

Socio-Cultural Heritage, Identity and Political Affirmation through Toponyms in the Far-North Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

If there is one theme in the context of the conservation of onomastic heritage which to rely on, it is undoubtedly toponyms. Indeed, toponymy comes from the Latin word *topos* which means place and from the Greek *onoma* which means name. It is the science which studies the names of places. As a science, toponymy is subdivided into several sub-branches and is an important source of knowledge of the past and the preservation of the memory of people. They constitute not only a very precious base of information which must be preserved, but also a spatial mark of the culture of the people occupying or having occupied a given space. In France, the French-speaking division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names was created with the adoption of resolution I/7, by the Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. This should be applied in North of Cameroon, because actions must be facilitated with UNESCO in the sustainability of the intangible cultural heritage, including toponyms. They are oral tradition in the Far-North and must be recorded in their entirety, preserved and capitalized. In addition, toponyms have an obvious identity stake, because the name conveys the appropriation of identity. But, geographical names are also among the most fragile cultural phenomena, because of their intangible and still very often oral character. In this sense, toponyms must occupy a prominent place in the development process. They are loaded with historical, religious and cosmogonic values. To what extent should toponyms in Far-North Cameroon cultural heritage be preserved? Are they vestiges of an identity or political assertion with regard to current changes?

Keywords

Inheritance, Identity, Affirmation, Far-North of Cameroon

1. Introduction

The question of heritage is at the center of the scientific life of several institutions which are developing major axes in the policy of identification and conservation of intangible heritage. It is subdivided into two main branches, namely tangible and intangible heritage. In the latter case, toponyms or place names, with all their variants, occupy a prominent place in endogenous development. They are initiated and undergo linguistic mutations and die. An identification and conservation policy must be made upstream for local development downstream. Decentralized local communities must handle this objective.

In the evolution of humanity, man is crossed by two tendencies or feelings. The first according to Jean Jacques Rousseau is that of its existence; the second, on the other hand, is that of conservation (Rousseau, 1762). This is what justifies the deeds and gestures of primitive and modern man, who keeps objects behind him until they become familiar with it, or are worn out and can no longer be used. This concern for conservation gives value to evolution and progress. This is about the conservation of tangible heritage. In Asian civilization, especially among the Chinese and Japanese, the notion of conservation takes a philosophical significance, because everything that comes from the past is considered venerable and sacred. Toponyms are a creation of memory, a cultural heritage and sacred.

The notion of conservation of artefacts as historical and sociocultural evidences is well developed in museums. It was in the second century BC that the Eastern Greek princes and the Romans developed the sense of conservation of art belonging to the classical and archaic eras for aesthetic and religious reasons. From the Renaissance, medieval monuments were held in great contempt and, when influenced by bad weather, they were replaced by modern buildings. Once again, there is a desire to conserve cultural heritage. In the context of intangible heritage, the names of places must be aware of a concern for conservation and sustainability. Toponyms are frameworks for the crystallization of ethnolinguistic wealth. These riches are an emanation of the creative subject and in this sense, deserve attention from municipal authorities.

In the Far-North region of Cameroon, toponyms are remembered; the major concern is the problem of memory fidelity as well as that of alterations due to oral transmission. It is established nowadays by scholars that people who have not known writing that their memory is more developed (Vansina, 1961). This makes sense, because a society cannot survive without its cultural base. So it must somehow conserve its cultural heritage, hence, the interest in keeping toponyms over time. This paper proposes to take a look at toponyms as cultural values that deserve to be preserved and capitalized within the framework of local tourism for endogenous development. This study, intended to be quantitative, builds its argument on forgotten toponyms in the history of the people in the Far-North region. The study is based on the population of Diamaré and ancient Margui-Wandala without disregarding some names in the Mayo-kani division.

It is a question of considering toponyms as intangible heritage alongside songs, proverbs, tales, funeral dances, libation and deprecation ceremonies.

2. Toponyms as an Intangible Heritage

It is interesting to begin this part with the debate that revolves around the toponym as an intangible heritage that must be preserved or not. It is also interesting to know that toponym is the science which studies the origin of the names of places in general. It has several variants depending on the geographic sites or toponymic referents. The names of places must be meaningful to individuals, be controversial, and have national or international repercussions. Toponymic analysis is evident in research into the origin, pronunciation and spelling of the toponym of a geographic entity as well as its history. Thus, we have the endonyms or sciences which study the names of the streets: “avenue kakataré” in Maroua which also host the lamidat of Maroua; the Domayo motorway or site of entertainment and enjoyment, oronymy or the science that studies the names of mountains: kosselbéi in Maroua with the forge and sale of poultry as its activity; Mokola in Mokolo or Wouzal in Koza as climatic site; hydronymy or the science that studies the names of rivers: Mayo-Tsanaga; Kaliao; Kani; Logone, etc; microtoponymy or the science that studies the names of some specific point: land of twelve bullets or execution sites of highway robbers in Margui-Wandala, for example¹.

The toponym was excluded for a long time from the intangible cultural heritage, because, it must be understood in the sense that the intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to another, is constantly recreated by communities and groups according to their environment, their interaction with the nature and their history, and gives them a sense of identity and continuity, thus helping to promote respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. But the convention of the 17th October 2003 in its article 2 paragraph (2) specifies that toponyms can be considered as “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vector of the intangible cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003). Considering the fact that toponyms are threatened; constantly recreates by communities and groups and gives them a sense of identity and continuity; in this context, toponyms are proven intangible heritage of identity which is; fragile therefore to keep.

2.1. Identity in the Intangible Toponyms

Toponyms or geographical names in the Far North are linguistic and cultural data that are gotten from the oldest phenomena: Marva, Moura, Mokola, Kaélé, Yagouna, etc. which are protolinguistic roots. This situation is consistent with the fact that toponyms enrich the lexis of oral expressions of an ethnolinguistic community: Fulani, Guiziga, Mafa, Moundang, Massa, etc. The mere mention of a toponym produces a sense of identity and continuity of the group. This identi-

¹Fanta Bring, 48 years old, lecturer, ENS, interviewed on the 22nd of August 2021 at Maroua.

ty is manifested when one appropriates and makes one's own toponymic root as a living vestige of prehistoric linguistic roots. The history of human movements and languages makes the Far-North a real puzzle in terms of real appropriation and knowledge of the history of the vast region (Boutrais, 1984). The plain in Diamaré, the mountains in the Mandara massifs, the wetlands in Mayo-Danay and Logone and Chari make toponyms rich with ecological references. Toponyms are ethnolinguistic creations in the sense that the semantic flavor of a toponym can only be detected in the logic of the ethnolinguistic group that secreted the name in question. The immateriality in this sense is perceptible by the lack of anchoring and materialization of the name in question in geographic space. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the territory serves as a spatial basis for heritage development processes. A process of patrimonialization strongly anchored in the culture. Basically, identification and valuation work is necessary. The tendency towards patrimonialization is to fix the toponym with time.

The appropriation of space of the locality, is only possible through toponyms which express an obvious identity issue. This desire to appropriate space and to assert the identity of the group in question can be appreciated when the English philosopher Francis Bacon noticed it in 1803 and advised Jacques 1st Stuart to name Great Britain the United Kingdom of England and Scotland. This is a privileged means of a better union and agglutination of several realms [...], although it appears to be in a superficial and foreign manner, the name produces impression and enchantment. The population is proud of living in a site whose toponym is in the language of the sociological group in place. It has several functions: the conservation of the cultural heritage; the appropriation of space and the assertion of the group in question and the sustainability of the group's heritage. In the first case, allusion is made to the riches of memory through socio-cultural creations. We affirm our identity through the designation of a site with the characteristics of nature (space, vegetation); the function of the site in question in the movements and cultural actions of men and finally toponymic changes depending on the location of the new facilities. The toponym thus becomes an ergonym. As part of the affirmation and sustainability of the legacy of the group in place, social pride is reflected in the simple pronunciation of the toponym in question. These place names endure mutations due to alteration with other established groups. In this sense, it is fragile and must be stored wisely.

2.2. Conservation despite Mutations

Geographical names are among the most fragile natural phenomena due to their intangible nature. The intangible character is a function of several external factors: migration and linguistic interactions; graphic and phonetic transcriptions. For the first, allusion is made to the movements and actions of men. Considering the fact that the movements involve a mixing of cultures, customs, beliefs, civili-

zations, it therefore becomes obvious for toponyms to suffer from the weight of cultural interactions. The only form that sometimes resists these interactions is the toponymic root. It transcends time and cultural effects².

As for mutations, colonial administrators played a big role in initiating the process of transformation of toponyms over time. This mutation is explained by the fact that the occlusives, labial, dental and palatal forms in African languages could not be exactly transcribed by the German and French colonial administrators. To this must be added the oral aesthetics of which the administrators spanked the prerogative. The toponym transcribed and used must respond to the will of the administration in place to appropriate the place (Diagne, 1984).

The conservation of toponyms must be done by the decentralized local communities in their policy of patrimonialization. In this context, heritage appeals to the idea of a legacy given by the generations which preceded us and which we must pass on intact or improved to future generations. There is a need to build up a heritage for tomorrow. It is in this context that toponyms must be preserved along with songs, dances, libation and deprecation ceremonies, in an ethnolinguistic or socio-cultural community. One step must be taken, that of identifying toponyms with a strong socio-cultural connotation and which can play an important role in the development of local tourism.

3. Decentralized Local Authorities and the Identification of Toponyms

In this context, it is a question of the development by the municipalities of local toponyms to promote as a real touristic asset. The conservation of toponyms is a pledge of the conservation of the tourist wealth of a locality. It should be noted that the tourist values of a geographical entity are closely linked to the name of the place. In the Far-North, Oudjila refers to the Chief of Podoko with several wives; Waza to the national park; Mozogo to the conservation park; Maga to the lake; Mora to the cross-border town that trades with Nigeria; Kaélé the city town harbouring the first CFDT installation. An effort must be made within the framework of other toponyms or localities that can play a determining role in endogenous development. The categorization of toponyms must have a connotation and an obvious historical value according to the nature of the referent (Maura, 2006). Firstly, it is worth making an inventory of the names of places having a geographical referent such as rivers; mountains, localities, etc. Secondly, on the other hand, the analysis must dwell on the names of places whose referent is sociocultural such as war sites, mythical or mythological places, etc.

The toponyms in this context change style and take appropriate names depending on the referents: the ergonyms depending on whether the referent is a production site, the brand of the products; industrial companies; cooperatives; intellectual works. Paroxysms designate historical facts; diseases; cultural, sporting and political events, historical periods. Phenonyms designate natural disas-

²Djaligué Zogoi, 78 years old, Lamido of south-Matakam, interviewed on the 10 of July 2021 at Mokolo and Gassissou Alexis, years old, researcher, interviewed on the 27 of June 2021 at Yagoua.

ters, the fall of the stars, microtoponyms for places known as streets, deserts; the buildings. We have also hydronyms which refers to river and oronyms to some mountains.

3.1. Praxonyms as Toponyms

It is worth analyzing some riches of the Far-North which deserve special attention from the decentralized local communities. Preserving the name means preserving the heritage of the area. The mentioning of praxonym Djinglia refers to a village located in altitude and full of tourist buildings: the craft center and a dam. The craft center that catches our attention is a place that deserves special attention from the municipality of Koza in Mayo-Tsanaga. The center is a site for the materialization of local skills, craftsmanship. Products such as baskets; mats; hats; brooms, ropes; curtains are made based on local patterns and colors. It is obvious that the conservation of the local heritage entails the conservation of the name of the place in question, dance site, place of sacrifices, etc. Maray is the celebration of conviviality among people of the Mandara mountain³. It is a celebration, a sacrifice to ritual powers and deities to thank the eponymous ancestors or the pantheons of an ethnolinguistic community. It is in this context that certain funeral rites take place. In most cases, the dead are buried in cowhides and rites are performed in honor of the deceased and for the protection of the living. We must also highlight the praxonym Rhumsiki which contains the crab wizard and the eponymous woodpecker (Kwarmba, 2007).

The Crab Wizard is a diviner whose art consists in interpreting the signs and the future from the movements of the crab and some herbs. It should be noted with the Zahan context that the cosmos does not constitute a frozen universe, cold mute, but on the contrary, “a world loaded with meanings, bearer of messages, a world that speaks” (Zahan, 1970: p. 129). Anyone who has the code is able to decipher the meaning of these signifiers. The praxonym is closely linked to the activities that characterize the name in question. It is in this context that we have a place called “ponré” which is a village of those involving in skin activities. They are tanner, transforming the skins of animals into handbags, belts, shoes, etc. sold in the city of Maroua and its surroundings. The Maroua III council should, as far as possible, consider the policy of upgrading the site in question.

In the Mandara massifs, a heritage strongly linked to the toponym deserves to be preserved. These are terraced crops. Essono Engelbert (2000) thinks on this subject that the populations of the Mandara Mountains, in this case the Kapsiki's, transformed entire slopes into terraced landscapes to manufacture agriculture (Essono, 2000: p. 156). There is a phenomenon of anthropization of space at this level. It is old and shows the relationship that man has with his environment. As part of the appropriation of space by name, the settlements in the Koza Plain are an obvious wealth and deserve to be safeguarded. They are instituted

³Rewetem Martin, 52 years old, former mayor of Koza council, interviewed on the 20 of september 2021 at Koza.

by the CFDT as part of the promotion of agriculture and the identification of certain plants.

When we mention the names of villages like Tourou and Mabass, the latent referent is the market where the art and customs of the Tourou and Mabass are exhibited. The women are wearing calabashes which are contrary cultural practice to other people, but rich in meaning among the concerned people. Among the latter, we can see the great plain of Nigeria with the high sheaths where the inhabitants exercise the forge with unparalleled dexterity and professionalism. Tourists who visit these localities are drawn to this culture which is labeled as rudimentary, old-fashioned. Photos taken by professional photographers in the past are developed and sold as postcards bringing currency into the community. In the context of the age of local culture and politics, the toponym Oudjila is illustrative for this purpose. The chiefdom of Oudjilla is located in the heights of the Mandara massifs, not far from Mora. The chiefdom was founded almost 200 years ago with its peculiarity being the multitude of the chief's wives. There are many elements rich in history that can edify tourists.

In the history of town planning in the Far-North, certain places of memory and industrial establishments give the phenonyms and ergonyms a true history. The name in question retains an ancient value despite cultural interactions.

3.2. Phenonyms and Ergonyms as Toponyms

In this light, it is worth showing the role certain phenonyms play in the life of the clan or tribe having this site as a locality that can play the role of reconciliation, expiration, purification, forgiveness, etc. The place called Mont Roufta is located in the district of Mogodé in Rhumsiki. This site is the symbol of traditional justice among the kapsiki. Roufta is a phenonym, a place of memory which is at the brink of losing the practice of endogenous knowledge in traditional justice. In the plain of Waza, the Grea cave plays a memorable role in the history of people of the Mandara mountain.

As part of the preservation of places of memory, the cave of creation deserves special attention. In the migratory process of the people of the northern Mandara massifs, one hypothesis is generally accepted. It states that the Chadian basin has long served as a point of habitation for men. The drying up of this area has forced people to migrate to areas conducive to human development. In their southward migration process, the Podoko, Mafa and Mada in this case used Grea Cave as a place of refuge. The collective memory of these peoples retains this locality as a site favorable to their settlement. These places play a role in the dynamics of memory and in the understanding of the mentality of the said people.

In the city of Maroua, the place called *Kossel Beï* played a major role in the migration process and the interaction between social groups. The installation at the foot of these massifs of a blacksmith's park makes this place known as an ergonym (Seignobos & Tourneux, 2002). The products produced are instruments

which reflect the social dynamics and the collective mentality of social groups⁴. The preservation and servicing of this site has dominant interest for the local heritage. A policy of patrimonialization must be made in these directions.

4. The Challenges of Decentralization, Toponymic Policies

The decentralization process in most African countries gives pride of place to decentralized local communities and regions as the main actors involved in this system. This decentralization consists, according to the Cameroonian legislator, in a transfer from the State, to decentralized territorial communities, of specific skills and appropriate means. Article 4 of the same law completes this definition by specifying that these communities are legal persons governed by public law, which enjoy administrative and financial autonomy for the management of regional and local interests. Indeed, the major issue of decentralization is to promote sustainable development by involving grassroots populations in the management of their affairs. This is to take into account the local wealth as part of their development into real heritage. In the patrimonialization policies, certain powers transferred to the municipalities must be highlighted for a good promotion of toponymic policies: the development of municipal tourist sites, to support micro-projects that generate income and employment; to reforestation and creation of communal woods, to the creation, maintenance and management of green spaces (parks and gardens of communal interest), to the development and servicing of public spaces and buildings; the organization at the local level of cultural days, traditional cultural events and literary and artistic competitions. These skills are transferred to decentralized local communities and which, if used wisely, are important assets in the identification and preservation of toponymic heritage. Some municipalities must guide the policy of preserving intangible cultural heritage and in this case toponyms.

Local Decentralized Communities and Local Tourism Industries

Local populations are the custodians of living heritage. Indeed, oral traditions and expressions (tales and legends), musical expressions (folk songs and music), performing arts (popular theater, folklore dances, rituals), useful and enjoyable artistic expressions (cooking, crafts, arts, servants, folk arts), the skills related to traditional building trades and crafts such as musical instruments are all expressions kept in living memory. The expression living heritage is used to identify more precisely all the traditions or playful practices included in the daily life of a community implemented by the bearers of traditions, custodians and relays of transmission, which express the models, the group values, characterizing the company and constituting the very basis of its cultural identity. The local population thus becomes a framework or is acquired, enriched and transmitted orally, a set of traditional knowledge and skills which have a value of cultural interest for the community. Preserving a core of local knowledge sources would be essential in promoting conservation and local development.

⁴Oumaté Makadji, 76 years old, trader, interviewed on the 30 of August 2021 at Maroua.

In the context of preservation, of the toponymic heritage, certain municipalities must preserve the names of certain sites. An effort is being made in the Maroua municipality through the construction at the entrance to the aforementioned city of a monument reflecting the battle of Ibba Sangué fought in city. The construction of the stele reflects the preservation of history and hence of the toponym through the historical and socio-cultural realities of the area. But the placement of this statue at the entrance to the city does not play a major role in promoting local tourism and endogenous development, it should be placed outside the city.

In the history of social relations between ethnolinguistic groups such as the Guisiga and the Fulani's, the hill that houses the current locality has played a decisive role in interethnic relations between the social groups in place. It should also be noted that the installation of the blacksmiths beside this hill denotes the desire to conserve manufacturing techniques and preserve the cultural heritage of the area. What about the municipality of Mora?

In the history of the kingdoms and other political entities in the Chad Basin, the kingdoms of Kanem and Bornu had as neighbors the political organization known as the Kingdom of Wandala with Doulo as its formal capital. It is a village located about 06 km north of Mora on the Mora-Kousseri road. Today, the ruins and fortresses of the ancient capital can still be seen. The preservation of this site would play an interesting role in the preservation of the toponym. This city also played a role in the colonial history of Cameroon.

Indeed, when the First World War broke out in Cameroon, German troops were present in all the major cities of Cameroon, including Mora. The Franco-British collision chased the Germans out of Cameroon, through the fall of the last rampart, the fortress of Mora. The battle was not without damage on both sides of the protagonists involved in this war. The German graves are still visible and well preserved on the mountain of Mora in the massifs surrounding the locality. The municipality should think about the protection and the safeguard of these artefacts and witnesses of history.

The Mokolo council is the base of the Mafa in the Mandara mountains. They have a secular cultural heritage. It should also be added that the town was the former capital of Margui Wandala which includes the present division of Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Sava. The toponym inhabited a large geographic entity called the Mandara region from 1932 to 1939. From 1950 until 1959, the constituency took the name of Margui Wandala region. The stalemate from 1940 to 1949 was justified by the central administration to centralize power at the regional level. Administratively, Mokolo depended on Garoua, capital of the North region. The department of Margui wandala was born in 1959 and the locality has been the capital of the Mayo-Tsanaga division since 1982. In view of this long administrative history, the mayor of the municipality of Mokolo should think about the protection of certain cultural heritage. German buildings and their erection into real tourist buildings. The central prison, the courthouse, the SDO's office are all settings that deserve the attention of the communal power, although the admin-

istrative buildings fall under the domain of the central power, in this case the ministry in charge of state property and land tenure.

As part of the intangible cultural heritage that deserves to be safeguarded with the toponym Mokolo, the Hudok or traditional dance is a value that transcends time. Indeed, the hudok is the celebration of conviviality among mountain people in general. It is a feast of thanksgiving, invocation and times of conjuring powers⁵. The local population is involved in all settings in the protection of toponyms. The naming of places describes the physical environment and, in specific terms, organizes the space and communicates the memory of the place. In the latter framework, the local populations are the protectors of a living heritage.

The local tourist industries form the set of productions related to ceramics, wood, culinary arts, dances, landscapes, etc. But how can toponyms, a wealth of intangible cultural heritage, be part of tourist industries and stimulate both endogenous and exogenous development? The names of places must be preserved in order to keep their historical and socio-cultural values. The prototoponymic root, the literal and lexical meanings are all assets that the tourist requires in order to understand the socio-cultural realities of an environment. If we recognize that there are no bad tourists, but uninformed travelers, we must admit that tourism is not only a hike, but also a need for soft, deep and spiritual vitality which are sources of creation of toponyms. The establishment of a framework in which the meaning of toponyms would be found would allow the locality to enrich their income and consequently increase sustainable development (UNESCO, 1984). In this context, focused on sustainable tourism based on progress, preservation of the environment and the desire to be in symbiosis with the history of a given environment.

Local communities in their management of natural or cultural heritage resources should preserve and improve the heritage to be left for future generations. This objective is visible in the will of the world tourism organization through the desire to promote fair, responsible and sustainable international tourism with the shared benefits of all partners: States, tourist operators, tourists, local populations, communities, civil society (Ducret, 2000: p. 67). In this regard, toponyms must, in promoting endogenous development, highlight local know-how, socio-cultural creations not as an obstacle to growth, but as a guarantee of the success and conservation of the toponymic heritage.

5. Conclusion

In a nut shell, the identification and conservation of toponymic heritage must be the objective of several decentralized local authorities in their policy of planning and maintaining the socio-cultural heritage. Considering the fact that toponyms are oral expressions like language, there is an intangible cultural wealth passed down from one generation to another and recreated over time. Its intangible aspect reveals the identity value of a social group in the sense that they convey huge information on the memory and history of the group in question. They

⁵Zinahad, 73 years old, notable at Koza chiefdom, interviewed on the 15 of september 2021 at Koza.

undergo mutations over time, because linguistic alterations, borrowings and turns can in some cases lose the toponymic flavor. But this wealth is preserved in the toponymic root which rarely undergoes changes with time. The role of conservation and identification depends on the collective effort of decentralized local communities in their promotion of the endogenous development of their localities. Despite the fact that toponyms take specific names according to the wealth of the environment, conservation should be a major focus of local communities.

Conflicts of Interest

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