared using it. Water is mixed with herbs in the *Bhuom* during most water rituals.

The *Zheh-abei* leads the second part of the ritual in honour of the dead. In his left hand, he holds a fowl or chicken and removes feathers from the bird three times, throwing them on the grave as well. Like the *Zheh'anduoh*, he speaks to deceased family members and

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26 Henry Kam Kah, "The Laimbwe Ih'neem Ritual/Ceremony, Food Crisis, and Sustainability in Cameroon," *Journal of Global Initiatives* 10, 2 (2016): 59-60.

admonishes them to give the living more children, meat, food, and happiness. He also appeals to them to forestall any looming disaster, protect their own from malevolent spirits, witches, and wizards, and give them long life and prosperity.<sup>27</sup> Other male members of the family then gather on the grave to touch the fowl with both hands; after this, the fowl is given to young boys to roast. It is eaten with corn fufu. The fowl or chicken serves a useful socio-cultural importance among the Laimbwe people: it is used to gather and feed people and also to cleanse the land of evil spirits once its blood has been spilled. Women prepare dry meat, fish, or tadpoles, which are eaten with corn fufu.

The importance of these instruments and ritual performances in the socio-cultural life of the Laimbwe cannot be over-emphasized. In the cosmology of the Laimbwe people, the number 3 signifies *Wuai* (children), *Nyengui* (bushmeat), and *Kesiazheh* (food). Whenever this number appears in a ritual, the emphasis is on fecundity and the provision of bushmeat and food by the dead to feed the family. The Laimbwe people place a premium on this funeral ritual because they consider it very important to unite families and to provide their daily bread.<sup>28</sup> It is also used to call on ancestors to protect family members and bring them peace and harmony.<sup>29</sup> The throwing of corn and feathers on the grave and talking to them pacifies and enlists the spirits of living-dead members of the family.

One significant element of the funerary ritual is the use of water following the arrival of family members from other places. A woman who arrives at the village for the burial of a relation is treated to this water ritual: the *Zheh'anduoh* collects water in a *Bhuom* and the woman is asked to wash her hands over the grave of the deceased family member. This is to enable the deceased to take note of her arrival and her intention to honour his or her dead. She then washes her face three times and with each of these three times, she splashes water on her legs. This is done to receive blessings and guidance of deceased family members. Water purifies her from any evil spirits that might have accompanied her if she did not honour the dead loved one; it renews her strength and propels her to greater exploits for the good of the family.<sup>30</sup> Her coming is a moment of family reunion, maintaining unity and support of one another in joy or sadness.

A similar ritual is also performed by the *Zheh'anduoh* for young boys who are still dependants and attending school or learning a trade, although inside, at the hearth. While facing the door, a young boy is given water to wash his face and hands three times (like the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Kam Kah, "Wuai, Kesiazheh, Nyengui:" History and Livelihood Challenges in a Cameroon's Montane Forest Reserve," *Economic and Ecohistory* XI, 11 (2015): 93-104.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Discussion with Susanna Mbong, Wonya-Mavio-Buea, 10 November 2023.

girl or woman), while throwing some of the water on the ground. The hearth is the source of life of the Laimbwe people; it is in the hearth that food is stored for future use. It is also in the hearth that some rituals are performed to connect with the living-dead: any such activity that takes place there invites the living-dead to enjoy the warmth of the hearth. Young boys throw a few coins on the ground for the gathered female elders to buy a condiment called *maggi*, which they share.<sup>31</sup> In this ritual performance around the hearth, the *Ehzele* of Laimbwe generally call on deceased ancestors to protect the boy or young man from accident and to shower him with blessings of money. He is also advised to use money wisely and to protect the family's image.

The funeral rite also provides an opportunity to take all the tender children of the family to the grave two or three days after the burial for the same water ritual.<sup>32</sup> Water is collected in a bowl by the *Zheh'anduoh* and these children are asked to wash their hands, faces and legs. This prevents them from bad dreams and teaches them to keep their cultural values, so that when they are older, they will not depart from them. It is also hoped that in washing their hands over the grave of the deceased individual, any of them with ailments will be healed and protected. The deceased of either sex is invoked to bestow blessing on these children and protect them from any harm that might befall them.

Another water ritual, one that concludes funeral ceremonies in Bu, is practiced during the *Mekwasuuh* masquerade performance and it involves men, women and children. While it is performed by the *Ehzem*, who owns the masquerade, its socio-cultural significance reaches into the entire community. This ritual performance is led by the *Keh'kam*, the leader of the *Mekwasuuh* masquerade; he carries water mixed with healing herbs in a *Keghei* (calabash) decorated with *Teh'sooh* (fibre) and *Tekreh* (robes) from the forest. The water with the healing herbs is splashed or sprinkled on the population by the *Keh'kam*. Women and girl children stand on one side of the compound turning their backs while men and boy children stand on the other side, facing the masquerade. This ritual wards off evil spirits and bad deeds, which may have been committed knowingly or unknowingly.<sup>33</sup> The greater significance of the ritual is that it does not permit people to go to the farm the following day; the farms are to be kept clean of evil spirits and if people go there the day after the ritual, crops will dry up. Only hunters may go and check their traps for game.<sup>34</sup> The plants mixed in the calabash are known by only a few initiated people. For this reason, evil forces are not able to weaken the potency of the ritual by making use of the same herbs for malicious reasons. The ritual assembles the villagers to wash them and protect

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31 Ibid.

32 Discussion with Andreas Kom, Weisoo Quarter Bu, 18 December 2016.

33 Discussion with Moses Ngui, Frederick Wakai Kom and Ernest Ache, Kassa-Bu, 24 December 2008; Discussion with Prudentia Wabi, Mbengkas, 10 January 2009.

34 Discussion with James Ambei, Bafren-Bu, 8 August 2008.

them against death. It also forestalls any plans by evil people to continue causing death and pain in the community.

For the harmony of the family and community, protection of childbirth against trouble or difficult circumstances also becomes a priority. When a woman gives birth if such conditions are present, she is secluded at home for a month and during this period, she will neither farm, cook food, nor carry out laundry activities. This is done for her by her relations. On the appointed day, a ritual is organized and performed by the *Phe'ngang* (priest(ess)) to enable the new mother to leave the home. The ritual involves the *Phe'ngang* mounting an *Ikeng* (clay pot) on the left-hand side of the hearth with special creeping plants wrapped round the mouth of this pot and, also, white marks.<sup>35</sup> This *Ikeng* is filled with corn beer. Two shells of a gastropod (snail), one male and the other female, float in the *Ikeng*. *Tetua* (locally-made candles, pl.; *itua*, sing.) are lit and mounted on the mouth of the *Ikeng*. The syncretic ritual gives the nursing mother and her husband the opportunity to thank God that He heard their prayers and gave them a child. It also unites the whole community, as witnessing villagers pour corn beer on their palms as they take an oath of support for the couple and ask the spirits that they never go through a difficult time in their marital life.<sup>36</sup>

This ritual performance concludes with a service of special food from a *Kekungheh*: a small loaf of corn fufu, sauce of oil and dried fish. The food is eaten with relish to ensure that the ritual ceremony is successful.<sup>37</sup> Evil or malevolent spirits within the community are appeased through this ritual of food. Serving as a communion to bind all present, Laimbwe culture is preserved. Through their massive attendance and participation, people come as witnesses to validate the solemn ritual to appease, thank, and appreciate all who played a role in bringing an end to pain in the family and community. Death of children at birth is to be a thing of the past and, especially, the birth of twins after difficulty in delivery makes the people dance and appreciate God through their ancestors. The mother and twins are adorned with creeping plants round their necks.<sup>38</sup> The culture of communalism is kept alive through the sharing of the contents of the *Ikeng*.

A woman who gives birth several times but the children all die may ask the *Phe'ngang* to organize a ritual to end this misfortune, when she has given birth to another child, in an effort to forestall the death of any of her future children. While consultations are

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35 Discussion with Vincent Kpwa Kendang, Bu-Town, 23 December 2016.

36 Ibid.

37 Discussion with Andreas Kom.

38 Discussion with Tri Kendang, Bafren-Bu, 27 December 2007; Abel Ngai, Bafren-Bu, 17 August 2008.



underway to have this ritual organized, she is not allowed to do anything nor to go outside in the rain (she may be affected by impurities in the air if rain falls upon her). The priest/ess guides the woman to cut some grass at home and to throw it on the ground. This ensures that bad spirits walk on this grass, which will negatively affect them. It is thus a ritual to dissipate any evil spirits which may harm her ability to reproduce, as well as a source of assurance and re-assurance.

The home-based part of the ritual is followed by a journey of the woman with her newborn child to a nearby river or stream, carrying a bowl and clay pot on her head. The mother and her child stand in the middle of the stream or river and are bathed together by the *Phe'ngang*. The bowl contains corn fufu and fish steeped in palm oil; it is collected from her by the *Phe'ngang* and he or she throws some of the food to the south of the stream or river and some of it northwards. They do this while pleading the case of the woman to the ancestors, calling on them to intervene and stop the misfortune of the woman losing her children through death so soon after birth.<sup>39</sup> This completes the ritual by the *Phe'ngang*; feasting continues at home, as people eat and drink corn beer from the *Ikeng*.

Through the *Kuiifuai*, their male regulatory society, the people of Bu often collect water from a stream in the *Kezheh* grove at the start of the dry season for ritual purpose. Collected in the early hours of the morning, the water is from the *Ukwoazheh* family and he collects it while nude. The water is used to cleanse the village of impending ailments and forestall negative forces from causing disaster. The ritual activity is held in the *Bei Saghekeh* (compound where matters are judged and settled).<sup>40</sup> The gathering of the villagers at the *Bei Saghekeh* drink from the calabash in order to fight against malevolent spirits and dry season ailments like cough. This ritual is a crowd puller; all roads lead to the *Bei Saghekeh* for boys, girls, men, and women. The ritual enhances respect for leaders, preempts impending health problems, and promotes culture, reconciliation, peace, and prosperity.

Proof of innocence is handled by a *Kuuh* (sing.) / *Tekuuh* (pl.) ritual. Swearings take one of two forms; the first involves preparing a concoction of leaves from special plants squeezed in water. A *Phe'ngang* administers the concoction into the eyes of people who each declined responsibility for an act to show whether they are either innocent or guilty. The results are visible when the guilty party scratches his or her eyes as if pepper was put into them. The innocent party does not feel any pain and endures the ritual without any

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<sup>39</sup> Discussion with Manfred Sei and Susanna Ekai, Mbengkas, 8 January 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Discussion with Hightime Kahghe Sah, 27 December 2007.

problem.<sup>41</sup> This particular ritual is known as *Ikiakuuh*. It is administered to both men and women without distinction, for the duration of the matter in contention.

In the second swearing ritual, parties in disagreement each come with their fowls (still alive). Similar to the *Ikiakuuh*, appropriate plants are mixed with water and given to the fowls to drink. The person whose fowl dies after drinking the mixture is declared guilty of an offence. To have this ritual performed, most people from the Laimbwe villages travel to a road-side settlement known as Mbietai on the Wum-Bamenda highway, while some people go to other places in Kom, Esu and Menchum valleys. Fowls are used because if the concoction were given to people to drink, their guilt would lead to death.<sup>42</sup> The one whose fowl dies from the beverage pleads for pardon and promises to mend his or her ways; some pay a heavy fine to the community. This ritual thus prevents looming disaster and also helps to clean the community of destructive spirits and individuals, while resolving conflict without violence among the people.

In a context which centralizes peace and prosperity, the Laimbwe people, like others in the western grassfields of Cameroon, use camwood and water to keep and propagate these products of social harmony. Both are also used by the people to heal the sick. During highly revered traditional weddings, young Laimbwe girls are bathed in water and rubbed with camwood; this preserves the sanctity of marriage from youth to old age. This ritual activity is organized to cleanse them of all impurities as they prepare to have life partners and perpetuate their matrilineal lineages or families through procreation; it also serves as a *rite de passage* into womanhood in the three main Laimbwe villages of Baisso, Bu and Mbengkas.<sup>43</sup> Elderly women are quite conscious of this inter-generational activity through which they communicate important messages of womanhood, such as responsible behaviour and care, to the next generation of women leaders in the communities.

Creeping plants squeezed in water are also used in family shrines to cure people of persistent ailments or to prevent these ailments from spreading through the community. Family and community members are given this concoction to drink and get well or to prevent them from contracting the ailments, and children are bathed with it. This important ritual in the health history of the Laimbwe is repeated at the beginning of every dry season to cushion the harsh health effects of the season and the disaster that would

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41 Discussion with Andreas, Weisoo, Bu.

42 Discussion with Vida Wei Chou.

43 Henry Kam Kah, "Camwood (*Pterocarpus Tinctorius*) in the Political Economy of the Cross and Manyu Rivers Basin of Cameroon and Some Hinterland Communities, 1916-1961," *Afrika Zamani* 20 (2012): 151.

accompany it. Some of these leaves are wrapped on the necks of women and signify a renewal of Laimbwe society through the agency of women.<sup>44</sup>

Water may also be used by insurgent women to defile the compounds of men who stand against them. They do this by moving into and urinating in the compounds; in extreme situations, the women defecate in the compounds.<sup>45</sup> Between 1957 and 1959, when women from Kom, Laimbwe, and other areas rose up against British colonial authorities and the indigenous institutions that supported them, Laimbwe women performed these rituals in the compounds of some stubborn men. These compounds were abandoned and left desolate, because women's urine frightened the owners away. Only a costly traditional cleansing ritual by notables enabled them to return.<sup>46</sup> On a positive note, years later the *Kelu* women (*Ehzele'ghalu*) – the former revolutionaries – also visited the defiled compound and bathed newborn babies with water and some special leaves. This was a purification rite which was meant to prevent evil forces from affecting them.<sup>47</sup>

### Decline in Ritual Activities

The decline in water-related ritual activities for *Ehzele* Laimbwe are a consequence of challenging and disruptive external influences. One of these was the advent of Christianity in Laimbwe country during the 1920s; the teachings of the Bible inspired some newly-Christian women to question the socio-cultural life of the Laimbwe people, especially ritual performances. Specifically, the Basel Mission made its way to Bu village in 1926 with the arrival of Catechist Fonto-oh Hiob (Job) from Nsem Bafut near Bamenda. The church eventually went on a collusion path with several aspects of tradition and custom of the Laimbwe people.

In one such instance, on 27 December 1964, the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Bu, Thomas Ngong Amaazee, together with a handful of elders of the church, including Victor Bo, Moses Nang, Abel Kpwai, Monica Mai, Susanna Wei and Elizabeth Ngei, acted against the Fon of Bu, Chu Mbonghekang and his council of elders, for indulging in “pagan” practices. In a petition signed by the Pastor and these elders, they argued that Bu village

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44 Henry Kam Kah, “Feminist Activism, Economic Carte Blanche, Political Control, Symbol and Symbolism: A Historical Interpretation of the *Kelu* Women Revolution in Bu-Cameroon, 1957-59,” *Afrika Zamani* 17 (2009): 94-95.

45 Ibid., 95; Henry Kam Kah, “Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership, 1957-1961,” *African Studies Quarterly* 12, 3 (2011): 76.

46 Ibid.

47 Henry Kam Kah, “Women as Makers of History: A Study of the *Kelu* Women Movement in Bu-Wum, Cameroon 1957-59,” *CASTALIA: Ibadan Journal of Multicultural/Multidisciplinary Studies* 17, 1 (2004): 28.

leadership was compelling Christians to join “pagan...juju societies” and also “drink pagan medicines according to old fashion.”<sup>48</sup> Some Christian adherents, in solidarity with the Pastor and his elders, preached or campaigned against Indigenous Laimbwe ritual activities. They aimed particularly at rituals associated with masquerade performances, child birth, and community cleansing, arguing that God was the solution to all problems and that these rituals served no real purpose.

Another reason for decline in these rituals is the construction of modern health centres in Laimbwe villages, notably in Bu and Mbengkas. In the past, *Ehzele* Laimbwe who gave birth relied exclusively on traditional birth attendants and pharmacopoeia. When there was need, a ritual was performed to welcome and protect any newborn child. The advent of modern medical facilities, like the health post in Bu, for example, in the 1970s and then its development into a health centre with resident nurses, have turned the attention of some people towards this style of medicine and away from rituals to heal the sick. Many women give birth in the health centre and those who might have delivered at home, they are taken to these medical facilities for medical attention.<sup>49</sup> Some Christian families are especially cool towards consulting the *Phe'ngang* for a protection ritual for the mother and newborn baby, thanks to the Western education that they have acquired. With it, they believe only in the curative power of the health establishment.

In addition, those who can perform these rituals have become fewer and cannot meet the demand to heal the sick and purify the land.<sup>50</sup> Some Priest(esses) have died without preparing others to succeed them, some have converted to Christianity and renounced the Indigenous rituals as a solution to their health problems, and some of the Priest(esses) have been taken to the towns and cities when they aged, to live and be cared for by their relations living there.<sup>51</sup> There is a general dearth in the number of people able to perform rituals, such as those concerning child birth or village cleansing. A few charlatans today demand money and other material wealth in exchange for their performance; this is unprecedented and has made more people lose faith in rituals as a solution to their socio-cultural problems. This monetization of communal rituals contributes to the lack of interest in participating among some Laimbwe women.

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48 Henry Kam Kah and Eric Kangha Chu, “Education, Preservation, and Transformation in a Cameroonian Polity,” *Lefem: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Transformation Education A Publication of St. Monica University Higher Institute Buea* 1, 1 (2023): 52.

49 Discussion with Rebecca Sih Dan, Bafren-Bu, 12 April 2023.

50 Discussion with Vincent Kpwa Kendang.

51 Ibid.

Migration has also contributed to the decline of these water-related rituals in Laimbweland. The commodification of agriculture, especially plantation agriculture, has led to a movement of young people from Laimbwe to the coastal region of Cameroon to seek employment there. Although they occasionally come home to commune with their kith and kin, this movement out of the village interrupts the transmission of these older cultural practices. Many young people who work in these plantations or in restaurants away from their home villages have accepted alien ideas and will not give their full attention to the necessity of performing these rituals.<sup>52</sup> The gap created in the propagation of culture explains why these young and mobile people prefer to use their money to consult a specialist for their psycho-social and health challenges in the towns, rather than returning to the village to subscribe to these water rituals. It is, however, worth noting that some people continued to go home for these rituals but the number has diminished.

### **Continuing Relevance of these Rituals**

Negative forces against these water related rituals notwithstanding, there are still *Ehzele* Laimbwe who tenaciously cling to rituals as a means of averting looming disaster and for protection. For example, people who become conscious of the fact that they may be compelled to prove their innocence decide not to foment problems that can create division and destruction.<sup>53</sup> The fear of open disgrace and of enduring pain when subjected to the *Kuuh* ritual in public has made some people become responsible and avoid wrong doing. Those who want a just society have also decided to subscribe to this ritual performance as an effective way of solving lingering problems such as theft and witchcraft. They encourage others to do same, to cleanse Laimbwe society of trouble-makers.

Other Laimbwe people still believe that rituals for nursing mothers enable them to carry out household chores and work on the farm. They believe that this serves several useful purposes. One is that such rituals unite the family and mobilize villagers to commune with one another, share experiences, heal wounds, and bring about peace. They argue that these rituals offer families that rare moment of giving gratitude to God for the gift of children, kindness, and for His love for them. Childbearing is at the heart of the culture and belief system of the Laimbwe people.<sup>54</sup> The fertility of women guarantees regeneration and the renewal of matrilineal lineages, and the rituals promote reconciliation between people and strengthen family unity. The mobilization which accompanies ritual activity

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<sup>52</sup> Discussion with Ngowei Moses, Likomba-Tiko, 17 July 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Discussion with Ndong Eric Kubuh, Bafren-Bu, 23 December 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Discussion with Prudencia Kai Wanjū, Jennet Ngwa, Rebecca Ngoi, Agnes Zei, Susana Wei, Mbengkas, 15 August 2007.

makes Laimbwe people honour their communal values, which may be described as “All for one and one for all.’

The rituals performed on graves of deceased persons continue to be popular among the Laimbwe because it is a form of direct communication between the living and the living-dead (ancestors who passed on but who continue to linger and protect their people). Through these ritual prayers of intercession are offered for family members who are away from home. The Laimbwe people have strong faith in intercession by their ancestors and their rituals places significant emphasis on this. Also, during the ritual on the grave, important lessons of life are passed down from elderly women and men to the younger generation of girls and boys. This is done to ensure continuity so that when the elders are gone, the baton of command will be safe in the hands of the young.<sup>55</sup>

Through the various water rituals, lessons of traditional pharmacology and the Indigenous knowledge system of the Laimbwe are transmitted by custodians of the herbs and barks used in these rituals. This is important because some ailments like side pain<sup>56</sup> are effectively treated using traditional herbs.<sup>57</sup> Due to harsh economic realities, there is a growing interest in Indigenous medicine and some of these rituals are regaining their popularity, becoming more relevant and useful to the people. A cross-section of the population continues to believe that the core cultural values of the Laimbwe people need to be preserved and, in some cases, revived. Those that are near extinction should be resuscitated for the collective good of the people.

Finally, many scholars and students show great interest in the documentation of cultural and ritual practices of the Laimbwe and other nearby people through research projects in institutions of higher learning in Cameroon and elsewhere.<sup>58</sup> Cultural festivals and other related activities featuring these rituals represent the people involved, which may help people from other places in learning from these cultural values. Although expensive, such activities are valuable because they recapture a ritual life that preserves culture, averts looming disaster, and cleanses Laimbweland of evil spirits.

## Conclusion

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<sup>55</sup> Discussion with Rtd Rev. Simon Muam Asang, Mbulom-Bu, 5 August 2008.

<sup>56</sup> This is a persistent and troubling pain at the side of the stomach. It could be on the left or right side.

<sup>57</sup> Discussion with Emmanuel Towah Ndong, Bu-Town, 10 October 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Discussion with Walter Gam Nkwi, Buea, 13 July 2023.

In this paper, I have shown that women's water-related rituals among the Laimbwe of Cameroon serve a variety of socio-cultural and cosmological purposes. This is not only limited to *Ehzele* Laimbwe, because other African communities experience this. As long as these rituals are performed when needed, they contribute to the preservation of the people's rich culture, avert looming disaster, and cleanse the community of malevolent spirits. This study is placed within a general framework of matricultural studies as they obtain in other parts of the world and applied to the Laimbwe ethnic group in Cameroon. I have shown in the paper that women or mothers relationship with water places them largely at the centre of Laimbwe society through ritual activities and in caring for the needs of the society. The rituals that are organized in honour of them bring people and resources together to feed the teeming population that participate in these rituals. In fact, women's agency is great, and they play a central role in Laimbweland.

The role of women in Laimbweland is closely related to what Wolfstone has said of matricultural societies in Canada and other parts of the world. What makes this study different is that, although Wolfstone's theory emphasizes the socially egalitarian nature of matricultural societies, this has not always been the case concerning the ritual life of the Laimbwe. Instead, particularly with respect to rituals concerning childbirth and purification, women pull the strings and command more power covertly and overtly.

The study has also shown that the water-based rituals of *Ehzele* Laimbwe express and sustain ritual systems similar to what Guédon has said of other matricultural systems. The study has shown that, in as much as the male and female gender in Laimbwe have a common enterprise, there are specific rituals activities that are led by men and others led by women. The Laimbwe matrilineal system is built around women to such an extent that their influence in Laimbwe socio-cultural activities is not in doubt. They are always there to push men to action, as well as regulate and even control their behaviour. Even after conversion into the Christian religion, some *Ehzele* Laimbwe continue to shape the life of their community through their pointed interventions during ritual performance. The men who perform these rituals do so to please and not to displease these women.

Women's agency in Africa can also be understood through the lens of ritual activity, based on the discussion in this paper. The introduction of Christian evangelism, which was in conflict with Indigenous cosmological beliefs, saw women play a dual role in this hybridization of cosmological views. Many new converts were women who embraced Christian doctrine but paradoxically, remained adherents of the Indigenous religious beliefs. Their agency is found in the adaptation, re-adaptation, and internalization of other cosmological aspects of the African world-view. The fact that Christian and traditional rituals exist side by side in the Laimbwe villages of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas show the dynamism of African women to embrace change and keep tradition.

Through traditional rituals, *Ehzele* Laimbwe are at the center of maintaining their cultural values, such as blessing, peace, stability, and the destruction of malevolent spirits, even when adopting Christianity's dissimilar practices and beliefs. If Laimbwe society today continues to see the relevance of their Indigenous rituals, it is thanks to the adaptive capability of their women. This has been brought out in this paper. When assessed through their water-based rituals, the Laimbwe matricultural system is similar to other matricultural systems in very many respects but also different in some unique characteristics. This study has examined all of these within a broader context of social change, changing gender roles, and the relevance or irrelevance of rituals to solving the problems of the Laimbwe people. The prevailing situation is therefore a hybrid one pointing again to adaptation, re- daptation, resilience, and refusal.

### About the Author

Henry Kam Kah holds a PhD in History from the University of Buea, Cameroon, and has over twenty-five years of teaching experience there. The area of research interest includes slavery, provenance, gender, conflict and culture. Professor Kah has several scholarly papers, book chapters and a co-edited book to his credit.

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