

Cameroon: Leopard and Conflict Between Ardo Sabga and Fon of Babanki Tungo, 1937–1946

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Abstract: This paper discusses the nature of disagreement over the treatment of leopards between Ardo Sabga and the Fon of Babanki Tungo between 1937 and 1946 in the North-West Region of Cameroon. It argues that this was a result of differences in the cultural backgrounds of these two eminent personalities greatly respected by the people under their leadership. Ardo Sabga was a Fulani Muslim and leader of the Fulani community and the Fon of Babanki Tungo was the indigenous traditional ruler of Babanki Tungo within whose territory the Fulani had been allowed to settle. Ardo Sabga, a later migrant into the North West Region, found no fault in killing leopards. One reason for doing so was that his cultural background did not recognize the leopard as a sacred animal that should be revered. Secondly, leopards were preying on the young calves of the Fulani which was greatly detested by the cattle owners. In the tradition of Babanki Tungo, like elsewhere in the North West Region, the killing of a leopard was prohibited because it was associated with royalty and respect. The animal is accorded enormous divine characteristics. As a sacred animal, it is expected that everyone should treat it with reverence.

In this paper, the qualitative method has been used to understand people's perceptions of the leopard as a sacred animal. Some statistics have also been presented to explain this phenomenon that is buried in the traditions and customs of different people around the world. The killing of leopards as sacred animals led to a clash between Ardo Sabga, who committed the act, and the Fon of Babanki Tungo, who vehemently detested it. The British colonial administration was drawn into the conflict to mediate between the belligerents.

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Introduction

Different civilizations or cultures of the world have given some animals special respect. Such animals have sacred attributes which make them associated with divine and mystical characteristics. The myths and legends attached to these animals make everyone in the community revere them. For each civilization or culture, there are several of these sacred animal species with divine characteristics. While in certain communities and countries, some animals are considered sacred, in others they are not. The ecosystem determines the animal that is given special or divine characteristics by the people. The belief that animals are sacred beings or are attributed sacred attributes dates back to the history of different communities in different parts of the world.

In several ancient civilizations, divine characteristics were accorded to animal species that were found around them (Demarco, 2019; MyAnimals, 2018). These divine characteristics were never attributed to animals not found and unknown to the people. These sacred animals were associated with legends and myths that defined the people they were. The myths and legends were linked to the way the people interpreted the world around them, including also their leaders who were thought to have divine powers or who were attributed such powers. Table I below presents some examples of animals and birds which were given divine characteristics or attributes and revered by their people.

The Babanki Tungo fendom, which is the area of study, is found in the North West Region of Cameroon. It is located between Bamenda town (precisely Bambili) and Bamessing village, *en route* to the Ndop plain (Jumbam, 2012). Ardo Sabga left Banyo and arrived in the North West Region, which administratively then was known as the Bamenda District of German and eventually British Southern Cameroons.¹ This was in 1916 at the heart of the First World War. He was welcomed by the Fon of Babanki Tungo and given the highlands of the fendom to settle and graze his cattle. The Fon of Babanki Tungo who welcomed Ardo Sabga in 1916 was Laliku. His relationship with the Fon and the indigenous people was very cordial at the beginning of his stay in this area. Awasom (1983) contends that, to reciprocate Fon's good gesture of providing Ardo Sabga with a place to settle unperturbed, Ardo was full of joy and gratitude to him. In return, he offered the Fon 10 cows and this was also appreciated by him. Amadou (2009), on his part, contends that the Babanki Tungo highland was eventually to become a permanent settlement for Ardo Sabga and his followers.

1 Bamenda was made a military district under the German colonial administration and then eventually came under British control when Germany was defeated and punished after World War I. For more information on this, see V. J. Ngoh *Cameroon 1884–Present: The History of the People* (Revised and Updated Edition).

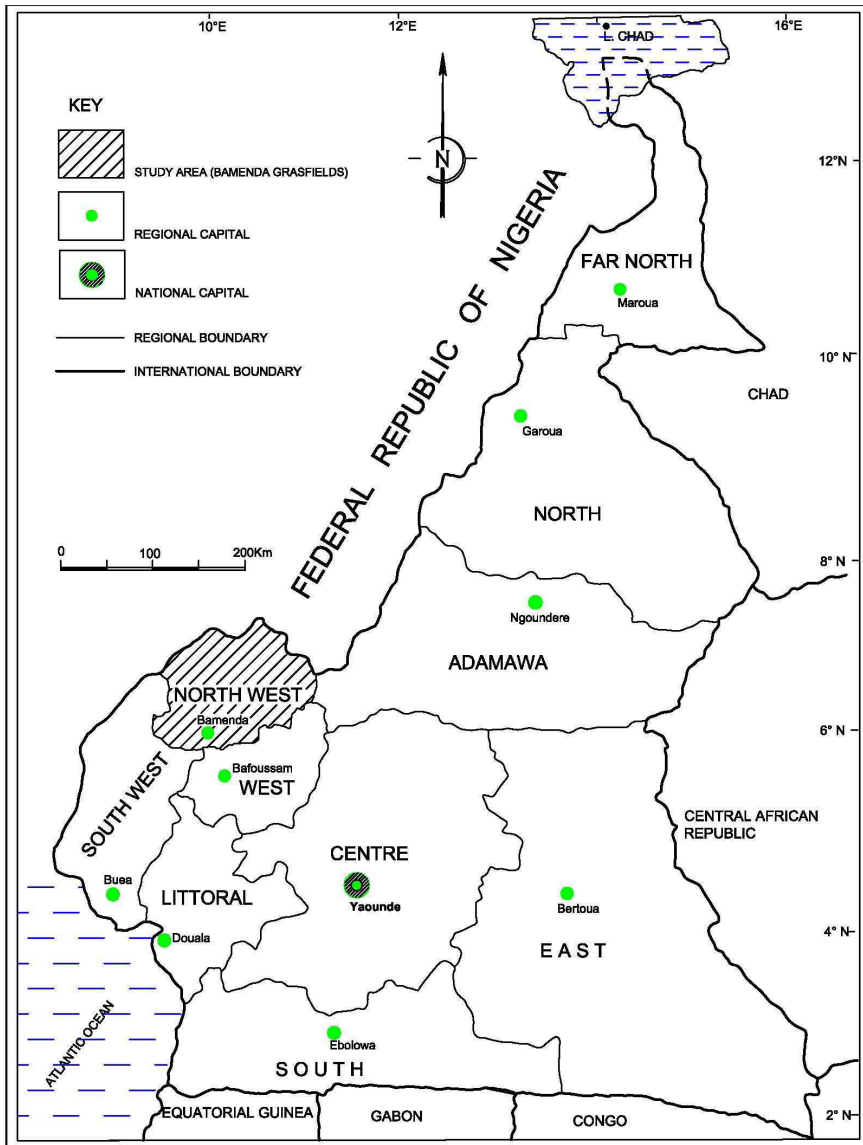
Table I: Sacred Animals and Birds in Communities in Some Countries

Country/Community	Animal	Divine Characteristics
Thailand	Elephant (white elephant)	Symbol of royalty and prosperity
India	Cow	Symbol of life, health, prosperity, and wealth (Only cows that did not give milk were sacrificed in the community)
	Dog	Guards to the doors of heaven
Mexico	Jaguar	Fertility, strength, and power
China	Tiger	One of the four powerful celestial gods besides turtle, dragon, and phoenix
	Lion	Protector of evil. (Lion-headed gods and goddesses were fierce deities who destroyed the enemies of the gods.)
	Monkey	Worshipped as god Hanuman and believed to be the incarnation of Buddha and seen in all temples
Northern Europe	Wild Boar	They represented courage, strength, prophecy, and magic
Western Europe		Symbol of health and protection. Warriors feed on its flesh before battles
USA	Eagle	Symbol of freedom, healing, power, valor, and vision
Peru, Mexico, Guatemala	Leopard	This was worshipped as a god
Northern Europe, First Nations of America	Owl	Wisdom and magic

Source: MyAnimals, 2018; Ayres, 2016; Ethan, n.d.; Demarco, 2019.

The highland on which Ardo Sabga came to settle was later to be called the Sabga Hill, and today it appears as such on maps and administrative documents of Cameroon (Amadou, 2004). This Sabga location has retained its initial prestige of being the earliest settlement for the Fulani in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The community is also highly respected among the Fulani and a source of reference to Fulani migration into Cameroon’s Western Grassfields (Amadou, 2004). The historic importance of Sabga as the first Fulani settlement in this part of Cameroon has made it become the headquarters of Fulani settlements found in the region.² In Maps I and II below are the locations of Sabga and Babanki Tungo in the North West Region of Cameroon.

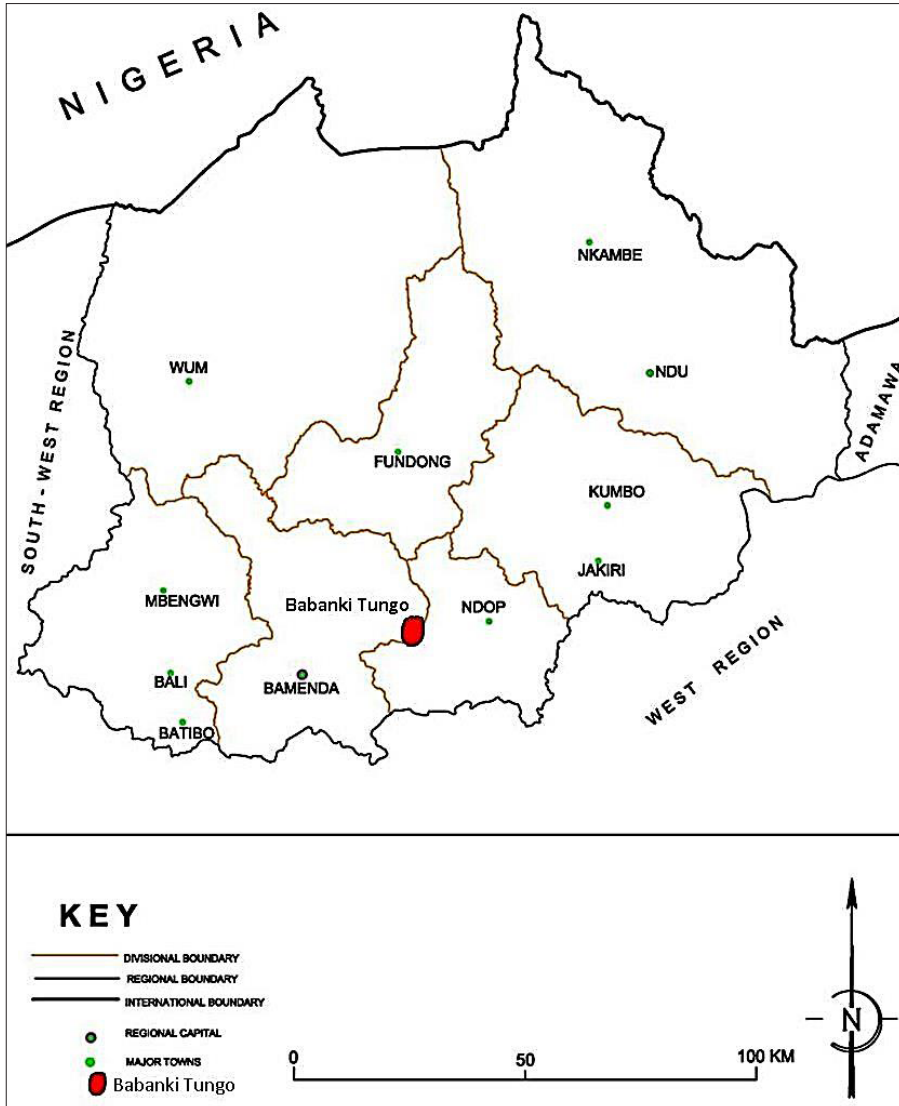
2 The appellation “Grassfields” is a broad term used to refer to the whole region of western Cameroon which includes the North West and West regions of the country. It is located between the Cross River basin and the two affluence of the Benue (Katsina Ala and Donga) in the North and the Mbam and Nkam in the East. Our focus is on the North West Region which lies the Babanki Tungo fondom. The North West forms what is known as the Western Grassfields while the West Region is the Eastern Grassfields. Also, see P. N. Nkwi (1989) for more justification of the appellation “Grassfields”.



Map I: Location of the North West Region in the Republic of Cameroon

Source: Adapted by the author from the Administrative Map of Cameroon of 1982, NIC, Yaounde

The entente between Ardo Sabga and the Fon of Babanki Tungo did not last long because in the late 1930s, there was disagreement between them. The disagreement was a result of the fact that Ardo Sabga started killing leopards that were found around the hills of Babanki Tungo. These leopards were a menace to him because they regularly invaded



Map II: Location of Babanki Tungo in the North West Region of Cameroon

Source: Adapted by the author from the Administrative Map of Cameroon of 1982, NIC, Yaoundé

his herds and killed his calves (NWRAB,³ File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)). Leopard attacks on calves became incessant and the Ardo Sabga could not bear it any longer

³ NWRAB is an acronym for North West Regional Archives Bamenda.

and explained why he killed many of them. In order to protect his animals from being killed, Ardo Sabga set traps and many of the leopards were killed much to the chagrin of the Fon of Babanki Tungo (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)). This was the genesis of chagrin against Ardo Sabga by the Fon of Babanki Tungo. According to the tradition and customs of the people of Babanki Tungo, fondom leopards are prohibited from being killed by whosoever.

In a personal communication with Christopher Nebayi on October 20, 2021, he spoke of the sacred attribute of the leopard. According to him, like any other person, an indigene of Babanki Tugoh fondom or not, at the site of a leopard on his farm, runs away or hides. The reason is that these are considered incarnated fons who move around to sanctify the land from evil forces (see photos 1 and 2 below). This view was shared by several other informants that we discussed with, notably His Royal Highness Sunjo I in a personal communication on March 18, 2021, Abubakar Ousmanu in a personal communication on July 24, 2021, and Mohammed Ismaila in a personal communication on December 18, 2020. If the leopard was an incarnation of the Fon, then no one could dare confront or kill it because this was sacrilegious. This was even more so because evil forces menacing the peace of the fondom were deterred from doing so by the presence of the fon in the form of the leopard. Mbuy (2000) contends that "In the Grassfields, there are tribal totems, animals and birds dedicated to specific groups..." (p. 20). The leopard was therefore an important sacred animal in Babanki Tungo that no one was expected to toy with for whatever reason.

The importance of the leopard in different communities that venerate it is aptly captured by Stacey Demarco (2019) in these words:

... leopard watched the people yet were very rarely seen themselves. Their paw prints might have been occasionally found on a ridge overlooking the valley, but not spotted. These watchers of the skies rewarded those who helped others. Leopards ever watching would place obstacles in the path of those who did evil for them to realize their mistakes and change, and if something was not right the leopard would wail mournfully for all to hear...

From what Stacey said of the leopard, one would see in the animal-human attributes of care, reward, and sympathy. Different communities, including Babanki Tungo, believed that leopards were helpful to them because, as Nebayi (2021) said, they sent away evil forces from the farms. They often placed obstacles in the path of those who were evil and did evil things so that they could repent and be good. Leopards also had feelings for when something untoward happened, they mourned through the sounds they made. Leopards were, therefore, part and parcel of the human race, and respect for the role they played in communities that gave them respect.

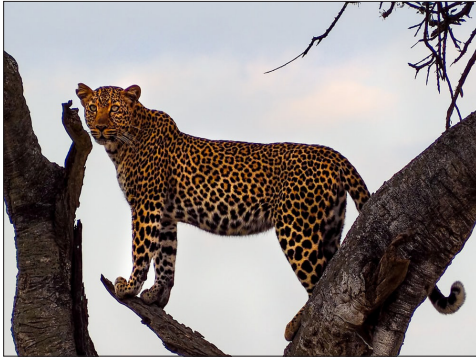


Plate 1: Photo of a Leopard



Plate 2: Leopard Wailing

Source: Unsplash photos for everyone (n.d.) Leopard.

Retrieved on October 25, 2021 from [Unsplash.com/s/photos/Leopard](https://unsplash.com/s/photos/Leopard).

When a leopard wails as in plate II above, it is a signal that something bad would happen (Demarco, 2019). Considering the importance of the leopard to the community, its incisor and faeces were hunted for several uses. In the Nso` *fondom*, for example, witch doctors used these for healing, fortune telling, and divination (Shuufaay wo kongir, personal communication, July 5, 2005; Faay wo Taantoh, personal communication, December 30, 2006 and Christopher Nebayi, personal communication October 20, 2021). These witch doctors were a highly respected social class because of their ability to heal the sick, foretell something that would happen to an individual, and for divination. The incisors and feces of these leopards contributed to giving them such respect in the community.

Divine attributes were not only associated with the leopard but with other animals in some communities of the North West Region of Cameroon. Animals with divine or sacred attributes included the lion, deer, and birds like the owl, *turraco bananarama* (a red feathered bird locally known in Nso` as *fern/Feng*, among the Laimbwe as *Idooh* and a host of others (Shuufay wo Kongir, personal communication, 5 July 5, 2005 and aay wo Taantoh, personal communication, December 30, 2006). Mbuy (1992), argues that "In the Grassfields, there are tribal totems, animals and birds dedicated to specific groups...". This is a function of the environment and what it offers in terms of animals. Whenever any of these animals were killed either deliberately or not, the carcass, including its skin, was taken to the Fon`'s palace to strengthen his authority as ruler of the people. The leopard, for example, known in the Nso *fondom* as *ba`a*, was sacred and reserved only for the Fon.

The Fon of Babanki Tungo, on receiving news that Ardo Sabga was killing leopards, sent an injunction order to him (Bouba Sanda, personal communication, January 13, 2019). The order called on Ardo Sabga to cease further killing these sacred animals and to respect Babanki Tungo tradition and customs (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2

(1937)). A summons also served him to appear in the palace of Babanki Tungo and answer charges against him. This summons fell on deaf ears and Ardo Sabga continued to kill more leopards, much to the chagrin of the Fon and his people. The refusal to appear before the Fon for interrogation was considered disrespect for a leader of the people who had assigned the piece of land on which Ardo Sabga and later Fulani arrivals settled (Ardo Jaja, personal communication, December 22, 2018 and Pius Vugah, personal communication, October 11, 2020). The Fon expressed anger and consternation with the attitude of Ardo Sabga and threatened to evict him from his fendom if he continued to defy his instructions (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)); Ardo Karimo, personal communication, August 29, 2021 and Stephen Vuningseh, personal communication, August 29, 2021).

This nonchalant attitude of Ardo Sabga could be explained on several grounds. He was bound by Islamic beliefs, practices, and the *pulaaku*.⁴ Ardo Sabga, therefore, did not bother about the Fon's summons. He considered that both of them had nothing in common but the fact that it was the Fon who assigned him to the piece of land he occupied at Sabga (Ardo Karimo, personal communication, August 29, 2021).⁵ Indigenous beliefs and practices were not in conformity with Islamic principles and were not to be respected by practicing Muslims of whom Ardo Sabga was one. The action could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to challenge the authority of the one who had given the Ardo land on which to settle and graze his cattle. The clash or disagreement between the Fon of Babanki Tungo and Ardo Sabga was similar to what Crapo (2002) said about the attitude of human beings. According to him:

In the real world of human life, individuals differ from one another in many ways. So it is more accurate to think of culture as a system of symbols, customs, ideas, and feelings that are constantly being negotiated and redefined by members of a society as they interact and communicate with one another. It is also this dynamism that allows indeed, impels each culture to change with the passing of time.

From this view held by Crapo, one thing that is certain is the fact that customs can be negotiated and redefined as people interact with others. This was not certainly what Ardo Sabga wanted the Fon of Babanki Tungo to understand because he did not even respond to his summons which would have given him the opportunity to explain himself and which might have led to an *entente* or a truce between the two over the killing of calves by leopards. In fact, it was the absence of this negotiation that led to a clash in

4 *Pulaaku* stand for Fulani virtues and code of conduct (for more, see Lucy Davis, 1995).

5 Ardo Sabga was a stranger and the first Fulani moslem to settle in the Bamenda Grassfields from the Futa Toro Region in Senegal (see NWRAB, File No. NA/b. (SAB) 1940/2, and National Archives Buea – NAB, Special Report (1920) for details).

relations between Ardo Sabga and the Fon of Babanki Tungo. They all differed in several aspects of belief, custom, and tradition and this explains their uncompromising posture over the incident of the killing of leopards by Ardo Sabga.

According to Kottak (1991), "People everywhere think that familiar explanations, opinions, and customs are true, right, proper, and moral. They regard different behaviors as strange or savage". The refusal of Ardo Sabga to meet the Fon over the killing of leopards was certainly considered not only strange but very strange because, among the people of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, the Fon cannot summon someone and he or she will turn it down. If this happens, it is not only an affront to the Fon but to the entire community since the Fon is an incarnation of all that the community represents. On the other hand, Ardo Sabga regarded the action of the Fon in stopping him from killing leopards as strange. This was because he thought that the Fon would support him kill these animals that were killing his calves. Keeping cattle was very important for the economy of the area and for the *jangali* which was a cattle tax paid to the government by cattle owners through traditional rulers.

In 1937, Ardo Sabga applied for a gun from the colonial authorities so that he could kill more leopards. His application was sent through the Senior District Officer for Bamenda Division, the largest division in British Southern Cameroons⁶ to the Resident in Buea. Part of the application read thus:

I have the honor most respectfully to apply through you to the Senior Resident, Buea , Cameroons Province to bear a short gun-double barrel.

I beg to state that I arrived here in the Bamenda Division and was known by the Government as Bororo Headman [herder] up to date.

I hope this humble application will meet you with your kind consideration and approval. (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)).

There was no clear reason advanced by Ardo Sabga why he wanted the administration to approve of him possessing a gun. One thing that was however clear in his application was the fact that the colonial government had recognized him as a Bororo leader *cum headman*. There was a wider implication of this statement. He was most probably claiming legitimacy and authority like any other community leader such as the Fon of Babanki Tungo. This leadership claim was however problematic because no two leaders

6 Bamenda Division until 1949 corresponded to the present North West Region of Cameroon. This large administrative unit was divided into a smaller Bamenda Division, Nkambe, and Wum Divisions in 1949 following the reorganization of the administrative unit. This reorganization led to the creation of two provinces in British Southern Cameroons. The Cameroons Province which was the name given to the entire territory before 1949 was now limited to Victoria, Kumba, and Mamfe Divisions while Bamenda, Nkambe, and Wum Divisions were under the Bamenda Province.

could lead in the same community without serious conflict over territorial control. Ardo Sabga was a leader of the Fulani community in Sabga in his own right. This was one of the earliest Fulani settlements in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon and had influence over other Fulani settlements in the region in later years. In spite of this, this should not have warranted him to claim control of a portion of the territory under the control of the Fon of Babanki Tungo. The territory had been assigned to him to settle and carry out his activities and not to claim ownership as his application seemed to have insinuated. Besides, considering the problem Ardo Sabga had with the Fon of Babanki Tungo over leopards killing his cows, one can understand that the application for a gun was to facilitate the continuous killing of leopards to save his cows from being all killed by these leopards.

The British colonial administration did not respond to the application of Ardo Sabga for a gun. Having waited in vain for a probably positive response, Ardo Sabga decided to petition the District Officer for Bamenda Division in 1941 hoping that this time around the colonial administrator will respond to his preoccupation with being able to hold a gun. In his complaint to the District Officer, he talked about four of his cows that were killed by a tiger [leopard], and three of them were left seriously wounded in the process. The Ardo pleaded with the District Officer to send a police constable or someone else to come and kill the animal that was menacing his cattle (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)). Even as Ardo Sabga wrote to the administration for a second time suggesting the line of action to take, he was certainly aware that it would be a difficult venture which might not be accepted by the District Officer. This was surely because of the distance between Babanki Tungo and Bamenda Station⁷ and the fact that the operation could only be done at night (Ardo Karimo, personal communication, August 29, 2021, and Stephen Vuningseh, personal communication, August 29, 2021).

Ardo Sabga might have thought that, although the first time the administration failed to grant him permission to hold a gun, this time around, the District Officer would allow him to do so. When the District Officer failed again to grant his heart's desire and considering that leopards were constantly killing his cows, Ardo Sabga took matters into his own hands. The failure of the District Officer to grant him the right to hold a gun led him to launch a ferocious hunt for these leopards right into their hiding places. This action was in defiance of Babanki custom and tradition (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)) which attracted the anger of the people. Using traps, the Ardo killed several leopards. Their carcasses and peels for each of them were graciously shared

⁷ Bamenda station was by then the base of the British colonial administrative officials of the by then Bamenda Division. Bamenda Division this time was one of the four administrative divisions constituting the Cameroons Province of the Nigerian Federation during the British Mandate of the territory (see V. G. Fanson (2017) and V. J. Ngoh (1919) for more information).

with his friends. To kill a leopard especially consciously was an offense to the Fon of Babanki and his people. To make matters worse, the fact that the carcass and peel were given to friends and not the Fon who was the incarnation of custom and tradition was treasonable (Shuufay wo Kongir, personal communication, July 5, 2005 and Faay wo Taantoh, personal communication, December 30, 2006).

When the Fon of Babanki sent for the carcasses and peels of some of the leopards killed, Ardo Sabga snubbed him. This could be interpreted as disrespect for authority because everyone in Babanki Tungo land was answerable to the Fon and Ardo Sabga was not to be an exception to the rule. Feeling humiliated by Ardo, the Fon wrote to the District Officer, Bamenda to complain about the behavior of Ardo Sabga which was not in line with the custom and tradition of Babanki Tungo (NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1937)). This incident showed clearly that the Ardo was not ready to receive instructions from the Fon who had given him the place to settle when he got to the Bamenda Grassfields in the first place. On February 9, 1946 Ardo Sabga in his reply to a letter of reprimand from the District Officer wrote:

I have the honor to reply to your letter no. 1972 of 01/15/1946 and beg to inform you that I have an iron trap which I bought about 27 years ago and have killed several tigers [leopards] with it. When a tiger is caught in the trap I have to send People with arrows to kill it. I have stayed in Babanki land for 21 years and have killed several tigers but the chief never asks for any.

All tigers [leopards] are killed; the skins are always presented to the Europeans whom I like. I am not eating tiger [leopard], the meat is always given to pagans.

I am not a hunter but when it [leopard] catches my calf or calves then I must set a trap and then kill it. Our Fulani customs differ [sic] from the people here, I mean the Babankis. All that is required here is not known in my own country [sic]. The District Officer may ask the Fulani about this matter NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1946).

In this reply to the District Officer for Bamenda Division, Ardo Sabga continued to refer to the leopard as a tiger. Babanki Tungo custom did not prohibit the killing or hunting of tigers but leopards. He confirmed the fact that after a “tiger” [leopard] was killed; the carcass was given to “pagans” who were his friends. He gave the leopard peels to European friends and not to the Fon as tradition demanded. He also pointed out that the Fulani custom was different from that of the indigenous people and called on the District Officer himself to verify from the other Fulani. The question one might ask is why did Ardo Sabga prefer to give the carcass of a leopard to the so-called “pagan” friends and the peel to Europeans than to the Fon? Was it a deliberate attempt to undermine the authority of the Fon and to create networks of protection against his defiance of instructions of the Fon? If he had been in Babanki land for 21 years and the Fon had

never asked for the leopard killed why did Ardo Sabga not give this to the Fon when he asked for it? What would the Ardo have done to protect his cattle which was the source of his livelihood without killing leopards which were menacing them? These were tough questions to answer considering that Ardo Sabga was a cattle rearer and the custom did not warrant the killing of leopards for whatever reason.

The crisis was finally brought to an end on February 18, 1946 when the District Officer wrote to Sabga stating that "Leopards, when caught must be handed over to the village Head and reported when this has been done. Local customs must be observed not Fulani customs in this matter." NWRAB, File No. Na/b. SAB 1940/2 (1946). One could argue that the decision of the District Officer was a solution but also a source of problems for co-existence between Ardo Sabga and his followers on one hand and the Fon and his subjects on the other. The fact that Ardo Sabga was called upon to hand over any leopard caught to the Fon or Village Head was certainly to maintain the authority and integrity of the Fon. British colonial administration was built on Indirect Rule with the traditional or natural rulers playing an important role in the chain of administration. The emphasis that local custom was to be observed even by the Fulani was a source of the problem. European colonial administrators in different parts of Africa were not comfortable with the Fulani who were adherents of the Islamic religion which has always been in conflict with Christianity. How could the Fulani who had a different cultural practice be forced to observe indigenous customs and traditions? Why did the District Officer not talk of co-existence but for one culture to swallow another one?

Indigenous Ways of Preserving the Environment and Contemporary Conservation Conflicts

Babanki tradition and customs prohibited the hunting and killing of some animal species because of the need to preserve them and the ecosystem. Among these animals were leopards, lions, tigers, and a few others including *tauracobannermani* bird. These were considered sacred in Babanki fondom and preserved and in so doing, the environment was also preserved. Hideouts of these animals in the fondom were to be avoided by everyone and no fire was to be set on them so that these species and the environment surrounding them were preserved for posterity. Any Babanki subject or foreigner who mistakenly killed any of these animals reported quickly to the Fon's palace with the carcass⁸ (Christopher Nebayi, personal communication October 20, 2021). Defaulters were summoned and punished by the traditional council of the fondom. This tradition is still

8 While the feathers of *tauracobannermani* birds were used only by the Fon to decorate dignitaries, notables, and people who in any way contributed to the development and advancement of the fondom, Leopard peels were reserved for the Fons bed or placed on his throne or were he placed his feet while sitting.

binding and everyone including foreigners residing in Babanki is obliged to abide by this. In similar areas of the savannah areas of the Bamenda Western grass fields, indigenous preservation of the environment was in the form of prohibiting people from harvesting culturally valuable plant and animal species. This was because of their importance for ritual ceremonies and therapeutic purposes. This was the case for example in the Mankon Fondom which is located not far away from Babanki Tungo. Other conservation practices included resource rotation, food taboos, and restrictions on harvest limits. The keeping of sacred forests around palaces for several ritual purposes went a long way to preserving environmental degradation (Ngambouk & Ngwa, 2019; Kah, 2015).

In spite of efforts that were made to preserve the environment, especially flora, and fauna, there have emerged conflicts threatening attempts at conservation today in Babanki Tungo and other ethnic groups of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. One of these is the lack of cultural sensitivity which has proven to be antithetical to conservation initiatives (Ngambouk & Ngwa, 2019). Many people who are insensitive to cultural norms that promote the preservation of the environment for sustainable livelihood have gone ahead to destroy what is left of this environment. The increasing number of farmer-grazier conflicts in this part of Cameroon is not healthy for the preservation of the environment. The conflict has not led to the destruction of crops but also over-grazing which has led to soil erosion and flooding in river valleys leading to losses in deaths and destruction of property (Sop *et al.*, 2015; Ngwoh, 2018).

Other contemporary conservation conflicts in and around the area of study are a result of changes in land tenure, competition for supremacy, succession crisis to the headship of villages, conflicts over the management of natural resources, and the Anglophone crisis among others (Sobseh & Dze-Ngwa, 2021; Muntoh, 2020). These and related conflicts have had a devastating impact on the environment. Several water bodies have dried up because of the destruction of vegetation around them for fuel wood and commercialization of timber. Government efforts at conservation are even at variance with indigenous methods of conservation (Ngambouk & Ngwa, 2019) and instead of the two working in tandem, they are rather at variance. There is, therefore, a need for a convivial relationship between indigenous and modern methods of conservation to mitigate the conflicts arising from efforts to preserve the environment.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the conflict that ensued between the Fon of Babanki Tungo and Ardo Sabga over the killing of leopards considered sacred animals in the customs and traditions of the people. The paper has shown that it was not only the Babanki people that had reverence for certain animals but a practice in different countries and ethnic groups around the world. Ardo Sabga's killing of leopards might not have been considered a deliberate attempt to defy the custom and tradition of Babanki

Tungo . He was forced to do so given that such animals were enemies to his cows, the very source of his livelihood and under his care. He killed leopards not just for fun or for the sake of killing them but because these were a menace to his cows. There was therefore no other way of securing his cattle from killing than to employ a deterrent method. Fulani custom it should be noted, did not recognise “sacred” animals as was the custom of Babanki Tungo. The fact that Ardo Sabga in his petition to the District Officer of Bamenda mentioned “Tiger” and “Buffalo” instead of the leopard was a glaring indication that he did not know the difference between these animals. The buffalo has as its habitat the river and the tiger is a different animal from the leopard. One could also say that Ardo Sabga was ignorant of the cultural significance of the leopard as long as it was not part of his own culture. For him to have defied the Fon’s order by killing leopards, was certainly because leopards continued to decimate his calves with no compensation from the traditional leader of Babanki Tungo. This repeated incident actually showed the clash that existed between the culture of the host and those who migrated to settle in the area.

The District Officer’s peace initiative to end the conflict was only partially good. His decision brought to an end the petitions that the Fon of Babanki and Ardo Sabga were trading against each other. The Fon’s threat to evict Sabga from his territory also ended. However, the District Officer’s peace initiative was a raw deal on several counts. The Officer ordered Sabga to respect Babanki custom by not killing leopards. This order was without any concrete measures or suggestions made to prevent leopards from killing their calves. Such an order was therefore not a good solution to the conflict that had embroiled the Fulani and Babanki communities. Neither the District Officer nor the Fon could stop hungry leopards from attacking Ardo Sabga’s herd and Ardo Sabga could not also sit and continue to watch his herd, considered to be the only source of his livelihood, continue to decline because of leopards.

This half-baked peace initiative of the District Officer for Bamenda added to the animosity or enmity that later developed between the Fulani and the indigenous people. The refusal of Ardo Sabga to declare and or pay his jangali tax dues to the Fon of Babanki as mandated by the British colonial administration was certainly one of the ramifications of the bad peace deal he had with the Fon over the issue of leopards killing his animals (NWRAB, File No. Na/b (SAB) 1940/2 (1939)). This view is also held by some of the persons interviewed in the course of this research (Ardo Karimo, personal communication August 29, 2021 and Stephen Vuningseh, personal communication, August 29, 2021).

Ardo Sabga, besides being a stranger in the North West Region of Cameroon was a Muslim who practiced the Islamic faith. With an Islamic background that had nothing to do with sacred animals, he killed leopards for killing his calves. He would have done so not because he had hatred for the custom and tradition of Babanki Tungo but for the leopard that was at the center of the conflict. The leopard seemed to have declared

war on young calves and it was in retaliation that Ardo Sabga became merciless against these marauding leopards which then attracted the furry of the Fon of Babanki Tungo and then the intervention of the colonial administration. The Fon of Babanki in whose land Ardo Sabga settled did not get into conflict with Ardo Sabga because he hated him in particular but because as a custodian of Babanki Tungo tradition and custom, he was compelled to protect leopards. Had he not been loving, he would not have asked Ardo Sabga to settle on the Sabga Hill. The fierce conflict between the Fon of Babanki Tungo and Ardo Sabga, eminent personalities of their respective communities could best be explained as a consequence of friction between two different and fend off or repelling cultures that co-incidentally found themselves operating in the same geographic space. The District Officer's failure to recognize this and to take the appropriate measures to ensure peace only exacerbated the problem in one way or the other. It was the colonial administration that tried to handle the conflict although with difficulties.

We have also shown that the people of Babanki Tungo like other ethnic groups of the western grassfields of Cameroon developed indigenous methods of preserving the ecological balance for sustainability. Due to changes over time and pressure on the environment, there have been conflicts in the area and there is a need to revisit these conservation methods and blend indigenous and modern methods to good effect. This will go a long way to promote peaceful co-existence and tolerance which are important in the survival of the environment.

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