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The Signification and Role of Royal Symbols on Grassfields Politics

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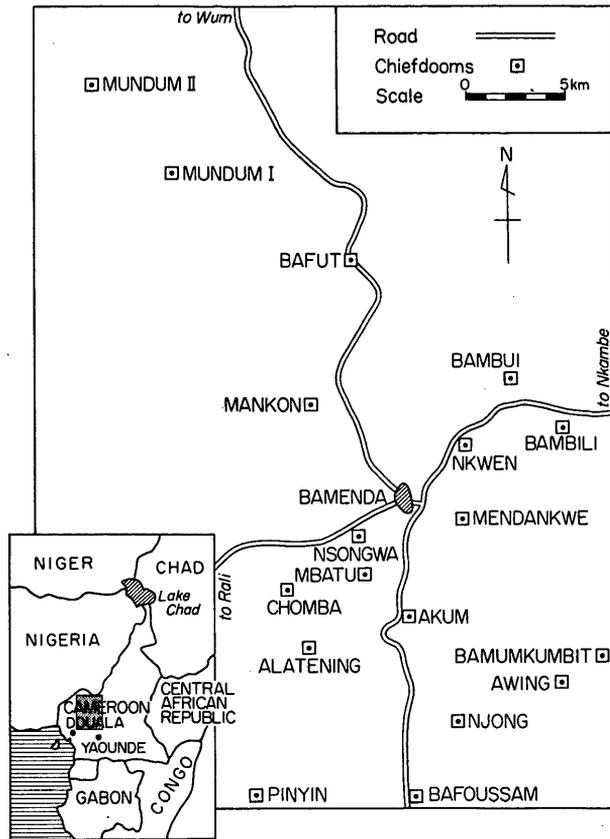
This study analyses the symbols of social distinction used exclusively by the monarch (*Mfo, Fon, Fo, Mfor, etc.*) in Cameroon Grassfields chiefdoms. The study of symbolism cannot be carried out in the abstract or independent of its socio-political context. The political systems of the area studied can be classified into two types, *Centralized* and *Segmentary* systems. Centralized systems are found among the Tikar (Bafut, Kijem Ketu, Bambui, etc.) and Ngemba chiefdoms (Mankon, Akum, Awing, etc.). Segmentary systems are mostly found in the *Meta* area.

In these chiefdoms the political, administrative, judicial and religious powers are concentrated on the *Fon*. Accordingly the symbols play the essential role of distinguishing between the ruler and the ruled and make the personality of the *Fon*, as a ruler, stand out on every single occasion of contact between the chief (*Fon*) and his subjects. In this study I examine 23 symbols of the chief, including the bamboo staff, red feather, *Ndoroe* leaves, and the like. These are not the only roles played by "Royal symbols", but seem to be minor compared to the role of distinguishing the chief from his subordinates, such as nobles (*Bukum*), heads of lineages, heads of wards and commoners.

INTRODUCTION

Societies in the Grassfields region of the United Republic of Cameroon are highly stratified. Some ranks are inherited and others are obtained by the performance of meritorious deeds, such as killing a ferocious animal. A person who performed such a brave deed received a title and wore in public paraphernalia reflecting his rank or social position.

This study is an analysis of the symbols of social distinction used exclusively by the monarch (*Mfon, Fon, Fo, Mfor, etc.*) in Grassfields chiefdoms. In most Grassfields chiefdoms no commoner or even a noble is allowed to wear the same clothes as the *Fon*. For example, the *Fon* alone wears the traditional gown with three moons placed concentrically on the back. A noble of the Inner Council can wear a gown with a maximum of two moons on it. Other minor nobles wear gowns with only one moon. This study is also limited to the Bamenda plateau sub-region and specifically to the villages of Bafut, Bali, Nkwen and Mbatu.



Map 1. Ngemba-speaking chiefdoms

In most instances a new ruler is not introduced formerly to his people. He can only be identified by certain symbolic ornaments. For example in the Ngemba chiefdoms on the day the new chief (*Fo* or *Mfo*) is to be introduced to the people, a line of nobles and kingmakers leaves the palace and marches slowly to the village green. The new chief will be distinguished by a long bamboo pole which he holds in his right hand with one or two red feathers (*Nifu ni Ngu-u*—the feather of the turaco) implanted at the top and wearing fresh leaves (*Mundoroe*) around his neck and completely naked except for a small loincloth (*Ntum*). Nobody else during this ceremony will be dressed in such a way or will carry such objects. The new king is recognized and accepted by a symbolic gesture: The casting of stones and fruit at the new ruler. This act makes the new chief a sacred individual. Henceforth nobody can insult, hit or kill the chief, violation of which is punishable by death. This is just one of many examples chieftaincy as an institution.

1. THE ROLE OF SYMBOLS IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF NORTHWEST SOCIETIES

The study of symbolism cannot be carried out in abstract or independent of its social context. Symbols serve a definite social purpose. This study of royal symbols is made in the framework of the social structures or the social organization of Grassfields chiefdoms.

Grassfields societies are organized into a complex structure with each member of society belonging to a particular stratum.

At the apex of the political pyramid of a Northwest Grassfields chiefdom is the king (*Mfon* [Mungaka], *Foyn* [Kom], *Fon* [Lamsa], *Fo* [Ngemba] etc.). The king, who is both a secular and spiritual leader, is the supreme political personality of the chiefdom. All important political activities within the chiefdom revolve around him, and the king in his palace constitutes the nucleus of political activities within the society. The king had extensive powers over his people and territory, and was *de jure* owner of all land in the chiefdom. The king was the sovereign head of government and was the very personification of his Kingdom; the prosperity and misfortunes of the land were attributed to the good or bad rule of the king. The king determined the destiny of his people and besides being a secular ruler, was also the spiritual head of the community [COLSON 1969: 45]. Of the *Foyn* of Kom, Nkwi remarked "The king personified his Kingdom. When his Subjects said '*Foyn nii sa'ila adjung*' (the king rules the country well), they meant that his reign was characterised by peace, harmony, prosperity and fertility. When there was drought, failure of crops, misfortunes and general discontent throughout the country, it meant he was not ruling well". [Nkwi 1976]. The Grassfields *Fon* was entirely responsible for the welfare of his people in his capacity as spiritual and secular ruler.

The king has political, administrative, judicial and religious functions. The *Fon* as the supreme political personality of the state exercises numerous political functions. Besides being the supreme administrator, he is directly responsible for foreign affairs. He represents the chiefdom or sends his envoys on important occasions such as commemorating the death of a chief and the enthronement of a new chief, participation in annual festivals organized by friendly chiefdoms, where his chiefdom is required to participate. The chief sends emissaries to friendly chiefdoms and receives envoys from them. The *Fon* is the only person empowered to declare war, but he does this only after consulting his nobles (*Bukum* in Ngemba) in council. Participating in such a council of war would be members of the *Kwi'fo* and the heads of the military lodges (*Manjong*, *Mfu'*, among others). Although he is the supreme administrator of the chiefdom, the *Fon* does not govern alone, regional administrators ruling parts of the territory on his behalf. In some chiefdoms the king appoints regional administrators and delegates powers to them. Such administrators were often kinsmen or men trusted by the king. The king could also revoke these appointments. In other chiefdoms where the territory is divided into villages with village-heads or subchiefs, wards with ward-heads and the like, the post of administrator could be inherited, but the *Fon* had to recognize the new candidate who was to

succeed to the post of regional administrator. The *Fon* often appoints a noble to participate in the ceremony of the enthronement of the new noble who would eventually become a regional administrator. In some Ngemba chiefdoms the chief sends camwood with which the new administrator has to be rubbed, thereby signifying the chief's supreme authority over all the land.

The above shows clearly that Grassfields chiefdoms had a centralized system of government and that the king delegated regional administrative powers. But this entailed risks in that it could lead to rebellion and secession [COLSON 1969]. It was through this "process of fragmentation" that some of the Ngemba and Meta chiefdoms were constituted in pre-colonial times. The secular authority of the king extended throughout his chiefdom and his legitimate authority was never challenged, which would be tantamount to treason, and punishable by death. Rare were persons who would challenge the legitimate authority of the chief, for chieftaincy was generally accepted as the most important part of Grassfields socio-political systems. The chief was the very embodiment of the soul of the community and acted as an integrative force within society. He was the force that united the final authority of the chiefdom, being the final authority in the settlement of litigation and gathering the people around him through frequent acts of generosity. Generosity was one of the outstanding qualities that a king had to possess to better insure the social cohesion of the community.

In addition to the secular authority of the king were his spiritual attributes. After the rites of enthronement, the king became a sacred personality and spiritual head of the chiefdom. The king in Grassfields society is a *sacred* individual who disposes of special powers that "have been transmitted to him by his father; he was conceived when his father himself was a *Fon*; and his father, before he died, spat on his successor to transmit his powers to him. During the installation festivities, the populace symbolically stones the successor, who stands bareheaded and wears only a white loin cloth; it is the last time the people can touch the successor and lay hands on him. After that, only his wives, his children and a few trusted palace retainers will be allowed to have physical contact with him, not, however, without having absorbed some medicines" [WARNIER 1975]. In fact after the ritual ceremony of enthronement, the *Fon* or the king undergoes a radical spiritual transformation. One of the gifts received by the chief during his enthronement ceremony is the capacity to communicate with the spirit world, especially with his ancestors, the former rulers of the chiefdom. Communication between the living chief and the dead chiefs is thought to occur at least once a year, when sacrifices are offered before the annual festivals. If the chief's rule is poor, his ancestors inform him then and he makes amendments. If a catastrophe of unknown origin suddenly affects the chiefdom, the chief communicates with his ancestors to enquire of the reason. Further, after enthronement, the *Fon* could decide to acquire the art of witchcraft, thereby permitting him to maintain surveillance over his population during the night to combat witches and wizards who might come to "eat" people. The *Fon* also could transform himself into an animal, especially into the leopard.

Thus on enthronement the king becomes sacred, with extraordinary qualities. A special vocabulary is reserved for him: his eyes are “stars”, his hands and feet are “rattles”, one can swear on his hands or feet; his food is his “medicine”; he does not defecate but “harvests his medicine”; his dwelling house is his “lake”, and so on [WARNIER 1975]. In Bafut, his clothes and parts of the body have special names. For example, his feet are called *Nchaah* whereas those of an ordinary man are referred to as *Akole*. In praises addressed to him, he is called “lion, tiger, *Ati-jong-jong* (thorny tree) etc” [SOH 1972]. In Kom, the king was addressed as *Cha'mufo* (kicker of things), *Lum-Nyam* (king of all animals) and *nyamabo* (leopard). These terms are more than just forms of address demanded by protocol, but rather seem to convey the firm conviction that the king is really a sublime personality. He acquires this extraordinary personality after the elaborate rituals of enthronement during which he receives extraordinary forces from the ancestral kings and when the medicine people of the village also give him extra powers. Even when the populace finally throws stones or a fruit, called “*Funya*” in Ngemba, at him, or when he is publicly bulletted, they seem to have conferred their collective spirit and power on him. This act transforms his nature and makes him a sacred being.

Besides these political, administrative and religious functions the chief also plays a major role in the settlement of litigation. He is informed of all criminal cases that are tried within his chiefdom. There was usually a network of tribunals within the chiefdom, coincident with the administrative division of the territory. Minor cases were judged by household heads and by ward or village courts. If not satisfied, litigants could appeal to the palace court (*Ntoh*) where the king sits as the supreme judge, together with his nobles (*Bukum* in Ngemba), and the case examined and judgement rendered. Beyond this, no further appeal could be made. Most criminal cases and those demanding the death penalty were tried in the King's court. There were in each chiefdom institutions for the enforcement of judicial decisions. In Mankon, for example, there is the *Takoengoe* which inflicted the death penalty. Elsewhere it was the *Kwi'fo* who exercised this function. Warnier, on the application of the death penalty in Mankon, observed that “a number of crime cases collected in Mankon show that the death penalty was inflicted by *Takoengoe* for the following crimes: murder, killing by witchcraft, repeated theft for consumption (theft followed by the sale of the items stolen was punished much more lightly) trespassing on the prohibition of *Kwi'fo* in case of epidemic in a foreign village, selling a Mankon person into slavery, keeping noble game, treason, cursing the country, adultery with a chief's wife. A leper who had several times refused to settle away from the town was eventually put to death” [WARNIER 1975]. Clearly, Grassfields chiefdoms contain well-elaborated judicial systems with judges at different levels and the *Fon* as supreme judge.

Although political, administrative, judicial and religious powers are concentrated on the *Fon*, Grassfields political systems made ample provisions for checks on the chief's political activities and for curbing unconstitutional behavior. Various mechanisms for checking the abuse of power can be identified in each chiefdom.

The first group that acts as a regulating force preventing abuse of power by the *Fon* is the traditional council (*Nukum* [sing.] and *Bukum* [pl.] in Ngemba). The privy council assists with day-to-day running of state affairs. In former times the 5–9 council members did practically no manual work. Rather, they leisurely passed time at the palace and discussed problems of state with the chief. With the *Fon* they constituted the ruling elite. During these sessions, they could point out abnormalities in the chief's rule, and in private they could even rebuke the *Fon* for major faults. In the Ngemba political system some councillors were agnates of the chief, such is the case with *Ndifo* (elder brother of the chief) and *Muma* (brother). Another member of the king's family who acts as a constitutional check on the king is the *Mafo* (mother of the king) who was either his real mother or a half-sister who succeeded the late *Mafo*. The *Mafo* plays a major advisory role and can exercise tremendous influence on the king. An important social group that often acts as a check on the king's conduct of state affairs is the lineage (*Atse* in Ngemba). The chiefdoms are usually sub-divided into lineages with powerful lineage-heads (*Butabatse*). These are powerful pressure groups within the chiefdom that check on a *Fon* ruling badly. Other prominent social groups, such as the regulatory society, *Kwi'fo*, *Manjong* and *Takumbeng*, provided a certain degree of constitutional restriction on the chief's conduct of state affairs. At a more general level, the general population can become a real check to the king's way of governance. For example, when angered the people would boycott the annual festivities at the palace. The *Fon*, on observing this poor participation, would enquire as to the cause of discontent, and then make the necessary amendments.

In the Grassfields of Cameroon, in particular, and in Africa as a whole, there were well defined constitutional provisions for checking the abuse of power by political leaders. Kingship is the most supreme and vital institution in Grassfields political organisation. It is the integrative force that assures continuity in the political life of the community. To a certain degree, Grassfields people consider the king as just an individual who has been enthroned to exercise the function of a political leader. Consequently, during his absence, their attitude to kingship as an institution remains unchanged. Councillors and other members of the community still go to the palace with their wine, enter the reception hall, bend down, clap to the vacant throne, and sit, drinking and discussing the affairs of the community. The king's temporary absence cannot bring about a discontinuity in the political activities of a Grassfields chiefdom.

THE COUNCIL

Second in importance to kingship in the Grassfields political structures is the traditional council, which can be regarded as a cabinet with the king or chief as the president [KABERRY 1962: 10]. This is the forum where major political decisions are taken, and the councillors (*Bukum*) assist the chief with the affairs of state. No major decision can be taken without one or two councillors being present.

The members of the council are usually members of the political elite, either lineage-heads (*Butabatse* in Ngemba) or ward-heads. In the Ngemba political

system the council is composed of royal and non-royal members. Prominent among the former is the *Ndifo*, who plays the role of the prime minister, and the *Muma*, a chief minister. The membership of the traditional council was usually varied. In former times the number was quite limited, often 5–9 persons. These people were usually the heads of the lineages that founded the chiefdom. As society increased in size and with the practice of promotion of people to occupy higher positions within society, their councils were enlarged to include the new elite. The council exercised a variety of functions. If advised the *Fon* and aided in the process of political decision-making, it helped in the administration of the chiefdom and it decided on the communal work to be carried on in the village. The council also had ritual and judicial functions. It was therefore a dynamic and stabilizing force within Grassfields political systems. If their politics have long been efficient political systems it is due to the major and indispensable role that the council plays within Grassfields chiefdoms. Councillors enjoy high status within society and have a paraphernalia (cap with a turaco feather attached, special gowns, seats, drinking cups etc.) that is exclusively reserved for nobles. The queen mother (*Mafo*, *Mamfon*, *Nafoy*, *Ya* etc.) is sometimes invited to participate in council meetings, especially when subjects that concern women are being deliberated. She is the only woman with the prerogative of sitting side-by-side with the principal political leaders and discussing affairs of state.

RETAINERS

Following the councillors in the political hierarchy are *Retainers* (*Nchinda*, *Oechenda*, *Nchindo*, etc.). Palace retainers were commoners recruited during boyhood by the regulatory society (*Kwi'fo*, *Kwi'fon*, *Ngwerong*, *Ngwose* etc.) to serve at court. The king (*Mfon*, *Fon*, *Fo*, *Foy* etc.) obtained regular services from the entire chiefdom, they built and renovated his houses, cultivated his farms, and hunted for him, among other things. Nevertheless, the *Fon* needed a corps of servants to perform the everyday chores to run errands or to act as envoys to friendly rulers. Retainers constituted in themselves a class that was particularly close to the king. While performing their duties retainers were uniquely able to know certain secrets of state. This is where their importance seems to lie. In addition, the fact that they were in regular communication with the sacred personality, the king enhanced their position in society and gave them a status above that of commoners. In matters pertaining to the palace, retainers that were close to the king were more important than even some nobles because only a few nobles could have access to the inner court, not to mention the royal chambers. Young men recruited as retainers either served as 'boy-servants' of *Kwi'fo* or *Ngwerong*, or as pages to the *Fon*.

From the information available on retainerdom it can be inferred that when chief-taincy was created, people were also conscious of the necessity to create another institution (retainerdom) to provide people to serve the chief and aid him in the practical implementation of decisions arrived at by the king and his nobles. The king was to occupy himself with high political activities and such activities as manual work and running of errands were to be reserved for the retainers. There was, there-

fore, a high degree of specialisation within the political system, there were on one hand, the king and the councillors, whose principal task was the handling of major political issues within the chiefdom, and on the other hand were those who actually implemented the decisions and saw to it that they were carried out at the level of the populace; this was one of the essential duties of those retainers who were members of *Kwi'fo*. Some retainers were exclusively assigned to perform services within the palace. After their period of service in the palace, they were often compensated. Through having served in the palace in different capacities, palace retainers emerged as a new class with important political, judicial and administrative roles. After having received a sound civic education and served as the *Fon's* confidants or as *Kwi'fo* retainers for several years, they stood out as the most patriotic social category within the society and on whom the *Fon* could depend for effective government. Their period of service within the palace was not only a time when they studied intricacies of government but also a veritable school in which a sense of loyalty to the state was inculcated. In certain chiefdoms, their formation was paramilitary in nature and emphasis was laid on such concepts as obedience, loyalty to the state and the king, keeping of state secrets, safeguarding the independence of the state, among other things.

Commoners numerically constituted the most important political group within any chiefdom. They were generally referred to as the 'country' (*Ala* in Ngemba). The masses within Grassfields politics were highly politicised, and participated to various degrees in the political life of the community. It has been shown that during the enthronement ceremony of the chief, the masses became involved at a certain stage by casting stones at the chief. In fact during the ceremony the new king must be presented to the masses for their recognition. While the political leadership within the chiefdom works hard for the effective functioning of governmental institutions, the people contribute their quota to the very survival of the political system by providing the king and other important political personalities with food, labour, retainers and warriors. The maintenance and renovation of the palace was the responsibility of the entire population, the common people referred to the palace as their palace, and everybody within the chiefdom knows that he has a responsibility towards the upkeep of the palace. Given this situation, there was a special disposition for the reception and entertainment of people in the palace. Any citizen or even a stranger who stopped at the palace should be fed and given wine. Similarly, any person was supposed to furnish the palace with provisions, to give part of the first harvest to the palace, participate in the *Fon's* hunt, not respond negatively if retainers pass through his compound and take a fowl, plantains, wine, etc. It is this local political consciousness which guarantees the solidity of Grassfields politics. The population constitutes the solid basis on which the political structures stand.

Many channels are available to the population to express its views on political issues. They include the traditional councils, usually heads of lineages representing their people at the palace, through members of *Kwi'fo*, who are themselves of the common stock, or through the retainers. Thus it becomes clear that everybody is

involved in one way or the other in contributing to the effective functioning of the political system and this practice in itself gives room for a high degree of democracy. Through the elaborate system of checking, the king could never really succeed in becoming autocratic.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Paralleling the political hierarchy is the social stratification of each chiefdom. Grassfields societies can be sub-divided into the following strata:

- 1) Royalty (All members of the royal family, the king, his wives, children and sometimes grandchildren of the king.) The king was often chosen from the circle of the royal family and the possibility that the king could be brought from another lineage other than the ruling dynasty was completely excluded. In certain cases if the mother of a prince came from another village, the possibility of his accession to the throne was completely eliminated. The king's wives had a particular status within society. They usually wore an insignia of cowrie beads as an indication of their status. On pain of death, no other male was permitted to touch, play with or have sexual intercourse with a wife of the *Fon*. Children of the *Fon* (*Bonbu nto*—children of the palace in Ngemba) were superior to children of ordinary people. On reaching adulthood they were given titles to distinguish them from commoners. In Bali-Nyonga, each prince automatically received the title of *Tita*, and most of the princes were given important appointments such as governor of an administrative unit.
- 2) Nobles (*Bukum*) Next follow the stratum of nobles, people that aided the *Fon* administratively. They can be considered as constituting a class in Grassfields society because the origin of most members can be traced to the origin of each chiefdom. Through the years, the permanence of this class has been maintained by succession. These people belonged to the lineages that founded the chiefdom and constituted the king's Privy Council.

Over the years the traditional council has undergone change. Progressive elements have been admitted such that village councils with a membership of 30 pous exist, as in the case of Mankon and other chiefdoms in North west Province. Despite this innovation, one still finds within this traditional council members of the inner council who are close councillors of the king. The councillors constitute an entire class within the social hierarchy of Grassfields society, the class of the notables.

The commoners class is composed of free born citizens of the land and immigrant elements from other societies that have been integrated. The class of commoners was not based on the principle of equality and people had varying statuses. For example a person who had displayed extraordinary bravery in the defense of the fatherland during war would be decorated by the king and authorised to wear the *red* feather (the feather of the turaco). This accorded him special status within society and made him superior to other commoners.

In pre-colonial days, the slave class (*Abu'* in Ngemba) was below the commoners. Slaves were the property of their owners and their family, and their status was just a little above that of an animal. When the *Fon* or an important noble died, he was buried along with one or more slaves. A slave's social position was not permanent and the social mobility that existed within Grassfields societies affected nearly all classes. A slave could gradually become integrated into the family in which he worked and become an integral member of that family, enjoying equal rights as the other members. Most classes were not closed, and people often changed their status either through personal achievements (achieved status) or through succession (ascribed status), as had been laid down by tradition.

Socio-political stratification among the female population of Grassfields existed also. At the level of the palaces there was usually a woman in charge of female affairs. She was variously called *Mafo* (mother of the king), *Mamfon*, *Nafoy*, *Ya*, etc. She was not regarded as the chief of the women as such, but the female representative in socio-political matters. She was the coordinator of female activities and spoke on behalf of women in certain matters. In certain chiefdoms, the *Mafo* or *Ya* also played the role of feeding the guests of the palace. In Bali-Nyonga apart from the post of *Mamfon* (mother of the *Fon*), there is also the post of *Mfongwi*. She was usually the *Fon's* half-sister. She had her own throne, residential quarters and obtained free services from the women of the chiefdom. On return from *Shu'fu* (purification ceremony during *Lala* time), there is a stop over at her compound and she feeds the population. She plays an important role in the governance of the women.

Apart from the different social strata that existed in Grassfields societies, there were multiple socio-political institutions that had varying roles to play. The *Kwi'fo* implements important decisions reached by the king and the nobles in council. It can be considered as the executive arm of the government rather than as the government itself. Of all the institutions or lodges available in each chiefdom, *Kwi'fo* is the most important.

Besides *Kwi'fo*, there were usually other social institutions or lodges. The military lodge (*Manjong*) had as its principal function the defense of the fatherland against foreign aggression. One of the minor functions of the *Manjong* society was to celebrate the deaths of important people or members. It is during this period that they practised the art of warfare. They carried out military exercises: shooting guns, displaying with cutlasses and spears etc. Members of *Manjong* also engage themselves in other duties such as cleaning roads, building bridges, organising the *Fons* hunt, etc. Generally membership of the *Manjong* lodge was not subject to any payment.

In the Ngemba chiefdoms, a prominent institution after the *Manjong* is the *Takumbeng*. There are usually two types of *Takumbeng-Takumbeng* of the princes and princesses (*Takumbeng bonbu nto*) and the *Takumbeng* of the women (*Takumbeng bangi*). At the level of the palace it is an association that caters for the interests of the princes and princesses and if there is a major problem that concerns the princes and princesses, it is through the medium of *Takumbeng* that representations are made to the *Fon* and the ruling council.

TERRITORIAL ORGANISATION

The socio-political systems of Grassfields chiefdoms, together with some of the societies or lodges that have been examined above, operated within a geographical context. Although frequently referred to as "village chiefdoms", these territories were regarded locally as sovereign states, being referred to as countries. Hence Ngemba expression "*Ala' Boferoe*" (the country of the Bafut), "*Ala' Mankon*" (the country of the Mankon). These were independent countries with well-defined boundaries in pre-colonial times.

The territory itself was sub-divided into different administrative units, usually villages, wards and compounds. The headquarter of the chiefdom was the palace (*Ntoh*), where important political decisions were taken and transmitted to the other administrative wards. The village usually had at its head a sub-chief who was responsible to the chief or king. Below were wards with ward-heads (*Butabatse* in Ngemba). They, too, were directly responsible to chief in all administrative matters. At the base of this territorial arrangement was the compound with a compound-head or the father-of-the-family. A number of compounds were grouped together to form a quarter or ward. All decisions were disseminated via this administrative structure. Often, *Kwi'fo* members would come to the market place or other large assemblies and announce decisions directly to the populace, but it was still the responsibility of the administrator of a given territorial unit to transmit the orders arrived at by the Council to his administrative subordinates.

2. SYMBOLS WORN BY THE NEW CHIEF

As we mentioned before, the new *Fon* is recognized during the enthronement ceremonies by certain symbols.

1 BAMBOO STAFF

One of the first symbols given to the *Fon* and which he carries in his hand before appearing in public is a long bamboo staff in which the red turaco feather (*Ngu-u*, in Ngemba) has been implanted. The political symbolism is forward-straight: It is the staff of office. Only one chosen as the new ruler can carry this staff. It would be considered treasonable for another person to appear in public with a similar insignia and he would be severely punished by the *Kwi'fo*.

In Bafut, it is generally believed that when the *Fon* dies, he goes to dwell in a deep place in a stream. The dead *Fon* sends the bamboo staff of office to indicate to the palace he lives in a particular pool of water. This bamboo staff has a high political significance, it is only when the population sees the new chief carrying it in his right hand, and accompanied by the king-makers, that they recognize him as their new monarch. In Bafut only one red feather is stuck to the top of the bamboo staff. After the enthronement ceremony, the bamboo staff is kept in the *Kwi'fo* house.

2 RED FEATHER

The red feather (the feather of the turaco, *Nifung ni angu-u* in Ngemba) has a high

symbolic significance in the Bamenda Grassfields. It is worn only by men of royal origin, nobles and others who have been promoted to high social rank. No commoner is allowed to wear the red feather. The red feather implanted at the top of the bamboo staff of the new chief symbolizes royalty, to signify that he will henceforth occupy the highest political post in the chiefdom. The red feather is often stuck to the caps of those entitled to wear it. The red feather is often worn in a conspicuous way by those who have the right to wear it: either on their caps or at the top of the bamboo staff that is held by the new monarch during the ceremony of enthronement. To earn the red feather, one must have performed a valiant deed, such as killing a ferocious animal. During the time of inter-tribal wars a person who brought back the head of an enemy was often knighted by the *Fon*, by being awarded the red feather. This symbolized social promotion. A person so promoted then enjoyed certain prerogatives, such as being able to talk to the *Fon* directly, or sitting and drinking with the nobles.

3 *NDOROE* LEAVES (plural *Mundoroe* in Ngemba)

These are leaves worn around the neck of the chief as a symbol of peace during his enthronement. It signifies that the new king will rule his people in a peaceful manner. This plant is cultivated around the *Fon*'s palaces.

In Bafut, *Ndoroe* a wreath of leaves is hung around the new *Fon*'s neck. It is placed around his neck by Mbonjim, Nchotu and Awambeng, three members of *Ndah Ndoroe*, who carry out the ceremony of putting the *Ndoroe* leaves around the neck of the *Fon* in the presence of the other members of the house.

After the stoning ceremony the *Fon* eventually reappears in public wearing the *Ndoroe* leaves and a cap (known in Bafut as *Nash*). His body is bare but he wears a large loincloth folded in the way that is referred to by the Ngemba as the *Ntum*. He then mounts his throne and is acclaimed by his people who organize vigorous dances to his honor. The wearing of the *Ndoroe* is not exclusive to the *Fon*. Other nobles wear it during their own enthronement ceremonies. In Mbaru, Nsongwa, Chomba, and Mankon, mothers of twins have the right to wear the *Ndoroe*. It is therefore a sign of distinction for it is not just any person who can wear *Ndoroe* leaves. Such a mother wears the *Ndoroe* because twins are revered and considered gods in Ngemba society.

4 TIGER OR LEOPARD BELT

In the villages of the Bamenda plateau sub-region, either leopard or tiger belts, or the pelts of these animals are frequently worn as a symbol of power. A long and flat waist belt made of either the skin of tiger or leopard is worn by a person in authority. The belt is allowed to hang over and away from the wearer's body. In other instances, the person in power sits on an elevated throne and the skin of either the tiger or the leopard forms a rung for his feet.

The putting of feet on a leopard or tiger skin during public ceremonies is the exclusive prerogative of the ruler (*Fon* or *Fo*) of the chiefdom. No other person has the right to rest his feet on a leopard skin. Some persons who have the status of



Photo. 1. *Fon Fominyen of Nyen-Momo division in his royal paraphernalia during his enthronement ceremony (1980). The royal symbols he bears constitute the distinction marks between his royal position and that of people with a commoners' status.*

Leopard skin,
symbol of power and nobility.

The red feather and the multicoloured hair
of the porcupine are worn on the *Fon's* cap as
indications of the royal position.

Fresh leaves (*mundorae* or *ndorae*),
worn around the *Fon's* neck symbolize
peace and royalty.

Fly whisk (*asang*),
a symbol of nobility.

Royal fetish,
a symbol of the *Fon's*
strong medicinal power.

The traditional Bamenda gown is esthetically designed
and contains symbols that distinguish the *Fon* from
the ordinary folk.

Ivory tusks lying on leopard skin,
a symbol of wealth and royalty.



sub-chief do wear leopard skin belts. For example, in the Ngemba chiefdom of Mbatu such important nobles as *Awasunt*, *Chiazah* and *Atangamuwah* possess leopard belts. People of lower social status cannot wear the leopard belt.

5 NDOBO CLOTH

This cloth is generally referred to in the Grassfields as the "traditional cloth", that is to say, the cloth that was brought from *Ndobo*, a locality in North Cameroon from where most people in the western Grassfields are said to have originated. The wearing of this cloth is not exclusive to the chief and his nobles. Anybody who can afford it is allowed to wear it, but there are other ways in which people are not allowed to use the *Ndobo* cloth. For example, when the chief appears in public during important ceremonies the place where he sits is usually decorated with *Ndobo* cloth. A long piece of cloth is usually put across the wall or the fence just behind the *Fon's* throne. No other person is allowed to do this.

6 ROYAL SHOES

In the Bafut chiefdom there exists a strong desire to distinguish between the items worn by the *Fon* and those worn by the ordinary people. For example, certain shoes (*Bah Nisa Mfo*) were traditionally reserved for the *Fon*. These shoes are covered with rare and precious traditional beads (*Niih*). No other person in Bafut is allowed to decorate his shoes with *Niih* so that they look like those of the *Fon*.

7 THE THRONE (ABEROE AFO IN NGENBA)

The *Fon's* throne should look different from the chairs of the other people, consequently it is either carved in a particular way, bearing, for examples, the image of an animal such as the leopard, or it is higher than the other chairs. In Bafut, the *Fon's* throne is covered with traditional beads (*Niih*), the only chair in the chiefdom so decorated.

8 THE ELEPHANT TUSK (NTANG IN NGENBA)

Fon's use elephant tusks as foot rests during grandiose public ceremonies, and *Nchindas* blow them to produce the deep sound that heralds the coming of *Fon* during a public ceremony.

The possession and use of the ivory tusks symbolizes nobility and leadership, and only chiefs are allowed to use elephant tusks (*Ntang* in Ngemba) in public. Any other person may procure an elephant tusk but cannot use it during ceremonies. To do so would be considered treasonable. The possession of an ivory tusk by the *Fon* symbolizes wealth, it is usually placed on a leopard skin for the *Fon* to rest his feet on. Ivory bangles are also used but wearing them is not the exclusive prerogative of the *Fon*, since other nobles can also wear them. Not distinction depends on the quantity worn. Depending on his wealth a chief can wear ivory bangles on both wrists. In Bafut, the *Fon* used to wear them in this manner during important ceremonies. But an ordinary noble may wear an ivory bangle only on one wrist.

9 COUNTRY BAG (ABAH ALA')

This is a small sealed leather medicine bag believed to contain the strong medicine

of the land, formerly worn by some chiefs in the Ngemba area. Generally referred to as *Abah ala'* or *Aba kwi'fo*, it is worn on the left arm. In Bafut, this device is unknown. The attitude to wearing this bag is gradually changing, modern chiefs preferring to leave them at home when participating in major ceremonies. Only old and conservative chiefs occasionally wear medicine bags.

10 GOWN

On important occasions such as the annual dance (*Ieroe*) held at the palace around December or January, the *Fon* dresses in a large Grassfields gown. Other people may wear similar gowns but that of the *Fon* and his nobles is distinguished by particular marks. On the back of the *Fon*'s gown are three concentrically placed "moons" in the middle, just below the shoulders. No other person is allowed to wear a gown with three concentric moons. High nobles of the inner council (*Bukum bukwi'fo*) are allowed to wear gowns with two concentric "moons". Lower order nobles wear gowns with only one "moon". The "moons" symbolize social distinction.

The right to wear such a gown can be granted only by the *Fon*. Usually a person desiring such a distinction would bring a goat, palm wine and food to the *Fon*. On that day, the nobles assemble at the palace. The *Fon* pours wine into his cup, takes a mouthful and sprays it on the gown. By this ceremony one moon is obtained. As a person continues to live in Bafut society he is observed by the *Fon*. If his character is satisfactory, he can be promoted to have two "moons" on his gown. People with two "moons" on their gowns are usually the kingmakers (in Bafut, *Bayonfo*). Those who have one "moon" are the ordinary nobles (*Bukum babang dang*).

11 ASANG (FLY WHISK)

One of the symbols used by the *Fon* in public is the *Asang*, a huge fly whisk made of the tail of either a cow or a dwarf cow (*Mbong* in Ngemba). The ownership of the *Asang* is not exclusive to the *Fon*, is usually bigger. In Bafut, the handle of the *Fon*'s *Asang* is covered with *Niih*, which distinguishes it from the other *Asang*. Since *Niih* is rather rare, not everybody can have it on the handle of his *Asang*. In Ngemba chiefdoms such as Mankon, Ndzong, Mbaru, the *Ma'fo* also possesses the *Asang*, which she carries during important ceremonies as a symbol of her nobility in society in general and among womenfolk in particular. She is the highest person in the female hierarchy and thus normally should carry the *Asang* to reflect her high social and political rank.

12 BUNDLE OF SPEARS

When the *Fon* appears in public during grand ceremonies, such as the annual dance, a bundle of spears (*Mukong ma abin* or *Mkong mefor*) is leaned against the wall behind him or held by a servant who stands behind him. These spears are often considered as royal spears that reflect the power of the *Fon*. When the *Fon* is making an important announcement he can take out one of the spears and hold it in his hand. These spears have deep significance attached to them since they symbolize the coercive authority of the *Fon* over his people. In this respect, therefore, no other person

within the chiefdom displays spears during ceremonies such as the *Fon* does. In Bali-Nyonga the bundle of spears (*Dingwasak*) is always beside the *Fon* during the *Lela* ceremony. Spears are weapons and so reflect the military capability of the chief who can divide them among his subjects and order them to fight the enemy.

13 ROYAL CAPS

In most chiefdoms the *Fon* may wear the same type of cap as the rest of the people but it will bear distinctive decorative marks. The *Fon* may affix to it a red feather and the long, sharp-edged, strong hair which falls off the skin of the porcupine. These are the two symbols of nobility that are often affixed to a hat in the Grassfields area. In Bafut, the *Fon* has three kinds of caps, *Mesang me nse*, *Ache atube taboeko*, and *Ache tu menjangare*. Of these the *Mesang me nse* can be worn only by the *Fon*. Other nobles, especially kingmakers, have the right to wear the *Ache atube taboeko* and the *Achetu menjangare*.

14 ROYAL CALABASH

The *Fon's* calabash may not be in anyway different from the ordinary man's calabash in design or structure but the manner of corking shows the difference. The *Fon's* calabash is usually corked with ordinary raffia palm leaves (*Nchare*). If a person encounters a calabash of palm wine corked with raffia palm leaves, he would automatically know that the wine is destined for the *Fon*. In gatherings, only the *Fon's* calabash is corked with the raffia leaves. No noble may have his own calabash corked in a similar way. If a *Fon*, such as the *Fon* of Bafut, is sitting in public with minor chiefs who pay allegiance to him, the palm leaves corking the *Fon's* calabash must be longer, to distinguish his calabash from those of the minor chiefs.

15 ROYAL CUPS (*BUSO'*)

A general regulation in Grassfields chiefdoms is that no person has the right to drink from the same cup as the *Fon*. Not even the highest titled noble (*Nkum*) has that right to drink out of the *Fon's* cup. Only another friendly *Fon*, a person with the same socio-political status, can drink from it.

Before the introduction of glasses, people drank either from cups made of calabash heads or from a variety of animal horns. To distinguish the *Fon's* drinking horns from those of his subjects, the horn of a rare animal was sought for the *Fon*. During important assemblies, the *Fon* could drink from a buffalo horn or another horn that had been further decorated (sometimes with *Niih*) to make it look different from other cups. The *Fon* was not allowed to drink from very common cups, such as those made from cow horn or calabash. In certain societies the lowest he could go was to drink from the horn of a dwarf cow (*Mbong* in Ngemba) in public.

16 *FON'S* SITTING PLACE

The *Fon's* appearance in public and the decoration surrounding the area where he sits was described above. Background decoration consisted of the traditional cloth (*Ndap*) or a large tapestry. On other occasions, and especially when the occasions were not very grandiose, and full of pomp and pageantry, very young raffia palm

leaves, those that were still in the bud were taken out, tied to long robes and suspended above and behind the place where the chief's throne was put. These fresh leaves (*Djidjia* in Bafut) were also suspended above the exit via which the *Fon* would leave the meeting. When there were such decorations, no other person was allowed to sit there or even leave the assembly palace by using that passage which had been decorated and reserved for the chief. A *Fon* may have his rest house in another quarter in his village. This rest house will constantly have the *Djidjia* above its to indicate that it is the *Fon's* temporary residence.

17 BEADS (*MUSANGA*)

Nobles and other rich people in the chiefdoms, after dressing in the voluminous Grassfields gowns would wear large beads (*Musanga*) around their necks. *Fons* used to wear these beads too. But in some bigger chiefdoms such as Bafut, the *Fon* used to wear the threaded teeth of the tiger or leopard (*Musong munangwe*) to distinguish between himself and others and also as a sign of power. Only the *Fon* was allowed to wear tiger or leopard teeth because he alone possessed that prerogative and even the appellation of tiger. Should any person insist on wearing such a necklace his entire family could be eliminated through witchcraft or a common curse.

18 DISTINCTION FOR ROYAL WIVES

The *Fon's* wives must be distinguished from the other women in the village. They wore cowries (*Ghoe* in Ngemba). In certain chiefdoms, such as Bali-Nyonga and Nso, the cowries used to be worn around the waist. In which case *Fon's* wives were obliged to go naked so that the cowries could be easily visible. When clothes were introduced, *Fon's* wives wore the cowries around their heads and later only around their wrists. Like the majority of the other symbols, only *Fon's* wives are allowed to wear cowries. Even the most important noble is not allowed to let his wives wear cowries, since to do so would be tantamount to indicating that the noble proclaimed himself chief. Even in Bafut the wives of the subchiefs of Bawum and Mambu do not wear cowries; they wear white buttons to indicate that they are wives of sub-chiefs.

19 ROYAL CHILDREN AND SYMBOLS

In everyday life the *Fon's* children do not use special symbols to signify that they are of the royalty, unlike the royal women. A prince may start wearing some objects of nobility only when he has become an adult and is escorted out on the palace to his own compound. Some could wear the red feather by virtue of descent from the royal family. In Bafut princes such as *Muma*, *Ndifor* and *Sama* are allowed to wear particularly distinctive symbols. The three, besides having the right to wear red feathers, are also allowed to wear ivory bangles on both wrists, as the *Fon* does, but they are not allowed to pile the bangles on both hands in exactly the same manner as the *Fon*. These princes play an important role in village government, and when the *Fon* is absent the administration of the village depends on them, and especially on *Muma* and *Ndifor*. It is through the exercise of this political function that their importance really derives.

20 ROYAL MESSENGERS AND SYMBOLS

When the *Fon's* messenger (*Nchinda*) is going on an ordinary errand, he may carry the *Nchare* (the young raffia palm leaves we described above) to indicate that he is in the service of the *Fon* and should not be disturbed, or that his requirements should be met expeditiously. When the mission is important he may carry the royal spear. This spear is usually well-decorated and in Bafut it is partly covered with *Niih*. The messenger may even carry along the *Fon's* small medicine bag, depending on the situation.

21 SYMBOLS DURING THE ANNUAL DANCE

Other symbols are used only during the annual dance, and only at the level of the palace. No other person is allowed to display such symbols in front of his yard or organize an annual dance similar to the *Lela*, *Leroe* or *Manderoe* that is held in the Bali, Moghamo, Menemo and Ngemba chiefdoms at around December. In Bafut, during the annual dance period, two forked sticks are planted in the open plaza at the entrance of the palace. In addition, there are the *Mamfoti*, two well-carved idols, one representing the female population and the other representing the male population. These idols are exclusively royal property, and are covered entirely with *Niih*.

In Bali-Nyonga the *Lela* dance is accompanied by rich symbols. In the middle of the courtyard (*Ntan lela*) in front of the palace is a huge stone pyramid (*Wolela*), on which a sacred and secret ritual sacrifice takes place in the night during the ceremony of the launching of the *Lela* dance. During the *Lela* dance many gorgeous symbols are placed on the *Lela* ceremonial ground in front of the palace. These include the two *Lela* forked sticks which are usually well-decorated with varying colors of black, white and red. Besides the forked sticks (*Letya* in Mubako), one finds also the *Tutuwan* (the flags) planted on long poles just adjacent to the *Lela* forked sticks.

At the entrance that goes from the *Lela* ceremonial ground (*Ntan lela*) to the palace, on left hand, is an elevated spot on which the *Fon's* throne stands. This throne is particularly well-carved. Behind is stretched a large tapestry with a huge loin on it, reflecting the power of the *Fon* and the traditional cloth (*Nji mbum*) is put side-by-side with this tapestry. A huge bundle of spears (a gift of the blacksmith to the *Mfon*) leans on the wall behind the *Fon's* throne, reflecting the *Fon's* military might. Other symbols are used during the *Lela* ceremony [CHILVER 1968].

22 ROYAL SYMBOLS-GIFTS FROM EUROPEANS

The advent of Europeans in the Bamenda Grassfields in the late 19th century also had an impact on the different royal symbols. When Zintgraff, the first European to reach the Bamenda Grassfields, arrived in certain villages, he distributed some gifts to the traditional rulers as a sign of friendship. Other Europeans later gave European-made articles to the *Fon*. The indigenous people in turn also gave such articles as ivory and carvings to the Europeans.

Most of the articles given to the chiefs have become integrated into the traditional royal symbols. The fact that they were rare articles facilitated their becoming royal symbols, that is to say articles that were owned by the monarch alone in the entire

village. The Europeans gave a variety of articles: parasols, cloth, jars, plates, iron armour, bells, etc. In Bafut and Bali, for example, the *Fons* have large parasols said to have been given to them by the Germans. In Mankon the *Fon* has metal armour which he wears around his chest. This is said to have been given to Angwafo II by the Germans in recognition of his ability to fight after the German-Mankon war. In Bali-Nyonga, in 1974, during the *Lela* ceremony, we saw on display a series of European articles (parasol, drinking jars and other ceramic wares) that were said to have been given to the chief by the Germans. Because these articles were rare, they could easily be integrated among 'kingly' articles. New meanings were even given to the ownership of these articles. For example, the ownership of a parasol symbolizes wealth. Parasols were not easy to come by, and when they became available later on, there were few who could afford to buy them. Thus the *Fon* remains the sole owner of the parasol in the chiefdom. As time passed, new sociological meanings became increasingly attached to these newly acquired articles. For example, when the population could afford parasols to shelter themselves during important ceremonies, they were afraid to do so because if they sat under the parasol like their chief, it would mean that they were trying to rival the *Fon*. Some even feared that their families might be bewitched as a result of such an action on their part. Consequently the parasol had become a 'royal property' and its ownership and usage was almost exclusively royal.

Another article of European origin which has had a sociological meaning attached to it is metal armour. The Mankon people believe that the ownership of the metal armour by their *Fon* carries with it the concept of bravery and heroism. The notion of invincibility is also attached to it. Since a bullet from a gun, a spear or an arrow shot cannot penetrate the armour, it means that the *Fon* is all powerful and almighty etc. It did not take long for meanings to be given to new symbols that were acquired by the *Fon*.

23 PALACES

One item worth studying in the framework of our examination of royal symbols is the palace (*Nto* in Ngemba and Moghamo languages). The *Nto* or the *Fon's* compound has characteristics that distinguish it from the compounds of other people.

In front of a palace is an open piazza (*Sani* in Ngemba), a field used for dances and other recreational activities. But the *Sani* cannot be used as a criterion for distinguishing palaces from other compounds. Important nobles also have these vast spaces in front of their compounds. In fact only *Fons* and nobles (*Bukum*) are allowed to have them. The slight difference between the *Sani* of the noble and that of the palace is that the piazza at the palace is larger than that found in front of a noble's compound, for the simple reason that it has to accommodate large numbers of people during important ceremonies, whereas the piazza of nobles often need only contain members of his lineage.

In the past the number of houses could be used to distinguish palaces from ordinary compounds. The *Fons* had the right to marry without the payment of bride price and this meant that many more houses had to be constructed to house the

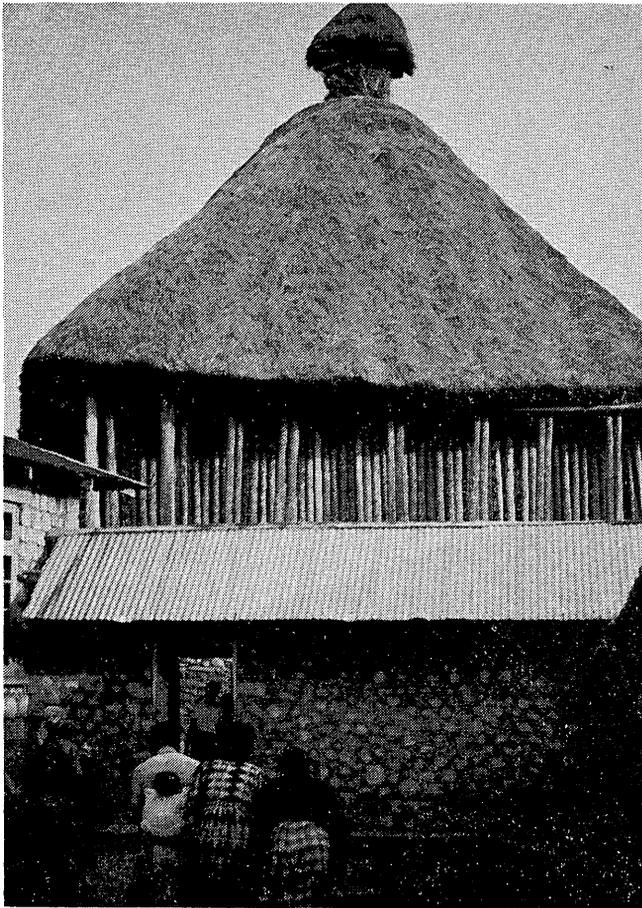


Photo. 2. The *Achum* of *Mankon*, an exclusive royal symbol.

Fon's numerous wives. The wives' houses together with the different ritual houses and those of different institutions, such as the *Manjong kwi'fo*, *Takumbeng*, *Nggiri* etc, make the quantity of houses in the palace necessarily higher than those in ordinary compounds. From the front of a palace one house stood out as being much taller than the others. This was the *Achum* or *Atshum*, the shrine of the former ruler of the chiefdom, and in which the present ruler is supposed to sleep. In Nkwen (Bafreng) informants told me that as a general principle the *Achum* had to be the tallest building in the whole village. No villager was allowed to construct a house of the same height. The roofs of the *Atshum* in certain palaces were constructed in a peculiar manner. There was usually a small dome or a small house placed at the apex of the conical roof of the *Atshum*. In Bambui in 1977, we observed that the *Atshum* had this small house at the apex of the roof, which made it appear entirely different from other houses in the immediately vicinity. In Bafut, a distinguishing mark of the palace is the small *Takumbeng* house (*Ndeg takumbeng*) located at the courtyard just before the

entrance to the palace precincts. At the level of the quarters is the *Ndeg takumbeng*, which serves as a resting place for the *Fon* when he is visiting that area. Nowadays, with the introduction of zinc into the Bamenda Grassfields it is not easy to distinguish palaces from ordinary compounds. However, most people have insisted that the *Atshum* should retain its authentic form, hence these buildings serve to indicate palaces.

This description of palaces was particularly accurate in the early 1950s. Nowadays the situation has changed drastically, with modernization, its architectural style has changed considerably. The types of roof described above are not now easily located. Since every building is roofed with corrugated iron. The walls are either of stones, mud or cement blocks. The houses are spread out in the palace in the form of bungalows where the old bamboo, mud, stick and grass-roof thatched houses used to stand. In certain conservative chiefdoms the *Atshum* has retained its old form, as in Bafut, Mankon, and Bambui. The general belief is that the ancestral kings, whose shrine the *Atshum* is, will be displeased to 'Live' under corrugated iron roofs.

CONCLUSION

A major question that can be asked is "what place should Grassfields scholars reserve to the study of 'Royal symbols' in their ethnographic research on Grassfields socio-political institutions". In our view, much attention should be given to those symbols that accompany kingship. In the course of this study we have tried to bring out the position of the king (the chief) as the most prominent political personality in each chiefdom. In fact, he is a hyper-political figure. The political systems of the area we have studied can be classified into two types, "Centralized" and "Segmentary" systems. Centralized systems are found among the Tikar (Bafut, Kijem Keku, Bambui, etc.) and Ngemba chiefdoms (Mankon, Akum, Awing, etc.). Even among the Ngemba, the concept of centralized government was only acquired after Ngemba people came into contact with the Tikar, who themselves had obtained this pattern of government from the Mbum. Segmentary systems are mostly found in the Meta area.

The hypothesis that we are advancing in the framework of our socio-political studies of this area of Cameroon is that the use of symbols as an instrument for distinguishing the ruler from his subordinates is more emphasized in centralized systems than in segmentary systems. The king (*Fon*, *Mfom*, *Nfo*, *Fo*) is a sacred and hyper-political figure whose socio-political nature is entirely different from that of the ordinary man. He is indeed believed to have supernatural powers after the enthronement ceremony. Since he possesses extraordinary powers, everything he possesses must be extraordinary or at least differentiated from that of the common folk. It can no more be accepted that the *Fon* should wear the same type of clothes, sit on the same type of chair, or be greeted in the same manner as an ordinary man. There must be that difference between him and the people over whom he rules.

In this perspective, the study of symbols that are associated with kingship should

be approached from a functionalist viewpoint. Symbols play the essential role of making the distinction between the ruler and the ruled and make the personality of the *Fon*, as a ruler, stand out on every single occasion of contact between the chief (*Fon*) and his subjects. It also makes them constantly aware of his "power and authority" over them and the allegiance that they owe to him. It is obvious that this is not the only role played by "Royal symbols". They also play an esthetic role, but this seems to be minor compared to the role of distinguishing the chief from his subordinates.

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