

The Voice of Royalty: The Symbolism of the Gong's and Elephant Tusk's Sounds to the Cameroon Grassfields Societies

Exodus Tikere Moffor^{ORCID}, Paschal Kum Awah

Department of Anthropology, The University of Yaoundé 1, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Email: extikere@gmail.com, awahpaschal@yahoo.fr

How to cite this paper: Moffor, E. T., & Awah, P. K. (2024). The Voice of Royalty: The Symbolism of the Gong's and Elephant Tusk's Sounds to the Cameroon Grassfields Societies. *Advances in Anthropology*, 14, 47-75.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/aa.2024.143004>

Received: April 21, 2024

Accepted: August 17, 2024

Published: August 20, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Fons or kings in all human societies occupy a high social standing. They have certain privileges, which others in the society do not have. In the Cameroon Grassfields, they have the prerogative to own and use symbolic art objects. The single or double gong and elephant tusk are among the prestigious objects, which were used by the *Fon* or the *kwifon* alone in the past. Today, instruments like the double gong are used by many masquerades and some church groups as musical instruments. This article seeks to investigate the functions and symbolism of the double gong and elephant tusk in the Cameroon Grassfields. The objective of the article is to examine the function as well as the cultural significance of these two objects in the lives of the Grassfields people. Data for the paper was collected using the qualitative method with the use of techniques, such as direct observation, in-depth interviews, life histories and photography. This data was as the fieldwork was going on and then completed soon after the fieldwork. To interpret the data, the authors employed the theories of functionalism, symbolic anthropology and cultural evolution. Major findings reveal that the double gong and the elephant tusk are emblematic cultural elements that are used for communication, linking the living and the ancestors and gods. It is a symbol of unity, authority and power, used by the *Fon* and the *kwifon*. These objects, which we call the voice of royalty, could be conserved for the posterity of the fondoms, which valorise them.

Keywords

Voice of Royalty, Symbolism, Gong and Elephant Tusk Sounds, Cameroon Grassfields

1. Introduction

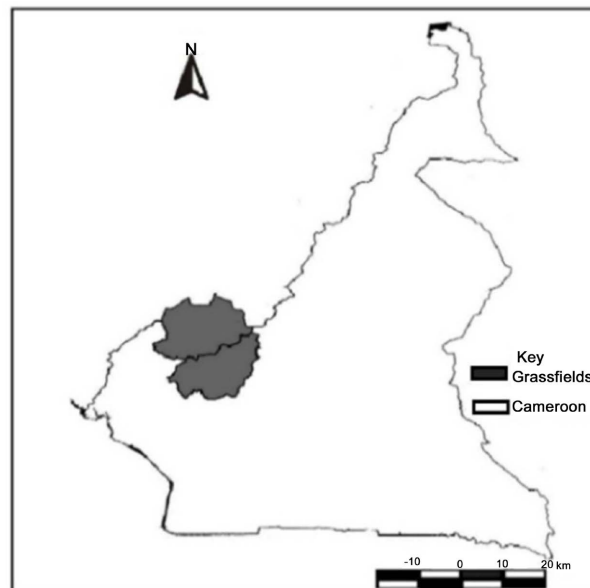
The people of the Cameroon Grassfields use varied tools and forms to com-

municate. Communication is the act of conveying meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood sounds, signs, symbols, and semiotic rules. It is thus a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in an attempt to create shared understanding. The tools and forms of communication in most parts of Africa including the Cameroon Grassfields are commonly regarded as folk media and such tools used in communicating range from drums, gongs, horns, whistles, and elephant tusks to flutes. Some of the instruments are blown (horn, elephant tusk and flute) while others such as the drum, and gong are beaten. The history of the gong in the Cameroon Grassfields is unknown. Authors such as Nkwi and Warnier (1982), Nkwi (1982), Knopfli (1999), Koloss (2000) and Notue and Triaca (2005) have written on the production and use the double gong and elephant tusk in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Moffor (2016) and Koloss (2000) on their part have commented on the Cameroon Grassfields palaces, meanwhile, Nkwi and Warnier (1982) have written on the personality of the Grassfields *fon*. This present article focuses not only on the double gong and elephant tusk, but also lays emphasis on the cultural significance of these objects, and the changes, which are currently taking place in their production and roles.

In this part of the country, the gong is produced solely by the men with the use of wrought iron. The elephant tusk is obtained from the elephant and like the gong, it is sometimes adorned with symbolic motifs by the carvers. Due to the importance of these objects, they have currently been represented in art articles such as costumes, stools, thrones and houseposts. They are the emblems of a fendom like Mankon. The gong, elephant tusk and some drums are emblematic and are used only by the royalty (Fon and kwifon) and some secret societies in this part of the country. When an object like the gong was played, it represented the voice of royalty since it was beaten sometimes by the *Fon* himself. If it was not beaten by the *Fon*, it is done so by his representative or that of the *kwifon*. Royalty in this paper concentrates on the *Fon* and *kwifon* because the *kwifon*'s premises are found in the Palace. The bond between the *Fon* and *kwifon* is clearly demonstrated by the fact that both have their seat of authority in the Palace.

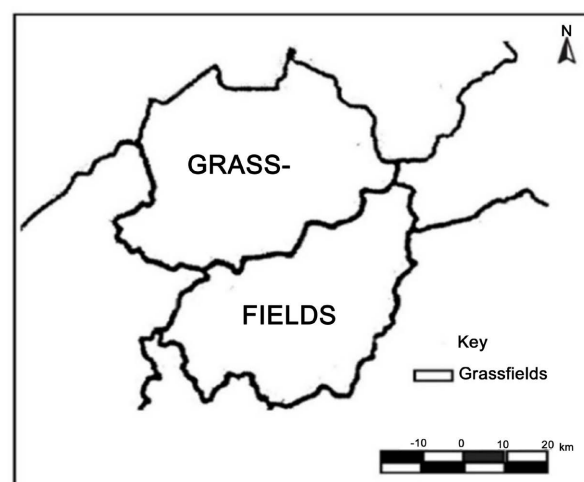
The King in most fondoms of the Cameroon Grassfields is known by the designation *fon*, *mfon*, *foyn*, *efo*, and more. In this paper, therefore, the appellation for the King is *Fon or Foyn*. The *Fon* is the head of a fendom or kingdom and writing about Grassfields *Fons*, Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 59) note that among the notables, the chief (*Fon*) was first and far above the others. The Grassfields is a part of Cameroon as demonstrated in **Map 1**.

The Grassfields comprise the three cultural areas of the Western Grassfields, the Bamilekes and the Bamums. These parts correspond to the North West and West Regions of Cameroon as portrayed in **Map 2**. They are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests at an average altitude of 4000 feet above sea level. These forests produce some species of trees, which the local



Map 1. The map of Cameroon showing the Grassfields. Source: Adapted from the administrative figure of Cameroon-MINATD-1992.

sculptors use to produce sculpted tusks. The most types of trees used in carving tusks are the “gum stick” in Pidgin English or *Cordia platthyrsa*, fig tree (Pidgin English) or *Ficus oreodryadum*, and *Pochylobus edulis*, bush butter in Pidgin English.



Map 2. The map of the Cameroon Grassfields. Source: Adapted from the administrative figure of Cameroon-MINATD-1992.

All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of varied sizes, and here, there are people of 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 Sub-Division claim origin from Widikum and the Balis are the Chambas (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).

Many Grassfields fondoms are independent and the political structure of most, if not all 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: p. 42). On the political strata of these fondoms, the *kwifon* comes first followed by the *Fon*, notables and quarter-heads. The *kwifon* and the *Fon* alone had the privilege to use the gong and elephant tusk.

The people of the Grassfields are polytheistic, they believe in religions such as the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Most Grassfielders are animists, they 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, brought to the Grassfields people by white missionaries is the belief in the Almighty God. Those who practice this religion are called Christians. At the introduction of Christianity, much of their traditional culture was abandoned, including many native dances and songs. Christians believe that God is the creator of the world and everything therein. By so doing, they have to give praise to Him. Christianity is propagated by many religious bodies such as the Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists and so on. Christian churches use the double gong as one of the fundamental musical instruments to produce music to praise God, the creator of man and the universe.

Islam is one of the religions in the Cameroon Grassfields. The word Islam means voluntary "Submission" or "Surrender" to the will of God (Allah). Those who practice this religion are called Muslims. They believe that God sent prophets to teach mankind how to worship Him, and the last of the messengers was Muhammad meaning peace be upon them all. Islam is found in some parts of the North West Region and in most of the Noun Division in the West Region. According to Ngwa (1967: p. 83), the Bamums are one of the peoples of Cameroon who have been greatly influenced by Moslem culture. Islam spread rapidly throughout their country, perhaps because they did not have a highly developed religion of their own. They were impressed by the Moslem faith and method of prayer and so did not hesitate to embrace it. This great influence had a far-reaching effect on the people's way of life. With the coming of Christianity in 1906, King Ibrahim Njoya was impressed by the teachings of the German missionaries and commanded members of his family and others to give up Moslem prayers. The small mosque that had been built at Fouban was destroyed by Njoya and a chapel was erected in its place. Njoya later fell under the influence of Islam again and ordered the German missionaries to leave the town. He destroyed the chapel, built another mosque and encouraged Moslems in Fouban. Since then, Islam has been the chief religion of the people. In modern times, many Bamums are either Moslem or

Christian.

2. Methodology

The methods that the researchers used in the research study were done under the following aspects: study design, selection of research participants, data collection, data collection tools and procedure and data analysis.

2.1. Study Design

The researchers used the narrative study design, a design that allowed the participants they interviewed to share their knowledge on the above topic. That is, participants were allowed to discuss just everything they knew about the double gong and the elephant tusk; from their production, use, and cultural significance to the changes that are currently taking place in these objects of high cultural value. This study design guided the collection of data and the researchers used methods of analysis that achieved the research objectives.

2.2. Selection of Research Participants

The researchers used the snowball sampling method to select participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where new participants are recruited by other participants to take part in a research study. It begins with one or more study participants and then continues on the basis of references from these participants. The process continues until the researcher reaches the desired sample of a saturation point. The participants who were mostly *fons*, *fonmakers* and notables had good knowledge of cultural objects in general and the double gong and elephant tusk in particular. The snowball sampling technique was to ensure that a wide range of the study topic was covered.

2.3. Data Collection

The findings which have been presented in this article are based on observations, interviews as well as life history conducted with some Cameroon Grassfields *fons*, notables as well as ordinary people on the voice of royalty: The Symbolism of the Gong's and Elephant Tusk's Sounds. The data was therefore collected using the qualitative method. Underlying this method, the following research techniques were employed: direct observation, in-depth-interview, life histories and more. The researchers paid numerous visits to some Grassfields Palaces, the compounds of sub-chiefs, notables and heads of quarters. The objective here was to observe the different musical instruments including the gongs and elephant tusks used in the Palaces. They attended the annual festivals in some fondoms, especially in Bafut and Mbei where they saw the different moments that the elephant tusks were blown during the ceremony. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 7 *Fons* in different Grassfields fondoms to understand the history, production, ownership and use of the gongs and elephant tusks, when they are used, who uses them

and for what purposes. The researchers also wanted to know from the *Fons* the reasons why these objects (gong and elephant tusk) are used as motifs on other art articles. They interviewed 10 clergymen as well as numerous Christians in different parts of the Grassfields to comprehend why the double gong is used in the churches today. Visits and interviews were conducted with some blacksmiths (8) in Oku, (3) Bamendankwe and (6) Babungo to observe how the gongs were produced, the material used in production and how the commercialisation of their products was done. The researchers equally interviewed (12) sub-chiefs and (15) notables in varied Grassfields fiefdoms to understand the functions of the gongs and elephant tusks in the life of the fiefdoms and also to comprehend the cultural significances of their sounds. A digital camera was used to snap the gong, elephant tusk and other objects on which the gong and elephant tusk are represented. The photographs gave more reliability to the verbal information collected.

2.4. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The researchers used the following guides: observation, interview and focus group discussion guides respectively to collect data for the study. Among the questions that featured on the guides were the perceptions of the double gong and elephant tusk, the functions and cultural meanings of these objects, and the factors which are influences change in their production and use.

In the course of the interviews, the researchers took detail notes in their exercise books. Most of these interviews were conducted in the evenings from 6 pm when the participants had returned home from their jobs. Many of the interviews lasted for about an hour meanwhile the focus group discussions went for about an hour and more.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data of the study was analyzed soon after our field work. Information recorded during observation and interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and arranged according to the different categories of people interviewed. The data was interpreted using the theories of functionalism of Malinowski (1944) and Radcliff-Brown (1965), symbolic anthropology of Geertz (1973) and the 19th century cultural evolution of Tylor and Morgan. The contents of the figures were interpreted iconographically.

3. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The voice of royalty: The symbolism of the gong's and elephant tusk's sounds examines the functions of the gong and elephant tusk and cultural significance of their sounds to the Cameroon Grassfields people. The gong as well as elephant tusks are among the most symbolic objects in this part of the country. It is the prerogative of the *Fon* and *kwifon* to use them. This part of the article looks at four aspects: the ethnography of the gong and elephant tusk, the personality of

the *Fon* and *kwifon* society, the uses and symbolism of the sounds of the gong and elephant tusk and the influence of modernity on these cultural items (gong and elephant tusk).

3.1. The Ethnography of the Gong and Elephant Tusk in the Cameroon Grassfields

The gong and elephant tusk are two very invaluable and emblematic instruments used in traditional or folk media and because of their importance, they are stored in the palace and used by the *Fon* and members of the *kwifon*. What are the gong and elephant tusk?

3.1.1. The Gong

The gong is known in Mbei as *nkem fon*, in Bamum as *nchem* or *manjiendum*, in Bambui as *ngem*, in Kom as *ngem* and in Babadjou as *nkah*. Mbei, Bambui and Kom are fondoms in the Bamenda Grassfields precisely in the North West Region meanwhile Bamun and Babadjou are fondoms in the West Region of Cameroon. The single or double gong is an object made from iron. Knopfli (1999: p. 64) states that the double gong is made of wrought iron. This object was produced by the male folks in fondoms such as Kom, Bafut, Bamendankwe, Oku, Kedjom, Mankon and many others. Concerning production centres, Knopfli (1999: p. 108) quoting Warnier, notes that most centres concentrated in what he called “The belt of the Grasslands of Cameroon” comprising the area stretching from Oku to Bagam. It is important to note that Oku is found in the North West Region, meanwhile, Bagam is in the West Region of Cameroon.

There are two main types of gongs: the single and double gong as portrayed in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**. A single gong has only one gong and a long handle. This type is usually very large in size and is found only in the *Fons* Palaces or in the compounds of “big notables” or sub-chiefs. This gong produces one sound unlike the double gong. The double gong has two gongs linked at the top with semi-circular handle. It produces different sounds and it is used by many dance groups or masquerades. It is also found in the Palaces under the supervision of a notable.



Figure 1. A single gong. Source: Tikere’s archive (20/10/2010).



Figure 2. A double gong. Source: Tikere's archive (20/10/2010).

Writing on the making of the double gong, Knopfli (1999) notes that:

The most fascinating wrought-iron object made by the Babungo smiths, for which they are well-known far beyond the Western Grasslands, is the double iron gong. This is produced in all sizes from 20 to 100 cm in height. The double gong consists of two single, cone-shaped, hollow bodies linked at the top with a semi-circular handle. They are hand-crafted in the old welding tradition and yield a uniquely African sound (p. 114).

The single or double gong is produced by male folks who have had a long period of training from their masters and then initiated in the society of blacksmiths. Upon graduation from the workshop of their masters therefore, the apprentices can then move on to start their own workshops (for those who have funds). Those without funds could stay and work with their masters for some time to raise finances to start a workshop. The gongs which they produced in the days were meant to be used by the royalty but today these objects are open to all and are sold in the local markets and beyond.

3.1.2. The Elephant Tusk

The elephant tusk is the tusk of the elephant. An elephant has two tusks. They are used to dig for water, salt, and roots; to debark trees to eat the bark, and to move trees and branches when clearing a path. In addition, they are used for marking trees to establish territory and occasionally as weapons. Like humans who are typically right or left-handed, elephants are usually right or left-tusked. The dominant tusk, called the master tusk, is generally shorter and more rounded at the tip from wear. As a piece of living tissue, it is relatively soft (compared with other minerals such as rock). The tusk, also known as ivory, is strongly favoured by artists for its carvability.

Knopfli (1999: p. 32) comments that ivory is a valuable material, it is part of the Palace treasure. Regrettably, it has been a commodity of commercial importance up to the present. The elephant tusks which are commonly used in the Cameroon Grassfields are sculpted with many types of motifs ranging from anthropomorphic to zoomorphic symbols. All the elephant tusks used in the cultural sphere have a hole through which it could be blown as seen in **Figure 3**.

The elephant tusk is an element of nature due to the fact that it comes from the elephant, an animal which is a part of nature. The people of the Grassfields



Figure 3. Craved elephant tusks with holes. Source: Tikere's archive (17/12/2012).

of Cameroon are transforming this element of nature into a cultural items. This is confirming the theory of cultural ecology of Steward (1955) which focuses on how cultural beliefs and practices helps human populations adapt to their environments and live within the means of their ecosystem. It contributes to social organization and other human institutions. Cultural Ecology also interprets cultural practices in terms of their long-term role in helping humans adapt to their environment.

Elephant tusk is the tusk of an elephant. The carving of the tusk like gong production is done by the men exclusively. As mentioned earlier, elephant tusks are sculpted with many types of motifs ranging from anthropomorphic to zoomorphic symbols at the command of the *Fon*. Once the production is completed, the object is isolated for period of time. This period of isolation is the moment that the object is being empowered. And its empowerment is done by special people in the palace.

3.2. The Cameroon Grassfields *Fon* and *Kwifon*

Most if not all the Grassfields fondoms are stratified with the *Fon* and the *kwifon* coming on top of the political strata with each having specific functions. Although they are on top of the political leader, they govern the fondom with the sub-chiefs, notables and heads of the quarters. The paragraphs below describe the *Fon* and *kwifon* and their functions.

3.2.1. The *Fon*

As already mentioned above, the king in the Cameroon Grassfields is known as a *Fon*. 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. However, they maintain semi-autonomous union councils and jurisdiction over their hereditary land.

The *Fon* lives in *ntoh* or palace, the storage place of village property and cultural heritage (Moffor, 2016). Koloss (2000: p. 150) refers to the Palace as the largest and most splendid complex of buildings in the country and simultaneously the nucleus of his absolute religious and political power. One of the *Fon's* 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 appropriately 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 Kedjom, Baham, Bagam, 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: p. 61).

While *kwifon* embodies the power of the people, the *Fon* portrays an extraordinary personality, who stands superior to the people. In Oku for instance, the King is referred to as *Ebfon* (pl. *tefon*). Although ultimately obligated to *kwifon*, the King is simultaneously viewed as “owner” of this powerful society or *juju*. At the same time, he is at least nominally the leader of all societies and has access to all secrets. The King plays a role of uppermost significance in the cultic life of the people, for he is the only person who may make sacrifices to the royal ancestors and to the Gods of Oku (Koloss, 2000: p. 150).

The *Fon* embodied the society, and to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 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. 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.

Writing on the personality of the *Fon* in Oku, Koloss (2000: p. 155), says that just as kwifon, the King (*Fon*) has the right to have announcements made in his name at the market place, whereby the *nchinsetock* or retainers act as his representatives. They carry the trumpet (elephant tusk) of the King, *kembab* (the same name as the trumpet of kwifon), which they blow as a summon but only upon reaching the big tree at the market. Following the horns signal, the speaker greets the public with the words: “The *Ebfon* has sent me to greet Oku”.

The real position of power of the King lies in his special relationship with kwifon, and kwifon is undoubtedly the stronger party in this union. This applies not only to Oku but probably to most kingdoms of the Grasslands. The King is designated as “son of kwifon” in many tribes. In Kom, the power of the King is not unlimited, he is merely the *wain kwifoyn* “the child of kwifoyn” (Koloss, 2000: p. 179).

The *Fon* is the “father” of his people and as “father”, he has responsibility of their well-being and prosperity, while his office as *Fon* is associated with many privileges and distinctions. The *Fon* is the custodian of all land, the very source of the people’s cultural spring. He is the fountain of the people’s spirituality (Moffor, 2022b). He is the bridge between the yesteryears, the here and now and the aftertime. The *Fon* therefore embodies the fondom as already mentioned above and due to this reason, he has the prerogative to use the gong and the elephant tusk.

3.2.2. The *Kwifon*

A distinctive feature of the political system of all Western Grassfield states is the police society known as *kwifon* which usually has its quarters in the palace precincts and has, among its duties, the recruitment of boyhood of the palace retainers from freeborn commoners. This secret society has secret gongs and special ritual functions. There are important masks associated with it. At important national events or the death of a member, the society puts on its masked dances. Its authority is of an impersonal kind and its agents cannot be held to account by the populace. In most parts of the Western Grassfield, it takes decision and gives instructions on very important matters about the fondom. For example, work on the palace, shrines, roads, repairs of the *Fon*’s palace and others.

The *Kwifon* society is made up of the very key members of each society, usually elderly persons. In many Grassfields fondoms, members of the *Kwifon* are clan heads, who have the right to own and use certain prestigious sculptured objects like symbolic stools, titled cups and walking sticks.

The *kwifon* society is the executive decision-making body of the government of Grassfields fondoms, the symbol of the sovereignty, the representative of the people. The *Fon*’s political authority and power was in the hands of *kwifon*

(Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: p. 144). *Kwifon* intervened in disputes and settled even sacrificial offences. It handled cases considered criminal such as murder, witchcraft and adultery with the *Fon's* wives. *Kwifon* could fine the *Fon* and even kill him especially in the pre-colonial days. It could force him to abdicate if he went against the customs and traditions of the country. It has prerogative powers to enthrone or depose a *Fon* and to exile evil-doers from the fondom. The removal of pollution is the prerogative power of the *kwifon*. It was the overriding authority whose members were at the service of the *Fon* and the people.

Like Grassfields *Fons* who lost most of their pre-colonial and colonial sources of power, the *kwifon* also cannot really manifest its full political powers today. That is, the introduction of colonial administration by the colonial masters brought some changes in the functioning of this society. There was the introduction of human rights and the creation of state laws among others. In recent times, villagers do contest the decisions of *kwifon* in various domains in many Grassfields fondoms. It happened in Bambui in 1998 and in Kedjom Keku in 2008 that the government refused to recognise the *fons* of the above-mentioned chiefdoms under the influence of certain individuals who claimed that their rights were being violated. These individuals claimed that the position of the *Fon* which was supposed to be theirs was handed to other persons. Villagers will take land disputes to the court if they are not satisfied with the judgement of the *kwifon*. That notwithstanding, the *kwifon* still remains the overriding authority in Cameroon Grassfields fondoms.

The *Fon* is the leader, and “father” of his people. He ensures the wellbeing of the latter. The *kwifon* on its part is the executive decision-making body of the government of Grassfields fondoms, the symbol of the sovereignty, the representative of the people as discussed above. These two bodies (the *Fon* and *kwifon*) had the right in the past to possess and use the gong and elephant tusk as well as other emblematic objects in the fondom.

3.3. The Role of the Gong and Elephant Tusk and the Symbolism of Their Sounds in the Grassfields of Cameroon

To understand the roles as well as the cultural significances of the double gong and elephant tusk, the researchers used the functionalist theory of Malinowski (1944) and Radcliff-Brown (1965) and symbolic anthropology of Geertz (1973) were used to interpret the data. Malinowski (1944) and Radcliff-Brown (1965) regarded culture as an integrated whole and tried to explain how the relationships among the parts of society are created and how these parts are functional that is, having beneficial consequences to the individual and the society. The theory sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability; it states that our social lives are guided by social structure, which are relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology focuses on the symbolic rather than material aspect of culture. It is the study of culture through the interpretation of the meaning of symbols, values and beliefs in society. The gong and elephant tusk are instruments used for com-

munication. Their functions like all other cultural elements are numerous ranging from political, religious to social. The functions of these objects and their cultural meanings are examined in the following paragraphs starting with the gong.

3.3.1. Functions of the Gong and the Cultural Significance of Its Sound in the Grassfields of Cameroon

The gong as earlier mentioned is an instrument used in folk media in the Grassfields. In the past only the *Fon* and *kwifon* had the authority to handle and use it. The *Fon* or the *Kwifon* used it to communicate with the people, ancestors and gods. It is beaten on specific days and at different moments to send out different information or to mean different things. According to Knopfli (1999), no one except the *Fon* could beat the gong for war. He first beats it to call the people to the palace, secondly when sending the men out to war and thirdly when the warriors returned victoriously from the battlefield. In the days of old, fondoms in the Grassfields were frequently fighting inter-fondom battles and when a fondom was attacked by another, the fastest way to assemble the people was beating either the double gong, the slit drum or blowing the elephant tusk. These tools were used because their sounds could cover so many kilometres.

Nowadays, the *Fon* also beats the gong during the Annual Festival which is held in commemoration of past wars. He beats it when he wants to draw the population's attention to this important event, of symbolic significance in the lives of the people in particular and the fondom in general.

Besides being used by the *Fon* himself, the double gong is the sacred instrument of the *kwifon*, the traditional government in Cameroon Grassfields fondoms. To Knopfli (1999), sometimes the double gong is called *ngumba* (*kwifon*) in colloquial speech. The gong is beaten by the members of the *kwifon* during the following important occasions:

- 1) The making of sacrificial offerings to the royal ancestors.
- 2) To announce the death of one of their members or some high ranking dignity, such as a kingmaker, knight, sub-chief or quarter-head.
- 3) During the burial of such personalities. The beating of the double gong by a member of the *kwifon* is absolutely necessary to draw the attention of the ancestors to certain important stages in the burial. If there is an omission or a fault, the burial is not regarded as valid by the ancestors and the deceased will not be accepted as equal in their world.
- 4) During the death celebration of a member of *kwifon*.
- 5) When "the fire has gone out", in other words when the *Fon* has died. No one would say "The *Fon* has died", but "The fire is out (or lost)", or "There is cold in the Palace".
- 6) On the occasion of a serious judgment. For instance, the *kwifon* has the power to impeach the *Fon* and to appoint one of its members to sit on the throne until a successor is found.

As discussed above, the gong is beaten on specific days and one of such days is

the Country Sunday, a day reserved for the fondom to commune with the ancestors and gods of the land. On such a day, according to Knopfli (1999: p. 64), the *kwifon* pours a libation to the late *Fons*. Palm wine is poured out of a long-necked calabash into an Indian bamboo pipe placed on each grave while the gong is beaten. On this day, no one is allowed to work on his or her land. The sound of the gongs no matter where it was beaten, represented the voice of the *kwifon* which was to be respected and obeyed by everyone. The double iron gong is thus a symbol of authority, one of the most important among all motifs symbolising religious authority.

When on official missions, such as to announce work on the *ntoh* or Palace, the *kwifon* sends some of its members who go out at night on the eve of the day of work to inform village folks. They go round beating the gong in a particular rhythm which patterns to the *kwifon* alone. Those who understand it will automatically know that the *kwifon* is coming. This rhythm is not played by just anyone. If played by someone not assigned by the *kwifon*, something grave can happen in the fondom. As they beat the gong, they give the message. If it concerns the cutting of grass for the royal building, they will say: “tomorrow all males in the entire village have to meet at the *kwifon* hill and cut grass for the thatching of the Palace. No male should stay at home. This is a message from the *kwifon*”. They say this in the local language. As they go round, they stop at the compounds of all the sub-chiefs and king makers to greet and collect whatever is kept for them.

The *kwifon* can also go out in broad day-light and when it does, it beats the gong. It goes out during the day when it wants to erect a traditional injunction (a special stick which is planted on a piece of land or before a house, etc., under dispute). During this period, the members move bear footed, bear chested and bear headed. Wearing only a small lion on their waists to cover their nakedness. They move in a line and as they process, the person in front beats the gong. On hearing the beating of the instrument, those who are not members of this secret group flee and hide and only come out when it has passed.

The *kwifon* also goes out to cleanse pollution, acts that are not accepted and if committed, certain cleansing has to be done. These acts that Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 57) call pollution include suicide, incest, fighting with a clansman, spilling human blood and breaking cultural utensils. Other kinds of events that are also polluting are accidental death by drowning and lightening. To go to the site where the suicide was committed, the members of this secret group play their gong as they process there.

In most parts of the Grassfields, there are agricultural rites performed in mid-May that is, two months after crops have been planted. An interlocutor in Bambui fondom said that:

This ritual is conducted to stop wild winds from destroying the crop. The rites are equally conducted to prevent the winds from destroying other crops like plantains and bananas plants. To perform the rites, the kwifon members go out in the night and conduct the rites at all major junctions in the fondom. As the go

round, they also stop at the compounds of sub-chiefs, and notables to honour them as well as collect their “things” that is, whatever a dignitary had to offer, one of them could even offer a fowl. As they go round, they beat the double gong to signal that they are passing. Those who are not members of this society must go into hiding when they get the beatings of the kwifon (September, 2017).

In the Bamum fondom, the double gong known as *manjiendum* is an instrument held by no one else but the *Fon*. An elderly Bamum told the researchers in an interview that:

The manjiendum (double gong) was introduced in this fondom during the war between the Bamum and the Mapou people. Mapou is a fondom found in Malantuen in the Noun Division. It was during this war that the gong was used for the very first time. This war was in the reign of Fon Mboumbou the great warrior. At the battle field, he got lost and was entangled by his enemies. These enemies (the Mapou people) mocked him telling him that now you are left alone, all the others are nowhere to be found. When he realised that he was alone and helpless in the midst of his enemies, he beat the double gong which alerted his compatriots who then noticed his absence and then went to his rescue by following the gong’s sound. His compatriots got to where he was and saved him (December, 2021).

Because of this very invaluable role the double gong played in his life and that of his people, when he returned from the war victorious, he then introduced it as one of the fundamental insignia in the Bamum land. This explains why at the entrance of the Bamum Palace, at Foumban, the double gong and other symbols like the double headed serpent are all emblems of victory (see **Figure 4**). From this day of the war onwards, the double gong was regarded as the voice of the *Fon* because he used it to call his people. This symbolic object is an instrument used in assembling the people.

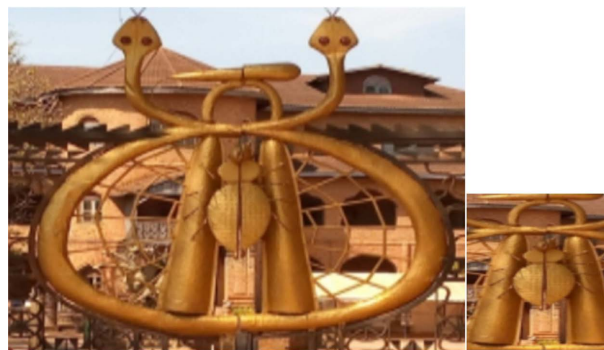


Figure 4. Some emblematic symbols of the Bamum people.
Source: Tikere’s archive (06/12/2022).

Today, there are no longer inter-fondom wars, the gong among the Bamum is used in specific ceremonies to communicate with the ancestors and gods. This gong today as demonstrated in **Figure 5**, is used during the *Ngouon* Festival which holds once every two years. A celebration which is aimed at showcasing the

Bmaum culture: economic, social, political as well as religious life of the people. This festival is usually a grandiose one that brings all Bamum people from far and near to commune with one another and with the ancestors and gods. During the festival therefore, the *Fon* beats the *manjiendum* may be to tell them (his people) that they are and will remain great combatants. The beating of the gong may equally be calling on the people to always work together or united. Important to note is the fact that this symbolic gong is the same one used at the enthronement of every new *Fon* in the Bamum land.



Figure 5. The *Fon* of the Bamum people with the *manjiendum*. Source: Tikere's archive (06/12/2020).

During the coronation of a new *Fon* among the Bamum, the gong is placed in front of him as demonstrated in **Figure 6**. The gong is an instrument which is beaten by the *Fon* to rally the population for an important mission as discussed earlier. But in this special enthronement occasion, it may be used to signal the ancestors and the gods of the land about the ceremony to alert, invite and ask them to guide, protect and also give wisdom, to the newly enthroned *Fon* to govern his people.



Figure 6. A newly crown Bamum *Fon* with the double gong placed in front of him. Source: Tikere's archive (10/10/2021).

The gong is equally used among the Grassfielders as an instrument which produces music to entertain the *Fon* and the people. **Notue and Triaca (2000)**, commenting on the musical instruments used in the Mankon fondom, note that:

Different musical instruments are used during leisure or various social activities in Mankon. The most common are the wooden drum and iron bells (double gong) often richly decorated belonging to the Fon, notables and customary societies. They play a liturgical role accompanying and providing the rhythm for dances and processions. Some of these objects have a sacred character and have been sanctified through sacrifices and magical practices. In this case, it is forbidden and dangerous to look at them, especially when they are producing sounds (p. 50).

3.3.2. The Double Gong as a Symbol Used on Arts and an Art Object

The double gong is a very important object in the lives of the Cameroon Grassfields people and due to its cultural value, it is represented on art objects such as embroidered costumes, thrones, title cups, bowls, drums, woven bags and many more. **Figure 7** and **Figure 8** are demonstrations of embroidered robes (togho) adorned with the double gong motif. The embroidered costume in **Figure 7** which is splendidly decorated in the Kom style is reserved for title holders or very important personalities in the Grassfields. In the Kom style, the embroiderer stitches much of white colour thread on black fabric as oppose to the *togho* of the other fondoms where the artist stitches a melange of red, orange, yellow and a little white colour threads on a black or *ndop* fabric. Sometimes, embroiders combine the *ndop* and black fabrics to produce gowns for the royalty (see **Figure 8**).



Figure 7. Kom style embroidered gown bearing the double gongs motifs used by nobles. Source: Tikere's archive (20/11/2020).

The double gong is also a motif used on the embroidered costumes of masquerades or *mukum* or *jujus*. Such *jujus* are usually own by members of the royalty; princes, notables, and the Palace. The two *jujus* in **Figure 9** and **Figure 10** are from the Mankon and Kom Palaces respectively. The first *juju* (see **Figure 9**)



Figure 8. Embroidered gowns bearing the double gongs motif used by nobles. Source: Tikere's archive (20/11/2020).

known in Mankon as *Muwatsu* is a Royal Dance. The leader of the dance group puts on an embroidered costume adorned with the gong, calabash and the lizard motifs. The gong like the other symbols as the costume portrays is adorned with cowry shells a symbol of royalty, wealth, fertility, etc. (Moffor, 2022a). This juju goes out and dances only in celebrations concerning the Palace, and one of its members. It is important to note that one of the musical instruments of this *mukum* is the double gong. It is handled and played by an initiated member of the dance group. When it is not in use, it is kept in the premises of the Palace under the supervision of a notable.



Figure 9. The *Muwatsu* royal dance of the Mankon fondom. Source: Tikere's archive (07/08/2017).

The second *mukum* as demonstrated in **Figure 10** is another Royal Dance in the Kom fondom. It is known as *Atsingé*. It leaves the Palace premises only when the *kwifoyn* or *Foyn* is going out on a very important occasion. In the past, in every outing, the *Foyn* himself led it. A *nchinda* in the Kom Palace this to say to the researchers:

What we have to understand is that this is the Foyn's juju reasons why in the past when it was leaving the palace, it was led by the Foyn. Today, because the Foyn is no longer young to lead the dance, it is led by Bobe kwifoyn (the father of kwifoyn) or the Foyn's guide, that is someone who is very close to the Foyn all the time. Someone close to the Foyn knows many things in the Palace.

This means that a nchinda who is not close to the Foyn cannot lead this juju. (08/11/2021).

The costume of *Atsinge* dance is decorated with the double gong motif to reiterate the fact that it comes from the Palace. Its music is produced with the double gong, and the instrument is played by the *Foyn's* guide. This guide of the *Foyn* in **Figure 10** said that:

I have worked as a nchinda in the Kom Place for 18 years. I accompanied the Foyn where ever he went, I have a mastery of most if not all the activities that take place in the Kom Palace due to my longevity of service for the Foyn and the Kom fondom. My rank is therefore higher than that of some older people who have served in the Palace. When I graduated as a nchinda, I joined the kwifoyn. That is why I was playing the double gong in the Atsinge dance (19/11/2022).



Figure 10. The *Atsinge* dance of the Kom fondom. Source: Tikere's archive (20/11/2014).

Like the *Muwatsu* Royal Dance of Mankon, *Atsinge* goes out only on state matters and during the death of very important personalities in the Kom fondom. It could go out when the *Fon* “disappears”, when the head of a quarter, a prince, notable or *bohchong* dies. The quarter heads are the *Foyn's* representatives in the different quarters. *Bohchong* is the owner of the *chong* dance in the Kom fondom. *Bo* or *Bobe* means father meanwhile *chong* is a dance. *Bochong* therefore means the father of *chong*. According to Ngam (2002: p. 45), *chong* is the highest social institution in the Kom society. The right to own or create the *chong*, is given by the *foyn*—the ruler of Kom.

Pertinent to note is the fact that the gong motif is also used as a symbol on items like houseposts and stools. The house decorated with sculpted houseposts in **Figure 11** is found in the Palace of Kedjom Ketinguh fondom in Tubah Sub-Division in Mezam Division. One of the houseposts precisely the one on the right is adorned from top to bottom with motifs such as the double gong, bats' heads, and earth spider. These are all royal symbols used by the *Fon* to perform his state duties. The gong, Knopfli (1999: p. 64) notes that it can occasionally be seen as a motif on stools and other art objects. It is one of the few inanimate objects, as opposed to animal or human symbols, whose use and meaning is so sig-

nificant that it has found acceptance in the range of approved and meaningful motifs in wood carving.



Figure 11. Houseposts decorated with multiple motifs including the double gong. Source: Tikere's archive (31/01/2011).

Art works decorated with this design like the stool in **Figure 12** are not handled by just anyone in most Grassfields fondoms. They are either touched by the *Fon's nchinda* or any important dignitary in the fondom. When not in use, they are kept in a place where commoners cannot have easy access to. The researcher visited Kedjom Ketinguh Palace and was led to the different sections by a *nchinda*. The latter told the researchers that:

*Do not lay your hand on any of these objects. That stool there like all other art objects decorated with gongs, is used by the fon who is the head of all sacred societies as well as all activities in the fondom. The Fon of Kedjom Ketinguh sits on this stool most times during cultural ceremonies such as *kebien ke ndong* (annual dance). He uses this emblematic symbol to confirm his leadership and authority (31/01/2010).*

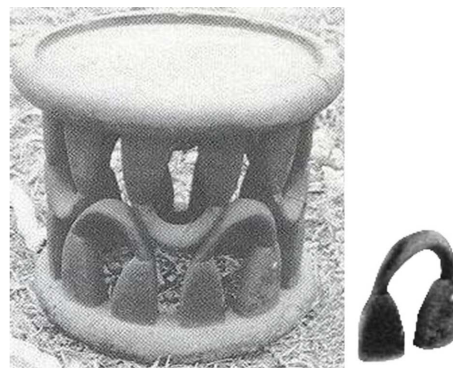


Figure 12. Stool with the double gong design (H. 44 cm, D. 42 cm). Source: Tikere's archive (31/01/2010).

In the Bambui fondom for instance, the compound of Tah Moteh (sub-chief) has a good number of stools and thrones. These stools are covered with card board paper to prevent people whose social rank does not match their use to sit on them. Tah Moteh had this to say in an interview:

Those stools as you can see have the titles of the different dignitaries who can use them. I have covered them first to alert the children that the stools are “law things” that is objects which children do not have to play with or handle anyhow. Secondly, if I do not write the various titles of those who can use them, somebody might use an object which does not match his social position (14/12/2000).

The traditional bag is one of the art items on which the double gong is designed. This bag like the one demonstrated in **Figure 13** is own either by the *Fon* or the *kwifon*. The one below is owned by the *Fon* of Mejang in Boyo Division, North West Region of Cameroon. It is handled by one of his retainers otherwise known as *nchinda*. This bag contains the *Fon*'s objects and wherever he goes, the *nchinda* goes with him and whatever he needs from it is given to him by no one else but the *nchinda*. The peculiarities of the bag is that it is decorated with two very emblematic (black and red) colours in the cultural sphere of the Cameroon Grassfields. The gong and all the objects adorned with this symbol stand for authority, one of the most important among all motifs symbolising authority.



Figure 13. A retainer carrying the *Fon*'s bag adorned with the double gong motif. Source: Tikere's archive (02/09/2022).

3.3.3. The Role of the Elephant Tusk and the Symbolism of Its Sound in the Grassfields of Cameroon

The elephant tusk is the tusk of the elephant, a very important object among the Grassfielders of Cameroon. Because of its invaluable nature, its ownership and use are reserved for the *Fon*. Some of these tusks are sculpted with different motifs; anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. The most used motif is the human head (see **Figure 3**). Notue and Triaca (2000, 2005) note that:

*The elephant is not only a source of inspiration, as plastic theme for Mankon and Grassland artists, but also a source of ivory and hair which are used to make various works of art. Ivory (elephant's tusk) is of great economic value and a sign of wealth. Ivory products, luxury articles or articles for prestige have for long remained the attributes of the *Fon* and important personalities of the Kingdom (p. 70).*

The sound of this object represents the voice of the *Fon* as it is used by him at different moments in ceremonies. He uses it himself or dedicates a notable to do

it on his behalf. In the Oku fondom for instance, Koloss (2000) notes that:

It is used during the grass-cutting festival (ebwoi kembab or “grass for kembab” (the trumpet of the Palace)), to produce music. This music is played by the nchisentock group using the double gong and the trumpet (elephant tusk). The grass-cutting ceremony is an annual festival conducted at the approach of the first weeding of the young plants. This is usually around the middle of April. There are usually many participants in this festival. “They demonstrate the unity and strength of the people and their reverence for the Fon or King and for the royal ancestors by cutting the grass on the slopes, which in earlier times was used for the grass roofs of houses in the Palace complex, including the burial houses of the deceased Kings. Although these instruments were meant to produce music, their sounds were also meant to summon as many people as possible to the festival in honour of their King” (pp. 392-393).

During the enthronement of a new *Fon* in most if not all the Grassfields of Cameroon, the elephant tusks are blown at the *Fon*'s very first outing to communicate his presence and also to show him to his people. This ceremony usually takes place in the palace plaza. When the *Fon* is shown to the public, he is led to his throne or royal stool where he sits and rests his feet on an elephant tusk or elephant tusks as demonstrated in **Figure 14**. The figure shows the *Fon* of Baba 1, in the Ngotetunjia Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. He is enthroned at the age of nine and even at his tender age, as the *Fon* and ruler, he has the power to use all royal emblems including the elephant tusks.



Figure 14. A newly enthroned *Fon* with his feet placed on an elephant tusk. Source: Tikere's archive (08/05/2023).

Nkwi (1982: p. 62) notes that the elephant tusk or ivory trumpets are blown to advertise the presence or announce the arrival of the *Fon*. During the annual dance festival in most Grassfields fondoms at specific moments of the dance, these elephant tusks are used to signal that the *Fon* is around. At the annual dance (abine-mfor) in Bafut for example, when the *Fon* is coming out of the *Achum* (royal lodge) to meet the public, his arrival is announced by two men who blow two trumpets made of elephant tusk as demonstrated in

Figure 15. The figure portrays two men who are notables or some important personalities from their traditional attire. One wears *togho* or embroidered gowns with the *ndop* and the double gong motifs meanwhile the second's *togho* has the symbols of the moon and double gong. These tusks are male and female, that is, they are adorned with anthropomorphic figures as portrayed in **Figure 15**.



Figure 15. Elephant tusks blown to announce the arrival of the Fon. Source: Tikere's archive (17/12/2012).

When the *Fon* comes out of the *Achum*, he sits on his throne and performs a rite of passage or adulthood rites on both male and female. When this is over, he is let to the Palace esplanade where he sits on another royal throne and rests his feet on two elephant tusks as demonstrated in **Figure 16**. Commenting on the annual dance festival in Bali-Nyonga, Knopfli (1999: pp. 32-33) notes that *usually two very old large tusks serve the Fon as footrests in front of his throne. Two tusks were also used in times of old as signal trumpets to call people to war and they are still used today, for instance in Bali-Nyonga, to open the Annual Festival, the Lela.*



Figure 16. The *Fon* of Bafut with his feet placed on elephant tusks. Source: Tikere's archive (17/12/2012).

The use of the elephant tusk is not limited to the annual dance festival. In this part of the country, whenever the *Fon* organises an important event in his Palace, he sits in the midst of his peers and places his feet on the elephant tusk which is in turn placed on a leopard skin. As he places his feet on the elephant tusks and leopard skin, it is believed that he will absorb the wisdom and might of the elephant as well as the courage, vivacity, and strength of the leopard. Reasons

why in some Grassfields fondoms, the *Fon* is called “elephant” or “leopard”. Notue and Triaca (2000, 2005) note that:

The ownership and use of elephant tusks during public ceremonies symbolizes nobility, authority and abundance. During important festivals, the Fon of Mankon sits on a carved throne with his feet on one or two elephant tusks laid on a leopard skin (p. 70).

Figure 17 shows the *Fon* of Kedjom Ketinguh Fon Viyouf Sheteh Nelson on his throne with his feet placed on an elephant tusk and a leopard skin. To Nkwi (1987: p. 51), elephant tusks and leopard pelts were symbols of power and sovereignty. This *Fon* like all the *Fons* of the Cameroon Grassfields, when they have a meeting with the notables or the heads of the quarters, he sits in his position of authority using most of the regalia of power such as the elephant tusk and leopard skin.



Figure 17. Fon Viyouf Sheteh Nelson with his feet placed on an elephant tusk. Source: Tikere’s archive (20/01/2009).

3.3.4. The Elephant Tusk as an Object of Arts

The elephant tusk just like the double gong is a symbol adorned on arts. The tusk is often carved out wood and it is usually positioned in front of many Palaces and sometimes around the sitting space of the *Fon* in the Palace. These sculpted elephant tusks are beautifully decorated with different motifs. The tusks in Figure 18 for instance are adorned with motifs ranging from the *ndop*, stylised scorpion, human head, the lizard, the net to human figure at the top. These symbols which appear on these sculpted tusks are royal motifs reason why they are seen only in the *Fon*’s Palaces. What is peculiar with these sculpted tusks below is that the tops are adorned with the male and female motifs respectively. The use of these motifs (male and female) may be to confirm the fact that society would not exist without these two sexes.

The figures below to be more precise are at the Palace of the Fon of Mbei fondom, Fon Mokom Njei II in Yaounde (the capital of Cameroon). Mbei is a Fondom in the Santa Sub-Division, North West Region of Cameroon. This oc-

casation was organised by the *Fon* to communion with his people in the presence of other Grassfields fons. The carved tusks are placed at the entrance of the Palace an indication of royalty.



Figure 18. Sculpted tusks at the entrance of *Fon's* Palace. Source: Tikere's archive (26/02/2022).

As earlier mentioned, carved tusks are placed at the entrance of some Grassfields Palaces. The researcher visited many Palaces in the Grassfields and found out that most of them have sculpted tusks placed at their entrances. **Figure 19** portrays the entrance to the Bana *Fon's* Palace. Bana is a fonom in the West Region in Cameroon. These tusks are two in number, one placed at each side of the entrance (one on the right and the other on the left). Everyone who enters the Palace has to pass under these objects. A notable in this Palace told the researchers that:

No one can successfully enter the Palace with any evil intentions. If he or she has any suspicious "bag" or medicine and is entering the Palace, when he or she passes under the tusks, the medicine will be rendered powerless. It will be neutralised by the powerful potion which has been used to empower these tusks. The Fon or the chief priest, performs some rites annually on these objects and at other important places in the fonom every time there is an important occasion in the fonom. This is done to renew and always keep these objects powerful (November, 2021).



Figure 19. The entrance of the Bana palace decorated with carved tusks. Source: Tikere's archive (11/12/2018).

The single gong or double gong and elephant tusk fulfil varied roles in the lives of the Cameroon Grassfields people. They play an important roles in the social life of the people where the gong is used as a musical instrument by many social groups. In religion, they are used as instruments to link the living and the dead. And in politics, the gong in the past was handled exclusively by the *Fon* or a member of the *kwifon* society to reach out to the people and the gods. These objects like their sounds were and are symbols of authority as their sounds represented and still stands for the voice of the royalty.

3.4. Dynamic in the Gong and Elephant Tusk among the Cameroon Grassfields

The single or double gong and elephant tusk are cultural elements and like all other cultural elements, they change with time. To interpret the data in this portion of the article, the theory of evolution was employed. This theory which may also be called cultural or socio-cultural evolution was developed in the 19th by Tylor and Morgan. It is the process of change and development in human societies that results cumulative change in their stores of cultural information. The changes in these emblematic items (double gong and elephant tusk) are observed in the production, ownership and use.

The production of the gong for instance was done using wrought iron. This iron was extracted from “iron pillar”, consisting of iron, slag and charcoal. Iron was obtained by hammering the iron pillar with stones in order to free the iron from the slag (Knopfli, 1999: p. 110). Today, these gongs are made of sheet metal obtained from petrol or oil drums. The cone-shaped pieces are chiselled out preferably from the uncorrugated, flat drum tops and bottoms (Knopfli, 1999: pp. 113-114). The change here could be due to two reasons, the first being that, to obtain the iron, from the iron pillar, was pains taking or a tedious exercise in which the producer had to engage in a lot of hitting. The second reason may be because the imported metal drums were very available in this part of the country. The availability of these metal drums therefore, facilitated the task of the blacksmiths. Working gongs from the metal drums was a less stressful activities and this led to the production of more gongs unlike in the past when wrought iron was being used.

Some of the interlocutors made the researcher to understand that there is a great difference in the sounds produced by gongs made from wrought iron and those from sheet metal. They note that single or double gongs produced with wrought iron sounds louder than those made from sheet metal. Again, gongs made from wrought iron is heavier and would last longer than those produced from sheet metal.

The single or double gongs were invaluable objects in the Grassfields reasons why it ownership and use was reserved for the royalty (*fon and kwifon*). The gong like most if not all arts such as sculptures, pottery and many others were reserved for the royalty because they played very important role in the cultural lives of the peoples. One thing to note is the fact that some Grassfields *Fons* for

instance *Fon* Zofoa II of Babungo was himself a blacksmith (Knopfli, 1999: p. 114) and because of their involvement and engagement in this activity, they produced only the type of gongs that were required to communicate with the people, ancestors and gods. Today, a lot of people out of this restricted class of blacksmiths produce these objects one of the reasons why this instrument is gradually losing its original function. Commenting on this trade in Babungo a major production centre, Knopfli (1999: p. 108) states that:

Blacksmithing is still a vital trade in Babungo today, probably as much as before. Neither has it died out in other Grassland chiefdoms. Knives, palm wine tapping, carving and farm tools, swords, ceremonial knives, barbed spearheads, double and single gongs, bell for hunting dogs, and other things can be seen displayed on every weekly market day either by the blacksmith themselves or by traders.

The fact that the double gong is found in most markets in the Grassfields and could be bought by just anyone who can purchase it has made this cultural instrument to be used in different sectors of the society, it is used by both sacred and profane societies and even in the churches. Knopfli (1999: p. 115), notes that the double gong is used in many forms of music for major traditional festivals like birth and death celebrations. And many church choirs—whose member is legion—use the double gong to accompany their singing.

Many Christians that researcher interviewed said that the double gong is used to produce music in the church to praise God who is King of all Kings. If other kings exist, God is above all of them so using this musical instrument to produce music for him is giving the respect and honour which he deserves.

There is equally a change in the fact that the gong like the elephant tusk are all designs which appear on arts. The importance of these objects inspired many artists to adorn them on embroidered costumes, stools, houseposts, and many more and these objects on which these motifs are decorated are reserved for the ruling class including the *kwifon*.

Some of the tusks seen in the Cameroon Grassfields today are made from cement as demonstrated in Figure 20. These objects are produced by bricklayers, who mix cement, sand and gravel and then cast on a frame made of binding wire. These “cement” tusks are bought by anyone who has the money to purchase them. Although cement tusks are adorned with emblematic motifs like the lizard, they do not possess the same powers like those sculpted from wood. Wood used in the carving of tusks are peculiar and Grassfields belief system holds that trees from which the wood is obtained are the house of spirits.

Culture is not static, it changes with time and this change is visible through the different cultural elements. As cultural elements, the gong and elephant tusk are susceptible to change and this change could be noticed in their production (raw materials in the case of the gong), and functions. Such changes are influenced by contact with other cultures. The gong for example was produced in the past from wrought iron extracted from “iron pillar”, consisting of iron, slag and charcoal but today, it is made from sheet metal obtained from petrol or oil



Figure 20. A workshop of a bricklayer showing cement sculpted tusks. Source: Tikere's archive (15/12/2012).

drums which came from the Europe. Because the elephant tusk was a very invaluable cultural item, artists especially sculptors started carving tusks from wood which were used to decorate the palaces but today these tusks are not only produced from wood, they are equally manufactured from the mixture of cement, sand and gravel.

4. Conclusion

The Cameroon Grassfields are the people who occupy the North West and West Regions of Cameroon. They have a very rich cultural heritage and this can be seen in their arts and traditions. The article “The Voice of Royalty: The Symbolism of the Gong’s and Elephant Tusk’s Sounds among the Cameroon Grassfields” examined the functions and symbolism of the sounds of the gong and elephant tusk to the people of the Grassfields. It equally purposed to explain the changes which have taken place in the production, ownership and use of these objects. The single or double gong and elephant tusks are objects of very symbolic value in the Cameroon Grassfields. The activity of making the gong and the carving of elephant tusks is reserved for the male folks alone. Some of the elephant tusks are carved or adorned with anthropomorphic symbols to match the status of those who have the prerogative to use them. These objects of symbolic importance are therefore reserved for the royalty, the *Fon* and the *kwifon*. These instruments were used at specific moments of the life of the fendom either by the *Fon* or the *kwifon*. But as time passes, instruments like the double gong are used by many dance groups or masquerades as musical instruments. Even in the churches today, the double gong is used to produce music to praise God. Although there have been changes in the production, ownership and use of the gong and elephant tusk, these objects remain a veritable or significant cultural identity and heritage of the Grassfields peoples. Their use and sounds are a manifestation of the social-political as well as religious organisation of the Grassfields’ fondoms. They were and are still objects of prestige authority, wisdom, majesty and many more.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books.
- Knopfli, H. (1999). *Sculpture and Symbolism. Crafts and Techniques: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grassfield Woodcarvers and Blacksmiths (Part 2)*. Basel Mission.
- Koloss, H. J. (2000). *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. Verlag Von Dietrich Feimer.
- Malinowski, B. (1944). *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Moffor, E. T. (2016). *Arts and Socio-Cultural Changes: The Sculpture(s) of Kedjom Chiefdoms (Western Grassfields Cameroon)*. Ph.D. Thesis, The Department of Anthropology, The University of Yaoundé 1.
- Moffor, E. T. (2022a). The Semantic Transformation of the Cultural Significance of the Cowry in the Cameroon Grassfields. *East African Scholars Multidisciplinary Bulletin*, 5, 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.36349/easjmb.2022.v05i05.001>
- Moffor, E. T. (2022b). The Making of Fons/Kings: An Insight into the Regalia of a Newly Crowned Cameroon Grassfields Fon. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering & Multidisciplinary Physical Sciences*, 10, 1-26.
- Ngam, F. C. (2002). *The Culture, Traditions and Customs of the Kom People* (2nd ed.). NIP Publications.
- Ngwa, J. A. (1967). *An Outline Geography of the Federal Republic of Cameroon*. Longman Group Limited.
- Nkwi, P. N. (1982). *Traditional Government and Social Change: A Study of the Political Institution among the Kom of the Cameroon Grassfield*. Fribourg University Press.
- Nkwi, P. N. (1987). *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon*. Department of Sociology, The University of Yaounde
- Nkwi, P. N., & Warnier, J. (1982). *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*. Department of Sociology, University of Yaoundé.
- Notue, J.-P., & Triaca, B. (2000). *The Treasure of the Mankon Kingdom: Cultural Objects of the Royal Palace*. Centro Orientamento Educativo.
- Notue, J.-P., & Triaca, B. (2005). *Arts Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom (West Cameroon) Dartmouth: Trustees of Dartmouth Collège*. 5 Continents.
- Radcliff-Brown, A. R. (1965). *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Free Press.
- Steward, J. (1955). *The Theory of Cultural Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. University of Illinois Press.
- Warnier, J. P. (1975). *Pre-Colonial Mankon: The Development of a Cameroon Chiefdom in its Regional Setting*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania.