

The Making of Fons Kings: An Insight into the Regalia of a Newly Crowned Cameroon Grassfields Fon

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Abstract

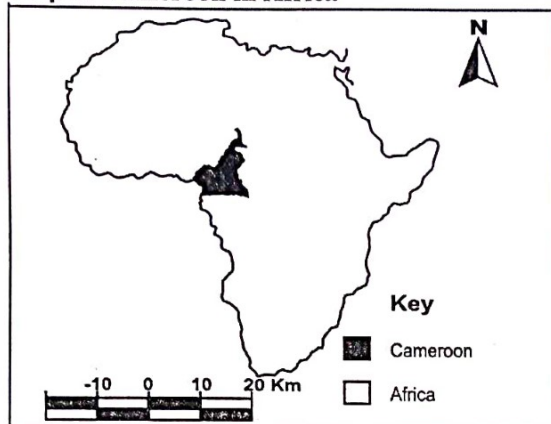
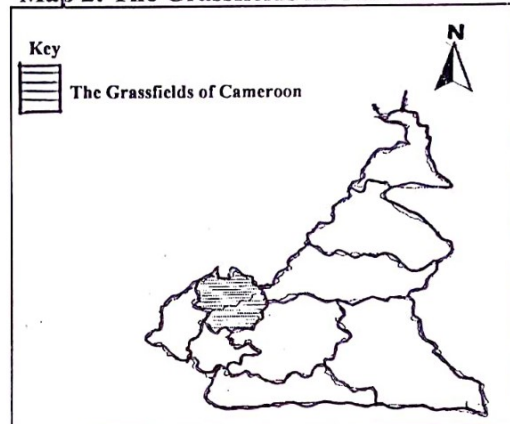
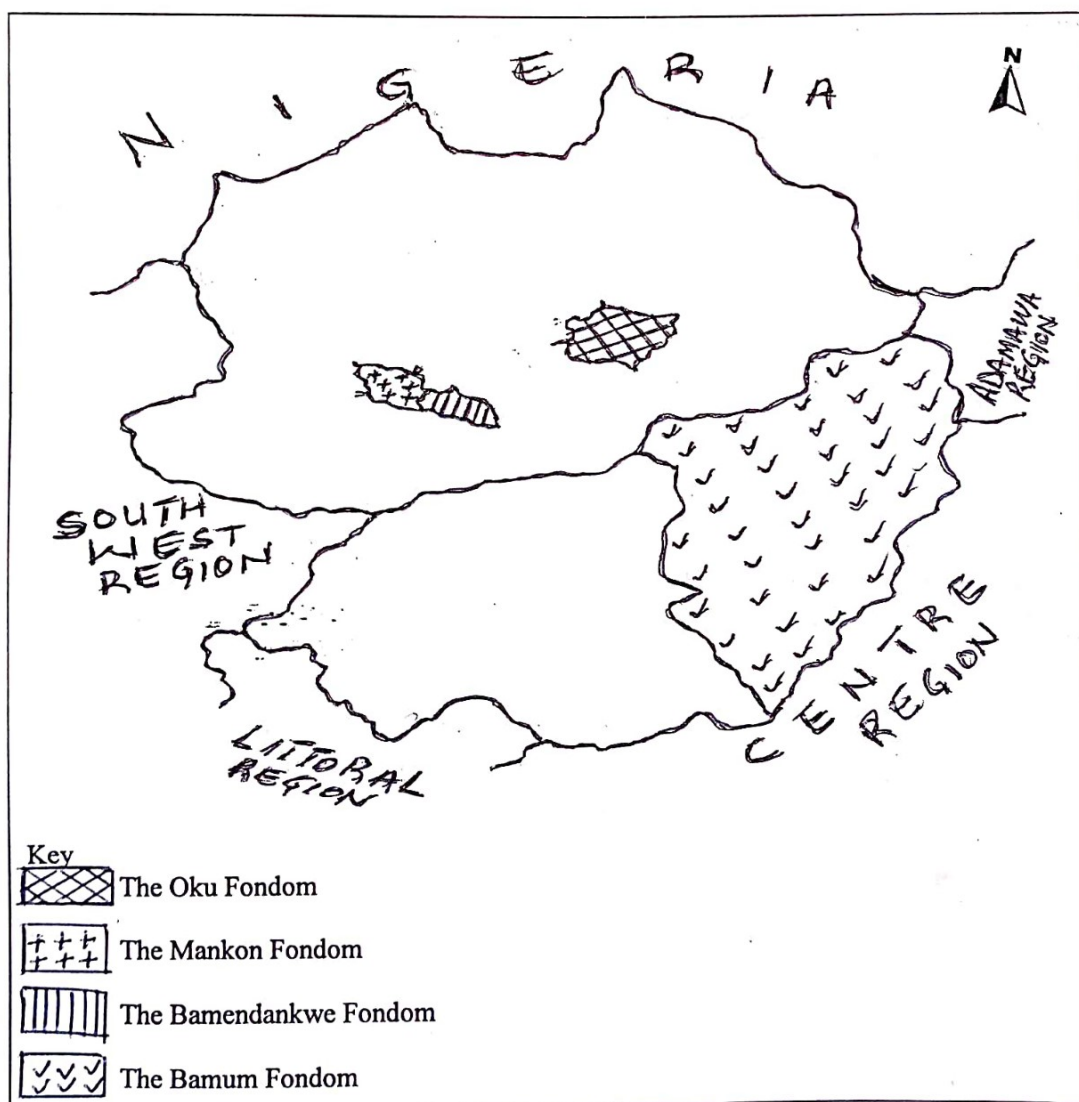
There is no human society which does not have a government. Every government is headed by a leader who ensures the smooth functioning of his society. These leaders have different attributions which may distinguish them from others in the society. This paper explores an insight into the cultural symbolism and connotation of the regalia of newly enthroned *fons* or kings of the Cameroon Grassfields. There are a lot of similarities in the dressing of *fons* during enthronement and this dressing may look ordinary to on lookers but they are symbolic, representing the link between the *fons* and the gods, they are seen as objects of power and also having religious functions. The paper thus examines the similarities in these regalia, as well as the cultural and symbolic meaning of these clothes in the Cameroon Grassfields. Data for this paper was collected using the qualitative method and interpreted using the functionalist and symbolic interaction approach.

Keywords: Fon, Regalia, Enthronement, Cameroon Grassfields

Introduction

All human societies have a system of government. No matter the system, each government is headed by a ruler or king. A king is a male ruler of an independent state, especially one who inherits the position by right of birth. That is, Kingship, a worldwide phenomenon, is usually hereditary (<https://www.bing.com/search?q=definition+of+a+king&FORM=QSRE2>). As seen above, a king is a supreme ruler, sovereign over a nation or a territory. The king has often stood as mediator between his people and their god, or, as in ancient Sumer, as the god's representative. Sometimes he is being regarded as divine and is the key figure in fertility rituals. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch>).

In most Cameroon Grassfields, the king is known as *fon*, *mfon*, *foyn*, *efo*, and more, but for the sake of convenience, in this paper, I am going to use the appellation *fon*. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 59) among the notables, the chief (*fon*) was first and far above the others. The Grassfields is that part of Cameroon which comprises the three culture areas of the Western Grassfields, the Bamilekes and the Bamums. These parts correspond to the North West and West regions of Cameroon. They are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests at an average altitude of 4000 feet above sea level. All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of varied sizes.

Map 1: Cameroon in Africa**Map 2: The Grassfields in Cameroon****Map 3: The Grassfields showing the study areas**

Source: MacMillan School Atlas of Cameroon
 Maps drawn by Tikere 22/08/2022

The people of the Grassfields of Cameroon have Tikar, Widikum and Chamba origins. The Bamilekes, the Bamouns and the majority of Western Grassfields are of the Tikar stock meanwhile most Ngemba speaking fondoms such as the Mankons, fondoms of the Momo Division and some fondoms of the Santa Subdivision claim origin from Widikum and the Balis are the Chambas (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).

Some oral sources hold that the Mankon trace their origins to a place called Nsahnyoum and migrated through the Mbam valley, the land of the Tikars, between the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries. The Bam̃m also spelled as Bamoum, Bamun, Bamoun, or Mum are an ethnic group of Tikar origin. She spread through the Grassfields territories and established a political entity in the 17th century, reaching its splendour around their capital, Foumban, along the 19th century. Oral tradition traces the origin of the Oku people from the outskirts of Egypt, in a place known as Belbele. Belbele was too dry to cope with and the population kept expanding. These factors forced the people to move to Tikari on the Adamawa plateau where they settled in a place called Rifem. They later left Rifem and settled in Kokefem (Oku). Like most Fondoms in the North West region of Cameroon, the people of Bamendankwe trace their roots to the Tikars. Oral History reveals that they migrated from Manda near Bankim in Adamawa region, for well over 200 years.

Many Grassfields fondoms are independent and the political structure of most, if not all the fondoms are basically similar. The *fon* has very great executive authority followed by chiefs and notables. The quarter heads also make up part of the political structure of these fondoms. The political system is based on hereditary and traditional authority and access to power is highly determined by direct descent (Warnier, 1975: 42). On the political strata of these fondoms, the *kwifon* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables and quarter-heads. And only him (the *fon*) and a few notables have the privilege to an enthronement ceremony, which involves the entire fondom.

The people of the Grassfields are polytheistic, they believe in religions such as the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Most Grassfielders are animists who believe that spirits inhabit some natural objects and such spirits control the lives of these people. They equally have many gods and each has a specific role in the society. If these gods are venerated they will be very benevolent (nice) but if neglected, they are capable of punishing the living. Christianity is the religion of many people of the Grassfields unlike Islam which is found mostly the Noun Division in the West Region. No matter the religion, the *fon*'s enthronement is performed to match the culture of the fondom.

Methodology

Data for this paper was collected using the qualitative method. This method was used through observation, in-depth interview, focus group discussions, life histories and photography. Under observation, the researcher attended the enthronement ceremony of *Fon* Nabil Mbombo Njoya of the Bamum, *Fon* Asaah Fru Angwafor IV and *Fon* Forchesiri III of Bamendankwe. This permitted me to have first-hand information on the regalia of these newly crowned *fons*. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with notables to understand the category of people who enthrone a new *fon*, where the different components of the regalia are obtained and their symbolism. The researcher brought together a good number of notables in a Focus Group Discussion to throw light on the symbolism of the feathers, leaves, necklaces, colours and animate motifs used in the enthronement of a new *fon*. A digital camera was used to snap the several elements which make up the attire of a new *fon*. The pictures snapped gave more credibility to the verbal information collected in the field. Data for the paper was analysed soon after field work was over, using content analysis and the contents of the pictures were interpreted iconographically. The data was equally interpreted using functionalism and symbolic interactionism.

Presentation of Findings

Leadership is a crucial part of every society and different societies have different ways of crowning their leaders. The findings of this paper which examines the making of fons in the Cameroon Grassfields are presented in four major parts which include, presentation of a Grassfields fon, perception and rituals conducted before enthronement, the ethnography of the regalia of a newly enthroned *fon* and the symbolism of the different insignia of the newly enthroned *fons*.

(A) Cameroon Grassfields Fon

As already mentioned above, the king in the Cameroon Grassfields is known as a *fon*. A *fon* is a chieftain or king of a region in Cameroon, especially among the Widikum, Tikar, and Bamiléké peoples of the Bamenda Grassfields (the Northwest, West Region) and the Lebialem of the South West Region. Though once independent rulers, most *fons* were brought under German rule or military subjugation during the colonial period. Following the defeat of Germany in World War I, the *fons* of British Cameroon came under British rule, and the *fons* of French Cameroon came under French rule. Since Cameroon's independence in 1961, the *fons* are under the jurisdiction of the Government of Cameroon. However, they maintain semi-autonomous union councils and jurisdiction over their hereditary land ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fon_\(title\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fon_(title))).

The *fon* lives in *ntoh* or palace¹, the storage place of village property and cultural heritage. One of his numerous duties is to bring villagers together from time to time and give them food, drinks and oil, especially during very important cultural festivities. The *fon* is thus generous; he has many wives and children. He could get married to any girl of his choice. This explains why they have numerous children. He is father of all and unifies the village around himself. The *fon* is exceedingly prestigious and regarded as being quite apart from other human beings. He obtains the protection of the late *fons* and their benedictions for abundant crops. He is sacred; he performs rituals and ensures that they are appropriate conducted to guard against outside threats.

Many things in the life of the *fon* indicate his separate status. In patrilineal fondoms with patrilineal rules of succession such as Oku, Mankon, Bamum and Bamendankwe, he had to be a 'child of the leopard', that is, conceived when his father was himself a *fon*, therefore, participating in his special nature. Upon succession, the *fon* is initiated in all the rituals, secrets and societies of the fondom. He is the only one in such a position, for no one else in the fondom, whether a high ranking lineage head or a palace retainer, has entrance to all palace buildings and fondom societies. This gives the *fon* a unique position as the symbol of the unity of his people. He does not eat in public, and in fact, many people believe he does not eat at all. People do not talk openly about him or about his body, but only indirectly or by metaphors. No one would say 'the *fon* is ill' but 'there is sickness in the palace;' or 'the palace is hot.' His children and wives are not referred to as the *fon*'s children and wives but as 'children and women of the palace'. His eyes are 'stars' and his feet are 'things'. No one could talk to him unless he/she bows, cuffs his/her hands over his/her mouth and speaks through them in a low voice (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: 61).

There is a special relationship between the *fon* and the leopard. Only the *fon* alone has the authority to use items that bear the mark of such an animal. It is believed that as the *fon* uses objects designed with leopard motif; he is going to gradually inherit the special abilities - might, strength, courage and wisdom of the leopard. He will not only acquire the special qualities of this animal but is capable of transforming into one. This confirms the reason why the *fons* of all the above mentioned fondoms are known and called leopard. There are also other animals usually reserved for the *fon*. Some of them are the tiger, the buffalo, the elephant, the scorpion and the lion. The *fon* has the exclusive right on certain status symbols for example, an elephant stool, bed and throne for himself, cowries as ornaments for his wives, ivory trumpets blown to advertise his presence, and a very elaborate architecture.

The *fon* embodied the society, and to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 62), he is hyper-social and hyper-cultural. Whereas the encroachment of nature on the cultural universe of the fondom is seen as polluting, the influence of the hyper-cultural *fon* is seen as a blessing and as constantly regenerating the society.

¹ In most chiefdoms of the Western Grassfield, the centre of political as well as religious power is the *ntoh*. The people's belief holds that *ntoh* is a 'store', a store of village properties and cultural heritage. As a store, a care taker is needed to carter for the village and its heritage and the *kwifon* the supreme body has the power to decide on whom to put on the head of this store. The person selected is called the *fon* meaning 'care taker' of the store and leader of those who own the store. The *ntoh* - palace therefore, is the heart of the chiefdom. The people think that as head of the village, the *fon* has to be taken care of; the palace has to be constructed by the villagers, the village have to work on his farm and make sure that he lives well. It is therefore, difficult for anyone, not even the *fon* to claim that he owns any palace property.

The *fon* is hyper-social and hyper-cultural because he embodies what human society is all about; the alliance between in-laws (the *fon* has many wives and married off his many daughters), the alliance between clans, lineages and quarters in the societies of the fondom, the social rules and norms, and the contact with the ancestors who warranted the social order and the prosperity of the community. This is why the *fon*, in olden days, was never involved in repression. Repression and social control must deal with polluting actions, and the *fon* belonged to the opposite pole of human society, the cultural pole, which is free from pollution and danger. He was therefore, kept away from any polluting contact and was never involved in social control and repression except as a moderator.

The *fon* is assisted by a few senior titleholders such as sub chiefs and queen mother – titular mother of the *fon*. The sub chiefs are usually referred to as the hereditary rulers, council of elders or clan heads. Being very instrumental in their various chiefdoms, they work hand in hand with the *fon* in the management of the chiefdom. They are the *fon*'s advisers; they appoint and crown a successor when a *fon* is 'missing' and they are equally the core of the *kwifon* society. The queen mother supervises the royal wives and also exercises significant leadership over the women of the entire 'country'.

The *fon* is the custodian of all land. He is the very source of the people's cultural spring. He is the fountain of the people's spirituality. He is the bridge between the past, present and future. The *fon* therefore embodies the fondom as already mentioned above and due to this reason, his coronation is an issue which concerns the whole fondom.

(B) Perceptions of the People and Rituals Conducted Before the Coronation of a New *Fon*

Many things in the life of the *fon* sets him apart from all the others in the entire fondom as discussed above. If he is ill, it is said that 'the palace is hot'. When he transits into eternity, the people say that there is 'cold' in the palace. So, when the *fon* journeys to meet his ancestors, it is kept from the general public. Traditional authorities (*fonmakers*) perform all rites before informing the general population about the disappearance and enthronement ceremony. The coronation date is made public a few days before hand by the *kwifon* and villagers are given some time to harvest food and store at home because during the enthronement ceremony, no one will be allowed to do farm work and other activities. The reason being that they (the gods) have to direct them (the *fonmakers*) on the next move to take.

The period it takes for the *kwifon* to declare the disappearance of the *fon* varies from one Grassfields fondom to another. It took three long weeks for instance for the *Kwifon*, to formally declare the disappearance of the *fon* of Mankon. It took six days for the *kwifon* to proclaim the disappearance of the *fon* of Oku. The disappearance of the *fon* of Bamendankwe was announced after seven days. Meanwhile with the Bamum fondom, the disappearance of the *fon* is proclaimed after a day. This is done in accordance with their religion. The period of proclamation therefore depends largely on the religion in particular and the culture of the people in general.

Among the Oku, when a *fon* disappears, there is a statue called *kebambo*, a wooden statue carved to represent the missing *fon*. This is another way to inform the general public about the disappearance of the *fon*. It is believed that the *fon* who disappeared, has now returned to the palace in the form of *kebambo* and *Kebambo* will be taken away only when the missing *fon* has been enthroned, as ordained by the gods.

Until the date of the new *fon*'s crowning if made known, people only whispered phrases like "there is smoke in the palace", "there is cold in the palace" and refused to even say that their *fon* has disappeared. Although he had already been "kept" at a sacred place unknown to the public. It is taboo to say that the *fon* has been buried. No one shed a tear, for it is an abomination to cry for a missing *fon* for he has travelled or transited to meet his ancestors.

The announcement of the disappearance of the *fon* is usually done early in the morning as from 5 am. This is followed by the expression of grief from the people who have to converge on the palace from far and near to start morning. That is, once the announcement of his disappearance is made, men do not wear caps, and women do not farm during the mourning period as a mark of respect for the *fon*. Both women and men dress in skirts made from dried banana stems, or fibre. The dried banana stems symbolise death with the disappearance of the *fon*. Their upper bodies are bare, except for the women who wear black bras. Princes, princesses, notables, kingmakers, and the public appearing with wood ash robbed all over their bodies.

On the said day announced by the *kwifon*, in the early hours as the people mourn their missing *fon*, in the case of the Mankon fondom, a line of princes emerge from the inner court yard of the palace. Among them is Prince Fru Asaah Angwafo (the next *fon* to be). He has a white *ntum* – (cloth tied around the waist to cover his nakedness). He holds a special walking stick with two red feathers of the bannerman turaco bird attached at the top. These are signs he is the chosen *fon*. He is hailed and celebrated as he walked into the palace square accompanied by his brothers. All of them are barefoot, the others except the *fon* to be holds a stick, their bodies covered with wood ash and they wear skirts made of dried banana stems (see Figure 1 below). In Mankon, the *fon* to be comes out in the midst of his brothers (as demonstrated in the Figure 1 below) meanwhile in the Bamum country, the *fon* to be enthroned comes out with the princesses (his sisters).

Figure 1: Arrival of the Found *Fon* and Brothers



Source: Tikere's archive (07/07/2022)

Then after, he (the chosen *fon* of Mankon) is presented to the people for confirmation and empowerment. This was done in a ritual where the people had to throw stones on the *fon*. During this time, he dressing remains the same - white *ntum* and holding a stick with two red feathers, feathers of the bannerman turaco bird as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The Chosen *Fon* of Mankon Holding a Special Stick

Source: Tikere's Archive (07/07/2022)

To empower him, the public throws pebbles or small stones, grass and leaves, at him in a symbolic ritual to show that this is the last time that any commoner would hurt him or be disrespectful towards him. In the case of Mankon, as he was pelted, he sprinted away into the palace. That is, the fortification of the *fon* with symbolic stoning will chased the new fon from the plaza to the inner chambers of the palace (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: The Symbolic Stoning Ritual of the *Fon*

Source: Tikere's Archive (07/07/2022)

This, stones throwing ritual according to the tradition of the Bamendankwe like all the other Grassfields fondoms, is symbolic in that it empowers the *fon*, an indication that the entire fondom has given him absolute power and authority over the village. It also means henceforth the *fon* is the custodian of the tradition, an embodiment of the fondom and the link between his subjects and their ancestors.

When the new *fon* is finally shown to the public, with the joy of seeing their "returned" *fon*, the people retired to nearby streams to take off their ragged clothing called locally in Mankon and Bamendankwe as "adzaga", and then wash off the wood ash worn earlier as a sign of mourning and cleansing to forget about their sorrow caused by the disappearance of their spiritual leader. It also signifies washing all the evil that had happened in the land. The removal of the *adzaga* and washing of wood ash is considered the separation with the spirit of death that took away their *fon*. After the taking off of the *adzaga* and washing away the ash, they return to the royal courtyard in the later part of the day in festival clothing, that is, in their best traditional outfits - including colourful handmade gowns – the *togho* and headgear to welcome their found *fon* and hear the name of his reign and equally take part in the joy and celebration to mark the "reincarnation" of the missing *fon* into his successor.

(C) An Ethnography of the Regalia of a Newly Enthroned Grassfields *Fon*

This portion of the paper is reserved to the description of the insignia of a newly crowned fons. In Mankon like in all the other fondoms of the Cameroon Grassfields, after the stone throwing ritual, the *fon* is dressed in the inner chamber of the palace by the *fonmakers* after which he is brought out for the second time and shown to the public. This is the enthronement ceremony proper. As far as the regalia of the newly crowned Grassfields fons are concerned, there are similarities as well as differences, and this is examined in the paragraphs that follow starting with the Bamum, followed by the Mankon, the Oku and then the Bamendankwe:

Bamum: *Fon* Nabil Mbombo Njoya, is the leader of the Bamum people in the West Region of Cameroon. He was crowned *fon* on Sunday, October 10, just a day after his father, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, was kept. He was made *fon* based on the tradition of the Bamum people. He was enthroned at a colourful traditional ceremony, wearing a unique traditional and royal outfit reserved only for the *fon* in this fondom. Nabil is the first son born after his father's enthronement. He was selected after an initiation conclave led by the notables of the fondom and he becomes the 20th in the line of Bamum *fons*. The peculiarity with the coronation among the Bamum is that the people renew the enthronement of their *fon* every two years in what they call *nguon* in which the *fon* is judged in public. After that, his reign is renewed.

As regards the regalia of the new *fon*, in the Bamum land, he is dressed in a feathered gown known in Bamum as *monpu ngu'u* - the coat of the fondom, he wears a cap made of fresh leaves and feathers of different kinds of birds among which is the bannerman turaco bird. He holds a stick called *nkuh ngu* - stick of the fondom in his right hand and a bag known as *pa'a ngu* (the bag of the fondom) on his left wrist. In front of him is the double gong. The new *fon* is always enthroned with his mother. As we can observe in Figure 4 below, the *fon's* mother wears a similar cap like the *fon*. She has beads on her neck, a bangle made of cowry shells on her left wrist. She holds a horsetail in her right hand and puts on the *ndop* fabric.

Figure: The Newly Crowned *Fon* of the Bamum with his Mother



Source: Tikere's Archive (10/10/2021)

The *fon* is enthroned on the beaded royal throne which bears a human motif. The body of the object is decorated with some blue beads, its head is red with white eyes as illustrated in Figure 5 below. Important to note is the fact that this royal throne is equally adorned with the *ndop* fabric a symbol of royalty among the Grassfields.

Figure 5: The Bamum *Fon* Enthroned on the Royal Throne



Source: Tikere's Archive (10/10/2021)

Mankon: The enthronement ceremony of *Fon* Asaah Fru Angwafor IV took place on Tuesday, June 7, to mark the end of mourning after the disappearance of *Fon* Solomon Anye Angwafor, who travelled to meet his ancestors. He was chosen from among the many children of *Fon* Fru Angwafor III. The new chieftain is the 21st reigning *fon* of the Mankon Fandom.

Angwafor John Asaah, chosen by the "missing" *fon* as his heir, came out from the palace dressed in *ngwashi* - a reddish loincloth tied around his waist. He is all anointed with calm wood giving his skin a reddish colour. The *fon* is first presented with a titled cup in his right hand, and an emblematic stick, a staff of office in his left hand. He has necklaces on his neck. He has a chain made of fresh leaves known in Mankon as *ndoreh* on his neck.

Figure 6: The Newly Crowned *Fon* of Mankon



Source: Tikere's Archive (07/07/2022)

In the second presentation, the *fon* takes a conspicuous position. It is an elevation created for the purpose that everyone could see him (see Figure 7 below). Here, he is raised on to an intricately carved stool by the *kwifon* to signify that he has been "enstooled" - as most Grassfields fondoms (the Mankon people) call the enthronement of the *fon*. The spokesperson of the *kwifon* in the Mankon language announce the name of his reign. He will be called *Fon* Angwafo IV. He will have some time to dance the *mandere* (the *fon*'s dance) rhythm before retiring ending the enthronement exercise.

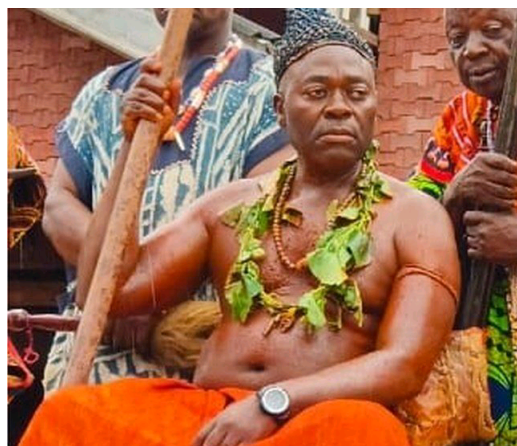
Figure 7: The New *Fon* Placed at an Elevated Position



Source: Tikere's Archive (07/07/2022)

He (the *fon*) sits on a titled stool holding the stick he held above, this time in his right hand. He hangs a bag on his left hand. He has six men close to him, cloth in different traditional attires: two on his right, two on his left and two behind him. The men on his right carry a calabash, a titled cup and a horsetail respectively. Those on his left hold a bag and a horsetail as shown in the figure below.

Figures 8 and 9: The Newly Enthroned Mankon *Fon* Shown to the Public



Source: Tikere's Archive (07/07/2022)

Oku: Prince Ngum Ernest Merlin is the new *fon* of Oku. He sits on the traditional ancestral throne of Oku fondom. He was Wednesday, May 12, enthroned according to the tradition and culture of the people of Oku. This comes six days after the disappearance of His Royal Highness Sintieh II Ngum Martin Yuosembom joined his ancestors on May 6, 2021. He becomes the 16th *fon* of the Oku fondom.

The dressing of the *fon* is done in secret in the presence of *fonmakers* such as the *tantohs*. After the dressing, he comes out for the first time for the population to see him as prescribed by tradition. Commenting on his regalia, we observe that he puts on a dress known in Oku as *kedangkechi fon* or *labseh wen ne ebfuah*. He wears a cap bearing the black and white colours. He equally carries a small beaded *ngwef*- bag on his neck, and puts on necklaces known in Oku as *eshieh Bang*, on his wrist is a white bangle known in Oku as *fenchak mah fon*. He holds a walking stick in his right hand and it is worthy to note that he carries it where ever he goes and each time the stick touches the ground, it produces some noise like the sound of a bell, to signal his arrival.

Figures 10 and 11: The Newly Crowned *Fon* of Oku

Source: Tikere's Archive (12/05/2021)

He comes out for the second time and in this second outing, he wears a different cap made of white feathers known in Oku as *Fenene mbong*. The *Fenene mbong* could be perceived as a crown, one which a *fon* only wears once in his lifetime - the day of his coronation. He equally wears *guod baa* - a leopard belt around his chest. The *fon* handles a walking stick in his right hand. He wears bangles made of cowry shells on his arm and wrist and he equally puts on varied necklaces on his neck. The *fon* also wears a skirt-like dress with the *ndop* design.

Figure 12: The *Fon* of Oku with a White Crown

Source: Tikere's Archive (18/12/2021)

The cap reminds the Oku people of their victory over the Kijem people to conquer Lake Oku that is the present lake of Oku which is of great importance in the history of the Oku fendom. This regalia is used once in his life time of each *fon*. So after removing the clothes from his body, the next person to put it on is the next *fon*. The dress dates back to the 1600s and 16 *fons* have worn it.

Bamendankwe: The new traditional ruler of Bamendankwe is *Fon Forchesiri III*. He is the 25th *fon* of Bamendankwe. He was presented to the public on Wednesday, September 2, 2020, in an official, yet traditional, ceremony at the esplanade of the *Fon's* palace. *Fon Forchesiri III* succeeds his father, *Fon Forsuh Nforngwa II*, who ruled Bamendakwe for over three decades. The new *fon* wears a cowry beaded belt (*yenghe*) around his body and the particularity of this belt is that it bears a human head. He puts on a chain made of fresh leaves known in Bamendankwe as *ndoreh* on his neck. He puts on a cap which carries three spines of the porcupine and he holds a stick (*akooh for*) which bears multiple symbols.

Figure 13: The Newly Enthroned *Fon* of Bamendankwe



Source: Tikere's Archive (02/09/2020)

In the next picture, he is enthroned on a beaded throne known in Bamendankwe as *mbereh for*. He wears *kwo'o for* - a leader belt beaded with cowry shells on his waist. On his left wrist, he wears a bangle (*mfeh*) made of iron. He has a traditional stool in front of him on which is a horse tail whose handle has been adorned with multi-coloured beads.

Figure 14: The *Fon* of Bamendankwe Enthroned on the Royal Throne



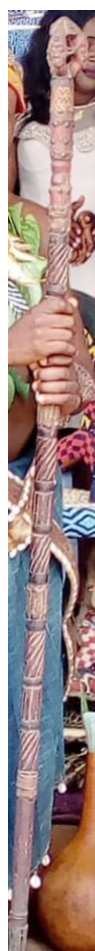
Source: Tikere's Archive (02/09/2020)

(D) Symbolism of the Regalia of the Enthroned Cameroon Grassfields Fon

The regalia of the Grassfields *fons* as discussed above bear many symbols. Such motifs are not mere objects of beautification, they portray the social, political as well as religious organisations of the Grassfields people. The symbolism this paper examines deals with animate, inanimate, plants as well as colours.

Animate Symbols: The animate motifs found on the regalia of the enthroned *fons* are the human head which can be seen on the walking stick and the body belt of the *fon* of Bamendankwe, the leopard noticeable on the belt of the *fon* of Oku, and the buffalo observed in the titled cup of the *fon* of Mankon. The human symbol represented on the above mentioned objects is not by chance, they are used to signify the power of the *fon* in particular and the belief system of the Grassfields people in general. Notué and Triaca (2000: 72), note that human symbol is a decorative element forming part of a composition of an ornamental scene on various objects, and describing deeds and events of a political, symbolic, social, philosophical or religious nature. Below is an explicit examination of the animate symbols visible on the regalia of newly crowned Grassfields *fons* starting with the human head.

(a) Human Heads: The walking stick here is that of the *fon* of Bamendankwe known as *akooh for*. A walking stick is usually used by older people to support them since they are old and often get tired when they go around. The walking stick is therefore a support to old people. The stick we find (in the hand of the *fon* of Bamendankwe like those of all other Grassfields *fons*), is not the simple stick which can be used by anybody in the fondom, it bears emblematic motifs one of which is the human head. It has three human heads and these heads are represented at the top of the stick. At coronation, the *fon* of Bamendankwe is only 30 years old, he is still very strong and energetic and he does not need the support of the walking stick to move around. But he needs this stick to support the huge responsibility he has, as head of an entire fondom which comprises thousands and thousands of inhabitants. This is therefore a symbol of authority. That authority bestowed on him during that exceptional cultural ceremony (enthronement) which comes only once in the life time of every *fon*.



This carving (stick) presents the human head. The human head is the seat of wisdom, the intelligible part of man for it has the ability to retain and transmit message from person to person. The head is important because it is regarded as the house of the spirit. Grassfields belief system considers the human head as a means through which the *fon* can reach the ancestors and the gods. This therefore explains why most royal objects such as walking stick, houseposts, doorframes, stools, thrones, title cups as well as the masks bear human heads.

(b) The Leopard: The motif of the leopard is seen in the belt of the *fon* of Oku (see Figure 12). The leopard (*Panthera pardus*), is a member of the *Felidae* family and the smallest of the four "big cats" in the genus *Panthera*, the other three being the tiger, lion and jaguar. Compared to other members of the *Felidae* family, the leopard has relatively short legs and a long body with a large skull. Its fur is marked with rosettes which are smaller and more densely packed, and do not usually have central spots. Leopards are generally considered to be nocturnal, agile and stealthy predators. Although smaller than the other members of the *Panthera* genus, the leopard is still able to take large prey given its massive skull that well utilizes powerful jaw muscles.

Antelopes and deers provide a majority of the leopard's prey.

The leopard is known for its ability in climbing and it is the only big cat that can drag its kills up trees and hanging them there. They are capable of carrying animals up to three times their own weight this way. Leopards have been known to humans since pre-history and have featured in the art, mythology and folklore of many countries where they have historically occurred, such as ancient Greece, Persia and Rome (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopard>).

According to Notué and Triaca (2000: 68) the leopard is a large elegant and powerful feline, with elongated forms. Thanks to its cunning attitude, power and ferocity, it is one of the most feared animals and, as such, one of the most respected in the African jungle. Knopfli (1999: 34) defines the leopard as a large feline, powerful, fast-running and flesh-eating animal, active particularly at night and very unpredictable.

Grassfields people give a lot of respect and honour to the leopard and this could be seen in the fact that a hunter who killed this animal in the days of old was awarded a traditional title – a red feather as a mark of bravery and courage. Such a hunter was to be given one of the *fon's* daughters as a wife, for he had the power and wit to overcome such an animal which itself had power over many animals in the forest. Mankon beliefs give this creature many powers. It is the perfect symbol of royalty and it is associated with political and judicial authority as well as symbolising strength, the power of the *fon*, prestige and the greatness of royalty. Besides, the *fon* is indeed called "leopard" and his children "those" of this animal (Notué & Triaca, 2000: 68).

To demonstrate its importance in the Grassfields of Cameroon in general and in Oku in particular, a leopard belt called *guod baa* is used by the *fon* during enthronement to absorb the leopard's power. It is believed that when this is done, the *fon* can transform into a leopard when need arises. When there is a problem in the palace to escape, he changes into a leopard. He can equally do so when he wants to go to somewhere either in or out of the fendom without anyone's knowledge. The leopard therefore is a symbol of strange, honour, protection and courage. The leopard skin tied around his body identifies him as the leopard of the people (*fon*).

(c) The Buffalo: The buffalo is represented in the title cup that the newly enthroned *fon* of Mankon holds. The buffalo especially the African buffalo is one of the most successful grazers in Africa. Buffalos have few predators and are capable of defending themselves against (and sometimes killing) lions. Lions do kill and eat buffalo regularly, but it typically takes multiple lions to bring down a single adult buffalo. When chased by predators a herd will stick close together and make it hard for the predators to pick off one member. Buffalo will try to rescue a member that has been caught (<https://a-z-animals.com/animals/buffalo>).

Knopfli (1999: 34) and Notué and Triaca (2000: 72) have written on the buffalo particularly the horn. To Knopfli the horns would be worked upon and richly decorated with all sorts of traditional symbols, and used as title cups by *fons*, chiefs, notables and heads of the family. Notué and Triaca note that the horn of the buffalo or other members of the Bovidae family (antelope, bull, ram etc) can either be a motif in the composition (figure of *fon* or notable holding it as a cup), or a material, the support of the other motifs or artistic representations. The libation horn (reserved for the *fon* or an important notable) is not only a marker of prestige but also has a cultural function because it contains the sacred palm wine used in ancestral cults. Its pointed end and phallic shape also symbolise latent energy and the overflowing of the forces of nature.

At enthronement, the new *fon* uses this same title cup which has been used by his predecessors to thank the gods of the land for the new dawn, numerous blessing and equally table a supplication to the gods for long life, more blessings, as well as peace in the fendom. This cup is used whenever there is an important cultural celebration in the land, namely the annual dance also known as the *fon's* dance or *mandere* in the Mankon language. This cup made of the buffalo horn is therefore a kind of band which exist between the living and the gods whose mediator is the *fon*.

Grassfields people including Mankon hold the buffalo in very high esteem and regard it as a royal animal. This animal is very invaluable because it is one of the fastest, one of the wildest and most dangerous in the bush. Due to this, it is difficult to hunt. This animal is equated to the *fon* because like

the buffalo that is one of the most feared animal in the wild, the *fon* is the most feared persons in the society because no one tampers with his power and orders.

Inanimate Symbols: The inanimate motifs found on or which are part of the newly crowned *fon*'s regalia are the double gong, the horse tail, the read feather, the spine of the porcupine. Also noticeable in the regalia of the *fons* are cowry shells bangle, wooden bangles, bags, and the *ndop* fabric. The symbolism of these objects are examined below beginning with the cowries or cowry shells.

(a) The Cowry: Cowry is the common name for a group of small to large marine gastropods in the family *Cypraeidae*. Shells of certain species have historically being used, in the past and present, very extensively in jewellery, and for other decorative and ceremonial purposes. The shells of cowries were used for centuries as a currency in Africa. Huge amounts of cowries were introduced into Africa by western nations during the period of slave trade. The Ghanaian unit of currency known as the Ghanaian cedi was named after cowry shells (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cowrie>)



The cowry shell is very invaluable in the cosmology of the Grassfields. We find this object on the *ngwashi* as well as the belt of the *fon* of Bamendankwe. It equally be observed on the armlet, bangle and the small bag of the *fon* of Oku. The cowries are also visible on the handle of the double gong in front of the Bamum *fon*. The mother of the *fon* of the Bamum wears a chain made of cowries on her left wrist.

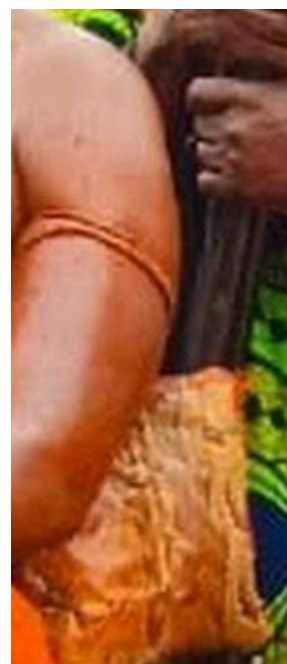
On the Bamenda Plateau, as Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 92) note that cowries were known as *aghié*, whereas elsewhere, they were called *mbefu*, which means "white money" or "white grains". According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 92) and Knopfli (1999: 65) cowry shells are valuable because in pre-colonial times they were used as money in many parts of Cameroon. Knopfli (1999: 65) continues by saying that anything could be bought with cowries, even women, for they were one of the goods to be bought with money.



Cowry shells were replaced by copper rods and the former's function changed in most Grassfields chiefdoms. Cowries are used as an ornament and a status symbol by the *fons* and chiefs. Chiefly wives wear strings of them as necklaces, armlets or anklets. *Fon*'s wives are marked out by wearing cowry shells as demonstrated in Figure 4 on the queen mother's hand (bangle). Queen mothers are traditionally respected in all Grassfields fondoms for being of greater social position than other women.

The cowry shells used on the armlet and bangle of the *fon* of Oku and the belt of the *fon* of Bamendankwe are an emblem of power, prestige and riches. The use of cowries on the handle of the gong continuous to manifest the power of the *fon* since the sound of the gong represents the voice of the *fon* which must be respected if heard.

(b) The Indigenous Bag: Every fondom has a bag which contains the secrets of the fondom and this bag is handed down from *fon* to *fon*. This bag which is handled by the *fon* of Mankon and Bamum, are used during the exceptional cultural ceremony of enthronement to mark the position of the *fon*. The bag is usually carried on the left hand as seen in the figures below. It is a form of protection to the *fon* and the fondom.



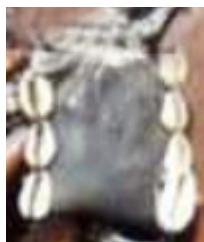
The bag of the *fon* of Mankon is produced out of the skin of the crocodile. The crocodile is another symbolic animal in the cultural universe of the Mankon. There is the cultural belief that this bag carried by the *fon* in this ceremony protects him from danger. The use of a crocodile is highly symbolic, it illustrates that the *fon* is not only protected by the contain of the bag but equally by the symbolic crocodile, a powerful animal. Its association with the crocodile is due to the fact that this animal has powerful jaws that can bite down with immense force any animal.



The bag carried by the Bamum *fon* is made of cotton, it is handed down to him like many if not all the regalia of the *fon*. This bag which he hangs on his wrist has a red colour and the handle made of white and blue colours. The bag known in Bamum as *pala ngu* meaning bag of the fondom contains the secrets of the fondom as discussed above.

Looking at the neck of the *fon* of Oku, we see a small bag which is adorned with cowries shells. This bag following the information got from informants, it is called *ngwef*- the bag of the fondom just like that of the Bamum fondom. It bag contains the secret of the land and whenever there is a problem, this bag is used by the *fon* after consulting the gods to solve the said problem. Apart from being an object that protects the *fon* from danger, it has the potency to hide the user, that is, it has the ability to make him invincible in any challenge as well as invisible from public view when in a dangerous situation. This bag like most of the other priestly objects (employed in coronation) is used by the *fon* only once in his lifetime, during this special enthronement occasion.

(c) The Double Gong: The double gong in all Grassfields fondoms is the voice of the *fon*. It is an object with immense importance and because of its role, it is not handled by just everyone in this part of the country. It is either handled by the *fon* himself at very urgent and significant moments during a cultural ceremony or by a newsman who goes out on behalf of the *fon* to give out information on certain issues in the fondom. When the sound of the gong is heard, inhabitants listen keenly to comprehend what the *fon* has to say because like already mentioned above, it sound stands for the voice of the *fon*.



The gong is made of iron and it is one of the most significant element of the *Grassfields*, the sacred instrument of the *kwifon* society in the Grassfields. The double iron gong is beaten during *fon's dance*, when a *fon* is "missing", or to announce the death and burial of a sub chief, king maker or a member of the *kwifon*. The beating of the gong by a *kwifon* member is to attract the attention of the ancestors - that is, informing them of what has happened.



When there is important work in the palace or in the fondom, the *kwifon* sends some of its members who go out on the eve of the day of work to inform village folks. They go round beating the gong, and giving the message. If it concerns the missing of the *fon*, like the case of the Bamendankwe, the large slit drum which is at the palace square is beaten by one of the *kwifon* member and the announcement of the coronation is been given. On such and such a day, there will be the new *fon* will be shown to the public there after, there will *nekwi nefor* - the death celebration of the *fon* who disappeared. This is said in the local language.

The double iron gong is also used on important occasions such as the making of sacrificial offerings to the royal ancestors. This often takes place on a *country Sunday* and performed either by the *fon* himself or a sub chief. The double iron gong is thus a symbol of authority, one of the most important among all motifs symbolising religious authority. The royal gong above is 'decorated' with cowries to reinforce is

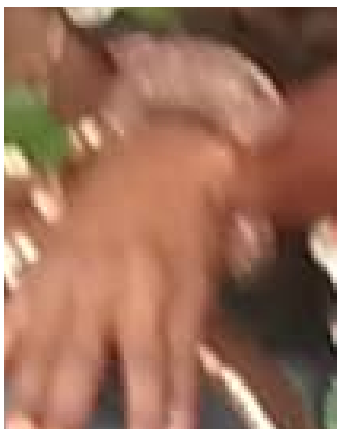
importance, a royal object which has to be handled and used only by those who have been ordained by the entire fondom, those who understand the culture which this sacred instrument has to valorise.

(d) The Bangle: The use of bangles is very prominent in the Grassfields of Cameroon. They are either worn by the *fon* or other title holders (notables). It is one of the symbolic items in the regalia of a newly crowned *fon*. No matter its colour, it is an object of authority. This bangle has a circular shape which the Grassfields people interpret as a circle. The circle is the most emblematic of all geometric designs in the Grassfields. The *fons* of Oku and Bamendankwe wear bangles and some people may look at them as decorative objects. But the circles go beyond mere decoration. It is regarded as the symbol of the full moon. The moon's prominence in the sky and its regular cycle of phases have since ancient times made the moon an important cultural influence on language, calendars, art and mythology (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon>).

Grassfields people may believe that this motif stands for the moon due to its circular nature.² The moon is Earth's only natural satellite and the fifth largest satellite in the solar system. It is the brightest object in the sky after the sun. The circular bangle is regarded as a full moon, the moon which comes out at night. The night is regarded as a dangerous period of the day when many unlawful things happen. The



moon therefore provides light to all irrespective of the sex, age or social status. Everyone even the dangerous of all criminals also benefits from this gift of nature. The *fon* who uses a bangle is regarded as a model, he is expected to set an example for others to follow and this explains why he is looked upon to provide the symbolic light that shines indiscriminately to every village folk. The *fon* must not look and treat certain villagers as superior to others, he has a duty to protect, love, and welcome everyone in the same manner like the moon. The moon therefore stands for peace, clarity, purity and unity.



There is yet another interpretation of the circle. It is considered to signify the sun. The sun is the star at the centre of the solar system. It is the star that the earth spins around. It is almost perfectly spherical and provides heat and sunlight, Earth's primary source of energy. In many prehistoric and ancient cultures, the sun was thought to be a solar deity or other supernatural phenomenon. Worship of the sun was central to civilisations such as the Inca of South America and the Aztecs of what is now Mexico. Many ancient monuments were constructed with solar phenomena in mind (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sun>).



The *fons* of Grassfields fondoms are referred to as the sun and this may be because like the sun which is at the centre of the solar system that the Earth revolves around, he (*fon*) is at the centre of most if not all cultural manifestation in the fondom. Like the sun, the *fon* has to unite his people around him, people to whom he has to from time to time provide palm oil and salt. The *fon* here is the symbol of unity.

The *fon* is considered as a special light of the sun that shines in the lives of the people, light which shines for all irrespective of age and size. This symbolism of the sun associating it with the *fon* may be due to the fact that it provides light which does not only serve humans, but is also very invaluable for plants that use it to manufacture food through a process

² The moon is the object, similar to a planet, which moves in the sky around the Earth once every 28 days and which can often be seen clearly at night when it shines with the light coming from the sun.

known as photosynthesis. The value of plants in the life of Grassfielders cannot be over emphasised. It serves as food, as medicine, as home of spirits, and much more.

(e) Necklaces: We equally notice that part of the regalia of the *fons* are necklaces made of varied materials, some are made out of imported beads for instance the red chain worn by the *fon* of Bamendankwe while other are made of animal bones the case of the *fons* of Oku and Bamendankwe.

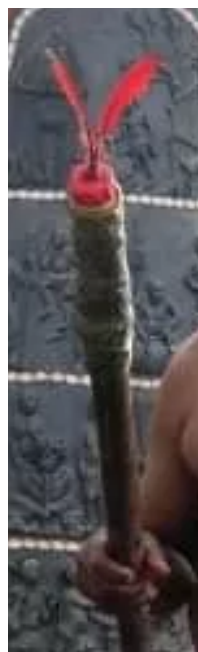
The *fon* of Oku wears a number of necklaces which include blue (necklace) made of some imported beads and brown necklace made of animal bones. These necklaces are exceptional because they are worn by the *fon* on this special occasion and once in his life time. The major function of these chains are to demonstrate his authority as the *fon* and head of the entire fondom as well as all the governing societies in the Oku fondom.



The *fon* of Bamendankwe has many necklaces on his neck but those outstanding are the red and the white ones. These objects which have been empowered by the highest governing society in the land is used by the *fon* at enthronement as a mark of identity and honour. On this occasion the *fon* dresses in this style and sits on the royal throne – *mbereh for*, projecting himself as the highest authority in the land.

No matter the colour of the above mentioned necklaces, they are all symbols of power used by the one ordained by the gods to be the *fon* of the people, a leader who must be honoured and respected by all in the land.

(f) The Red and Other Feathers: The red feather, feather of the bannerman turaco bird, is an invaluable cultural object to the Grassfields people. It is used as a title object, awarded to individuals who have carried out development projects which have helped enormously to the growth of the fondom. Individuals who have carried out projects like the supply of potable water, electricity, building of bridges and more, are rewarded with a traditional title, a means of recognition of hard work and a way to encourage other to follow their example. This red feather which is a titled object gives the *fon* the authority and prestige he deserves as the head of the fondom. The redness in these feathers is a symbol of power provided by the ancestors and gods of the land.



One of the major emblematic object used to crown the Bamum *fon* is a feathered gown known in Bamum as *monpou ngou* meaning, coat of the fondom. *Monpou ngou* is one of the most important royal objects in the Bamum land founded by Nchare Yen alongside the *wouo ngou* - stone of the fondom and the *kumba ngou* - the stick of the fondom. The dress is embroidered with multi-coloured feathers just like the costume of the

mabu - traditional masquerades commonly called jujus. This costume is used in very important cultural celebrations and also during the enthronisation of a new *fon*. The multi-coloured feathers used on *monpou ngou* are believed to be from all the birds which are found in the Bamum fondom. These many colours are a representation of the immensity and the diversity of the population



governed by the Bamoun *fons*. In the past, when it is not in use, it is kept in the *nda ngou* - house of the fondom but today, it is preserved in the Palace Museum and it is taken out only when it has to be used.

The *fon* wears *monpou ngou* once in his life time but *Fon* Njimoluh Seidou the 18th *fon* of the Bamoun wore it twice meanwhile *Fon* Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya wore it thrice. *Fon* Njimoluh Seidou wore it twice as seen above, the first time during his enthronisation, and the second time during the 50th celebration of his reign. The objective of this second occasion was to train the group of the 7 *nkoms* - *fonmarkers* on how to handle as well as crown a new *fon*. 50 years after his enthronement, the *nkoms* who crowned him were no longer alive and their successors were not acquainted with *monpou ngou*. There was therefore the need to organise a ceremony of that kind to teach them how the enthronement of the *fon* is done.

The 19th *fon* His Majesty Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya wore it three times: In 1992 during his coronation, In 2017, during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of his enthronement. (The objective of this event was still to train the young *nkoms* on how to handle the *monpou ngou*) and in 2021, during the installation of the Momafon Shüt some months before he joined his ancestors (his disappearance).

As the name implies, the coat of the fondom refers to the fact that it is only worn with the approval of the entire fondom that has unanimously accepted that he should be *fon* with all the rituals which have been conducted before and during the enthronement ceremony. This dress therefore is an embodiment of the fondom vested in he who has the power to rule over the land. And whatever he does must be for the interest of the fondom.

The use of feathers of the bird on the stick of the *fon* of Mankon and the gown of the Bamum *fon* is highly symbolic, they represent supernatural power. Because it is believed that birds understand the secret of the world above. It is able to connect the heavenly and the earthly, a good instrument to the *fon* who is regarded as a divine ruler who depends on the force and wisdom of the supernatural to govern his people. In traditional authority, power is legitimated by the sanctity of age-old customs. People obey their rulers because “this is the way things have always been done”. Additionally, they view a ruler’s power as eternal, inviolable, and sacred. A ruler is considered to govern in the name of ‘a divine right’ ordained by God.

(g) Spine of the Porcupine: Another very important title symbol among the Grassfields is the spine of the porcupine – known in Bamendankwe as *ngum*. This title like the red feather is awarded to those who have helped in the growth of the fondom. The peculiarity of the *fon* is that he wears three *ngums* meanwhile other notables would wear only one. He wears three to show the difference which exists between him and the other members



of the government. These three *ngums* show that he belongs to the royalty, belongs to all sacred societies in the land and he interferes in the affairs which concern the commoners. There is no sacred society in which he cannot intervene, he is *fon* over all. It is significant to mention that there are other *fons* who use caps made of the spines of the porcupine but such caps are utilised only during important celebrations.

The porcupine is a title symbol because it has the spine which it uses as a means of defence. Porcupines are large rodents with coats of sharp spines that protect them against predation. Using the spines of the porcupine in the enthronement of a new *fon* is like showing the general public that the authority of the *fon* should never be challenged or that the fact that he is at the service of the public does not mean that he is weak. If his authority is threatened, like the porcupine, he is capable of attacking, the deviant like the porcupine would do to any animal that threatens its security.

(h) The Peace Plant: The elevated podium prepared to show the *fɔn*'s position is decorated with the *dracaena* - the peace plant and the *ndop* fabric. The use of this plant is not by chance, peace is expected to reign during and after the coronation ceremony. Peace is a commitment not to harm, but to nurture love in all individuals. Peace is a relationship of the living well together. It is strong and lasting, based on respect, serenity, cordiality and mutual understanding among people. It comes from the expression of the heart just as much as from the mind. It is through human affection motivated by peace that we can transcend violence.



After his enthronement, therefore, the *fɔn* has his main responsibilities to love and protect everyone in his country. He is an embodiment of peace, and as one, he is there to ensure that peace reigns in the entire fondom. The *fɔn* is the father of all and unifies the village around himself. He is therefore not supposed to be engaged in repression and as already discussed above, repression and social control must deal with polluting actions, and the *fɔn* must belong to the opposite pole of human society, the cultural pole, which is free from pollution and danger. He could only take part in social control and repression as a moderator (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).



The *ndop* fabric is a royal dress visible in all cultural celebrations which involves the *fɔn* princes and princesses. During any ceremony be it coronation of the *fɔn* or a chief or an important notable, this fabric is used to decorate the palace or the compound of the notable. This material which usually handmade bears two main colours, blue and white. It also carries many geometric figures such as circle, triangle, rectangle and others. The function of the royal dress, the *ndop* is employed to manifest the *fɔn*'s as the authority in his land since the object is that of authority. This fabric is equally spread in the palace during cultural celebrations as a means to invite the gods and ancestors to take control of the occasion.

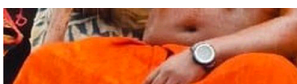


The elevated position of the *fɔn* is not merely because he has to be seen by the public, the major reason is to project him as the highest or biggest notable in the fondom. He is not the biggest person in his society per say, but because of the power conferred on him by all in the fondom through the stones throwing ritual and the enthronement, makes him to occupy such a conspicuous position. The position is further reinforced by the other personalities around him carrying ritual objects, the bag of the fondom, the calabash of the fondom and many more.

Colour Symbolism

Colour is the appearance that something has as a result of reflecting light. Colour symbolism in art and anthropology refers to the use of colours as a symbol in various cultures. There is a great diversity in the use of colours and their associations between cultures (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_symbolism). Looking at the regalia of newly crowned *fɔns* of the Grassfields, we find several colours: red, white, black, brown and many more. This article examines only two of such colours, red and white.

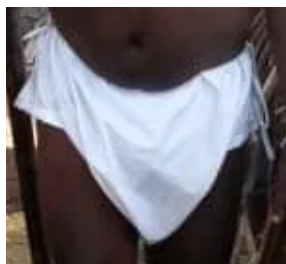
(a) Red: The red colour is symbolic, it could be seen in the garment and in the product used to anoint the *fɔn* of Mankon. The red substance is obtained from the *camwood* tree. Camwood (*Baphia nitida*), also known as African sandalwood, is a shrubby, hard-wooded African tree. Its wood is commonly used to make a red dye. (https://www.liquisearch.com/what_is_camwood). The redness symbolises power, which is capable of commanding the supernatural.





When a new *fon* is enthroned especially in the Mankon fondom, he sits on the installation stool properly rubbed with *camwood* by the priest in the presence of 'sons of the place' and chamberlains. This takes place at the royal grave shrine. The actual placement of the *fon* on an installation stool leads one to conclude that the throne figure sculpture is the actual as well as symbolic stool upon which new *fons* are installed. The people believe that the *camwood* has the power to bless as well as change the conduct of the royalty.³ The *fon* is not the only one entitled to benefit from these blessings, his fondom as well since the *fon* embodies the entire fondom.

(b) White: The white colour can be seen in the *ntum* of the Mankon *fon*, the cap of the *fon* of Oku, cowries, the bangle of the *fon* of Oku and the necklace of the *fon* of Bamendankwe. White represents purity and justice. This means that anyone who uses the above mentioned items must treat all village folks equally and must always be just in their judgements. If this is not done, the leader might be punished by death from the gods or by the ancestors. Today in the Grassfields of Cameroon, many *fons* are either disappearing prematurely or ousted by the people because of their inability to treat the people justly.



The white *ntum* worn by the *fon* of Mankon is a sign of identity. As he is introduced to the public for the first time, he comes to the palace court yard in a queue with his brothers (princes). He is the only one who wears the white dress while his brothers wear dried banana leaves. Anyone without any first-hand information will understand that he (the prince in white *ntum*) is the chosen one.

Fenene mbong - cap originated from a mysterious victory of the Oku people over the Kejem people in a fight for the ownership of the mysterious lake Oku. This fight was more of spiritual and marine than physical. It happened that the *fons* of Oku and Kejem had to enter under the waters of the lake and wrestle there so that whoever came out alive was to be the owner of the lake. Indigenous were spectators. Moments after the fight took off under the waters, blood surfaced on the waters indicating the death of one of the wrestlers (*fons*). Thereafter, the *fon* of Oku appeared from the waters with this whitish crown (cap) on his head, making him a champion and the crown remained a significant royal regalia.

(c) Green Plants: The *fons* of Mankon and Bmanendankwe have chains made of some climbing plant meanwhile the *fon* of Bamum and his mother have head masks made of some fresh green leaves and feathers. The plant chain used by the *fons* of Mankon and Bamendankwe is made from the plant called *ndoreh* (in Mankon and Bamendankwe) as demonstrated in the figure below. This chain is used on these *fons* to illustrate their high social position, they are *fons*, head of their different fondoms as such they have to receive the blessings from the ancestors and gods especially as the *ndoreh* is obtained from the resting place of the former *fons*, ancestors.



³It is the belief system of Kedjom people that a *fon* is someone who should possess specific virtues such as fatherly, gentle, peaceful, transparent and so on. But in the case where these values are not met, it is believed the red colour of the *camwood* will change him and make him possess only good qualities.

Figure 15: Ndoreh



Source: Tikere's Archive (10/11/2018)

It is important to note that this same plaited plant is put on the necks of twins and twins' mothers each time there is an occasion in their honour. Twins in the days of old were 'children of the *fon*'. This explains why when they were born, they had to be introduced to the palace. If they were male children, they had to stay and grow up in the palace. If they were female children, they had to stay in the palace and they would get married to the *fon* when they grew up. Their parents had to have an added name to

their names and the father received an award of the red feather, a traditional honour.



Among the Bamum, a crowned *fon* put and his mother on the *mbupuet* – a mask made of fresh leaves. These leaves are harvested from the forest of Njimom. The peculiarity of this plant is that it does not grow in the compound of a man who has a dubious character. It is used in other fondoms of the Grassfields like in Bambui to enthrone a *tah* – a sub chief.

Figure 16: Mbupuet



Source: Tikere's Archive (18/12/2012)

These leaves mentioned above are all fresh and green. The colour green is symbolic to the Grassfields people. In ancient mythology, green commonly represented fertility. For example, ancient Iranians called the last month of winter “Esfand” because, at this time, spring and greenness return to the earth. In particular, they devoted the fifth day to the earth and women. Likewise, ancient Greeks portrayed Osiris, their god of the underworld, birth, rebirth, agriculture, and fertility, with a green face (<https://www.verywellmind.com/color-psychology-green-2795817>).

The Grassfields people like many ancient mythologies associate the colour green with life, renewal, growth, and hope. It is common in the Grassfields like in most parts of Africa that in the month of April, one month after the return of the rains, that all the plants are coming back to life with fresh growth and life (plants producing green leaves and a green environment) after a long dry season, when all grasses are dry with some trees even shading their leaves. Green demonstrated in the new leaves is an assurance, the colour of life, renewal, nature, energy, growth, harmony, freshness, safety, fertility, and environment.

The green leaves used either as chains or head mask on the new *fons* therefore represent a new era, beginning in their different fondoms. A new *fon* is usually a reincarnation of his predecessor. Although a new *fon* continues the activities of his father, his reign commences at his enthronement, a new renewal, a new dawn in the life of the fondom. A new *fon* is a representation of hope. At the disappearance of the *fon*, the people are like orphans who are in need of care. The new *fon* brings hope and assurance to the people who will look forward to him for protection.

Conclusion

This paper on the making of */fons/* kings: an insight into the regalia of a newly crowned Cameroon Grassfields *fon*, presents an ethnography of the regalia of newly enthroned *fons* as well as examines the symbolism of the different elements identified on these regalia. The *fon* is the highest personality and an embodiment of his society. By so doing during his coronation, he has the prerogative to specific insignia. These regalia which range from the caps, bags, costumes, horse tails, walking sticks, necklaces and many more are more than mere decorative objects. The above mentioned items constitute the attire of enthronement which might change at different moments of the celebration. This attire symbolises the rising sun, the coming of a new *fon*. Most of the *fons* only dress in this attire once in their entire life time, during this special ceremony called enthronement. It should be noted that the person who has the title to dress them are the *fonmakers*. The insignia of the *fon* present him as the highest authority in the land as they (insignia) have varied symbolic significance which range from authority, majesty to peace. These priestly objects are used to bond the living and the ancestors and gods.

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