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Myths and Controversies of the Origins of the Misaje People: Changing Trends in Socio-Economic and Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The massive movement of people during the 19th century in the different parts of Cameroon including Misaje was propelled by many factors. These movements and settlements in the Misaje area were predominantly effected by four ethnic groups, namely: the Hausas who claimed to be the first settlers and the recent immigrants made up of the Nchaney, Bessah and the Dumbo ethnic groups. Prior to this movement, the indigenous Hausa group who had earlier settled in Misaje were already involved in varied socio-economic activities such as trade in kolanuts, palm products, slaves, ivory and salt especially during the long distance trade between the Bamenda Grassfields communities found within the contemporary Nigeria. In the meantime, their presence within the study locale created an avenue of alternating peace and confrontations with the Hausas who claimed to be the aborigines. However, the focus of this paper is to examine the myth, controversies and polemics surrounding the origins of the

indigenous ethnic groups in Misaje. It equally examines the different contested claims and debates surrounding their history and how their presence have led to overt confrontations between the Hausa, the supposed legitimate settlers on one hand, and the Bessah, Dumbo and Nchaney immigrants. Furthermore, the paper also argues that the evolutionary trends in the socio-economic and cultural mores implanted by the aborigines (Hausas) emanated from the myths and controversies of origin. It further argues that in recent times, these ethnic groups have manifested claims of supremacy over Misaje. Therefore, gleaned from both primary and secondary sources, the paper reveals that, these conflicting claims of supremacy over Misaje have acted as a fertile ground for the emergence of misunderstanding among the settlers. Concomitantly, there is need for the government in collaboration with other stake holders to mitigate the resurgence of such conflicts and encourage paecefull coexistence.

Key words: *Controversies, Confrontations, Ethnic groups, Hausas, Misaje and Myth*

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent and establishment of the Nchaney, Mbissa and Dumbo people in Misaje around the 19th century have influenced the socio-economic and cultural activities of the area. But prior to the advent of these ethnic groups there existed the Hausas who claimed to be the aborigines, involved in sale of kola nuts across the Cameroon-Nigerian borders. According to Takor, they acted as middle men during the long distance trade because they had established permanent settlements around trade centres⁸⁵. Thus, the issue of integrating these indigenous groups of people into this milieu that was considered as a commercial entrepôt gradually emerged in confrontations that perturbed the peace and stability of the study locale. It is based on this premise that incorporating the people within this set-up culminated in overt skirmishes between the so-called aborigines and the incoming ethnic groups. Nevertheless, despite this

⁸⁵ N.K. Takor, "The Bamenda Grassfields in Long Distance Trade c.1850-1961: Evolutionary Dynamics, Socio-Economic and Political Transmutations", PhD in History. University of Yaounde I, 2011, p. 5.

perturbation, the evolution of the socio-economic and cultural transmutations had some repercussions in shaping the lifestyle of the people in this area. Aspects such as nuptial customs and traditions, dead celebration of a fon and succession were the preoccupations that projected the evolutionary dynamics in the socio-economic and cultural legacies in Misaje.

The history of origin, migration and settlement of different ethnic groups in the Cameroon Grassfields in general and among the Misaje people in particular is surrounded by a lot of myths. Recent debates put forth by some scholars have raised a lot of controversies with regards to the origins of the various ethnic groups that made up the people of Misaje. According to Michaela, there are diverse claims and narratives linked to the origins of the Misaje people⁸⁶. This is based on the varied sources of history. Nevertheless, such claims especially among the recent migrants (Bessah, Nchaney and the Dumbo people) on one hand and the Hausas who claimed to be the initial settlers remains our central point of focus. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to trace the origins and the history of the co-existence of the people.

2. LOCATION OF STUDY AREA

Misaje was raised to the status of a Sub Division in 1992 by Presidential Decree No 92/187 of 1st September 1992⁸⁷. This was followed by the creation of the Misaje Rural Council in 1993 by Presidential decree No 93/321 of 25th November 1993. Misaje is the administrative head quarter of the Misaje Rural Council and Misaje Sub Division. But before then, Misaje was administered as part of Ako Sub Division in Donga Mantung Division. According to the population statistics of 1987, Misaje Sub Division had an approximate population of 33000 people.⁸⁸ It has twelve villages with each headed by a Fon who was in charge of local village

⁸⁶ M. Pelican, Mask and Staff, *Identity Politics in the Cameroon Grassfields*, Berghahn Books publishers, Berghahn, New York, 2015, p. 25

⁸⁷ Misaje Rural Council Archives (MRCA), file No. 201, Administrative Affairs, Decree No. 92/187 of September 1992 gave Misaje the status of a Sub Division, 2009, p. 40.

⁸⁸MRCA, file No. 20, Population statistics of Misaje Sub Division in 1987, 26th September 2009.

administration. These twelve villages included Nkanchi, Nfume, Bem, Chunghe, Mbissa, Kwei, Kamine, Akweto, Bebekette, Bebejatto, Kibbo and Dumbo.

Misaje Sub Division is found in Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. This Division is made up of five Sub Divisions namely: Ndu, Nwa, Ako, Nkambe Central and Misaje. Misaje Sub Division shares boundaries with three other Divisions of the North West Region of Cameroon and the Federal Republic of Nigeria⁸⁹. To the North, it shares boundary with the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to the East with Ako and Nkambe sub Divisions, to the South with Bui Division precisely Noni Sub Division and to the West with Menchum and Boyo Divisions⁹⁰. Misaje Sub Division is found between latitude 6° 30' and 6° 50' North and longitude 10° 20' and 10° 30' east. It is made up of twelve villages with an approximate population of about thirty three thousand people according to the 1987 population census and has a surface area of about seven hundred and fifty kilo meters square.⁹¹

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAME OF ANALYSIS

Myths are the oldest and most powerful of all forms of story. They often carry an important message for a culture or group. Therefore, myths were stories that gave people a relationship with the universe, the passing of time and with their environment⁹². Some myths gave the official view of creation while others were a way to explain natural events. Myths were passed on by words of mouth and their function was to explain, to teach lessons and to entertain⁹³.

According to Ebbute, a myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ MRCA, file No. 201, Administrative Affairs, p. 55

⁹¹ Misaje Rural Council Archives, BEDEVCONSULT (Break Through Development Consultants), an assessment report on the Monographic study of Misaje Area, 2004.

⁹² H. Ohlgren Thomas, *A True Tale of Robin Hood*. Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997, p. 55.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 60.

phenomenon and typically involving supernatural beings or events⁹⁴. A myth is different from a legend in that it is a traditional historical tale or collection of related tales popularly regarded as true but usually containing a mixture of fact and fiction⁹⁵. In the same vein, Pelican refers to myths as stories that contributed to the elaboration of a cosmological system and to a cohesive social identity⁹⁶. Myth was frequently opposed to history of events that can be dated or located in a chronological relationship to the present⁹⁷. To her, myth was commonly used as a term for purely fictitious narrative that often involved supernatural persons, actions, or events, but it also embodies popular ideas about the natural world and historical events in a given culture⁹⁸. This implies that the group telling the story believed it is true. However, it is worth mentioning that the myth surrounding the history of the Misaje people can be attributed to that of the Kom people who believed they originated from a large tree to have swallowed a snake and later on vomited in their present site⁹⁹. Thus, myths had important purposes for the people of Misaje and formed a part of their belief system.

According to Timothy Lintner,¹⁰⁰ the most succinct definition of controversy is based on the notion of authenticity. Simply, controversy is the contention that emerges from real-life authentic topics. This controversy raises compelling questions that were both approached and answered from different perspectives based on social, cultural, regional and political values, beliefs and biases. He goes further to state that the theoretical underpinning of controversy resides at the core of a functional democracy. This is applicable in the context of the Misaje people when a

⁹⁴ M.I. Ebbutt, *Hero-myths & Myths of the British Race*, New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1910, p. 34.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

⁹⁶ Pelican, *Mask and Staff*, 35.

⁹⁷ M. Hertefeldt, « Mythes et Idéologies dans les Rwanda Ancien et Contemporain » in the *Historian in Tropical Africa*, edited by J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L. Thomas, London, 1964, p.56.

⁹⁸ Pelican, *Mask and Staff*, p. 40.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁰⁰ T. Lintner, "The Controversy Over Controversy in the Social Studies Classroom" *SRATE Journal* 27 no. 1 (Winter 2018), 14.

plurality of divergence in perspectives were not just tolerated but actively encouraged to enhance cohabitation and harmony.

Richard Woolley posits that a controversial issue was one that presents challenges and stimulated debate which involved no universally held or fixed point of view¹⁰¹. Almost any issue can become controversial when people hold different beliefs, views or values. Some issues are controversial because of their subject matter this is very visible in the twelve villages that make up the Misaje Sub Division which in this work are classified into three different clans. It should be noted that even though in broad terms they claimed a common origin, their different narratives however have variations that are controversial. The three clans or villages include the Nchaney, Mbissa and the Dumbo.

As far as the Nchaney clan was concerned, one school of thought holds that they migrated in the first half of the nineteenth century from Kimi in the Banyo (Adamawa) as a result of the Fulani raids and jihads. This movement was under the leadership of Ngungu, who was afraid that his children would be killed during the war¹⁰². It was believed that the Bessah people migrated from Kano (Nigeria) around the ninetieth century¹⁰³. This was as a result of a war of supremacy between the people of the Ussa clan and the Kano people in Nigeria that forced the Mbissa people that constituted part of this clan to split off¹⁰⁴. As such, they left Nigeria and came to Cameroon through the Adamawa Region and finally settled in their present site found in the Misaje area. On the other hand, it was believed that the Bembo and the Moh people came from an unknown

¹⁰¹Richard Woolley, "Controversial Issues: Identifying the Concerns and Priorities of Student Teachers" Policy Futures in Education, 9 edition, no. 2 (2011), p. 281.

¹⁰² E.N. Tata., A Concise History of the Kemazung People 1861-1997: Over 100 Years of Amazing Historical Evaluations, No publication place, No publisher, 1989, p. 19

¹⁰³Interview with Ayaba Cyprain, 70 years, Fon of Nfume village, Nfume, 26th November 2021: According to him, a controversial claim is brought in that Ngungu transformed into a bee and swallowed his children. When he arrived Nkanchi village, he vomited his children and in the course of time, he changed his name from Ngungu to Mbene, which signified the "place of Mbene"

¹⁰⁴ Idem.

land where a mighty tree was seen as their source of origin¹⁰⁵. However, the controversies surrounding the origin of the Misaje people must be subjected to serious scrutiny. One cannot therefore present a single and unanimously accepted story about the origin of the Misaje people.

4. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HAUSAS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE NAME MISAJE

The Hausas were the earlier settlers in the Misaje area which was considered as a transitional zone during the period of the long distance trade¹⁰⁶. As far as the meaning of the name Misaje is concerned, it is a word derived from the Hausa language *mai saje*, which signified the “master of the beard”.¹⁰⁷. According to Pelican, the name Misaje was given by a prominent Hausa businessman who operated a rest house for traders coming from far off places to rest before continuing their trip to Nigeria¹⁰⁸. Thus, in this context, Misaje signified “master of the beads”¹⁰⁹. The long distance trade made Misaje to be considered as a commercial centre whereby merchants from Kom, Nso, Babungo and other areas carried items such as salt, kola nuts, and palm kernels to Nigeria¹¹⁰. From Misaje, these traders passed through Dumbo which was one of the bordering towns between Cameroon and Nigeria. While in Nigeria, they exchanged these items with other items such as clothes, gun and gun powered whiskies and other basic commodities¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Ngwang Kiwajo Christopher, 60 years, Fon of Mbissa, Misaje, 11th September 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Takor, “The Bamenda Grassfields”, p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ M. P. Pelican, “Getting along the Grassfields: Inter-ethnic Relations and Identity Politics in North West Region of Cameroon”, Ph. D Thesis, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, 2006, p. 49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ Takor, “The Bamenda Grassfields”, p. 40.

¹¹¹ I. M. Betseke., “A Socio-Economic Analysis of Rural Activities in the Dumbo Village, Misaje Sub Division, A Monographic Study Report” Jakiri, “A Village study Report”, T.S.A. Nkambe, August 2014, p. 30.



Due to the presence of vast and available grazing land, Fulani pastoralists began to penetrate the area in the 1920s¹¹². The area under study, like many other communities in the Grassfields has an outstanding history which can be traced as far back as the pre-colonial period. The present Misaje Sub Division is made up of people claiming different origins, even though they have similarities in culture and languages. The various ethnic groups that made up the sub division have been classified into three clans. These clans are comprised of twelve villages considered to be the aborigines. The table below shows the classification of villages peopled by the ethnic groups found in Misaje.

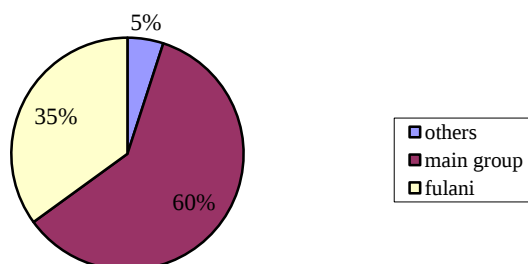
TABLE 1: The 1987 Population statistics of Misaje Sub Division

Ethnic group	Villages	Population
A. Nchaney	Nfume	2.489
	Bem	1.378
	Nkanchi	10.887
	Nchunghe	818
	Kibbo	935
SUB TOTAL		16.507
B. Dumbo	Dumbo	4.976
	Kwei	524
	Bebejatto	1.384
	Bebekette	1.760
SUB TOTAL		8.644
C. Mbissa	Mbissa	1.502
	Kamine	3.179
	Akweto	3.420
SUB TOTAL		8.101
TOTAL		33.252

Source: Misaje Rural Council Record, file No. 20, Population statistics, 1987.

¹¹² Takor, "The Bamenda Grassfields", p. 23.

Figure 1: Population Distribution in Misaje Area in Percentage (%)



Source: Constructed from table 1 above

Table 1 and figure 1 illustrate the distribution of population figures in the study area. Official sources revealed the total population of Misaje Sub Division at 33000 people (1987 population census). Besides this figure, there has been considerable population growth since it was released. Generally, population statistics are based on estimates. This is because it is always difficult to assess the size of each group in a community or that of a country at large. But notwithstanding, in terms of percentage the above mentioned villages account for sixty percent of the entire population, the Mbororos and Hausas constituted thirty five percent while the other groups made up five percent.¹¹³ The others here referred to non-indigenes such as the Wimbuns, Pinyin, Bansa, Bafut, Bali, and Nkwen among others. It should be noted that the Nchaney clan was the most populated because it had the largest number of villages. This was followed by the Dumbo clan with an estimated population of 6.644 inhabitants, which is the second largest. We equally have the Mbissa with a population of 8001 inhabitants.

Besides the indigenous people (aborigines), there also existed non-indigenous population consisting of the Pinyin, Wimbun and the Fulani ethnic groups. They were attracted into the area by the good economic opportunities such as trading activities, favourable climatic conditions and

¹¹³ Misaje Rural Council Archives, file No. 22, Population Statistics in Misaje Sub Division, 1987.

good topography. They also constituted a strong force in the growth and development of the community. This can be explained by the fact that they were engaged in commercial activities such as craft and trade that generated a lot of income for them. Also, they were involved in farming activities, fishing, hunting and wine tapping. In the light of the forgone discussion, Misaje was considered as a cosmopolitan community that constituted a cross section of different people. However, it is worth mentioning that in the history of the area, Misaje was considered as no man's land and this was as a result of the presence of non-indigenes in the area.¹¹⁴

4.1. Different Narratives about the Origins of the People of Misaje

The nineteenth century was marked by massive population movement in Cameroon. Many reasons attributed for these movements which can be viewed from varied perspectives. They included inter-tribal wars, Fulani raids, Jihads (Holy wars) and the prevalence of natural disasters, the search for fertile lands and good water supply, the quest for secured environment and grazing land¹¹⁵. Before the nineteenth century, Misaje used to be an empty vast land that harboured a lot of wild animals and this attracted hunters into the area¹¹⁶ but in the meantime, people started settling in the area. This was precipitated by merchants who were engaged in long distance trade which was marked by the commercialisation of slaves, kola nuts, and palm kernels etc. These items were most often exchanged in Nigeria with items such as salt, limestone, clothes and guns.¹¹⁷ These merchants established settlements in Misaje which acted as their resting area before they continued with their journey

¹¹⁴Interview with Richard Chefon, 57years, Fon of Nkanchi village, Misaje, 11th September 2021.

¹¹⁵ I. Fowler, and D. Zeitlyn, 'Introduction: The Grassfields and the Tikar', in I. Fowler and D. Zeitlyn (eds), *African Crossroads: Intersections between History and Anthropology in Cameroon*. Oxford: Berghahn, 1996.

¹¹⁶ Pelican, Mask and Staff, p. 30.

¹¹⁷M. J. Rowlands, *Local and Long Distance Trade and Incipient State Formation in the Bamenda Plateau in the Nineteenth century*, 1979, Ph D Dissertation in history, University of Yaounde, pp. 1-20.

to Nigeria.¹¹⁸ Businessmen from the Adamawa area and other parts of the Grasslands made a stopover in Misaje. The long distance trade did not only influenced the lives of those who were involved in it but also that of the indigenous people as some of them acted as middlemen in the trade. Thus, Misaje became a commercial centre that embraced merchants from almost every area in the Grassfields¹¹⁹.

4.2. Nchaney Myths of Origins

The history of the origins of ethnic groups in the Grassland area especially the Misaje area is very intriguing. These ethnic groups within the study locale belong to the Tikar group who claimed to have migrated from Kimi in the Banyo area in the Adamawa area.¹²⁰ Some sources hold that it was as a result of the Fulani raids and jihads in the first half of the nineteenth century that precipitated their migration. This movement was under the leadership of Ngungu, who was afraid that his children would be killed during the war.

According to Daaku, Oral traditions transmit messages in the form of songs and oral statements¹²¹. These sources were very common in the history of myth of the Misaje people. This was corroborated in an interview with Ayaba Cyprian who holds that Ngungu transformed into a bee and swallowed his children who were later on vomited when he arrived Nkanchi village.¹²² When he died, he was transformed into a rock. Disputes erupted as to who would be the successor.¹²³ After his death, many fons have ruled the Nchaney clan and they include the following, Mbene II, Kabo, Kirine, Kimenchung, Chimbung, Bamine, Fimban, Massa, Nchenghe, Fuma I, Ngong, Sale, Micheal Fuma and lastly the present Richard Chefon who succeeded Micheal Fuma in 1997.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 45.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Fon Richard.

¹²⁰ Rowlands, Local and Long Distance Trade, p. 15.

¹²¹ K. Y. Daaku, 'History in the Oral Tradition of Akan', In *Folklore and Traditional History*, edited by R. N Dorson, the Hague, 1973, p. 40.

¹²² Interview with Ayaba.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ MRCA, File No. 3Ad 2012, Misaje Council Development Annexes, 2012, P. 88-150.

At the roots of the Nchaney polity and identity, is the mythical migration of its ancestors, who finally settled at Nkanchi, by the eighteen century¹²⁵. Fon Richard and his group of elders and notables summarised early Nchaney history as follows:

We migrated from Kimi in the Banyo area in Adamawa; we are Tikar. This happened as a result of a serious war caused by the Muslims in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. We were called the nchaney and were under the leadership of Ngungu, whose name means the carpenter bee. He was afraid that his children might be killed. He transformed into a bee and swallowed his family. He flew to this place here Nkanchi, which by then was a virgin place, a free land¹²⁶. When he got here, he vomited his children. He was no longer called Ngungu but Mbene and the place was called fembene, meaning 'home or palace of Mbene'. His children were called bami babi soshung in our language, which means 'the people of those who are seven'. These were the seven kingmakers from the seven families that make up the Nchaney.

Similarly, Fon Ngungu's vomiting of his children can be interpreted as an act of procreation which implied the creation of a new chiefdom¹²⁷. A crucial component of Nchaney identity was vested in the group's relationship with the land they occupied. This connection was expressed in the ritual responsibilities of the fon and the seven kingmakers. They were in charge of fostering the relationship with their ancestors, who were represented in the eight stones found in the village's sacrificial site. Nchaney identification with the land and the ancestors replicated a distinctive feature of many Grassfields societies. The land was generally

¹²⁵ Pelican, "Getting along the Grassfields, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Fowler, and Zeitlyn.. 'Introduction: The Grassfields and the Tikar', pp.1-16.

¹²⁷ R. Newton.. 'Intelligence Report on Mbembe and Nchanti Areas in the Bamenda Division of the Cameroons Province', unpublished manuscript. Buea: National Archives of Cameroon, 1428, Ac. 12a., 1935, p. 56.

thought to punish those who transgressed against the moral code and could be called upon to make judgment in disputes. Moreover, land was considered the primary means of production for farmers.

As Warnier argues, the fon's control over ancestral substances and over the chiefdom's boundaries was crucial to the production of locality which were at the heart of disrupting unity and belonging among the chiefdom's heterogeneous population¹²⁸. The contemporary population of Nkanchi was conceived of as descendants of the seven founding families who were represented by the seven kingmakers. Each family had its own initial settlement, which included a sacred site where its members could hide in case of war. In addition, there was an eighth family in Nkanchi, the Che, who claimed to be the original inhabitants that the seven founding families met upon their arrival, and who had retained their ritual autonomy¹²⁹. This was a common plot in the founding histories of Grassfields chiefdoms and it is indicative of the composite nature of Grassfields societies.

4.3 Bessah Narratives

The Mbissa clan originally known as Bessah was made up of three villages, namely: Akweto, Kamine and Mbissa. It was believed that they migrated from Kano in Niger around the ninetieth century¹³⁰. The Mbissa people who constituted part of the Ussa clan and the Kano people in Nigeria splitted off as a result of a war of supremacy¹³¹. As such, they left Nigeria and came to Cameroon through the Adamawa Region and finally settled in their present site found in the Misaje area. But before their arrival in the area, the Bemboo and the Moh people who were the original settlers claimed to be the aborigines of a small settlement found in the Leseh hill.¹³² It was believed that the Bemboo and the Moh people came from an

¹²⁸P. N. Nkwi and J.P. Warnier, *Elements for A History of Western Grassfields*, Yaounde, Publication of the Department of Sociology, 1982, p. 30.

¹²⁹MRCA, File No. 3Ad 2012, Misaje Council Development Annexes, 2012, P. 50

¹³⁰Tata., *A Concise History of the Kemazung People*, p. 19.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 22.

¹³² Interview with Ngwang Kiwajo Christopher, 60 years, Fon of Mbissa, Misaje, 11th September 2021.

unknown land where a mighty tree was seen as their source of origin.¹³³ Immediately after their settlement in the Misaje area, the Ussa chief of Nigeria who considered the Mbissa people as an integral part of his chieftdom went out in search of the runaway faction. The efforts of the chief went in vain as his team were unable to know exactly the new settlement of the Mbissa people.

4.4. Dumbo Claims

With regards to the history surrounding the myth of origins of the Dumbo people, no clear claims have been established. Based on narratives from Fon Jebo Augustine, the people claimed their origins from Northern Nigeria, precisely from Kano around the 19th century.¹³⁴ Furthermore, he holds that they migrated as a result of Fulani raids and jihads that plagued the area. This was because they were afraid to be converted into Islam since they were considered as infidels. They entered Cameroon through the Northern Region, precisely, Adamawa, passing through the Grasslands area before moving further where they finally settled at the present site in Dumbo¹³⁵.

5. CONFLICTING CLAIMS OVER MISAJE

Misaje constituted one of the villages in the Bamenda Grassland with a long and outstanding history. It is a place of contested claims and multiple history of origins, dating back to the colonial period. It was an agglomeration of ethnic groups and occupational groups, mainly attracted by economic opportunities. To begin with, Misaje had a multi-ethnic character. In the nineteenth century, the area now occupied by Misaje was used as a hunting ground by inhabitants of nearby villages¹³⁶. The first families to take up residence and cultivate farms in the area were from Nkanchi. In the 1920s, pastoralists began to settle in the nearby highlands. Most probably, they were responsible for coining the name Misaje, which eventually became the established toponym. According to Pelican, the

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Tata., *A Concise History of the Kemazung People*, p. 15.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 25.

¹³⁶ Pelican, *Mask and Staff*, p. 60.

name Misaje was derived from the word *mai saje*, an Hausa term meaning “master of the beard”¹³⁷. This nickname was said to have been given to a prominent Hausa businessman who operated a rest house for traders and travellers. His business was patronized by Hausa traders and Mbororo herdsmen and soon the hamlet was popularly known as the place of *mai saje*, meaning Misaje¹³⁸.

During the 1930s, the British colonial administration decided to set up a customary court and a native authority in the Mbembe and Nchanti areas. A few years later, they asked early Hausa settlers, first established at Nkanchi, to transfer to Misaje town. More settlers were to join in the course of the construction of the Ring Road in the late 1940s and 1950s¹³⁹. Workers were recruited from surrounding villages and throughout the Grassfields, some took up permanent residence and engaged in farming and business activities. Around the same period, a second group of Mbororo pastoralists entered the region and were encouraged by the British administration to settle in the grassy lowlands of the Misaje Native Authority Area¹⁴⁰. Consequently, the cattle business flourished and attracted other ethnic groups and Grassfields traders. The people of Pinyin, a village in the southwest of the North West Region, were particularly involved in cattle trade, and a few established themselves in Misaje¹⁴¹.

All these developments turned the Misaje community into a conglomeration of people from in and out of the region and this boosted economic growth¹⁴². In the early 1970s, Fon Michael Fuma, then chief of Nkanchi, transferred his palace to Misaje. In 1974, the Société de Développement et d’Exploitation des Productions Animales (SODEPA), a major para-statal enterprise that engaged in producing livestock (cattle)

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.70.

¹³⁸ Betseke., “A Socio-Economic Analysis of Rural Activities, p. 25.

¹³⁹ R. Newton., ‘Intelligence Report on Mbembe and Nchanti Areas in the Bamenda Division of the Cameroons Province’, unpublished manuscript. Buea: National Archives of Cameroon, 1428, Ac. 12a, 1935, P. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁴² J, Sayani., Stock Breeding in the Misaje Area as an aspect of Rural Development, Master of Arts Dissertation in Geography, University of Yaounde, 1986, P. 33.

which was intended for immediate consumption and the sale of surplus in both the national and international markets. While its establishment caused the displacement of many Mbororo families, the ranch attracted technicians and business people from all over Cameroon and contributed to improving the region's economy and infrastructure¹⁴³.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Misaje had developed into a small town with a flourishing economy. In the 1990s, Misaje town, like most places in the North West Region, experienced vicious party-political struggles and the divisive effects of the politics of belonging. At the same time, it benefited from administrative changes, in particular the creation of Misaje Sub-Division in 1993, which resulted in gradual improvement in the town's infrastructure.

6. ECONOMIC TRANSMUTATIONS

People in the area were agriculturalists and predominantly involved in livestock rearing. About 80% of the population is engaged in this sector.¹⁴⁴ Agricultural activities range from farming, hunting, fishing, and palm wine tapping. Farmers practise shifting cultivation and bush fire slash and burn methods as a means of clearing farms especially during the dry season. This was intended to make the soil ready for tilling and planting of the crops. It is important to mention that seasonal crops such as maize, groundnuts, beans, cassava, coco yams constituted the mainstay of the economy. Legumes such as okro, pepper and tomatoes were also grown in fenced gardens around compounds. Perennial cash crops like coffee, cocoa, kola nuts, mangoes, plantains, palm trees are common in large farms or plantations. For example, there exist large mango and sugar cane plantations at Kamine and Dumbo respectively.¹⁴⁵

The Nfume and Nkanchi villages were noted for the cultivation of oil palms which were vital for the production of palm oil. The aforementioned cash crops were very significant because they generated income as buyers

¹⁴³ C.S. "Kimah, The Dumbo Cattle Ranch, 1974-2008, A Historical Investigation", Masters of Arts Dissertation in history, University of Yaounde I, 2010, p. 33.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Jetrude Kimbung.

¹⁴⁵ Betseke., "A Socio-Economic Analysis of Rural Activities, p. 24.

came from distant places such as Bamenda, Douala, Yaounde and other neighbouring villages.¹⁴⁶ Animals reared in the locality included goats, sheep, fowls, cattle, guinea pigs. The presence of cattle in the area was as a result of the coming of the Fulani around the 1920s. This practise of cattle breeding was emulated by the local inhabitants from the Fulani as it generated huge income for their wellbeing.

Apart from agriculture and livestock activities in Misaje, small scale local craft production centres existed that served as side-lines for some people. This included sculpture, weaving of caps, bags and baskets, decoration and designing of traditional regalia and articles made from bamboo¹⁴⁷. We also had the transformation of animal derived products such as horns, skins and tails of animals into traditional items like cups, bags and dancing instruments. These items were mostly used during important events like marriages, death and birth celebrations. Other income generating activities included the extraction and sale of local building materials such as stones and sand. There was also the sale of beer and native liquor (nkang and shaa) drinks made out of corn¹⁴⁸. These locally brewed drinks were highly patronised especially on market days. This was because during such days, traders from almost all the neighbouring villages came and sold their wares and at the end of the day, they bought their basic needs like salt, kerosene, magi, palm oil, matches. Also, till date traders come from other areas out of the North West Region such as Douala, Yaounde and Nigeria with semi-finished products which included building materials like roofing sheets, cements, and fashionable items like clothes, shoes, household goods, fuel (kerosene, gas and petrol), school materials and drugs¹⁴⁹. The incoming traders in return bought local items from the area like garri, eggusi, njanser, groundnuts and corn. It is worth mentioning that Dumbo with its very fertile the soils were one of

¹⁴⁶Interview with Jenebayo Moses, 50years, teacher and a businessman, Misaje, 16th August 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Idem.

¹⁴⁸Betseke., "A Socio-Economic Analysis of Rural Activities p.40.

¹⁴⁹ Takor, "The Bamenda Grassfields, p. 70.

the renounce villages involved in the cultivation of cereals such as groundnut, egussi and njanser¹⁵⁰.

In the early 1930s and late 1940s, Zebu cattle were introduced into the grasslands area which coincided with the arrival of the Mbororo (Fulani).¹⁵¹ Before the coming of these immigrants, the indigenous populations were already involved in the rearing of livestock species like sheep, cattle, goats and pigs. The purpose of livestock keeping was for sacrificial ceremonies, birth and death celebrations and other events. These animals were held in high esteem as they were seen as symbols of friendship between people and other communities in the form of exchanges of gifts¹⁵². With the arrival of the indigenous population in Misaje area, they started emulating the practices of these Fulani. Subsequently, they gradually accumulated capital from economic activities and trading of cash crops. The cash crop produced included cocoa, coffee, banana, palm oil.

As would be expected, the income generated from cattle rearing inspired some chiefs in Misaje to develop interest in the activity. Amongst these chiefs was Fon Michael Fuma who received herds of cattle as gifts and tributes from Fulani immigrants.¹⁵³ Among the other immigrants, such as the Pinyin people who constituted a majority in Misaje, they earned the reputation of being skilled graziers and cattle traders.¹⁵⁴ They established closed social and economic relationship with the Mbororo with some Pinyin serving as apprenticeship in cattle rearing. The close affinity for cattle rearing among the people of Misaje can be traced from the early years of British colonial rule in the area.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰Ibid, p. 55.

¹⁵¹ J. Boutrais, *Etude d'une Zone de Transhumance, la Plain de Ndop, Yaounde*, ORSTOM, 1995, pp.58-59.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁵³Interview with Ibrahim Musa, 70years, Hausa chief, Misaje, 20th August 2021.

¹⁵⁴Idem.

¹⁵⁵J. P. Warnier, *Histoire du Peuplement et Genese des Paysages dans l'ouest Camerounaise*, *Journal of African History*, 1984, pp.395-410.

During the second half of the twentieth century, local livestock breeders in Misaje started developing interest in cattle rearing. This was as a result of the influx and implantation of the Fulani herders in the area. As time went on, some individuals started keeping their own cattle. As compared to farming activities, cattle husbandry became an economic activity for the local population who depended on it for their livelihood and survival¹⁵⁶. Accordingly, it occupied an important slot in the economy of Misaje. According to Fon Richard Chefon, having cattle was just a means of investing money and accumulating wealth.¹⁵⁷ Local graziers differed in some aspects from the Mbororo herders in that the former aimed at increasing their stocks while the latter concentrated on milk production.

The indigenous cattle breeders in Misaje learned from the Fulani breeders how to breed and care for the cattle as they taught them how to communicate with cattle in the Fulfulde language. This was done by giving names to animals. This aspect of involvement of indigenes in cattle rearing influenced the integration and inter-ethnic relations¹⁵⁸. Pre-existing friendship became intensified and new ones were created. This constructive potential of mutual understanding was particularly effective in the initial phase when native graziers depended on Fulani for professional instruction and assistance.

In the meantime, the indigenous graziers (Nchaney) decided to detach themselves from the Mbororo (Fulani) herders and this was because of administrative reasons. Farmers were required to pay poll tax whereas graziers were taxed according to their number of animals. Indigenous graziers were asked to pay the Njangali tax (cattle tax) to the Mbororo Ardos who were in charge of collection. This arrangement worked out for some time but it later on changed. This was because the Nchaney graziers started complaining that the Mbororo Ardos were treating them differently and suspected them of misusing their tax money. As a matter

¹⁵⁶ B.W. Ojong and P. Edi., "Cattle Rearing Systems in the Misaje Area, Cameroon: Biomass Resource Pressure and Decentralisation Challenges," University of Udine, Italy, Via Sondrio 2, 33100 Udine, Italy, 2010, p. 33.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Fon Richard.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Musa.



of fact, they requested the administration for the appointment of Nchaney Ardo with whom they could work.¹⁵⁹

6. CONCLUSION

As outlined in this paper, the movement of people around the 19th century in Cameroon influenced the trajectory movement of groups patterns and transformed some communities including Misaje. These movements have not only influenced the adaptive capacity of communities but have also characterized the current changing trends in the socio-economic and cultural ethics of the three clans of Misaje, namely: Nchaney, Mbissa and Dumbo. In an attempt to leave in peaceful co-existence, these ethnic groups have experienced discrepancies which have manifested in overt confrontations and conflicts in the course of integrating with the Hausa who claimed to be the original settlers in the region. Moreover, the widely shared understanding of myths and debates surrounding the origins of the people was characterized in the socio-economic and cultural uniqueness that have portrayed a strong attachment adopted by the indigenes to suit their different lifestyles. Despite the initial dichotomy in history of origins and changing trends in socio-economic and cultural heritage, these ethnic groups now lived in peaceful co-existence. Thus, portraying Misaje as a cosmopolitan entity with people practicing common economic activities such as livestock breeding and agriculture, which were important sources of food, income and sustainable development. Concomitantly, the claims of myths and controversies of origins among the Misaje people have gradually dissipated over time and circumstances. Therefore, this study brings to the fore integration strategies adopted by the various ethnic groups in Misaje to harmonize the controversies surrounding their history of origins. This has made it possible for the ethnic groups to coexist peacefully over the years.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 77.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

- Interview with Ayaba Cyprain, 70 years, Fon of Nfume village, Nfume, 26th November 2021
- Interview with Ngwang Kiwajo Christopher, 60 years, Fon of Mbissa, Misaje, 11th September 2021.
- Interview with Richard Chefon, 57years, Fon of Nkanchi village, Misaje, 11th September 2021.
- Interview with Jenebayo Moses, 50years, teacher and a businessman, Misaje, 16th August 2021.
- Interview with Ibrahim Musa, 70years, Hausa chief, Misaje, 20th August 2021.