

PERCEPTION OF NATURAL HAZARDS: THE CASE FOR A SYMMETRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Emmanuel Yenshu Vubo

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Buea

ABSTRACT

An analysis of perceptions of natural hazards shows that local people incorporate elements of their social, political and cultural life in categories, which also describe physical aspects. An interpretation of local people's perceptions of the Mount Cameroon eruption of March 1999 as well as local narratives about volcanic lake activity in the North West Province of Cameroon show a collapse in the nature- culture/society divide characteristic of modernist anthropology. This paper argues for a symmetrical anthropology that endorses neither the latter divide nor a fusion of social and natural categories but considers the attitudes towards the environment as culturally defined within a unique human experience.

INTRODUCTION

The recent eruption of Mount Cameroon (starting March 27, 1999 and running for two weeks) was both a physical event of immense importance to scientists. It was also a social event of dramatic proportions because it affected the lives of peoples living close to the mountain and called for widespread reaction from the national public. The same can be said of other natural hazards (floods, fires, earthquakes) that occur all over the world. The most interesting aspect of this eruption from an anthropological perspective was the way Cameroonians perceived this eruption since this conditioned or affected ultimate reactions. Although this is not synonymous with saying that what people know affects their behaviour, the categories of perception of the environment are largely responsible for the interaction between social communities and the latter. I intend to explore the social categories which were at play in reaction to the mountain's eruption and, beyond that, social categories of perception that are at play in the relationship between local peoples and their environments. This study is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it sheds light on the evolution of cultural forms in areas which, under the push of colonial experiences, have been undergoing intense modernisation. Secondly, it puts into focus the object of Anthropology, i.e. human experience in its diversity, in an era which is increasingly coming under the influence of the Cartesian mind in the

name of globalisation. The basic question is that of the value indigenous categories of perception in situations of catastrophic physical occurrences, which need operational knowledge. Lastly, the study highlights the unity of the human experience as stressed by anthropological practice which has often sought to transcend the distinctions imposed by modernist logic.

I will start by examining the local interpretations that were given to the mountain eruption. I will next look at other past or contemporary perceptions of other natural hazards. This will lead to a social categorisation of perceptions of natural occurrences and a discussion on the relevance of this framework for a cognitive Anthropology of the environment. Cognitive Anthropology studies "the relation between human society and human thought... [i.e.] how people in social groups conceive of and think about the objects and events which make up their world..." (D'Andrade 1995:1). In this regard, I am following the lead of Latour's (1991:100-103) symmetrical anthropology to argue that there is a unity of human experience which dictates that one should believe neither in the "radical distinction between humans and non-humans... nor in the total overlap of knowledge and society." One should rather consider human experience as building (or rather constructing) communities of "natures and societies".

I. THE MOUNT CAMEROON ERUPTION: PERCEPTIONS AND REACTIONS

The eruption was a dramatic experience to most inhabitants of the lower eastern and southern slopes. It sent many people packing out of their homes for safe havens; others saw their homes collapse; plantations got destroyed; all this ending in the threat of the village of Bakingili facing extinction from the map. It attracted both national and international attention, as the threat of a disaster became more real as the days passed. The press carried out reports which either expressed local belief systems or grafted this into second political concerns.

The Modernist Press

Dr. Kai Schmidt-Soltau, a columnist with *The Post* (N^o 115 of Monday April 15 1999) recounted the coincidences between 20th-century eruptions of Mt Fako (Cameroon) and political changes in Cameroon. The 1922 eruption occurred during an important year as this coincided with the League of Nations partition of the former German Kamerun. Schmidt-Soltau holds that "The Mountain erupted in anger, but Europeans never did have sensitive ears and they did not ask Epasa Moto [the mountain god]. It is obvious that the lava was an illustration of the unwanted

separation". He associates the 1954 eruption with the triumph of conservative political forces over progressive UPC forces fighting for the independence of Cameroon, the 1959 eruption with independence, and the 1982 eruption with Ahidjo's transfer of power. He then concludes that "it is now [incumbent] on the new "old" man [famous allusion to new wine in old wine skins that characterised an internal debate within the CPDM party] to prove if he is still a real politician: an extinguisher ... or just another promiser."

Nicoline Pwaw echoes this opinion in the same edition of the paper when she concludes that "if past logic is anything" to go by, then one should expect identical changes. *The Posts' vox pop* quotes Gabriel Njimini, a 75-years-old Bakweri man as linking past eruptions to local events. He feels that the 1959 eruption, was caused by the anger of the Mountain god because of the fact that power had changed hands from an indigene (Dr. E. M. L Endeley) to a non-native (Dr. John Ngu Foncha). He also attributes the 1982 eruption to the death of the local paramount chief, Endeley. As for the 1999 eruption this is either due to the death of one of the local chiefs, Monono, whose remains were desecrated or the failure to respect traditions, a fact which angered the mountain god, *Epsa Moto*.

Bate Besong, one of Cameroon's leading playwrights, in an article in *The Post* (N^o 116), tries to confront each eruption with its epoch. In this regard he treats this "ultimate phenomenon as an essential and characteristic metaphor of a nation's fictional homecoming: its *Weltanschauung*, its affirmation". He warns against ignoring the danger of ignoring the ability of the "Mountain [to use] its magic to turn the world upside down. To deny or minimise these prophetic signatures is to take away much of its Promethean essentiality and deprive it of its Olympian halo."

Local Interpretations

The foregoing motivated me to explore the social categories of perception and reactions. It was my belief that this could give one a clue to interpretations of the environment in general. A rapid ethnographic approach was used. I collected data on a sample of thirty-seven informants with the use of a loosely structured questionnaire in the Buea area. The sample was composed of both indigenes and non-indigenes. Most non-indigenes had experienced this eruption for the first time and had practically no interpretations to offer. To them this was just one of the unknowns of the natural world which was beyond human understanding. Some of them had only known of eruptions through the audio-visual media

Most of the indigenes, Bakweri, had either heard of earlier Mountain eruptions or had experienced them (for those who were older). One elderly person described the 1959 eruption in the following terms: It was very serious. It came down right to the Ekona Mbenge area where it halted. The light produced by the eruption was like electricity and shone all over the area. Ashes were produced as flames flew above housetops.

Some informants reported that the effect of the 1982 eruption was felt in Ekona, Bakingili and Kumba.

The following causes were advanced by some indigenes:

One of the spirits that inhabit the world either in the sea or the bush. In this case the mountain spirit was angry. A "born-again" Christian said: These are traditional beliefs that there are gods in the mountain. When there is an eruption, they need scarifices. I am happy that Jesus sacrificed all the sacrifices that I need." Another informant explained that Epasa Moto who presides over the mountain might get angry or annoyed and cause the mountain to erupt. If the mountain is over-exploited, the gods become angry and provoke the eruption.

Strangers making unauthorised sacrifices on the mountain. They also took part in the mountain race. All these provoke the anger of the ancestors who cause the eruption.

Explosion of rocks: fire eats the soil making the earth to tremble.

Minerals cause an eruption when overheated. One informant held that scientists explained this by the accumulation of oil in the mountain.

The chief of Likoko Mimbea gave explanations that combined some pseudo-scientific explanations and local cosmologies. He made allusions to the annoyance of Epasa Moto, errors of strangers who exploit the forest at random and perform sacrifices they are not supposed to and the action of minerals. To buttress the latter point, he cited sharp stones in the area where there was lava flow.

Reactions ranged from fear, helplessness, escape and fatalism to indigenous ways of coping. The latter consists of chiefs making intercessory prayers with the ancestor or mountain gods. According to our informants, the paramount chief usually calls on the other chiefs and elders so that they all move to the mountain and perform sacrifices at the point where lava has halted. During the 1982 eruption, there were as many as fourteen priests performing rituals. These priests constituted themselves into a secret society and used domestic animals such as goats, pigs and fowls as elements of sacrifices.¹³⁷ According to the chief

¹³⁷ It is rumoured that albino virgins were used in the past. Our study does not confirm this.

of Likoko Mimbea, the sacrifices slowed down the eruption or at least its "noise".

Contrary to the politically-minded press reports, most of the informants did not see a symbolic relation between the present eruption and past ones. Most informants only highlighted the similarity in causes and differences in intensity. They felt that the present eruption was more intense than the 1959 and 1982 eruptions. Most respondents were of the opinion that it was likely to reoccur with some people predicting intervals of five, thirteen or ten years. The caution expressed by some was that it could only occur if strangers continued to make sacrifices on the mountain. The born-again informant, while indicating that he was not in a position to predict, however, hoped that "such things do not happen to eliminate justified feelings that there are gods resting up there". Another informant thought this could happen again around human settlements.

II. HAZARDS IN OTHER CAMEROONIAN ORAL TRADITIONS

This brings us face to face with the question of perceptions of natural catastrophes in local cultures. Both contemporary and past reports point to interpretations of natural catastrophes in terms of local social categories.

Rowlands and Warnier (in Nyamnjoh 1997:95) report that on August 16, 1984, Monoun, a volcanic lake in the Foubot area released a toxic gas that asphyxiated thirty-seven people, including a Catholic priest, and many animals³⁸. It was interpreted by public rumour as attempts by former President Ahidjo (a Muslim) to regain his position against President Biya (a Catholic) through a demonstration of the superiority of occult powers in the region of his erstwhile enemies, the Bamileke.

On August 21, 1986, Lake Nyos released a lethal gas that killed more than 1500 (according to official reports) and several million animals. It was rumoured, and it still is, that president Biya and the government had allowed the Israelis to carry out secret nuclear tests in the region against a fee of 14 billion CFA francs. Such rumours were fueled by the fact that the disaster coincided with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Cameroon and Israel. This catastrophe was also woven into other events, (such as the scare around ATT Vaccination (Ndumbe and Yenshu 1992) to insinuate that this was an attempt by the central government to stealthily curb the population of the North West Province known to be politically hostile.

³⁸ An explosion has been reported of recent without corresponding interpretations of the same type

III. EXAMPLES FROM HISTORY AND LOCAL PRACTICES

I will like to refer to the deluge story of the Kedjom, which is situated several centuries ago in the vicinity of Lake Oku. I will explore other instances and practices reported in the literature (Chilver 1991). This will enable us to attempt to establish the link between collective categories of perception and natural catastrophes.

I have chosen to present a version of the Kedjom deluge story I collected in 1989 in Kedjom Keku and then compare it with the versions of Eugenia Shanklin (1992) and E.M. Chilver (1991). The story runs thus:

Agho became Fon while in Oku where they were living in contiguous territory with the Kedjom. Both parties had left an adjoining piece of land at the meeting point of their settlement. Soon a man with over-grown hair visited them and asked for land to settle on. The people were astonished that a single individual could be making such a request. They answered him by saying that if they were three in number his wish could have been granted. The stranger then went over to Oku where the Fon of Oku had his hair shaved. He was offered food: huckleberry and foofoo corn. He had been entertained with a cock at Kedjom. The man then ate and went and settled on the free zone. He spent two days building his hut. In the evening he went up to the settlement on the other side and began to inform the people that if in the evening they felt wind blowing and saw signs of rain in the sky, they should not go out of their houses. Doors should be closed. He informed both the Oku and Kedjom people. This stranger's instructions were followed strictly. It rained and winds blew throughout the night. In the morning the people woke up to discover a lake had formed on the piece of land. The Fon of Kedjom and Oku each began to claim ownership of the lake. This continued for two days. The Fon of Oku then suggested that it was not good to continue to struggle over the lake. Rather, they could go into it and on coming out they would know who was the owner.

The population of Oku and Kedjom then turned out en masse on the day the Fons were going into the lake. After three days, the people gathered again around the lake. Suddenly, the Fon of Oku came out. The Fon of Kedjom never came out again. After a period of three days his funeral rites were performed and his brother Angwuh succeeded him. Angwuh is the one who settled at Kuwee. Nkim, the brother of Agho who was lost in the lake, then decided to look for a suitable site ahead to settle in. He went down to Ntabuwe where the Bafut court used to be situated. Nkim was later to become the Fon in Bafut. Finge (Tifon or the co-adjutant for Ajolye) then left and went to Njinikom where he settled.

Another version collected by Shanklin (1992: 59) would rather point to natural occurrences subsumed in oral tales and legends. The version runs thus:

At Oku there is a sizeable crater lake (6° 12' N 10°? 28'E) and Oku people say that at one time two groups were settled beside the lake. On the western slope, were the Babanki or Kijem people, and on the eastern slope, were the Oku people. Each had their Fon. There were many disputes between the two ethnic groups, one being a disagreement as to which group owned Lake Oku. One day a stranger came and asked the Fon of Kijem for land on which to build a compound. The Kijem Fon was a disagreeable fellow and he refused to give land. The stranger then went to the Oku Fon, who gave him a building plot. But the stranger did not like the land that was given to him, so he went back to Oku and asked for a different plot. The Fon allotted him another, but again the stranger was not happy, so returned to the Fon, asking for a different plot. Once again, he was given a plot, and once again, he returned to complain about it. Finally, the Oku Fon, seeing that the man would not be satisfied, told him to choose his own land. The man settled down beside Lake Oku, and as it is said in Pidgin English, "*no one over knew what he did there*". (The implication is that the man had no visitors because he was a witch.)

When the stranger died Kijem and Oku people went to celebrate his death, the Kijem people on their side of the Lake and Oku on theirs. Both Fons were called into the Lake (presumably by the now dead stranger) and they obliged, each entering from his own side. They were then taken to the lake bottom and soon after they disappeared, streaks of red (blood) began to appear on the Oku side.

As they watched the red streaks come up, the Oku people thought their Fon was dead and they began to mourn for him. At the same time, there appeared in the distance a Fon dressed in fine new cloths, and the Kijem people began to cheer, believing their Fon was being returned to them, having been honoured by the host with precious garments.

But, in fact, it was the Oku Fon who was dressed in fine clothes and the Kijem Fon who had been slaughtered. The two groups returned to their homes, wondering what would come next. Soon after, the waters of lake Oku left the lake bed and destroyed most of the homes and people on the Kijem side; the remnant moved away from the lake, further west into Belo Valley (6°10' N 10° 21'E).

IV. SOCIAL CATEGORIES, PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES

I will start this analysis by indicating that the categories of perceptions, whether indigenous/local or scientific, are essentially social

in nature. In this regard, I would agree with Durkheim and Mauss ([1903] 1968 and 1969) that the group, which he considers primitive, projects its own categories to nature. Before looking at the implication of such an affirmation on the Anthropology of the environment, I will first attempt an identification of the categories, which are essentially political, cultural (in the sense of a definition of person, the world and modes of action) and physical/natural. The following table illustrates the expression of these social categories in the discourses about natural hazards that are reported in the oral traditions both past and present.

Social Categories of Discourse and Relation to Natural Hazards

Category of Discourse	Theme of Discourse		
	Discourses about eruption of Mt. Cameroon	Discourses about explosions of Lake Nyos and Monoun	Discourses about earlier volcanic lake activity
Political	Association of earlier eruptions with political facts	Association of explosions with contemporary political facts	Grafting of volcanic activity of lakes to inter-tribal conflict and conflicts over environmentally strategic space
Cultural	Attribution of eruption to death of chiefs, anger of mountain god, spirits or ancestors.	Attribution of lake Nyos gas explosion to failure of natives to make sacrifices	Association of lake activity to retributive action of nature spirits and gods. Recurrent themes according to Chilver (1991:20) are spirit doubles, which activate transforms/zombies and association of numinous powers with waters, some times benevolent, sometimes wayward or punitive.
Physical/ Natural	Attribution of volcanic action of mountain to minerals, petroleum or molten rocks	Gas explosions with a lethal effect on a large number of people	Narrative about physical activity (torrential rain, floods which kill people, landslides, lethal lake activity)

One can then examine these categories and the catastrophes separately. Starting with the recent mountain eruption, the political categories are concentrated either around national events (partition of national territory, political transitions during independence period or later) or local events (Endeley's loss of elections to Foncha). The cultural categories concentrate on the action of gods, nature spirits and mountain.

However, a new disruptive element is introduced. This is the stranger³⁹ who makes unauthorised visits to or sacrifices on the mountain. The blame is also on the exploitation of the environment around the mountain. Physical explanations of a pseudo-scientific nature are also presented. The action here is the performance of rituals and sacrifices to the spirits, gods or ancestors in order to appease them or atone for faults.

If one turns to the Kedjom deluge story, Shanklin informs us that the Oku people still make elaborate sacrifices to the lake, which showed by its action that it belonged to the Oku people. From that day to this, no red streaks have appeared in the Lake. Before making some comments, I may say that she simply analyses this story from the point of view of population movements/dynamics when she indicates that such stories 'explain' the present Grassfields settlements patterns and ethnic grouping. According to her, they point to maleficent water, water that misbehaves in a spectacular way and sets in motion the migration of ethnic groups (*ibid.* p. 62).

This modest analysis by Shanklin is however oblivious of the cosmologies and worldviews, which underlie the themes and it is only an understanding of this background that could enlighten our interpretations of the various versions of the story. These worldviews fashion the relationship of peoples to their environments and other groups with which they struggle over the control of the latter. The first point about cosmologies is the animation of physical occurrences. According to Grassfields cosmology, physical features (streams, mountains, pools, lakes, winds, rainfall, landslides) could be the abode of spirits which could either be maleficent or beneficent. Such spirits could interact with the human world and even preside over the destinies of groups (clans, ethnic groups, and nations). They are therefore venerated worshiped or avoided. In their interaction, they can take on human form but do not discuss with the latter in human language. Neither do humans interact with them in human form. The language of human-spirit interaction is therefore symbolic: humans have to resort to signs and symbols to solicit certain reactions from the nature spirits that are interpreted in symbolic language.

Competition over some geographical features and natural resources (forests, lakes with fish, rivers, mountains) may then take symbolic appeals to spirits said to reside in the features. I stress the idea of symbolism because as Warnier (1995: 258) has shown, the concept of violence leading to bloodshed was alien to Grassfields mentality before the Chamba and Fulani raids. I would postulate that the events around

³⁹ There has been widespread animosity between local inhabitants of the coastal area and non-natives against a background of political tension.(cf. Yenshu 1997).

the lake were more of a symbolic competition over the lake. It might have been that just after the Oku won this symbolic contest, a disaster of the lake Nyos type occurred, leading to deaths (cf. Chilver 1991; Shanklin op.cit.) Red streaks such as the ones observed during the Nyos explosion, which were described as "red as blood" (Tikum Mbah Azonga 1996: 1812 - 1814), could have easily been described as a death. It would be in this light that the catastrophe was interpreted as being a rejection of the Kedjom people by the lake god, an indication that the place was not good for habitation. About the likelihood of a natural hazard, Freeth (1992: 54) notes that Lake Oku is only 52 meters deep, but it has a large surface area and a volume of about 2,270 million cubic meters. If charged with carbon dioxide, it could contain more than three times as much as Lake Monoun could⁴⁰.

I would say that based on the selective destruction or havoc that the lake caused, the Oku might just be grateful to have been spared and therefore honour the lake. This may explain Kedjom aversions for watery lakes and the preference for the Mbi dry crater (where sacrifices used to be performed) which offered them shelter later. In this regard, people move away from destructive natural forces to ones which offer protection and shelter.

It also appears to be linked to the preferential "behaviour" of the lake and consequently the transfer of power by the Ntul to the Oku. Worthy of note too are versions collected by Mrs Chilver (1991) and myself from Nso and Oku informants. Mrs Chilver's version carries with it the retribution-by-natural-disaster motive, but does not mention the idea of Fons entering the lake. What is significant too is that it is contrasted with an earlier version collected by Father Emonts that mentions Babungo as competing with Oku over the ownership of the lake. Here this is a sacrifice of the Cain-and-Abel type where Oku is given possession of the lake when its sacrifices are found to be more acceptable. The Babungo chief dies in the competition but not in the lake.

In another version I collected from an Oku informant two Fons (Kedjom and Oku) sacrifice goats at the lake and enter the lake from different sides. Here the lake spirit takes the Fon of Kedjom Keku and kills him on the Oku side. Soon, only the goats come out. The Oku Fon comes out adorned with a different cap. All Kedjom then leave Oku. This version bears striking similarity to Emonts' version, which point to competition by

⁴⁰ Lake Monoun exploded in August 1984 killing 37 people. Lake Nyos released toxic aerosol of water and carbon dioxide that killed more than 1250 people. If I compare the two incidents, the Kedjom disaster must have caused more casualties,

sacrifice. Here the loser does not only lose but also dies, which is an ill omen. These versions seem to corroborate our view that legends combine real events (competition, sacrifice, natural disaster, death of kings) and supernatural interpretations (the retributive action of nature spirits, the power of victorious kings). This will evidently point to the competitive power of water points that are both troublesome and the source of blessings. The symbolic meaning attached to this competition is justified by the fact that present versions of Oku history tend to suppress this version of facts in preference for a conquest history which pits the Oku and the Ntul (Bah 1995; Nforme n. d. 7-11). Another version by Shufai Jem Bamfem of Nso presents the Kedjom Fon as not dying but escaping miraculously with the use of natural powers to form a new prosperous kingdom. This version bears striking similarities to resurrection themes.

Stories of chiefs competing by visiting the bottom of the lake to speak to a god or gods have also been evidently grafted to the storytelling traditions of the area. This one bears very close similarities to the Ye-eng and Naa story as narrated by C. Wola in Lantum (1964:116-122). Here two girls visit a lake to fetch tadpoles and crabs. Yeng, who catches crabs, pushes Naa into the lake in order to collect the latter's catch. The source of Naa's disappearance becomes a mystery. Naa who is captured by the lake spirit reveals her presence by singing to a man fetching wood. The latter then informs the parents. A diviner advises those relatives to move to the lakeside, weep into a piece of clay pot, throw the tears into the lake and jump into it to show one's innocence. This is done and all innocent people come out of the lake. Only the wicked friend sinks into the lake while Ye-eng is saved. She appears adorned with jewels. On return home, the lake streams after the people and it is only after they strip Yeng of all her jewels that it abates. Evidently, all the thematic and structural elements of the narratives are reflected in the Kedjom – Oku conflicts: retribution, the agency of physical features and the proof of innocence by entering a lake. From the structural point of view, the literary butts are two competing persons or two diametrically opposed moral characters, pitted against each other, while the terrain for action is the lake which is imbued with both physical and metaphysical powers.

Mrs. Chilver (op. cit. 17-20) reports sacrifices at Lake sides at Awing and the Mbi dry crater (Kedjom Keku), lake activity which leads to migration and the evidence of earthquakes in Western Grassfields history. In attempting to answer the question whether oral traditions deal with earlier lake disaster in the North West Province, she suggests that "the translocation of lakes is such an unexpected phenomenon that its

appearance in Grassfields folklore may be the best evidence it can provide for past volcanic activity."

The conclusion one can arrive at here is that natural catastrophes are not always lived as natural occurrences, but are grafted unto prevailing social categories. Durkheim and Mauss (op.cit: 223-224) hold that just in the same manner as science, social categories of perception are of a speculative nature. They are not meant to facilitate action but to ease understanding or make intelligible the relationship between things.

Etant donné certains concepts considérés comme fondamentaux, l'esprit éprouve le besoin d'y rattacher les notions qu'il fait des choses. De telles classifications sont donc, avant tout, destinées à relier les idées entre elles, à unifier la connaissance; à ce titre, on peut dire sans inexactitude qu'elles sont oeuvre de science et constituent une première philosophie de la nature.

(Durkheim and Mauss *ibid*: 224)

In the present scheme of things therefore, one could consider the scientific interpretations of the mountain eruption just one of the various interpretations that are possible. One can also situate them within the utilitarian conceptions of the environment, which can be contrasted with non-western, non-Cartesian categories. The specific type of relations societies entertain with their environments could determine this. One could make a distinction between Western utilitarian conceptions of the environment, which are situated within a background of science and technology and non-western anthropomorphic views which give life to objects, therefore presenting natural occurrences as a result of spiritual or human-like agency. While science and the need to exploit the environment and therefore instil a dominating attitude towards nature largely govern Western cosmologies, non-western views present humans as the victims at the mercy of an overwhelming Nature. Such a Nature may simply be the object of veneration or appeasement as is the case of Nature spirits said to reside in gigantic features. This may underlie the presentation of religious sites as elevated and the conception of sacred geographical sites that one finds in the so-called great or revealed religions. A tendency towards veneration would therefore serve to preserve the environment because Nature is only partially considered as of use-value.

This is just the opposite of western utilitarian perspectives, enhanced by the economy of exploitation and conquest, which drives man towards the creative destruction of nature. In its congenital sin of a claim to an all-knowing status, this perspective forgets its own very limits as can be seen in the inability of science to predict with precision natural

hazards. As such, one could therefore find paralleled interpretations of the eruption dictated by the prevailing social categories en vogue. Local indigenous people would attribute the eruption of the mountain either to Epasa Moto, to the death of a chief, or an impending event while politically minded persons will easily see coincidences between eruptions and political events, without this having any relation to scientific interpretations. One can also question why these local perceptions still abound in an age of science. This is principally because of the difficulty in getting access to science in an equally economic age. One has to go through a rigorous schooling process to be acquainted with certain notions, even then, most educated were not aware of what was actually happening. Moreover, African people still stick to their own traditional worldviews, which largely govern their lives. This would explain the local chiefs' sacrifices to the mountain god as well as interpretation of the recent occurrences in terms of prevailing social categories of perception.

Beyond these distinctions and dichotomies one notices the collapse of the nature-culture divide that is so dear to the Western mind. In this context nature is considered as part of the social world or one can say nature is acculturated i.e. the environment is part of the cultural and not the economic world. Bruno Latour (1991: 103) has made a case for a symmetrical anthropology, which should cease from seeing the world with specifically modern eyes. In short, an anthropology wherein "Pre-moderns are like us [the Westerners]", offers a better analysis of the Westerners than the modernist anthropology offered of the pre-moderns. The argument is that both Westerners and pre-moderns have built communities of natures and societies." As such the same approach, in which the anthropologist captures the wide array of social perceptions of the environment, applies to all societies.

"To become symmetrical, anthropology needs a complete overhaul and intellectual retooling so that it can get [stop] believing neither in the radical distinction between humans and non-humans at home, nor in the total overlap of knowledge and society, elsewhere" (Latour *ibid*: 101).

This is the task ahead.

CONCLUSIONS

I have examined some social categories of perception that characterise local people's representations of some natural catastrophes and hazards. I have shown that this is a combination of political, cultural and physical/natural categories and that this tends to collapse the distinction between nature and society as the various categories are interwoven. As a preliminary exercise in what Bruno Latour (*ibid*) has

called a symmetrical anthropology, I have sought to represent the local person's experience of natural phenomena in a holistic manner i.e. one where nature and culture/society become a single existential experience. This can be applicable in all contexts where natural catastrophes occur. The local person's reaction would not only be subsumed to the quest for survival but will go beyond that to embrace political, ontological and social questions. In other words, it is not a specifically African or non-modern question. For instance, a natural catastrophe like the one recently reported in Turkey would bring into play these categories even if in a different manner. A holistic anthropological approach, which goes beyond Cartesian categories of analysis, would therefore be more useful in this regard. In short this is a call for an anthropology which is the *logic* of human existence in opposition to a study of human existence according to the modern vision.

REFERENCES

- D'Andrade, Roy. 1995
The development of cognitive anthropology. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Bah, Njakoi John. 1996
Oku: Past and Present. Three Essays. Jikijem. mimeograph
- Chilver, E. M. 1991. "Does Oral Tradition deal with earlier lake hazards in the North West Province" in Education Review. April-June 1991.
- Durkheim, E. and Marcel Mauss. 1903
 "De quelques formes primitives de classification." in Mauss, Marcel. 1968 and 1969. *Essais de Sociologie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Freeth, S.J. "Potentially hazardous lakes in West Africa" in FREETH, S.J. 1992
 Natural Hazards in West and Central Africa. Braunschweig; Weisbaden: Friedr. Viewig & Sohn Verlagsgesellschaft GmbH. International earth sciences monograph series. pp 47-56.
- Lantum, Dan. 1964. (ed.)
Folk tales of Nso. Lagos: Nso History Society Publications.
- Latour, B. 1991.
We have never been modern (translated from French by Catherine Porter). New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Tokyo/Singapore/Harvester Watersheef.
- Nforme, Jacob Yungong (n. d.).
 "Know your tradition". Mimeograph.
- Ndumbe P.M. and Yenshu E.
 "Cameroon: Vaccination and politics." *The Lancet*. Vol. 339. May 16th 1992.
- Nyamnjoh, F. "Political Rumour in Cameroon" *Cahiers de l'Université Catholique d'Afrique Centrale (UCAC)*. 1997. *Melanges*. 93-105.
- Shanklin, E. 1982.
 "Natural hazards in the oral history of West Cameroon" in Freeth, S.J. 1992. *Natural hazards in West and Central Africa*. 5th edition. Braunschweig, Weisbaden: Friedr. Viewig & Sohn. pp57-62
- Tikum, Mbah Azonga. "The Lake Nyos disaster." *West Africa*, 1 September 1996
- Yenshu, E
 "Ethnic Minorities, the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the State in Cameroon. An appraisal of the Sawa Revival Movement." Paper presented at the 1997 Annual PAAA/APA Conference on the theme Africa on the Threshold of the Third Millennium: Anthropological Perspectives. Accra, 8-12 September 1997.