Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: Why Some Bamileke Tribes Worship Skulls by Menkwet", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke, Eleanor A. Dasi and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1315. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Menkwet

Why Some Bamileke Tribes Worship Skulls

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Why Some Bamileke Tribes Worship Skulls
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Fefe
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	November 31, 2017
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Bafang, Western region of Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaounde 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com
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Creators



Menkwet (Storyteller)

Age of narrator: 68 (in 2017)

Social status: Commoner

Profession: Farming

Language of narration: Fefe

Bio prepared by Divine Che Neba, University of Yaounde 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Bafang* is one of the Bamileke villages in the West Region of Cameroon. It is situated between Latitude 5° 9' 31.1904'' North and Longitude 10° 10' 47.0928" East, in the Haut-Nkaam Division of the West Region of Cameroon. As part of the Bameleke people of the West Region, the Bafang people are deeply rooted in their traditional rites, though some of the people have embraced the Roman Catholic Church. The Bafangs worship ancestral skulls. Their indigenous priests and trade-practitioners prepare charms, perform incantations and consult the oracle in order to solve individual and community problems.

Occasion: Staged

* See Bamileke at britannica.com (accessed: August 6, 2021).

Summary

A long time ago, there lived a troublesome young man in the Bamileke land (Bafang), who disrespected everybody including the ancestors. He was the only lone son of his parents and spent a great deal of his time breaking the laws of the land and being rude to people, irrespective of their origin, age or social status. He had no reverence for tradition. He did what he wanted anyhow, anywhere, any time and with anybody. Upon observing how disappointing their lone son was, his parents started regretting having given birth to him. They did the best within their capacity to counsel him and get him on the rails to no avail, and later cursed him for such persistent ill-conduct. He cared very little about his parents' curses and continued living recklessly till they both died. It was then that he became conscious of his past life, but his parents were no more. He had no family to turn to since everybody viewed him more or less as a renegade. Life to him at this moment was a nightmare, and all his projects ended up failing. The young man started lamenting his past actions and wondering what evil would befall him as a consequence of the curses meted out on him. He wished he had apologised to his parents, but it was too late. After some years, his situation degenerated from bad to worse. There was nobody to turn to. He needed counselling but the whole village was virtually against him because of his past life. Nobody came to his

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assistance. As guilt was tormenting and eating him up, he became nervous and almost became insane. He kept wondering day and night, looking for an outlet to his numerous problems. He could not sleep at night. One day, after a day's hopeless venture, he went to sleep. While in his slumber, he had a dream. In the dream, a strange voice addressed him: “My son, I know you would sacrifice anything you have in order to get in touch with your parents and ask for forgiveness. You have been lamenting for a long time now. On the fifth commemoration of your late parents’ death, go, dig out their skulls and prepare a worship altar for their homage. Ask them to forgive you for all your wrong deeds. Afterwards, you will treat them nicely and lovingly; from time to time, you will cater for their basic needs, that is, pour libation to them constantly, offer sacrifices to them and ensure their proper upkeep. Treat them as if they were alive, then, many doors will open to you, and you will be prosperous.”

After this dream, he respected and executed all the recommendations the voice had given him. He experienced an incomparable success, prosperity and made up his mind that he would no more abandon his parents who were then represented by the skulls. After witnessing the stubborn boy’s success, and what he did to attain it, the whole clan took up the practice and till date the worship of skulls is a permanent ritual among the Bamileke people of the Western region in Cameroon.

Analysis

The history of skull worship is widespread among the Bamileke people of the West Region in Cameroon. Like most Africans, ancestor worship is part and parcel of the daily lives of the Bamileke people (Bafang). J. S. Mbiti in *African Religion and Philosophy* intimates that death is not the complete annihilation of the human soul but a leeway to the world of the *living dead*. To him, the dead are not dead, since they continue to play a vital role in the lives of the living. It is within this framework that the Bamileke people continue to pay homage, even to the skulls of their ancestors. As the myth recounts, the people’s attachment to the skulls of their ancestors stemmed from a prophecy, which came in the form of a dream, from the abode of the ancestors. The revelation only proceeded to cement the bond between humanity and the ancestor. Adhering to this ancestral call, family heads, village priests, and other traditional religious leaders within defined homes and communities perform occasional and yearly rituals in shrines that accommodate skulls of ancestors to appease them. These ancestors, the people

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believe, are the lucky ones, who sit in the middle (intermediaries between God, the gods, and humanity). The practice has proven its worth among the people and foreign invasions from Christianity and Islam have not been able to dismantle it. Most worshipers sometimes intensify the practice by wearing amulets to ward off unwanted spirit in the family and the community at large. Despite these acclaimed mythical bearing from the Bamileke, skull worship in particular and skeleton worship as a whole is not only a Bamileke invention, but can be traced back to many cultures through history, from antiquity to the present. The reasons for which people in different places worship skulls vary, but the converging point is humanity's attachment to the hereafter.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Disobedience Revenge

Further Reading

Leland, Kurts, *The Unanswered Question: Death, Near Death and the Afterlife*, Massachusetts: Hampton Road Publishing, 2002.

Mbiti, J. S., *African Religion and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1969.

Skull cult at britannica.com (accessed: August 6, 2021).

Addenda

Researcher: Divine Che Neba

Assistant researcher: Etienne Ngelo

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Method of data collection: Tape recording and note taking

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