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# Management of Library and Archival Indigenous Knowledge for Public Access: The Case of Limbe Botanical Garden in Fako Division of South West Region of Cameroon

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a panoramic view of the state of resources found in Limbe Botanical Garden in Fako Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. It reveals the intriguing historical perspective of this institution and shortlists various species of flora grown as is the case. Even though there is progress made in the conservation of plant species in this institution, this paper identifies that there exists a great risk of completely losing everything someday if strict measures cannot be taken now to firstly retain what is available and secondly increase both the number and variety of various life resources in this institution. In an attempt to safeguard the indigenous role played by this institution precisely in the domains of education, tourism, recreation, science and the conservation of biodiversity, this paper makes a clarion call for the maximisation of the institution's information value. Consequently, recommendations have been advanced to resolve various managerial problems that have wrecked the smooth functioning of Limbe Botanical Garden.

**Keywords:** Library and archival indigenous knowledge, plant species, public access to information, Limbe Botanical Garden.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge that categorises or defines a given ethnic group of people as exclusively distinct or unique. According to Barasa (2007) indigenous knowledge is defined as the holistic tradition, scientific knowledge of a people, land, natural resources and environmental development over many generations as a result of their interrelationship with the natural environment towards cultural, social, economic and physical well being of the people. The

management of indigenous knowledge consequently becomes obligatory in every society for the singular reason that it forms the basis for local decision-marking in farming or agriculture, health care provision, food production and preparation, education, natural resources protection, and a host of other activities in rural and semi urban communities. In essence, it is that knowledge used to manage all the sectors and subsectors of the traditional or rural economy with informed strategies to protect, conserve and sustain resources in the environment (Rouse, 1999 & Gyekye, 1996). According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, there are over 350 million people throughout the world having indigenous traces in their origin and background. It is eminent that these groups of people lay a lot of emphasis on cultural values.

In 1987, the World Conference on Environment and Development (WCED) and in 1992, United Nations Conference on Environment all raised awareness to the general public on indigenous issues. Meanwhile on separate occasions, these two bodies emphasised the incorporation of all knowledge systems including indigenous knowledge in protecting and sustaining the environment (Warren, 1992). However, an eminent problem arises in most communities or countries because despite various available guidelines for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge very few countries have put in place institutional structures and arrangement to assess the role of indigenous knowledge. No wonder Warren (1992) strongly argues that despite the fact that indigenous knowledge represents an immensely valuable database that provides humankind with insight on how numerous communities have interacted with their changing environment, very little of this knowledge has been recorded. This has greatly contributed to the loss of cultural values.

## THE PROBLEM

For several decades, the people of Limbe in Fako Division, South West Region of The Republic of Cameroon have developed a close and unique relationship with various plants species found particularly in Limbe Botanical Garden and generally in Limbe as a whole. This great institution of flora has undoubtedly become an exigency of the culture of Limbe dwellers. In other words, Limbe Botanical Garden has become part of the culture of Limbe inhabitants. According to article 31 of the declaration of the right of indigenous people:

- They have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures including human and genetic resources, medicine, knowledge of properties of flora and fauna, oral traditions, literatures, designs and performing arts.
- They also have the right to maintain control and develop their intellectual properties over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

Despite this laudable initiative, concrete decisions on how to practically maintain, control, protect and develop the value of traditional indigenous knowledge are gradually fading away. A variety of problems within communities have flung traditional indigenous knowledge into near extinction. Avenues for the preservation of traditional indigenous knowledge are on a fast decline and there is suspicion that when they shall reach a certain threshold value, everything shall be completely lost and forgotten. Loss of this system of knowledge shall therefore lead to the absence of indigenous identity and severe reduction in the recognition and understanding of an invaluable sustainable system of knowledge.

With dedication and commitment, and coupled with the natural attachment that a group of people undoubtedly have for their natural resources, one would have expected to see Limbe Botanical Garden booming with much life and new plant species. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for some practical reasons. This institution rather looks dilapidated and more often it experiences stagnation and retardation in its growth and development. The land surface that it initially occupied keeps shrinking and several species of plants which it started up with, are continuously

being lost. Consequently the fundamental question to be asked goes thus: is the current management of indigenous knowledge in Limbe Botanical Garden depriving the inhabitants of Limbe in particular and the Cameroonian public in general of vital indigenous information which they need to upgrade their standard of living? If the answer to this question is yes then it is imperative that the problems wrecking the smooth functioning of this institution are identified and proper solutions clearly offered to them.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Limbe Botanical Garden was created in 1892 by a group of German horticulturalists. It started under the directorship of Paul Pruis who became the first conservator of the garden. It served as a trial and acclimatisation center for the production of exotic crop species such as coffee, cocoa, rubber, palm, tea, sugar cane and banana within the then Kamerun and other German colonies. In its heydays Limbe Botanical Garden was described as one of the most important tropical botanical gardens in the world. To complement the work in Limbe, experimental plots for high elevation plant species such as *Camellia sinensis* and others were established in Buea and elsewhere. The garden possesses a herbarium, laboratories, classrooms, museum, library, archive and staff accommodation. It initially covered a land surface area of 200 hectares which unfortunately became drastically reduced to only 44 hectares.

In 1920 the British took over the responsibility of the garden following the advice of Royal Botanic Garden in Britain. It was then managed by Kew–trained superintendent. Slightly over a decade, the British departed in 1932 and the garden was directly managed by Cameroonian personnel until 1958. Shortly afterwards and precisely in 1961 when West Cameroon had independence, the administration of the garden was taken over by West Cameroon Government. Despite efforts made by several Cameroonians of good will to sustain the garden, it rather declined during this period. In 1988 a British-Cameroonian partnership was initiated through a memorandum of understanding which led to the renovation and development of the garden. With redefined boundaries, the garden now covers an area of 48 hectares of land. Most recently, the role of Limbe Botanical Garden has changed from that of agriculture to those of conservation, education, science, tourism and recreation in order to meet the needs of today's changing world.

## INDIGENOUS ROLE OF THE GARDEN

Cameroon Government is currently partnering with British Overseas Development Administration (BODA) to carry out the fundamental function of the garden which is to sustain indigenous knowledge of the people of Limbe thereby maintaining and raising a traditional knowledge system to be passed from generation to generation in the town of Limbe in particular and the country Cameroon in general. This allows the people of Limbe (and to a certain extent other Cameroonians) to have an indigenous identity and recognition. This fundamental function of the garden is achieved by:

- Encouraging the conservation of Cameroonian forest by the local or indigenous people for sustainable use.
- Encouraging scientific studies of natural resources for the benefit of mankind.
- Developing environmental awareness at different levels of the society for a better society.
- Promoting tourism and recreation in the region.

On the other hand, the indigenous role played by Limbe Botanical Garden is seen in the following:

### Education

It is of interest to the garden that the local knowledge (indigenous knowledge) which is unique to the culture of Limbe is jealously safeguarded and transmitted from generation to generation. In

this light, the garden educates the people of Limbe and the general Cameroonian public to sustainably protect and manage this irreplaceable heritage.

### Tourism and Recreation

Limbe Botanical Garden provides a peaceful escape from nearby hustling and bustling neighbourhoods such as Douala, Edea, Nkongsamba and Buea. With its thematic structures, colourful trees and ideal setting, it stands besides Mount Cameroon (the highest mountain in West Africa) and the country's extensive national park system, as one of the outstanding places of interest in the country's touristic pool. It is one of the big attractions for relaxation and provides great entertainment to tourists who come to visit.

### Science and Conservation

In order to maximise conservation, the garden has attracted much foreign support and has become an institutional base for scientific research and genetic conservation. Thus comprehensive scientific research on plants are carried out in laboratories at the garden. The results of these research are valuable knowledge used in ensuring sustainable conservation of various plant resources.

## PLANT SPECIES FOUND IN LIMBE BOTANICAL GARDEN

The following table summarises various plant species found in Limbe Botanical Garden. The table presents the family name, generic name and specific name of each plant species.

**Table 1: Plant Species Found in Limbe Botanical Garden**

| Family | Genus and Species |
|---|---|
| Acanthaceae | *Isoglossa nervosa* |
| Araceae | *Chlorophytom deistelianum* |
| Aristolochiaceae | *Pararistolochia preussi* |
| Asclepiadaceae | *Baresantus purpureus* |
| Begoniaceae | *Begonia hookeriana* |
| Boraginaceae | *Myosotis sp* |
| Compositae | *Crepis cameroonica* |
| Cyperaceae | *Burbostylis densa* |
| Flacourtiaceae | *Camptosylus ovalis* |
| Graminaceae | *Deschampsia mildbraedii, Sporobolus montanus* |
| Iridaceae | *Hesperantha alpinau* |
| Labiatae | *Plectrantus dissitiflorus* |
| Myrisinaceae | *Afrardisia oligantha* |
| Oleandraceae | *Arthropteris cameroonensis* |
| Splemaceae | *Splenium adamsii* |
| Teridaceae | *Teris preussi* |

**Source: Limbe Botanical Garden, 2025**

## INFORMATION VALUE OF PLANTS IN THE GARDEN POPULARLY CALLED BY THEIR INDIGENOUS (VERNACULAR) NAMES

### Iroko Tree

It is amongst the biggest trees in the garden. It is used to produce wood for the construction of roofs of houses, wooden frames and wooden houses (cottages) or "caraboot." The iroko tree is scientifically called *Lofara alata.*

**Ironwood**

It is one of the hardest trees in the garden. Ancient toilet seats were made out of ironwood. It is used for road and railway construction. Ironwood is of the genus Sapelle.

**Bush Mango**

It is highly commercialised and therefore has a great economic value. It possesses recommended nutritional significance and it is used as food spice or ingredient. However, recent research on this plant species reveals that its medicinal value cannot be overemphasised. It assists in the treatment of diabetes and obesity. It is also an antioxidant and has antimicrobial function thus it inhibits the growth of microorganisms. Bush mango is scientifically called *Irvingia gabonensis.*

**Synamum Tree**

This tree is sometimes called in Pidgin English "small no be sick" by the local population. The leaves are used as local 'essential balm' to treat springs and insect bites.

**Kingelia**

This is a plant which slows down the rate at which snake bite hurts and retards the advancement of the venom. The liquid that oozes from the main plant body (stem) is used as eye drop while its fruits are used in the treatment of waist pain. It is scientifically called *Kingelia africana*

**Rattan/Cane (Mologo)**

It is used to produce household furniture such as cane tables, cane chairs, cane wardrobes and cane cupboards. It is also used to produce household utensils such as cane baskets and cane dishes. It is used for waving of several other objects. In the Limbe Botanical Garden, three varieties of this plant exist namely: *Laccosperma secundiflorum*, *Laccosperma robustum* and *Eremospatha macrocarpa.*

**Eru**

It is highly nutritive and contains dietary fibres that play a significant digestive role. This herbaceous plant is scientifically called *Gnetum africanum.*

**Vohimbe**

It is best known for the impeccable role it plays in stimulating the male sexual organ to be sexually aroused.

**Bitter cola**

It has recently been alleged to have some potentials of preventing the spread of the deadly Ebola virus. This claim is not scientifically proven. However, it also stimulates erection of the penis during sexual intercourse and gives men a huge appetite for sex. The only species found in this garden is *Garcina kola.*

**Aringa plant**

It is used to produce local sugar and sugary related products such as biscuits and others.

**Iboga**

Traditionally, the local population associates it with myth and believes that it has the capability of connecting them to their ancestors. This plant is scientifically called *Iboga stabananti.*

**Soap tree**

It produces foams and locally it is used by the inhabitants to wash dresses and dishes. Some people use it in bathing. Its scientific name is *Sabinus sabonaria.*

### Bush pepper

It is used by the locals as a food spice. It makes traditional meals more delicious. It is scientifically called *Piper guineensis.*

### Moringa

It is a medicinal plant used in the treatment of a variety of ailments amongst which include diabetes and high blood pressure.

### Vocanga

It is a highly medicinal plant whose roots are part of a combination of raw materials used in the manufacture of quinine tablets and other related malaria drugs. It is used locally to treat malaria and fever.

## MAJOR PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN LIMBE BOTANICAL GARDEN

### Illegal purchase of resources

This vital institution which has the obligation of protecting and preserving great indigenous identity of its host population is not for commercial purpose. This implies that the plants species which it grows are not for sale. Unfortunately, some people of ill intention connive with some unscrupulous personnel working in the garden and actually exchange money with them for some plants species. Some influential individuals of high affluence have succeeded to corrupt some nonchalant workers and have bought certain plant resources from them with huge sums of money.

### Insufficient finance

The fund with which this institution is run is not enough. Despite the fact that the government of Cameroon who is the principal stakeholder of this garden is doing her best to financially cater for the needs and demands of the garden, workers often cry of low salaries, lack of incentives and absence of motivation as part of a crucial system of problem they face. On the other hand, some plants species which require financial inputs in the forms of manure and or fertilizer which will enable them to stay on propagation, suffer great difficulties of growth and sustainability.

### Reduction in land size

The size of Limbe Botanical Garden keeps decreasing almost on a yearly basis. As a result of population explosion there are many people and little land for settlement in Limbe and its environs. Therefore, some inhabitants of Limbe have encroached into the land destined for the promotion of various plants species by Limbe Botanical Garden. In the account of reduction in land size, Limbe Botanical Garden has suffered tremendous challenges of land loss. It initially occupied a land surface area that measured 200 hectares but now the garden stays within the confines of only 48 hectares of land. Experimental plots for high elevation plant species such as *Camellia sinensis* and others which were established in Buea and elsewhere have all been turned into farmlands and settlement areas.

## DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN LIMBE BOTANICAL GARDEN

Various remedies can be meted out to counteract the aforementioned problems. Such remedies include the following:

In order to preserve a great system of knowledge which has a huge indigenous identity for posterity, Limbe inhabitants should ensure that amongst other measures put in place to safeguard the wellbeing of their property, any impostor caught in the dirty act of illegal purchase of the resources of Limbe Botanical Garden should be seriously sanctioned per the provision of various rules and regulations governing the institution. The government of Cameroon on her part should

develop stringent measures that denounce all forms of malpractices meted on this institution. Amongst these stringent measures should include denunciation, penalty, fine, payback and complete seizure of illegally purchased resources belonging to the institution. As a matter of fact any charlatan who unfortunately tries to practice a contrary behaviour should be clamped down by law enforcement officers (namely police and gendarme) and punished accordingly.

Limbe Botanical Garden should endeavour to be prudent in the execution of its budget in every financial year. Sometimes, the money that is made available for disbursement by this institution unfortunately enters into wrong hands. If misappropriated, the take-home message which the general public holds is that there is insufficient fund to run the institution. In furtherance, the administration of this institution should put in place strict measures on auditing, checks and balances. The Government of Cameroon in association with other agencies such as Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection, Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, and Ministry of Tourism and Leisure should generate enough money that will meet the financial needs of this institution.

It is regrettable that the size of Limbe Botanical Garden has undergone a drastic reduction over the years. The garden started up on a land surface of 200 hectares but gradually lost 156 hectares to unscrupulous Limbe indigenes. Out of this remarkable loss, recovery efforts have been instituted by the authority and this has yielded some fruits. This has led to 4 hectares of lost land once more occupied by the garden. Currently the garden stretches over 48 hectares of land up from 44. Therefore it is recommended by this study that such recovery efforts should not be stopped. Cameroonians of goodwill should assist the government of Cameroon so that together with the authority of Limbe Botanical Garden, further efforts should be made to recover other lost parcels of land.

## CONCUSION

It is clear that the management policies in this particular institution called Limbe Botanical Garden which is found in Fako Division of the South West Region of Cameroon has battled with some unavoidable crisis in the past years to preserve an array of indigenous knowledge. To this end, this institution has rather retrogressed. However, owing to the impeccable cultural attachment of the people of Limbe in particular and the Cameroonian public in general to this garden which has for several decades upheld great edifying, enlightening and enriching values; it is mandatory for individuals, corporate bodies or associations, the government of the Republic of Cameroon and the entire Cameroonian citizenry to put hands on deck and ensure the proper conservation of resources found in this garden.

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