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## Women and Land Snails Consumption in the Southwest Region of Cameroon

By Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Both marine and terrestrial species of snails are consumed in most countries worldwide, including Southwest Cameroon where it is an age-old practice among various ethnic groups. Before the introduction of snail farming in the Southwest Region of Cameroon in the 1990s, all the residents who ate snails acquired them through gathering.

There is significant internal variation in the history of land snail consumption among four ethnic groups: the Banyang, Mbo, Balung, and Bakweri. The long history of land snail consumption among the Banyang and Mbo can be attributed to their geographical proximity to the eastern region of Nigeria, where the consumption of land snails has been widespread since ancient times. In contrast, until recently, land snails were perceived by the Bakweri and Balung as filthy pests that crawled and ate dirt, especially excrement, and thus were unhealthy and/or taboo for human consumption. This paper intends to demonstrate how some groups refused to eat land snails in pre-colonial times and during foreign rule in Cameroon (1884-1960), and how due to women's roles, that changed so that they are currently nutritionally important in their diets due to the snails' multifarious importance as a source of food, medicine, and income.

*Keywords:* Land snails, Cameroon, Snail farming, Banyang, Balung, Mbo, Bakweri

### Introduction

The consumption of land snails has been fast adopted by many in Southwest Cameroon. Land snail meat is known under various nomenclatures in Southwest Cameroon notably, *Nyamangoro* in Bakweri, *kuo* in Mbo, *Ngo* in Nweh, and "Slow Boys" in Pidgin. Its low fat and cholesterol levels make it recommendable for people of all ages and especially for patients with vascular diseases. Due to women's involvement, land snail rearing and consumption has increased as of late throughout Southwest Cameroon. The Integrated Rural Development (RUMPI) project has sponsored snail vulgarization for a couple decades now. But before the RUMPI project commenced, snail rearing was an indigenous initiative among the Mbo and Banyang of Southwest Cameroon. Animal nutritionist and physiologist, Doctor Kingsley Etchu, has taken some 170,000 snail-breeds throughout the region, apart from the 10,000 under his care at Ekona in the Bakweri area. Snail farmers are found among all the ethnic groups in the region including, Mbo, Bangwa, Banyang, Bakweri, Bafaw, Ballung, Bakundu, Mundani, Oroko, Bakossi, and others. The popularity of snails in the region is partly due to their wide availability. Land snails are considered a delicacy for both high and low-income earners in the region.

In Buea, the chief settlement of the Bakweri, where offices close by 3:30 pm, many workers rush to the "White House" or "Ewusi Bar" to secure their plates of snail pepper soup, lest they may miss it for the day. Still, among the Bakweri, snails are consumed with relish in the Clerk's neighbourhood, Mile 17, the Molyko University area, and Great Soppo. In other peripheries of the region, people rear and supply the delicacy to urban centres such as Douala, Yaounde, Bafoussam, and others. Given the favourable environmental conditions in the region, many female snail farmers have opened to foreign

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markets. Among the Banyang for instance, Dorothy Ebai has gained fame in drying and exporting snail meat to European and African countries such as Germany, Italy, Ghana, Nigeria, and others. Many Cameroonians who reside abroad popularly known as “Bush Fallers” on holidays in the Southwest do not return to their over-sea residences without a parcel of dried snails. As a replacement of ordinary and expensive livestock, the snail (as it is easy to keep), may well be the way forward to source family protein and income. All this is thanks to women’s active participation in snail rearing. Apart from the economic dimension of snail businesses, there are also social aspects that have influenced the industry. The snail has come from being considered by many cultures as “an excrement consumer” to now being found at almost every table in the Mbo, Banyang, Balung, and Bakweri communities. The purpose of this paper is to investigate why land snail meat, which was considered unclean by certain cultures in Southwest Cameroon, is now being consumed by all the ethnic groups in the region.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was carried out in Southwest Cameroon. The region has an area of 27,520 kilometers square and ranks second in size after the Eastern Region. It is bordered on the South by the Atlantic Ocean, on the Northeast by the Western Region, on the East by the Littoral Region and Nigeria, and on the North by the Northwest Region. The researcher used a qualitative research method to collect data for this paper. Direct observation was also carried out. The researcher spent two months on the field conducting oral interviews – among the Bakweri, Mbo, Banyang and Balung people – with aged snail dealers who could recall some pre-colonial practices as told to them by their parents and also those who could recall both past and contemporary taboos related to snails. The factors taken into consideration before selecting an interviewee were age, ethnic origin, and profession related to snail activity. A few of these interviews were taped while the majority was recorded in note form. The oral interview form was most readily available. The essential issue in collecting such information was to know the right informants in each of the surveyed ethnic groups, book interviews with them, and then meet them individually or collectively with a tape-recorder, a pen, a field notebook, and a previous knowledge of the information to be sought and questions to be posed. The field trip carried out by the author enabled him to have firsthand information and knowledge on the people’s attitudes towards snail consumption in Southwest Cameroon. The second source of information is archival materials. Research was carried out in the Buea National Archives solely to sort out information related to the study. Theses and dissertations dealing with snail-related issues were consulted as well as secondary or published sources. The author financed the field trip himself because he did not receive outside funding. The disciplinary perspective that framed the research is historical.

### **Geographical Setting and Ethnic Composition of the Southwest Region of Cameroon**

Located in the Gulf of Guinea, Cameroon lies at the intersection of West and Central Africa. The Southwest Region is located within the equatorial forest zone which provides a conducive habitation to different edible snail species. Equatorial forest covers 4/5 of the total area. The area is bordered by the Northwest Region, Littoral Region, Western Region of Cameroon, and the Eastern Region of Nigeria.

The region is characterised by two main seasons: the rainy season which lasts for eight months and the dry season which lasts for merely four months. The long rainy season provides a favourable environment for land snail hunting. Generally, the relief of the region is flat with some isolated mountains along the Cameroon chain of mountains. The region hosts the highest mountain in the country (Mount Cameroon with 4,095 meters altitude) (Neba, 1987) and in the whole of West Africa. This is the most prominent of the West African volcanic mountains. The eruptions in 1909, 1922, 1954, 1959, 1982, 1998, 1999, and the earth tremors in 1976 and 1999 testify to this (Fongouck, 1988). Although the region is inhabited by several Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, the ones that have been studied in this paper include

the Bakweri,<sup>2</sup> Banyang,<sup>3</sup> Balung and Mbo.<sup>4</sup> The women from these groups adopted different land snail hunting methods and had different histories of including snails in their diets.

### Edible Land Snails Found in Southwest Cameroon

Although several species of snails are found in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, the most prominent is the African Giant Land Snail (*Archachatina marginata*). This type of snail has the highest body weight (420-525 grams) of all the snails found in the region. This is the largest species of land snail found in Cameroon and in the whole world. Adult shell height is usually 140-170mm. Shell pattern and colour varies but is usually dark brown with varying amounts of lighter brown and yellow stripes. Flesh colour varies from light brown to almost black and is coarse to the touch. They commonly lay about 8-10 eggs in a clutch and take about 6 months from egg to adult. These snails are the most consumed in Southwest Cameroon (Nkematabong Monday March 15, 2010). This is the species that Dorothy Arrey, a prominent farmer who raises snails among the Banyang, and other farmers of Southwest Cameroon dry and export to European and African countries such as Germany, Italy, Ghana, and Nigeria.

There is also the Garden Snail (*Archachatina archachatina*). This snail, with a body weight ranging from 150 to 275 grams, has a dark brown shiny shell. It lays about 12-18 eggs in a clutch and takes about 6 months from egg to maturity. The average shell size is about 150 mm, though it can be much larger. The shell colour ranges from yellow orange to dark orange and has wavy dark brown/black stripes. Because of the shell pattern, it is often called the Giant Tiger Snail. The columella and parietal wall are pink. The flesh color is usually dark grey but can be a lighter grey brown. The young ones have tiny grooves on the shell.

The 'long Mop' snail (*Archachatina fulica*) is also consumed. This snail is known as 'long mop' due to its pointed end. It has a body weight ranging from 135 to 205 grams and its shell colour may be pale brown, yellow brown, or dark brown. While in captivity, the body whorl is usually a uniform dark brown and the other whorl striped or flamed with white or yellow, the stripes becoming closer together toward the apex. The sutures are usually quite deep. The shell shape can vary but is usually quite slender. The columella is white blue. The shell is quite thick and robust. The flesh is usually a medium brown but can be darker. It lays about 150-300 eggs in a clutch and takes about 6 months from egg to adult. It has a soft body which makes it less preferred by some Cameroonian consumers.

*Achatina immaculata* has a shell height of 90-140mm. It is one of the most polymorphic species in the *Achatina* genus. The shell color varies immensely: dark brown with yellow/light brown radial stripes, uniform dark brown, bluish brown, split-in-half yellow and brown, medium brown, light brown,

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<sup>2</sup> The Bakweri live on the Southeastern slopes of Mount Cameroon with a population of approximately 32,000 inhabitants. They are one of the coastal groups of Cameroon that inhabit the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Their ethnic group is confined to what was formerly known as Victoria Division in the former British Cameroons. For more information about the group, see Arrey Daniel Ndip, (1994), "Plantation Agriculture in Cameroon 1885-1915: The Case of Victoria Division" (Post Graduate Diploma dissertation, Yaounde University), p.8.

<sup>3</sup> The Banyang inhabit the Southeastern portion of the former Mamfe Division of Southern Cameroons, now Manyu Division of the Southwest Region of Cameroon. They are bounded in the East by the Bangwa, in the Southeast by Mbo, in the West by Ejagham, and in the Northwest by Anyang. For details on the socio-cultural history of the Banyang, see Kennedy Eyoung Tambe, (1991), "Banyang Socio-Cultural history: From the pre-colonial period to the development of Banyangi Quarters" (Post Graduate Diploma dissertation, Yaounde University), p.1 and E.H.F. Georges, (1930) An Assessment Report on the Banyang Tribal Area, Mamfe Division, (AF/17), file NO. 268, Buea National Archives, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> The Mbo group under study includes the English-speaking and the French-speaking Mbo. Before the imposition of colonial rule in Cameroon in 1884 which led to the eventual partition of the group, the Mbo constituted a single linguistic entity. But from 1916, the group was divided by the Anglo-French boundary following the expulsion of the Germans. For details on the political history of the Mbo, see Forka Leyepey Mathew Fomine, (2001), "Traditional Diplomacy between the chiefdoms of Mbo Region of the Southwest Province of Cameroon 1905-2001: A Historical perspective" (M.A. dissertation, Yaounde University).

or light brown with stripes. The body colour also varies, but with *Achatina immaculata* in captivity, it is usually light yellow-orange or light brown. The shell shape varies from obese to slender. There are many sub-species and variants. The snails with slender or light brown striped/bluish shells are sometimes called *Achatina panthera*. They are generally not as easy to keep as *Achatina fulica*, and young can be difficult to rear. The eggs are slightly larger than those of other *Achatina* snails.

*Achatina iredalei* is quite small compared to other species in the *Achatina* genus. Adult shell height is usually about 70mm. Characteristics are a slender yellow shell and a yellow body, which may or may not have a brown head. This species is few probably because it is ovoviviparous; it does not lay eggs but gives birth to live young. The young are slightly bigger than other *Achatina* babies that are being hatched. This species is more consumed in Yaounde, and other towns in the Central Region of Cameroon.

*Achatina reticulata* species has a shell height of about 120-130mm. The shell shape is quite slender and pointed. It is white with wavy dark brown stripes and dots. Some shells have browner colouring than others. The distinguishing feature of this species is its radial and spiral grooves on the shell. The body colour is cream with a brown head. They are also abundant in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, where they serve as a delicacy. *Archachatina marginata suturalis* is the smallest species of snails in Southwest Cameroon and in other parts of the country. It has a shell height of about four centimetres. The columella is red, and the apex is usually reddish.

Another popular species is *Archachatina degneri* whose adult shell height is approximately 120 mm. When the snail is fully grown the lip becomes averted. The body whorl is large in proportion to the rest of the shell. The columella, parietal wall and inside of the lip are a deep red/violet. The shell colour is almost uniform medium brown, with some lighter brown/yellow/greenish stripes. The flesh has a light brown colour with a darker head. There is a defined dark stripe along the 'neck' down to the head. They make excellent pets. *Archachatina degneri* is predominantly eaten in the North and Extreme North Region of Cameroon by the Mousgoum, Massa, Doowaayoo and Toupouri. It serves as an excellent accompaniment to millet dumpling which is a staple food in the area.

### **Land Snail Hunting in Southwest Cameroon**

Land snail hunting was not a gender-based occupation in Southwest Cameroon. Although men, women, and grown-up children were engaged in snail hunting, women took the lead. Women carried out land snail expeditions during the day but predominantly in the night. The tools used for night expeditions included a bush lamp, a bucket, a bag, and a stick or a cutlass. The female hunters would jointly visit target zones such as the surroundings of fishponds, banks of streams, rock surroundings, areas of permanent pasture and the surrounding of crops like okra (*Hibiscus esculentus*), banana (*Musa sapientum*) and plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*). The process of hunting was simple: a stick or cutlass was used to shift dead-moist leaves which served as hiding spots where land snails took refuge. Any snail discovered was picked and taken home for consumption.

A significant fraction of the female farmers of Southwest Cameroon set up traps near fishponds and other targeted areas. This was done by placing food bait such as yam and plantain peelings, cowpea residue, paw-paw leaves, and cabbage or water leaves on a particular spot near the pond. The spot was then concealed by reversing the mouth of a plastic bucket or basket on it. After a couple of days, the trap was checked, and the snails entangled were collected and carried home for nutritional and other purposes (Makebe, 2006).

The rubber plantations located among the Balung in Muyuka and its environs provided Balung women a peculiar opportunity to hunt land snails. The surroundings of rubber stems provided adequate shelter and moisture that is highly required by snails for comfortable habitation. Interestingly, Balung women carried out collective snail hunting ventures in the night. In a long queue, the women would enter the rubber plantation and carefully begin to shift grass or any available object around rubber stems. Any

snail discovered under grass was picked and taken home for food. Some women simply gathered snails in the yard where kitchen refuse was discarded. All Balung informants attested to the fact that dirty spots were the most attractive sites to snails and consequently, huge quantities of snails were gathered there.<sup>5</sup> This indiscriminate snail hunting led to a reduction in the snail population so to remedy this precarious situation, Southwest female farmers began to domesticate and raise snails in the early 1990s as an indigenous initiative.

### **Land Snail Farming in Southwest Cameroon**

Land snails were an integral part of the West African culinary tradition. In Southwest Cameroon, a major snail consumption community where there was indiscriminate hunting and consumption of snails disposed them to growing scarcity and if it continued, it would have led to the extinction of some species exacerbated by the rapid destruction of their natural habitat. Consequently, the snail population began to decline considerably, primarily due to human activities such as deforestation,<sup>6</sup> bush burning, the use of chemicals and the gathering and collection of young snails.<sup>7</sup>

The agricultural practices of Cameroonians characterized by cutting and burning of the forest, also endangers the livelihood of the snails. Coupled to these is also the danger of spontaneous bush fires. The use of pesticides, insecticides, acids, and other dangerous chemicals in farms: most of these human activities, if not all, destroy and reduce the snail population. For example, it is noted in Southwest Cameroon that snail meat is usually more expensive during the season that cocoa is sprayed with insecticides. This emanates from the fact that the chemical used for spraying kills snails and destroys their eggs. There was therefore the need for proper snail farming<sup>8</sup> in the region to forestall this threat.

Historically, snail farming is quite a recent practice in Southwest Cameroon, granted that prior to the 1990s, it was given scant attention by both men and women but after the 1990s women began to develop an interest in snail raising. Another factor that necessitated snail farming in the region was the consumption of snail meat that increased tremendously over the past two decades. Considering the importance of land snail meat in the diets of the residents of Southwest Cameroon, female farmers deemed it wise to start raising snails, first as a means of preserving the rather endangered species but also in a bid to meet up with local demands, and second as a source of income granted the fact that a majority of Southwest female farmers lived in abject poverty prior to the commencement of snail farming in their region due to their initiative.

Southwest Cameroonian female farmers adopted varied snail raising methods for instance, the free-range pen method. In this method, an area of approximately 15x10 meters of land was mapped out and fenced properly with sticks or iron rods to protect the snails from rodents, ants, and snakes. A variety of plants to serve as food and shelter was planted in the fence (Omole and Etengeneng, 24-26 October 2006). The plants were principally paw-paw (*Carica papaya*), banana, plantain, cassava (*Manihot utilissima*) (Zongo, February 1997) and others. The fruits and tubers of these plants served as food to the

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<sup>5</sup> Reminiscences of aged Balung informants. Andrew Mukete, aged 70, narrated during an interview held in his bungalow at Muyuka on 13 December 2008, that the first source of snails to the Balung was the sites where kitchen refuse was discarded. In colonial times, the Balung believed that snails were dirty creatures because they fed on dirt. This cultural barrier has been dismantled among the Balung due to increases in intermarriages, urban interaction in Muyuka, and other factors.

<sup>6</sup> Cutting down of forest vegetation that exposes the snail population to the danger of insufficient shading, exposure to direct sunlight and wind. It could also lead to starvation because most of the vegetation preferred is damaged. If some precautions are not taken, this can lead to the extinction of the snail species in no distant future.

<sup>7</sup> The collection of snails before they attain maturity especially when the demand is very high poses a serious threat to snail population. Since the harvesting and/or collection of snails is predominantly carried out in the night, there is the risk of collectors trampling on the young ones.

<sup>8</sup> Snail farming is the keeping of snails in a confined environment under human control and management.

snails while the leaves served as shelter. This method had a few disadvantages. First, it was difficult to locate eggs and baby snails. Second, it was difficult to keep predators<sup>9</sup> completely out. Third, the method required a large land surface. Fourth, it was difficult to keep record as the snails continued to stray in the fence. Fifth, there was a high incidence and prevalence of diseases, parasites, and weeds.

Another prominent method made use of old tyres. About four tyres were placed one on top of the other and fresh soil was put in first. The tyres were perforated to ease ventilation. The stocking density depended on the size of the tyres; size 13 R, 14 R and 15 R could take up to 20 adult snails respectively. The topmost tyre was covered with a nylon sheet. The snails raised via this method were generally fed with oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) kernels, yam (*Dioscorea spp.*) peels, paw-paw leaves and fruits, soya beans (*Glycine max*) residue and lettuce leaves (*Lactuca sativa*). For the snails' abode to be moist, water was sprinkled in it from time to time (Karamagi, 2006). This method was advantageous in that the materials required for rearing were cheap and provided adequate hiding spots for snails (Etchu, 2006).

Some Southwest women used cages to raise snails. The cages employed were of varied designs and sizes. Overall, they were constructed with a variety of materials, namely wood, metal, or bamboo. The cages were easily transferable. Such was the case with hutch boxes and moveable pens. It is worth noting that the hutch boxes are ideal for hatchery and nursery pens as the eggs and young snails can easily be located and observed keenly while moveable pens are suitable for fattening purposes and for housing mature snails. They are also used as exhibition pens. The whole cage must be covered with a sheet of fine mesh to keep the snails confined in the cage and thus prevent them from escaping. Here again, the stocking density depends on the size of the cage. A cage with length 1.5 meters, with 0.5 meters and height 1.2 meters can take about 200 adult snails.<sup>10</sup> This method was introduced by animal nutritionist and physiologist, Doctor Kingsley Etchu, who resided at Ekona in the Bakweriland. Doctor Etchu played a significant role in disseminating the knowledge of snail rearing in Southwest Cameroon by taking 170,000 snail breeds throughout the region. Doctor Etchu narrated in an oral interview that he was the chief coordinator of the RUMPI project that sponsored snail vulgarization in Southwest Cameroon for some decades. He also kept 10,000 snails.<sup>11</sup>

Other farmers employed the low fenced pen method. In this method, three layers of blocks were placed one on top of the other to get a height of about 80-100 centimeters. A sheet of nylon was used to cover the abode and provision made for feeding and watering. A water bath with disinfectant was placed in the enclosure. This method was commonly employed for commercial production with a stocking density that ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 depending on the capacity of the abode. The low fenced pen method was relatively easier to manage as neither stooping nor kneeling was required. Nevertheless, the method was relatively expensive to construct as opposed to the free-range pen method. The snails raised via the low fenced pen method were fed with cabbage (*Brassica spp.*), cassava, African spinach (*Amaranthus hybridus*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), banana, soya beans residue, poultry litter and rice (*Oryza sativa*) bran (Etchu, 2006). The high fence pen method was the best housing type of about 3x3 cm with about three coaches made of block and wire mesh. This was also provided with water feed troughs. This method was used predominantly for commercial production, having adequate ventilation for all stages of snail production (for instance, incubation period, hatching, growers, and breeder snails), and no stooping or kneeling was required of the stockman. Perforated pots, basins, buckets, and drums were also used by Southwest women to raise snails.

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<sup>9</sup> These are animals or birds that feed on snails, notably field mice, rats, frogs, toads, birds, lizards, snakes, Carabid beetles, millipedes, centipedes, ants, and others. Snails can be safe in the free-range pen method by setting traps outside the farm and construction of gutters or water baths for prevention against soldier ants.

<sup>10</sup> Personal observation of cages among the sampled groups during fieldwork from early December 2008 to late January 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Kingsley Etchu, doctor, animal nutritionist and physiologist, aged 55 years, Ekona, 29 December 2008.

No matter the snail raising method employed, the most important features of any snailery are that, it is escape proof, it keeps predators out, and it allows easy access for routine management activities such as mulching, irrigation, or artificial wetting, tilling and tending, enumeration and culling. Through the above elucidated traditional snail raising methods, edible snails were readily available in Southwest Cameroon year-round. As earlier mentioned, some of the snails raised in the region were exported to European and African countries. Even within Cameroon, the snails raised in the Southwest Region were supplied to big cities like Yaounde, Douala, and Bafoussam where snail farming was less developed. The traditional methods employed to prepare and consume these snails were as varied as the methods exploited to raise them.

### **Traditional Snail Preparation and Consumption in Southwest Cameroon**

Roasting is a common form of snail preparation in Southwest Cameroon. To roast a snail, it is put in a hot flame with wood ash and sparks placed on it. After roasting for about 20 minutes, the burnt shell is peeled manually, and the waste discarded. Salt and pepper (*Capsicum frutescens*) are then applied on the flesh and roasted again for about 7 minutes depending on how hot the flame is. After roasting for the second time, it is removed from the flame, sliced manually into pieces, and shared by the housewife amongst household members for consumption.<sup>12</sup>

Another popular method of preparing snails was in the form of *soya*. This was prepared exclusively by women. Prior to preparation, the snail was unshelled. Each sampled group used tools to unshell the snail. For instance, among the Balung, it was unshelled using a clean umbrella spoke, a nail or a file,<sup>13</sup> while among the Bakweri, the unique tool used was a tiny bamboo stick. Similarly, among the Banyang, the unique tool used was a small sharp-pointed iron rod, while amongst the Mbo, a small cooking knife or a short bamboo stick was used.<sup>14</sup> After pulling out the snail, it was imperative to get rid of the slimy mucus that surrounds it. Among the Balung, this was scrubbed off using calcium carbonate or the juice of grapefruit or lime but among the Mbo, lime juice was the sole device employed. The Banyang used the imported liquid popularly known to them as *alom*, lime juice and salt<sup>15</sup> while the Bakweri used lime juice and the chaffs of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*). The few Bakweri women who did not use the foreign sugar cane introduced in their community in the 1890s used the chaffs of the Bakweri indigenous sugar cane known to them as *mondadwani*.<sup>16</sup>

After getting rid of the slimy mucus, the snail was washed, sliced, and steamed with the following ingredients: salt, magi cube, green spices, ginger, garlic, and pepper. After steaming, it was deep fried in palm oil or ground nut oil. After adequate frying, four tiny slices were pinned on a short bamboo that measured about 25 centimeters. That which was intended for sale was put in a transparent bucket ready for marketing. Often phrases from snail *soya* vendors are heard such as “fine *Nyamangoro*”, “fine Congo meat,” or “fine *soya*” in public places, especially brewed beer parlours. One short bamboo was sold at 100F CFA, approximately 0.2 U. S. dollars. The *soya* was either pulled off the bamboo manually and eaten or simply pulled with the teeth and munched.<sup>17</sup> The snail *soya* constituted a conspicuous dish consumed during cocktails and other ceremonies. The same *soya* is also featured on family tables at mealtime.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Agatha Tabor aged 55, housewife and snail seller, Mamfe Central, 6 December 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Johnson Ako aged 62, retired clerk and snail consumer, Muyuka, 10 December 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with James Fossoh aged 40, Snail trader, Mbo, 17 January 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Makebe, “Landsnail among Banyang people,” p.54.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Benjamin Lyonga aged 55, Batoke, 12 December 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Barabbas Mafani aged 60, Snail farmer, Batoke, 24 January 2008.

Another prevalent and conspicuous technique for preparing snail was to incorporate it into *eru* (*Gnetum africanum*).<sup>18</sup> After un-shelling the snail was washed to get rid of its slimy mucus. The antennas<sup>19</sup> and intestines were extracted and discarded. It was then sliced with a kitchen knife and steamed (in pre-colonial times, this was done in a clay pot<sup>20</sup> but currently it is steamed in a metal pot) for about 30 minutes with beef and smoked meat or fish. The ingredients added were merely salt and magi cube. After being steamed properly, water leaf was sliced and added to the snail and continued to boil for about 10 minutes at most. After this duration, the *eru* which was already sliced into tiny pieces was added to the water leaf and snail.

While boiling the snail, *eru*, water leaf (*Talinum triangulare*) and the other ingredients were stirred. In pre-colonial times, this was done among the Banyang and Mbo with a wooden spatula but in the contemporary Southwest society, it is stirred with an aluminum spoon (this is a marked change in Mbo and Banyang material culture). After stirring for about 5 minutes, palm oil was incorporated into the combination. The other ingredients included smoked pawns, yellow pepper, magi cube, and salt. The snail and *eru* were stirred intermittently for approximately 30 minutes after which the combination was carried away from the fireplace and served for consumption. In pre-colonial times, this was served amongst the Banyang and Mbo in calabashes and wooden bowls but currently, it is served on plates and modern dishes. In pre-colonial times, the snail cooked in *eru* or any other vegetable was eaten with bare hands as an accompaniment to cocoyam (*Xanthosoma mafafa*) (Anderson, 1929; Rutherford, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1923) dumpling but during the colonial period and nowadays it is served with different dumplings<sup>21</sup> prepared out of cassava, especially *garri*.<sup>22</sup> Snail incorporated into *eru* is eaten during all important ceremonies in Southwest Cameroon such as royal enthronement, funeral entertainments, naming rites, and both traditional and modern weddings.<sup>23</sup>

But the method employed to prepare snails among the Bangwa was slightly different from that used among other ethnic groups. During an oral interview with Cecilia Anyiche, a sixty-year-old housewife who has been cooking snails for domestic consumption for three decades, she related that “cooking ‘*Nyama*’ or snail is very time consuming. Back at home she sits in an open space to work freely. She

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<sup>18</sup> *Eru* is an indigenous legume in Cameroon. This partially domesticated vegetable is one of the most popular vegetable plants in Southern Cameroon. The Banyang were the first to start eating *eru* in the Southwest Region of Cameroon but in due course, the knowledge of *eru* consumption disseminated to the Mbo, Balung and Bakweri settlements. Although the Bakweri were not the first to commence the consumption of *eru* in Southern Cameroon, they were the first to domesticate it. So much *eru* was harvested in the wild and eaten by the Bakweri that the plant became rare in their area prior to the commencement of cultivation. In 1987, the Limbe Botanic Garden (situated among the Bakweri) “Conservation through Cultivation Programme began to train and advise Bakweri farmers to grow *eru* on their farms. Nowadays, the cultivation of *eru* has become widespread especially among the Bakweri

<sup>19</sup> But I noticed that the antennas of the snail used to prepare *soya* were not discarded. They were carefully fried, wrapped in a plastic sheet and kept apart. Customers tasted this as a sample of the snail *soya*. A customer who purchased a reasonable quantity was given a few fried antennas free of charge. On 10 January 2009, I was fortunate in the Balung neighborhood in Muyuka to be given a few antennas free of charge after purchasing 500F CFA snail *soya*.

<sup>20</sup> In pre-colonial times, all the food types were cooked in Cameroon in the clay bowls that were covered with both wild and domesticated leaves. All what concerned grinding such as pepper and beans was done manually on a grinding stone.

<sup>21</sup> The various dumpling types prepared out of cassava include water *fufu*, *nkoum-nkoum* and flabby pounded cassava tubers.

<sup>22</sup> This is one of the important food products of cassava in Cameroon. This dry foodstuff is made by grating the peeled roots and fermenting the mash so obtained for three or four days in sacks, pressure being applied on the sacks by placing stones or logs on them. After fermentation, the material is sieved to remove coarse fibres, and roasted by heating, with continuous stirring in a flat aluminum pan over a slow fire for two to three hours. A small quantity of palm oil is added to prevent sticking and to impart an attractive yellowish colour. The finished product is a coarse granular flour, which may be reconstituted with hot water into a dough or gruel and eaten in the form of *garri* dumpling. It may also be soaked in cold water together with a few cubes of sugar and eaten either manually or with a spoon.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Agnes Ayukachele aged 57, housewife and snail seller, Mamfe Central, 25 January 2009.

starts by holding a snail shell in an upward position. Then insert a hook into the shell to pinch its flesh, twist the hook in a clockwise manner, and then drag outward slowly so that the full-size snail can be extracted from the shell. She repeats the process until all have been extracted. She would then put the snails in an empty bowl, scrub thoroughly to extract its gluey substance and then select the snails and put them in an empty bowl, drop a cube of alum, or 'calcium carbonate' locally called 'kanwa' to harden the soft flesh and scrub again. Next, she will put the snails in a bowl of water, some salt and wash thoroughly to get rid of its gluey substance. The snails are then sliced one after the other, getting rid of its eyes. It is then cooked for at most thirty minutes. It may be incorporated into *egusi* soup, pepper soup, tomato sauce, bitter leaf soup or any available type of soup.<sup>24</sup> The custom of incorporating snail meat into *egusi* soup was introduced into Southwest Cameroon by Southern Nigerian migrants in 1922 when British Southern Cameroons were administered as an integral part of Nigeria (Fanso, 1985).

The snail meat that was incorporated into pepper soup was of peculiar significance. For instance, when offices closed in Buea at 3.30 p.m., workers from both private and public sectors rushed to the "White House" or "Ewusi Bar" to secure their plates of snail pepper soup lest they may miss it for the day. During an oral interview with Rose Ajebe who sold snail pepper soup in the bar, she related that her arrival at Ewusi Bar ignited the joy and calmed the fears of her waiting customers. When she finally settled to dish out the snail, the first opening of her flask was celebrated with cheers, as the addicting flavour rolled out of the flask betraying the heat and spices of a well-cooked dish. "A single food flask fetches me at least 25,000 FCFA in times of snail scarcity" Ajebe added.<sup>25</sup> Ajebe was also solicited by many Cameroonians from abroad who paid her to smoke snails and supply them during their journeys back to their destinations. Snail pepper soup was consumed with special relish at Mile 17, Molyko Buea University area and Great Soppo. Interestingly, the snail meat that was once marginalized and strongly despised by certain ethnic groups in Southwest Cameroon slowly became a delicacy because of its nutritional, medicinal, and economic value. The credit goes to Southwest female farmers.

### The Nutritional and Medicinal Value of Land Snails

The land snails raised and gathered by women in Southwest Cameroon provide its consumers with multifarious nutritional and medicinal benefits. Concerning nutrition, oral evidence gathered from snail consumers indicates that snail meat is tasty, tender, and nutritious.<sup>26</sup> Its tenderness and texture makes it the most suitable meat for all ages. Snail meat is also an excellent source of protein; its protein content is about 37-51 percent compared to that of guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*) 20.3 percent, poultry (*Gallus domesticus*) 18.3 percent, fish 18 percent, cattle (*Bos indicus*) 17.5 percent, sheep (*Ovis aries Linnaeus*) 16.4 percent and swine (*Sus scrofa*) 14.5 percent (Etchu *et al.*, 24-26 October 2006). Nine of the 10 amino acids needed by humans are in snails' protein. The essential ones being Lysine and Arginine. These amino acids are crucial to human health and growth.

Written evidence indicates that snails contain 3 percent minerals as compared to 0.8 percent for guinea pigs, 1.0 percent for poultry, 1.0 percent for sheep, and 0.7 for swine. The consumers of snail meat in Southwest Cameroon therefore suffer less from dehydration. Moreover, the snail is an excellent source of enzymes, for instance: B-glucosonidase which is found in the liver of mammals (cattle in particular) is present in the digestive glands of snails.

Moving now to the medicinal value of snails, it is imperative to make the point clear that as medicinal animals, snails have an age-old history in Southwest Cameroon. Aged informants from all the surveyed groups asserted that the sticky liquid from the snail was used as gum for fresh lacerated

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Cecilia Anyiche, aged 60 years, housewife and snail seller, Fontem, 5 July 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Rose Ajebe, snail seller, aged 47 years, Buea, 27 July 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Conversations and discussions with informants in Mamfe, Mbo, Balung neighborhood and Bakweri Region. Some of the informants who shared this view were Sylvester Kuku, Mathias Ekume and Denis Agbor.

wounds<sup>27</sup> and that its meat and shell were also combined with palm oil and taken orally as treatment against severe headache. To treat a wound using a snail, its shell was burnt and ground into powder. Its sticky substance was first applied on the wound followed by the powder. The application was repeated daily for about five days. The slippery substance aids the stop of bleeding. No aged resident of Southwest Cameroon was ignorant of the fact that snails treated fresh wounds. This fact was common knowledge in the entire region. But the custom of using snails to treat headaches was reported only by a few residents. It might be plausible to infer that this custom is recent in the area.

Furthermore, snail's high iron content was important for the prevention and treatment of anemia. A significant proportion of informants among the Bakweri and Balung was of the opinion that they started to eat snails in the early 1960s because medical practitioners advised them convincingly that snail meat provided its consumers with more red blood corpuscles than any other meat type and thus it prevented anemia. The snail meat was also an important preventive against malnutrition, especially against kwashiorkor in children. The children who frequently had snails in their diets sparingly suffered from kwashiorkor as opposed to those who did not.

All over the Southwest region, there was the widespread belief that snail meat stimulated the movement of the fetus and thus facilitated delivery in pregnant women. Aged informants especially among the Banyang related several instances in which women who suffered from delivery complications ceased from suffering when they began to eat huge quantities of snail meat during pregnancy.<sup>28</sup> I take this oral evidence with a grain of salt until it will be corroborated with medical research.

Again, the consumption of snails promoted fertility hence it helped to cure sterility in women due to its high pharmaceutical function. Medical and social research on snails conducted in Southwest Cameroon demonstrates that snail meat is an excellent antidote against hypertension due to its high calcium content.<sup>29</sup> Due to its high calcium and phosphorus content, the consumption of snails by nursery mothers made the baby stronger and healthier with strong bones and teeth. This evidence is self-explanatory based on the high calcium and phosphorus content of the snail.

Snail meat was also said to digest easily and therefore it constituted an efficacious medication against stomach disorders. A Mbo informant – Mary Fossoh – related eloquently that twice in 1997, she had severe constipation and other stomach disorders, all what she took as nutritional therapy was the snail meat. According to this informant, snail meat treats constipation instantly.<sup>30</sup> In addition, some traditional practitioners among the Banyang recommended snail's shell as a drinking cup and some concoction (liquid mixture consisting of herbs) to cure or prevent stammering. These traditional practitioners believed in the existence of a magico-religious role of the shell in the healing process. What the patient needed to do was to channel a prayer of supplication (words of healing) via the shell to his ancestors, as he drank the concoction. Kenneth Ayamba who hailed from Faichang village, farmer, aged 50, and initially a stammerer, testified to have been healed by drinking from the shell. Kingsley Obi, aged 70 and Clement Takang, aged 64, both traditional practitioners from Tali village claimed to have healed a good number of victims who ceased from stammering.<sup>31</sup>

Some patients who had suffered from asthma narrated that snail meat was efficacious in calming down asthmatic crises. These patients believed that the asthmatic crises of the patients who ate snail meat was less fatal as opposed to those who did not. Southwest Cameroonians were also of the opinion that

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Menyoli from Bakweri, Sixtus Fozong from Mbo and other aged informants attest to the fact that they had used the sticky liquid from the snail to treat fresh wounds. Menyoli further substantiated his opinion by saying that in 1987 he used the sticky liquid four times to treat his personal fresh wounds.

<sup>28</sup> Magdalene Taku, aged about 75, narrated persuasively to me during an interview in Mamfe that this nutritional therapy was handed to her in the early 1940s by her departed mother. By then she was approximately 12 years of age.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with James Enow aged 50, medical doctor, Muyuka, 13 January 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mary Fossoh aged 52, school teacher and snail raiser, Mbo, 7 December 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Conversations and discussions with Banyang traditional healers during fieldwork.

snail meat was excellent in strengthening and treating infected kidneys. Informants narrated several instances in which victims of kidney infection were treated solely by eating fresh snail meat. Other ailments treated with the aid of snail meat were diabetes and hepatitis. The simple consumption of snails treated these fatal ailments. These snails were also prized for their medicinal properties to alleviate eye irritation. The last but not the least medicinal value of snails eaten in Cameroon was their role in maintaining smooth skin and preventing it from being impacted by infectious diseases such as scabies and ringworm.<sup>32</sup>

### **Economic Value of Land Snails**

It will be erroneous to draw a definite conclusion that the importance of snails raised by women in Southwest Cameroon was limited exclusively to medicine and nutrition. The financial situation of most 19<sup>th</sup> century Cameroonian women in general and those of the southwest region was very deplorable. It was because of this melancholic situation that Southwest women got themselves engaged in snails hunting, gathering, and rearing to liberate themselves from the prevailing predicament. Another striking factor that necessitated the engagement of these women in snail hunting, gathering, and raising was men's refusal to share the proceeds that were realized from household farm labour. Agriculture constituted the backbone of Cameroonian economy and was the principal source of income in rural areas. Men's refusal to share farm proceeds with women therefore put Southwest Cameroonian women in a protracted predicament. It was in this backdrop that the women got themselves engaged in snail raising to alleviate poverty among them.

As already mentioned, beside nutritional and medicinal values, snails also had some economic benefits. Land snail rearing and commercialization had multiple economic benefits in Southwest Cameroon, perhaps the most important was income generating (Ngoh, 2008). To demonstrate that female snail raisers earned a fortune from snail commercialization, a survey was carried out to illuminate the weekly income earned by each group or individual women who raised snails. The amounts earned were as Table 1 indicates.

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<sup>32</sup> Reminiscence of aged informants among all the surveyed groups. Some of the informants were Augustine Tumbu from Mbetta, Zachariah Enow from Banyang, Simon Mafani from Bakwer, James Monono from Balung and others.

**Table 1: Weekly Sales of Land Snail Raisers in Southwest Cameroon from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

Division of origin	Sub-Division of origin	Ethnic Group	Snail farming group or individual	No. of kg of snails sold in a week	Estimated amount earned per week in CFA
Fako	Buea	Bakweri	Bolifamba Central Farmers	42	90,000
Fako	Buea	Bakweri	Big Ten	37	82,000
Fako	Buea	Bakweri	Good Friends	40	70,000
Fako	Limbe	Bakweri	Etekele	51	94,000
Fako	Limbe	Bakweri	Ndenecho	30	65,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Achu	17	35,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Glorious integrated	52	90,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Rural integrated	31	65,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Multipurpose solidarity	45	95,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Mundi group	34	70,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Orphan women	30	62,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Tabong women	25	48,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Manyu Animal farm	50	95,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Rose Fomanka	12	20,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	CWA Mbetta	17	35,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Alliance club Lebock	22	40,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Dorothy Fotindongsung	38	72,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Agnes Nkong	10	15,000
TOTAL				583	1,143,000

SOURCE: Constituted by author during fieldwork in Southwest Cameroon from early December 2008 to late January 2009.

As Table 1 indicates, Multipurpose solidarity, a small snail raising group found among the Balung and Manyu Animal Farm of the Banyang earned 95,000 FCFA during the surveyed week. This is really a fortune when compared to a group like CWA Mbetta which earned just 35,000 FCFA. Two Bakweri groups – Etekele and Bolifamba Central Farmers – followed Multipurpose solidarity and Manyu Animal Farm with 94,000 and 90,000 FCFA respectively. There was no fixed price for a kilogram (K.g.) of snail, reason being that after measuring the snails in small pans extra quantities were added depending on the number of pans that the buyer purchased and his ability in bargaining. It is for this reason that the Bolifamba Central Farmers sold 42 K.g. at 92,000 FCFA while the group known as Big Ten also from Buea sold 37 K.g. at 82,000 FCFA. Another survey was carried out to investigate how much the female sellers of fried snail (snail *soya*) earned in a week. The earnings were as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2: Weekly Earnings of Selected Fried Snail Sellers from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> of October**

Division of origin	Sub-Division of origin	Ethnic group	Name of seller	Amount sold per week in FCFA
Fako	Buea	Bakweri	Limunga Lyonga	20,000FCFA
Fako	Buea	Bakweri	Sandra Limonge	16,000
Fako	Limbe	Bakweri	Clara Mafani	14,000
Fako	Limbe	Bakweri	Dorothy Enjema	18,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Jeannet Mukete	14,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Maurine Ako	20,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Judith Ekang	32,000
Fako	Muyuka	Balung	Agnes Ndonko	36,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Dorothy Enow	30,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Geraldine Etchu	18,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Martina Enow	22,000
Manyu	Mamfe	Banyang	Mary Ebai	20,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Bibian Anyiche Fomine	14,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Mary Ehu	15,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Dorothy Ndoh	24,000
Kupe Mwaneguba	Nguti	Mbo	Victorine Elad	14,000
TOTAL				327,000

SOURCE: Constituted by author during fieldwork in Southwest Cameroon from early December 2008 to late January 2009.

As Table 2 indicates, Agnes Ndonko who hailed from the Balung group in Muyuka subdivision sold snails amounting to 36,000 FCFA in a week. This amount is incredible granted the fact that there are plantation workers in this subdivision who do not earn up to this amount even in a month. The second highest seller—Judith Ekang—who sold fried snails worth 32,000 FCFA was also a native of the Balung group. This evidence suggests that Balung women who marketed fried snails earned more than those from the other groups.

Besides income generating, land snail gathering, raising, and marketing offered full-time employment to some women in Southwest Cameroon. For example, some girls who completed secondary school but could not further their studies, immediately engaged themselves in the gathering and marketing of snails to the traders commonly known in the area as “buyam sellam.” As a result, these young women could buy the school requirements of their juniors or teach them a petit trade such as sewing, hairdressing, carpentry, motor mechanic and others. Dorothy Enow from Banyang, Bibian Anyiche Fomine from Mbo and Limunga Lyonga from Bakweri, recounted to us how they struggled and provided the school expenses of their junior brothers and sisters via the gathering and marketing of snails. Still in connection to employment, many unemployed housewives whose husbands abandoned them with the children saw light in the gathering and sale of land snails.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Dorothy Ebai aged 52, housewife and snail seller, Mamfe, 20 January 2009.

In the entire Southwest Cameroon, women made good use of the shells and other waste substances such as the excrement and intestines extracted from snails. This trash, which has high manure content, was discarded on farms and it increased soil fertility and significantly improved agricultural outputs.<sup>34</sup> Many female farmers, especially those who cultivated food crops, told us that the manure acquired from snails accelerated the growth of food crops more than any other indigenous manure. According to these female farmers, the sole manure type that rivaled the waste of snails was the imported fertilizer.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the amount of money required to start a snail farm is affordable to many female farmers of Southwest Cameroon. With an amount of 20,000F CFA, a female farmer can conveniently raise snails provided she buys about four damaged tyres and approximately 15 young healthy snails. Snail raising does not require much land as crop cultivation, which makes it cheaper to be carried out in the city. Caring for snails does not also involve strenuous physical exertion, so the work can be carried out with relative ease by physically disabled women and is especially useful for occupational therapy. More so, when an economy is in a bad shape just like that of Cameroon, interest in self-sufficiency increases. Because snails are small, noiseless, and easy to handle, they can be raised in an urban situation without infringing on the peace of neighbors. And indeed, this is what is happening in Southwest Cameroon. As earlier mentioned, only a small piece of land is required for snail raising and they quickly adapt themselves to a variety of conditions hence they are raised successfully by women in small towns.<sup>36</sup> Female snail farms serve as touristic sites in Southwest Cameroon. Cameroonians from other regions such as Littoral, West, Northwest and others converge on snail farms in Southwest Cameroon just to learn the techniques of snail rearing. Again, the market for snails has always been and will always be there. So, there is a need for snail raising and marketing to be encouraged in the region. Although the land snail now occupies a central position among delicacies in Southwest Cameroon, some strict taboos were once associated with it.

### **Totemic Significance and Taboos Associated with Land Snails**

Interestingly, the land snail was the totem of certain lineages amongst the Banyang. Two lineages among them strongly believed that the land snail was their totem that symbolized peace and guaranteed the continuity of their lineages because they originated from it. The members of these lineages believed that if they ate snails they would inevitably die. No physician could treat such a recalcitrant.<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly, all attempts to get informants cite the names of those who had died in these lineages because they ate the totemic animal were futile and abortive. Although the Banyang spoke about the names of the dead, our informants deliberately refused to mention them to us. This totemic significance of land snails in a few Banyang lineages is an example of internal variation in a cultural practice within an ethnic group. Several land snail taboos were observed in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. Until the 1960s, it was a strict taboo for Banyang and Mbo pregnant women to eat snails. This taboo emanated from the fact that slimy mucus surrounds snails in their shells. The Banyang and Mbo women who observed this taboo thought that if violated, their babies would spit extraordinarily during adolescence. It is very interesting and fascinating to hear that this taboo was observed just by a tiny fraction of Mbo and Banyang pregnant women. Nevertheless, from the 1960s, all Banyang and Mbo women began to eat snails and no repercussions were ever noticed.

Moving now to the groups that started eating snails in the 1960s, it is imperative to make the point clear at this stage that in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, it was a strict traditional prohibition among the

<sup>34</sup> Makebe, "Landsnail among Bayang people," p.67.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Gabriel Fontem, aged 54, snail farmer, Mbo, 5 January 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with George Musonge aged 63, farmer, Buea, 17 December 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Johnson Enow aged 51, school teacher and snail consumer, Mamfe, 7 December 2008.

Bakweri for a pregnant woman or any other woman who had not attained menopause to eat snails. Motovi Marcus Mukunde, an aged Bakweri informant narrated eloquently during an oral interview that any Bakweri woman who broke the interdiction suffered from excruciating abdominal pain during menses. Although a pregnant woman does not menstruate, after delivery, she suffered from severe abdominal pains during her first menses. But from the 1990s, Bakweri women of all ages began to eat snails. All attempts to get the relationship between the snail and the belief that if eaten, it could cause woman severe abdominal pains, were abortive. The sole reason put forward by a few Bakweri male informants is that snail meat tastes so good that during the first three decades that the Bakweri ate it, men attempted to monopolize its consumption, but to no avail. James Mukunde, a popular herbalist claimed that in the 1980s, he cured about five Bakweri young women who ate snail meat and suffered from severe abdominal pains. We strongly criticize and challenge this oral evidence given the fact that in the contemporary Bakweri society, women of all ages eat snails, and none have reported to have ever suffered from an adverse effect. It is incredible that at a certain point in their history, snail meat consumption was once a threat to the health of Bakweri women given the fact that its consumption caused no harm among the Mbo and Banyang. This is another instance where oral history must be taken with a grain of salt.

Although it was in the early 1960s that the Balung and Bakweri started consuming land snails, this slimy, boneless animal was not a novelty in their regions. In earlier times, it was a strict traditional interdiction for the Balung and Bakweri to eat snail meat because of the widespread belief that snails crawled, and ate dirt, especially excrement. Based on this belief, the Balung and Bakweri considered snails to be filthy and dirty pests not suitable for human consumption. When the Bakweri and Balung were further interrogated on why they began to eat snails in the 1960s, they responded that they changed their eating habit because all their neighbouring groups became snail consumers so there was no reason why they should stay aloof from its consumption. They also realized that irrespective of the fact that the animal ate dirt, it did not cause any negative effect when eaten, so it was implausible to avoid it persistently.

In the worldview of the Oroko, chief occupants of Ndian Division still in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, to eat snail meat is taboo to pregnant women due to the snail's ability to shrink into its shell when provoked. The Oroko believe the snail shrinks because it is not courageous when touched and so if eaten by a pregnant woman, her baby too would not be courageous in the future. Even if such a child becomes a soldier at adult age, he would never have the courage to fire a gun. When intimidated by an ordinary person, he would always escape in imitation of the snail that its mother ate during pregnancy. Oroko informants added that if such a child is a male and gets married, his wife will always beat him in case of a domestic brawl. Until this day, Oroko pregnant women often do not eat snails.

Among the Mbaino, a prominent ethnic group in Momo Division in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, the sticky substance that surrounds land snails caused the consumption of snail meat to be under taboo in the entire Mbaino group. The Mbaino persistently believe that snail meat causes stomach disorders because of the glue substance that surrounds it. Interestingly, our empirical evidence indicates that the Mbaino who reside in Southwest Cameroon, eat snails without qualms.

### **The Current State of Snail Production and Consumption in Southwest Cameroon**

As of 2022, the pattern of snails' production and consumption has changed tremendously in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. The Anglophone problem that is traced back to the Foumban Conference of 1961 generated into an Anglophone crisis in 2017. The crisis has plagued the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon from 2017 to this day. The two regions are Southwest and Northwest. As the crisis started in 2017, a huge number of people, including men, women and children ran into bushes. However, women and children dominated in number. They only make intermittent trips to towns and villages where they initially resided. While in the bushes, the sources of food are limited to them. Consequently, snail gathering has become the chief source of nutrition and income to the runaway

women and children. They now gather huge quantities of snails, first for their personal consumption and second for sale when they go to towns and villages to visit their few relatives who remained there, principally the men. While there, they market the snails as economic commodities. A ten-litre bucket of snails that was sold at 4.000F CFA before the crisis is now sold at 15.000F CFA.

Interestingly, the number of people consuming snails in Southwest Cameroon has also increased remarkably. For example, the members of ethnic groups such as the Nso, Kom, Aghem and others from the Bamenda Grassfields that did not initially eat snails have now started eating them with no ramifications. They do not only eat but also gather in bushes and sell in towns and villages. It is apparent that in due course, all the residents of the Southwest region will become snail consumers.

More so, snails are no longer perceived as animals whose consumption is limited to pagans, adherents of Traditional African Religion and Christianity, a significant number of Muslims, especially those who hail from Northern Cameroon have started to eat snails both as a delicacy and source of medication. In an oral interview with a woman of the Bamileke ethnic group origin in December 2021, she narrated that:

“the consumption of land snails is no longer restricted to the members of certain ethnic groups in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. She said medical doctors in their rotatory credit societies have been advising them repeatedly since the past five years to always eat the flesh of snails when they have a wound and that the constant consumption of snail meat accelerates the healing process of a wound.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Land snails played (and continue to play) an important role in both the dietary needs and incomes of women in Southwest Cameroon. Nutritionally, the essential amino acids found in snails are crucial to the health of the residents of the region. Medically, snails prevent against kwashiorkor in children. The findings from this research reveal that the children who ate snails suffered less from nutritional diseases compared to those who did not.

This paper has unraveled some of the striking peculiarities of Southwest Cameroon's culinary history. Snails incorporated into *eru* were eaten with the fingers either with cocoyam dumpling or stiff *garri fufu*. Eating with the fingers was (and still is) a typical characteristic of eating habits in pre-colonial and contemporary traditional African societies in general and Southwest Cameroon in particular. The cooking of snails in pre-colonial times in baked clay pots and the serving of the meat in wooden bowls is another important practice that prevailed in Africa especially south of the Sahara prior to the European era. Moreover, the stirring of snails in a clay pot (while cooking) with a wooden spatula that has been substituted all over Africa with aluminum spoons is a fundamental change in material culture worth illuminating.

In today's world in general, and Southwest Cameroon where food needs do not seem to level with food supply, such a venture like snail farming cannot be underestimated in the quest for meeting the protein needs of the majority of Southwest Cameroonians. It is obvious that the future demand for snails will be higher than its supply if there is no change in the pattern of snail consumption in Southwest Cameroon. Prospective female snail farmers in the region should be encouraged and subsidized by the Cameroonian Government considering the increasing number of snail consumers in Cameroon. There is no need to perceive snails as filthy pests as the Bakweri and Balung did before 1960.

Through snail rearing, Southwest women have succeeded to alleviate poverty among themselves, at least to an extent. Aside from government's subsidization, snail rearing should now constitute an important course in the agricultural training centers in Cameroon. By training both men and women to

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Rebecca Asongleack aged 65 years, snail seller and consumer, Buea, 28 December 2021.

raise snails, their availability will increase and consequently, snails will always be available in Cameroonian society. To ensure this availability in Cameroonian society, Southwest men must also join women to raise the snails.

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