

Research Article

# Place of Food in the Lives of Peoples of Nkam Division-Cameroon: Symbolic Reading of the Act of Food During Certain Events of the Life Cycle

Hen Mbah Rom é Gervain<sup>1</sup> , Bike Mbah Jean Baptiste<sup>2,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Arts, Letters and Human Sciences, University of Ngaoundere, Ngaoundere, Cameroon

<sup>2</sup>National School of Agro-Industrial Sciences, University of Ngaoundere, Ngaoundere, Cameroon

## Abstract

This article questions the place of food in certain events of the life cycle among the Nkam peoples, namely childbirth, traditional marriage and death. A substantial observation has been made. The different stages of the family cycle are punctuated by events marked by rites. These are always associated with a food component which, at each phase, presents particular specificities. It is this observation that motivated the present research, the main objective of which is to highlight the symbolic charge which accompanies the rites which punctuate said events. It is therefore an invitation to explore an identity heritage which constitutes a cultural reference for these groups. The results obtained are based on qualitative surveys carried out in the Nkam department, Littoral-Cameroon region. These investigations, carried out through interviews and participant observation which were held during the course of the events but also during the scheduled meetings. These interviews were combined with the exploitation of literature. This therefore made it possible to organize the present work which revolves around food as an inseparable component of socio-cultural life. In addition, the act of eating appears to be ritualized and carries identity, giving it meaning and imposing itself at each stage of the fabric of human existence.

## Keywords

Food, Rites, Identity Heritage, Childbirth, Traditional Marriage, Death

## 1. Introduction

Food is a biological fact that meets the vital needs of human beings. However, it is subject to a cultural arbitrariness which greatly influences the ways of eating. Also, the Nkam department, the area subject to our study, is part of a very vast cultural whole which is Black Africa. As a result, it shares with other regional groups in this geographical sphere a certain number of conceptions and representations that can be grouped under the term Negro-African philosophy. The said

philosophy will therefore serve as a reading prism throughout this text.

Indeed, although Africa has a plural tradition which is anchored differently depending on the tribal groups, “the African Negro still presents a remarkable unity beneath his great somatic and cultural diversity” [1]. In addition to the aforementioned unity, it must be added that communities are defined “in their being, in their cultural productions, by the

\*Corresponding author: [jbmbahgm@gmail.com](mailto:jbmbahgm@gmail.com) (Bike Mbah Jean Baptiste)

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environment; the peoples of the great forest have very different civilizations from the civilizations of the peoples of the northern savannahs" [2].

In line with the above, the peoples of Nkam represent a small group of several communities living in a forest environment in the Littoral-Cameron region. Peoples whose agricultural and culinary specificities are unique due to a past enriched by migrations but also and above all, by centuries-old exchanges with the neighboring Grassfields. Exchanges that have configured their food repertoire "with a thousand flavors". This is therefore an immersion in the culinary and ritual catalog of these populations straddling the Littoral and the West of the country. At the same time, this incursion has the merit of highlighting the role of the food act, omnipresent at each phase of the life cycle; the said objective arising from the observation of the prevalence of the food episode at each level of the family register.

In doing so, why does the food act appear as an identity contract inseparable from the evolution of the existential framework? So what are its relevance and value? The answers to these concerns will shape the architecture of this article, which will highlight the place of eating and drinking at each stage of life, while emphasizing their ritual and symbolic charge. Birth will constitute the first register of analysis. Traditional marriage will represent the second. Finally, death will mark the last axis of reflection; each stage characterized by acquisitions, integrations and changes. Concomitantly, a good understanding of the systems of thought will shed light on the customs and habits of the target populations.

## 2. Methodological Aspects

This production was built around directive and semi-directive interviews, combined with observation of the facts. The investigations were carried out over a period of two years from March 2020 to September 2022. The geographical setting of the study is the Nkam department, Littoral region of Cameroon. Questionnaires were established as a guide to interviewing informants.

Furthermore, the survey also consisted of participation in ceremonials surrounding the events analyzed in this text, with exchanges aimed at better understanding the observed facts. These two elements combined have proven to be decisive in understanding the representations constructed by populations as well as the approaches they adopt in terms of food in the management of cases of childbirth, marriage and bereavement.

At the same time, discussions around food culture and the perception of self and group identity also featured in the interviews. The experience of resource people, such as the elderly as well as traditional dignitaries, brought added value during the collection of field data. The chosen sample is made up of 80 people, all nationals of the study locality.

In addition to the research of oral data and those relating to the analysis of observed reality, it is imperative to add that of

the review of written documents [3]. It is in this wake that the exploitation of literature has opened up areas of reflection related to the present subject. This, combined with elements from the field investigation, guided us towards achieving results of which the analysis of key concepts, notably food, rites, heritage and identity, is the first articulation.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. Conceptual Aspects: Around the Notions of Food, Rites, Heritage and Identity

#### 3.1.1. Around the Notion of Food

The concept of food can be compared to the way of producing and consuming food [4]. This is also dependent on several elements, in this case the social environment, the availability of food and psychocultural representations. This term has thus interested a number of disciplines, notably medicine, dietetics, psychology, economics, sociology, anthropology, ethnology and history [5]. Each has made it a field of expertise by focusing on a specific aspect. Man becomes an object of analysis based on what he eats: The biological, psychological or social subject [5].

From that moment on, food is no longer limited to the strict context of edibles. In order to feed himself, man, through his "conceptual thinking", makes choices based on a set of techniques, rules, representations and symbols which are transmitted to him through generations [6]. Cultural arbitrariness correlated with nutritional and dietary requirements therefore greatly influences the act of eating [7]. This is why the concept of what is edible can vary from one geographical area to another [8]. In doing so, a community living in a given ecosystem will only feed on a tiny part of the available resources due to psychocultural constraints governing the life of the group [9].

#### 3.1.2. Around the Notion of Rites

The existence of Man is based on ritual action given that this gives meaning to everyday life [10]. This is why the earthly experience of humans is peppered with ritual acts. The latter stand out as markers of "social identity". Birth is presented as the first rite of passage while death is seen as "the geometric place" where the ultimate rites are carried out, ensuring the passage of the soul to the beyond [11]. We could then say with Jeffrey that rites regulate "relationships with oneself, with others, with the world" [12]. The human being is both actor and subject of the "ritualization models" that he received from his ancestors.

The rite would be likened to "a communication system". It establishes a platform for exchanges which features senders and recipients. Between these actors, messages circulate which refer to signs responding to cultural codes. The ritual act thus becomes a language and a symbolic representation

that becomes an image, specific to a given group [13, 14].

That said, the ritual reading of the eating act suggests that it summons and mobilizes individuals, according to rules linked to a commensality conditioned by socio-cultural constraints and translates in fact, into a significant and signified language, shared by eaters [13]. Thus, food asserts itself as a field of observation which brings together all human facets, in a space ritualized by gestures imbued with sometimes seemingly innocuous symbolism. Real and imaginary, flavors and affects coexist there [15]. Periods of food consumption are therefore, in the sense of Van Gennep, micro-rites. This author affirms in this regard that commensality is a rite of aggregation and a sacrament of communion [11]. It also implicitly translates a staging or replays the framework of the community who practices it [16].

The rite can also fulfill a function of protection against misfortunes or calamities and thereby, appease existential fears [17]. A distinction must however, be made between rites marked with sacredness and ritualized acts. This is due to the fact that the ordinary is punctuated by rituality without however referring to sacredness [18]. According to Jeffrey, ritualization brings together practices reproduced in a context other than religious. The rite, which originally referred to the techniques of exchanges with the divinities, goes well beyond just religious communications [12]. Moreover, rituals induce pauses, and are repeated in time and space, while introducing a transition.

Also, family life itself is embellished with rites which season it like spices in a sauce. Let's think about the commemoration of births or deaths, a moment full of emotion which strengthens ties and energizes family life (Family rites: We deserve to experience this as a family). To the number of these rites, we can add that of the blessing of New Year's Day, which concerns many religions. They thus put aside their fundamental differences to celebrate around a meal specially prepared for the occasion, the new year. Sharing accompanied by wishes of gratitude and happiness. The ritual act proceeds here by attenuating and regulating the risks of emotional overload", by soothing the pain caused by the drama [19].

### 3.1.3. Around the Notion of Heritage

A complex concept, heritage derives from the word *patrimonium* which literally translates as "the inheritance of the father". However, it is important to distinguish it from what is bequeathed by the mother, *matrimonium*. Generally speaking, heritage refers to "material goods that an individual inherits from his ancestors and which he transmits to his descendants" (Larousse).

The beginnings of the concept of heritage can be found in antiquity. Philo of Byzantium already made an inventory of the seven wonders of the ancient world in the year 29 BC (Before Christ). Subsequently, in 44 BC, the Roman senate legislated on the prohibition of the sale of ruined buildings, judging individuals guilty engaging in acts of vandalism on public buildings [20]. This craze continued in the Middle

Ages with the development of ancient buildings as well as relics that belonged to saints, regalia as well as libraries and archives belonging to royalty and the clergy. This desire to conserve, however, conceals the desire to perpetuate the monarchical regime [20]. The Age of Enlightenment is part of this continuity with the formation of a European heritage through private collections [21]. Unlike the period previously mentioned, the monarchy, motivated by the desire for luxury and modernity, destroyed castles deemed too old for its taste. This action is shared by the church which demolishes "pagan" monuments to preserve those it recognizes as "sacred" [22].

Fundamentally, the term heritage currently presents several variations, in this case cultural, tangible and intangible heritage. Cultural heritage was born at the end of the Second World War; the imperative to preserve monuments reflecting the identity of the nation is being felt [23]. It is therefore a conception of heritage focused on built architecture. But the 1960s and 1970s marked a major turning point in the understanding of heritage with the rise of indigenous populations' demands for land ownership. This situation pushed the UN (United Nations) in 1992 to redefine cultural heritage in its content which now extends to natural landscapes recognized as a product of human activity but also as millennial partners of human communities [23].

From the above, we would assimilate everything that exists to heritage because everything is a construction, a development and a work remodeled according to the human values attached to it. It is therefore a cultural capital which reflects the creative diversity of humanity according to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Through it, cultural identities are continually updated [24].

Material heritage, a component of cultural heritage, refers according to the French encyclopedia, to collections of objects that we have available every day, in this case furniture, equipment tools, constructed buildings. Its main character is its tangibility. It can therefore be fixed or mobile. Within it we find historical, archaeological sites and monuments and landscapes shaped by man. To these are added museological objects, ethnographic tools as well as private archives which are attributed to archival heritage.

The intangible heritage which interests this study, for its part, had its beginnings in the years 1972 in a context marked by the recognition of intellectual property linked to traditional arts. To this end, local knowledge is elevated to the rank of world heritage of humanity by the convention for the safeguarding of traditional popular culture of 1989 [25]. We are therefore witnessing here a transformation of the traditional and monumental notion of heritage in a logic of revaluing traditional achievements or living expressions received from our ancestors and transmitted to our descendants [26].

It would not be superfluous to recall that the atmosphere of the 1970s, characterized by a fragmentation of identities, is a fertile field for the expression of popular cultures, notably

music, dances, recreational activities, crafts, customs, rites and beliefs [27]. These initiatives culminated in the Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage in 2003 [28]. Boutaud and his collaborators therefore include in this category of heritage the customs, perceptions, forms, knowledge and know-how recognized by human groups as constituting their cultural heritage [29]. In this regard, we can cite “oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or know-how linked to traditional crafts” [29]. Applied to this study, these ritual elements framing the life cycle reflect the cultural identity of the people of Nkam.

### 3.1.4. Around the Notion of Identity

The Le Robert dictionary presents identity as the “character of two things identical” or the “character of what is one” (referring to unity), of “what remains identical to itself” (Le Robert). Larousse also offers some definitions. In the first, he presents identity as the link between two or more beings “who have a perfect similarity”. The second definition presents identity as “a permanent and fundamental character of someone, of a group which constitutes their individuality, their singularity”. Finally in the last, identity is a “set of factual and legal data which makes it possible to individualize someone (date of birth, surname, first name, filiation, etc.).

Fundamentally, identity is at first glance a construction of the individual and therefore a self-identity. The latter depends on the history of the subject which is subject to permanence and mutations [30]. This history takes into account the interaction of the subject with those around him and all the components of the education provided in his living environment. All these parameters are integrated into a given cultural system itself built around representations and practices which constantly update the relationship with the world [30]. One of the aspects of identity is the character which represents “the set of distinctive marks which make it possible to re-identify a human individual as being the same” [31]. It is based “on an affirmation of myself, on an individuation which makes the unique man different from others.” [31].

If on the one hand identity means personal construction, on the other hand it also implies relationship. This means that this self-identification takes place in the relationship with the other. It is therefore put in place through the otherness that we encounter in our environment. The latter is made up of all the constituent elements of the individual's universe. At the forefront are the people sharing his life and the actions they take. In the second place, comes the language used with its codes and its signs, its signifiers and its signified [32]. To these elements are added the customs and representations in force in the group. Beyond the aforementioned factors, the material life of the community should be associated with the plant and animal environment. All this is in the opinion of a traditional dignitary, subject to the symbolic and magical life which underlies the

conception of the tangible and intangible worlds.

Furthermore, given that identity is relational, it implies a dialogue with others. His validation implies that of others. Self-image is therefore dependent on the acceptance of one's alter ego. Thus, the membership of an individual in a group will only be recognized as such under the condition of recognition by the members of the group and validation from the outside [31].

From this development, comes cultural identity recognized as the process by which a community of individuals whose understanding of the universe, the way of taking related actions and conveying ideas, finds that other communities operate in a more or less different way [33]. In this sense, identity is based on the link between individuals and their attachment to certain commonly shared values. Identity cultural would, in this logic, be the mark of the uniqueness of human groups, which establishes ethnic, religious, and even socio-political borders [34].

It is accepted that cultural identity is immutable since its deep structure seems to resist time. However, it persists through its ability to adapt and enrich itself thanks to external cultural contributions which constantly redefine it [34]. Through transmission and incorporation, values, beliefs and cultural traits become anchored in people, giving them a cultural identity of their own, but at the same time attaching them to a given group [35].

## 3.2. Feeding the Parturient in the Nkam: Vector of Body Regeneration

Birth is under all the skies, an occasion for rejoicing and gratitude. It is also an opportunity to honor women for the work they have accomplished in giving life. This is because fertility is a crucial thing, offspring being a reflection of prestige and the guarantee of human accomplishment. The days, weeks, even months following childbirth are important for the young mother. It is the place for the latter to rest and above all, to recover on a health level from the tears and on a psychological level, from the stress caused by childbirth. To do this, the person concerned must stop all activity and concentrate exclusively on breastfeeding her baby.

The birth is the occasion for the deployment of all generosity and the manifestation of African solidarity. The young parturient is thus the subject of all the attention of those around her. He brings him a gift of corn flour, the fundamental ingredient of corn couscous. Neighbors and members of the immediate and extended family take turns ensuring that the new mother is sufficiently well fed. The objective is the body weight of the person concerned [36]. It should, however, be mentioned that these gifts were subject to special verification. The dishes were most often tasted by other people before being consumed by the mother. As for meals whose origin was considered suspicious, they were thrown away. All these measures aimed to avoid poisoning but especially the transmission of witchcraft through food.

The diet of the new mother was therefore rich and varied. During the days following childbirth, primacy was given to corn couscous accompanied by *Nkui* sauce (*Triumfetta cordifolia*). The virtues attributed to this dish, in particular its ability to cleanse the woman's stomach of residual waste from childbirth and that of boosting the production of breast milk, have made it a meal of choice. So, the parturient had to consume it very hot, a real torture for her.

Furthermore, until around the 1980s, "Nkui couscous" was prepared twice in a single day and had to be consumed "each time it was cooked" by the new mother. This meal was served to him, accompanied by vegetables sautéed with red oil, by his assistance, on banana leaves having been folded into plates. Subsequently, the couscous was kept in "thermos" woven locally and covered with banana leaves which retained the temperature of hot nature [36].

In addition to corn couscous (*Zea mays*) with *Nkui* sauce, absolutely recommended, the young woman also consumed other foods acclaimed. This is the case for tubers roasted in red oil from which it is delighted at every opportunity. Macabo (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), plantain, yellow yam (*Dioscorea cayenensis*), potato (*Ipomea batata*), were grilled on embers and served to the young mother as breakfast in the opinion of the informants. These tubers were also used for the preparation of broths after having been finely cut into small strips accompanied by smoked fish, the type most appreciated in the locality is called *Mbounga*. To this end, plantain broth was a source of prestige because its consumption required a certain social ease.

Alongside this dish, others were also made, but because of the high preparation workload, have become Sunday meals or biweekly. This is the case of Koki made from cowpea beans (*Vigna unguiculata*), also offered to the young Baganté mother, and locally grated macabo called *Mbikwang* accompanied by white peanut sauce (*Arachidis hypogaea*) also consumed in the Haut-Nkam department and also mashed macabo with sautéed vegetables, popular in Menoua.

The rites which proceed from the nutrition of the new child in the Nkam aim to make the latter considerably overweight. This phenomenon is also observed in geographical spaces with potential different agricultural sectors. According to some expatriate informants, in Senegal, the young mother is force-fed millet porridge called "roui" associated with butter or milk cream. The objective here being to give back its "curves", lost following childbirth.

### 3.3. Eating During Weddings: Sharing Identity Dishes, Symbolic of Union

From the outset, it is important to specify that marriage marks a decisive stage in the life of every individual living in a society. This being said, it is subject to various cultural perceptions that define its role and importance, depending on the community in which the two people who unite evolve. It is therefore wise here, to lay the foundations of representations

linked to traditional marriage in the Nkam department before addressing the place of the food question in this life process.

For [37], representations related to marriage are in the Negro-African universe, imprinted with "the seal of sacredness". The marital union is a sociocultural "institution", which is akin to a "meeting point of history past, present and future community uniting, from this point of view, all members of the community: the deceased, the living and those who will be born.

It is right that according to the system of thought in force in Nkam, the two people who marry are only representative samples of the community. In reality, much more than a simple contract, marriage carries a strong ritual charge and marks an essential cycle in human existence. Before approaching the individuals concerned, it symbolizes the union of two families, the unification of two clans, even the meeting of two ancestors; because it must be remembered, according to an elder, the Bantu has an "unshakeable" affection for his ancestor, who places all the acts punctuating his daily life in a community dimension.

Marriage is one of the happy events that punctuate life. He is the rite of passage which marks "access to the age of social majority" and symbolizes the "crystallization of initiatory ritual practices", beginning at birth [10]. It is in this spirit that its celebration is accompanied by food festivities. It is therefore right that all food prepared or any food consumed in this register is ritual and loaded with symbols.

In the context of the study in which society is patrilineal, marriage will mark the departure of the woman from the parental residence and the move into her husband's family [38]. The matrimonial process begins with "the request for the daughter's hand" which is the preliminary meeting of the two families concerned, who will eventually "unite never to separate again" because this would be the opprobrium cast on them. This ceremonial is an opportunity for the weaving of links, the exchange of gifts and the consumption of palm wine (white wine), a ritual drink which symbolizes the acceptance of the request of the family of the boy, who came to the parental home of the "predisposed" in quality of "foreign". In this regard, [39] states that:

The girl who is not present up to this point, makes her appearance when the spokesperson describes her or calls her by name. The suitor's family then offers a calabash of wine to the future in-laws. The calabash is given to the girl who gives it to her father to indicate her consent. If the father takes the calabash and drinks his wine, it is because he accepts the marriage proposal, and applause follows. The future in-laws then draw up a list of gifts that the boy's family must give them. To close the ceremony, the father of the bride-to-be offers a buffet to his new friends.

This passage underlines a pictorial aspect. The absence of the young girl gives way to careful physical description by the representative of the son-in-law's family, who must to be faithful. This act enhances her in the eyes of the public. And when she finally appears, the wine palm that is given to him,

symbolizes in turn his acceptance and that of his father.

The drink therefore seals this rite of acceptance and marks the transition to next step. The latter will be marked by the contribution of all the elements, mentioned in a list that the host family draws up and gives to the visiting delegation.

In addition to the palm wine consumed, the gifts brought by the delegation in visit, were among other things, bunches of plantains, a tin of red oil produced with “utmost care”. For its part, the bride's family offers dishes to the guests to show his hospitality. “Big day meals” are prepared as a prelude to the holding the dowry ceremony itself. Plantain stew with oil palm and accompanied by game meat (porcupine meat, deer, rat), is served to guests. In this regard, it is mentioned that, until relatively recently, this the dish was served in banana leaves spread on the ground. Each guest, provided with a macabo or taro leaf as a plate, served himself and ate with his bare hands. Compliance with this protocol, also practiced during births, was essential and marked the “celebration of life” very dear to the Bantu. Next to this dish, another dish essential during meetings is the *koki*. This evening is watered with palm wine, symbol of living together in Nkam.

A dean points out that during the ceremony, a particular meal is cooked over a wood fire. This special dish is called pistachio cake, or *Nkân ô ngond* in local languages or *Ngonda Mkân* in Douala. Its cooking over a wood fire is essential so as not to alter the “cultural charge” it contains. He is made by matriarchs whose social status is recognized and revered. Cooked at smothered in banana leaves, it can be seasoned with smoked fish and to enhance its value, game. The pots used for this purpose have gone from the terracotta pot, to the metal one with “three feet”, popularized throughout the southern part of Cameroon during the independence phase. At the end of the ceremony, this dish of “enormous dimensions”, is given to the head of the delegation of the son-in-law's family as a present, to the whole family but more, as a symbol of “the door that was opened to strangers”. From then on, the latter change their status and are now linked to the candidate's family. This ritual food therefore marks the alliance. Back in the son-in-law's family, this pistachio cake is presented to everyone the family as the fruit of the conquest that was carried out.

### 3.4. Eating with the Dead: The Role of the Act of Eating in Farewells

Death is a universal event that affects all community's human. The latter attribute different meanings to it depending on their cultural areas. Before addressing the role of food in managing the advent of this fatalism, we should question the meanings and symbolic constructions which accompany this phenomenon in Nkam.

In the African imagination, beyond the physiological cause at the origin of a death, there is in many cases a metaphysical reason which caused it because illness and death come from an external agent, of a superior force that strips us of our strength [40]. Death is the reflection of the drama of existence,

which threatens man throughout his life [41]. Thus, according to a traditional dignitary, for having uttered curses or threats to a person, an individual can find himself accused, rightly or wrongly, of the illness, of having cast a spell or of the death of the said person. This reflects a marked propensity towards superstition among Africans.

From the above, it appears that in order to escape the fear of death, manifest in the thought of man, the African Negro ensures eternity, quest of the human race since the origins. Indeed, through the exercise of ancestor worship, the protagonist magnifies the life he received from them, but also translates his victory over death since life is extended into the afterlife by the ancestors [2].

Therefore, the departure of a loved one upsets and disrupts the established social balance. The consequence is a void created by the missing link. In this atmosphere charged with emotions, moments of denial and acceptance alternate, because the absent presence of the dead is almost permanent in the minds of the living. Likewise, the tragedy plunges the afflicted into unconscious fear because now the dead inspires fear. This is what [42] states, continuing his remarks:

Because death could also come to haunt the living, we must show him signs of respect (notably through prophylactic rituals). Finally, death plunges the living into the sacred which, opposed to the profane (the everyday), requires supervision. All these tensions are experienced and made sense of both in time and space and in the bodies of the mourners. By witnessing the practices of stopping time as if to mime death to mark the stages of mourning, locating the dead in a place (the cemetery) and wearing the clothes and/or jewelry of the dead as if to better register death in itself.

Faced with this truth, which is so difficult to admit, those close to the deceased will look for supports on which to express the grief caused by the farewell. These symbols provide aid during the grieving process. A whole psychic, gestural and protocol gymnastics are then deployed in rituals which will ultimately soothe the agony, support acceptance and perfect the relationship between those who stayed and those who left. The latter must in fact be honored so that from the new dimension into which he has passed, he can intervene for the living. Funeral food practices are part of this dynamic.

Death therefore brings consternation and dejection. The affected family is in a daze. It is a difficult period during which alternating moments of denial and acceptance. In the opinion of the ancients, when someone died, the village took note of this through the shrill cries that came from the deceased's compound. The women lay on the ground, lamented and covered their bodies with ash. Small children were also smeared with ashes. These will be recluse for the entire period of mourning. Indeed, according to the considerations in course, a death caused the release of certain spirits of death. Furthermore, taking advantage of the circumstantial chaos orchestrated by the news, the sorcerers found themselves “in spirit in their “secret place” called *Hom yap té* in the Dibom language, in order to decide “eating a

person's soul". The most likely victims were children. This is why, after protection rites carried out by the traditional practitioner *Ngan dibom* (literally the spell blocker in local languages), the latter were hidden under cover looks.

In the urgency of protecting ourselves from the contagion of death, certain rites must be carried out. It is at this level that the act of eating intervenes. A meal notably the taro with yellow sauce was cooked "without the meat". The eldest of the clan accompanied by the traditional practitioner, to the edge of the forest, where this food was sprinkled on the ground, followed by a libation of palm wine. The eldest held on occasion, a speech to the ancestors to implore their clemency and protect the frightened family against the fiery darts of the spirit world. Failure to fulfill this offering food could prove fatal for the community.

For the occasion, we favored meals that were easy to prepare in large quantities. This is why *Koki* cake made from cowpea beans, but also small weights, called *Matop*, with palm oil (*Mouu ma Ngan*) in the local language was one of the daily meal. Cassava corn couscous with *djancens* sauce or base of cassava leaf and peanut paste and braised tubers accompanied palm oil, were also served to the audience. [36] adds in this meaning that depending on the season, the participants feasted on corn and fresh peanuts or boiled.

The consumption of this meal in a funeral context by an audience numerous testifies to the social value that the community accords to the disappeared. It further translates "an accumulation of merits influencing the good fate of the soul of the dead" [17]. Likewise local wine (palm wine) whose consumption daily accompanies ordinary activities (work on the plantation, support meals), "welds social bonds and strengthens group identity" [43], takes on a funerary ritual value. Then, there is the burial with the rites which accompany it and which complete it.

Once the body was buried, preparations were made for "the customary ceremony" which was to be held the following day. Speaking of the said ceremonial, the people of Nkam remain quite evasive, claiming that anyone who revealed the slightest detail of the process would be struck dead. As a prelude to this ceremony, sacred dishes were cooked. These were to be the subject of a sold-out banquet by the initiates during the ceremony. These meals were in this case prepared in consecrated pots and by women "initiated into the custom" exclusively. The menu included *koki*, corn cake with vegetables or *Taha*, both cooked with red oil, to etouffee in banana leaves and finally plantain stew called *Kondr è* [36] affirms in this sense that *Taha* is renowned in Bamileké country as favorite dish of the ancestors.

This food ceremonial by summoning the spirits of the dead, honors them and associated with the living "in a food festival". This recalls funeral practices ongoing in Roman Africa during which the mourners found themselves in the twilight in front of the grave of the deceased and shared bread, fish and wine. This "sacrificial" meal had a triple purpose: To feed the dead and the ancestors in order to ensure peace between the two

worlds, purifying the family from the link with "death", replacing it "in the society of the living", and finally, in addition, ensuring the unhindered entry of the disappeared in its new dimension [44].

## 4. Conclusion

At the end of this work, which had as its object the relationship between food and life cycle in the Nkam department, it appears that food accompanies the individual from birth to death and even beyond. The period corresponding to pregnancy is a sensitive moment in the life of the future mother but also that of the baby to come. Also, the diet must be rigorous and selective. The birth for its part, it has a universal character, it is a source of joy and celebration. In depending on the geographical area in which it occurs, it is subject to representations and symbols. For Nkam nationals, it can mean the return to life of a deceased relative and the occasion for great celebrations.

So, after childbirth, the parturient's diet is redefined because the good nutrition of the infant depends on it. Its dishes carry symbols that embody strength and regeneration. Among the happy events that punctuate this earthly journey is marriage. A rite of passage which confers maturity in African society, it is celebrated with pomp and gratitude. Food occupies a special place because it symbolizes, through the good of the exchange and consumption of food, demand, acceptance, the outcome of the process and the celebration of union.

Death gives another dimension to food. This fatalism shared by all human communities is the occasion for great pain and terrible confusion. This is the place to affirm with Thomas [45] that in the face of this cataclysm, the African, through representations, annihilated its force and decreed "survival in the afterlife, reincarnation, ancestrality guarantor of the sustainability of the group". It is with this in mind that Africans have created various "activities around the afterlife", notably funeral rites as if to honor the dead but also to ensure the continuity of life by a bridge built between the living and the deceased [46]. It is in this spirit that food plays a major role. Food gifts given to the bereaved family are a great mark of affection and support. In addition, eating with people who are mourning would help to ennoble the journey of the dead and ensure that they are well received in their new world [45]. Finally, eating with those who have departed would appease the inhabitants of the afterlife, ensuring protection and peace on the world of the living.

## Abbreviations

BC	Before Christ
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

## Authors Contributions

**Hen Mbah Romó Gervain:** Conceptualization, Investigation and Data curation

**Bike Mbah Jean Baptiste:** Methodology and Resources

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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