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## Title Cups and People

### Relationships and Change in Grassfields Art

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#### Introduction

Throne objects such as title cups, for example, have been produced and used in Bambui since immemorial time. Reserved mostly for titleholders or members of the traditional elites, title cups form part of a “network of exchange of objects that has played a crucial role in defining regional cultural identity at least since the eighteenth century” (Forni 2007: 42). Of all the regalia of traditional elites across the Cameroon Grassfields and Bambui in particular, the title cup is one of the most important objects used in understanding the traditional structure of the society and how the society in turn relates to the cup. Its importance rests in its role in facilitating communication between the titleholder or successor, who is custodian of his people (the living), and their ancestors, considered the overall custodians of both the successor and his people. In other words, titleholders, both men and women automatically gain all the rights of their late forefathers and mothers upon receiving the title cup. A titleholder or successor without a title cup is unthinkable in Bambui.

Title cups in Bambui, as title cups in other villages across the Cameroon Grassfields (Knöpfli 1997:

17; Notué and Triaca 2005: 164f.), are considered the “hands” that pilot the plane or activities of the village (Mombo-o II, pers. comm., March 2006). The title cup is one of the main objects used in traditional religious rituals such as initiation, ancestral worship, traditional marriages, child birth, and burials, all aim at enhancing the wellbeing of the Bambui community. As noted by Forni (2007: 42) and other Grassfields scholars, objects are essential elements in the comprehension of the commercial and competitive relationships among autonomous Grassfields villages. Title cups are entrusted into the hands of traditional elites such as the *fon*, who is head of the social organization of the village. The *fohnbe-eh* or Bambui *fon*, for example, is the secular and spiritual leader of the Bambui people as well as *ta-an-to-oh* or head of the royal clan (see Ndenge 2005: 33, for example, for more on Grassfields *fons*). He oversees the organization and performance of all religious rituals in his community, presides over issues relating to war, and he is the highest magistrate in his *fondom*. He heads and is responsible for the creation and functioning of all traditional societies and *juju* groups that cater for the well-being of his people. All these are achieved through the use of a title cup in pouring libation on the ancestral stone of the ancestors or gods of the village. The *fohnbe-eh* is closely assisted in his functions by the *meufo* or queen mother, who is either his real mother or one of his sisters if his mother is deceased. The *meufo* is responsible for the well-being of the *fon*'s wives, princes, and princesses, as well as that of the entire Bambui community. She plays the role of magistrate and teacher over the *fon*'s wives, resolving disputes and educating them on how to perform their royal duties. The *meufo* is considered a titleholder in the Bambui *fondom* and she has the right to certain traditional religious rituals normally reserved for the *fon*. Like other titleholders, she owns a title cup that distinguishes her from other women in the palace and the villages as a whole.

#### The Bambui People and Their Culture

Bambui is one of the many Grassfields villages claiming to have come from the upper Mbam River, the region of the sacred lake usually referred to as Kimi or Rifum, home to the present-day Tikar. They were led to their present territory by a brave warlord leader called Zehtingong who subsequently became the first *fohnbe-eh*, *fon* of Bambui (date not known). It is believed the Bambui people settled temporarily at Pheduh, Mankha-ah Bghiendang and Tuola-a

before moving to the present site (pa Momah, pers. comm., May 2005). Ancestral shrines, now considered sacred sites are found in these places. As noted by *fohnbe-eh*, some of the shrines have been transferred to the homes of titleholders or the Bambui palace, where periodic rituals are now performed using the title cup. Bambui is one of the four villages including Bambili, Kedjom keku, and Kedjom ketingoh that make up Tubah Subdivision in Mezam Division, Northwest Province. When travelling from Bamenda to Nkambe or Fundong, Bambui is the second village that one encounters and is located just about a ten-minutes drive from Bamenda central. Bambui covers a land surface of about 85 square kilometers with low-lying land in the central and western parts, and undulating hills in the northeastern and eastern parts. It has a pleasantly mild climate in contrast to surrounding villages with a long and abundantly wet season.

Bambui is a fairly large village with a population of about 16,000 inhabitants who are in turn divided into 17 quarters, each administered by a *tante-eh*, a quarter head, and a traditional quarter council made of male and female elders as well as youth leaders. Quarter heads are appointed by the quarter council in consultation with the traditional ruler and the population of the quarter in question. Quarter heads are in turn incorporated into the ranks of members of the village traditional council which is made up of titleholders from the royal family, *tanyis* and *manyis* or twin parents, and others from across the village who are directly or indirectly involved in the traditional administration of the village. Professional artists and some traditional medicine men or herbalists are also expected to assist in the running of their respective quarter affairs because they provide sculptures and other art objects as well as talismans to the traditional hierarchy in the quarter in particular and the village as a whole.

Succession in Bambui as elsewhere in the Bamenda Grassfields is passed down from father to son and mother to daughter. This happens when the *fon*, for example, or head of the family dies. Once enthroned, the successor can never abdicate. Succession across the Bamenda Grassfields (with the exception of Kom) is patrilineal, with a greater share of the family head or husband's property going to one of his sons, and that of the woman to one of her daughters. However, the successor and his siblings are expected to respect all members, including the living and the dead, of their maternal family. The general belief in Bambui is that most ill luck depends on the state of respect and relationship that the patrilineal siblings accord to their *tah-me-eh*, their matrilineage. Cordial relationship results in

fortune and prosperity, while lack of respect and a bad relationship leads to misfortune and failure. The successor, *njindie-eh*, is chosen from among the second to the last son.<sup>1</sup> This can either be done by the family head or husband before his death or by family members if he dies without choosing one. Once this is done, the successor inherits not only property but also all social and political responsibilities held by his father, such as traditional titles and other social responsibilities. He also inherits his father's wives (with the exception of his mother) and his siblings, and other family members who were answerable to his father. As a successor he is expected to appoint relevant people to vacant traditional positions in the family, such as successors to deceased siblings, for example, because leaving such positions empty is a taboo and can bring misfortune in the form of sudden death or famine to the family. He is also entitled to a traditional title within the royal structure because of his experience as head of a patrilineage. More importantly, the successor is expected to inherit and live only in his father's compound, because it is there where ancestral stones are placed and venerated.

The status of a successor in Bambui is marked by the possession of a wide variety of objects, such as the title cup, dress, caps, gourds, staff, stools, statues, and bags. Most of these objects are used during family rituals and ceremonies as well as in *juju* and *manjong* festivities. However, women successors do not own as many objects as their male counterparts because of their social status. One notable object owned by all women successors is a title cup made from gourd or calabash. Successors (mostly men) are also expected to own large raffia farms and to keep wine for unexpected visits by the quarter head, family members, or other notables. In a situation where visitors turn up and there is no raffia wine, the successor will share a kola nut with them as a sign of respect. The kola nut is also a request to the visitor to deliver whatever message he/she brought. Because most of these things are found in the village and the tradition is largely practiced there, it is difficult for successors or a Bambui successor to happily live in a city. Family members living out of the village return at different times not only to participate in rituals but also to get traditional blessings from their successor. Traditional blessing can be in the form of traditional wine, libation in the family

<sup>1</sup> The reason for exempting the first son from successorship relates to the fact that he is the eldest among his siblings and may play the role of choosing his father's successor or mediating between them in time of crisis. However, in some cases, the first son might be sent back to succeed his mother's father in a situation where the latter did not have a male child.

shrine, or just drinking water from the ancestral or title cup. In performing the blessing, the successor pours some of the raffia wine or drinking water to the ground, making some incantations before handing it to his sibling or family member to drink. The significance of this practice is to call on the ancestors of the family to protect their son or daughter wherever he or she goes.

All Bambui families, including Christian and non-Christian homes, are associated or affiliated to customary societies of some sort, and these societies require them to use different categories of art objects in traditional ceremonies fashioned either to venerate members of the traditional elites, to appease the wandering spirits of their ancestors, or just to enhance social cohesion within the village. At the helm of customary societies in Bambui is the regulatory society, variously referred to as *ngumba* or *kwifor*.<sup>2</sup> As in most of the villages of the Northern Mezam Area (NMA), *kwifor* in Bambui represents the overall voice of the people. It is headed by *tah-kwifor*, “father of *kwifor*,” who is recognized as an important titleholder in the village. He is the president of *kwifor* and is assisted in his functions by a group of notables. However, as civilization makes its inroads into the Bambui traditional structure, the old ways are slowly beginning to break down and most modern urban elites are entering the mainstream of development. In fact, most of what existed before the coming of Christianity to Bambui has changed, but a lot is still intact. The impression given by my informants during the fieldwork is that Bambui is one of the few villages in the Bamenda Grassfields that still retains many of the age-old customs and beliefs, living in accordance with the ways and practices of their forefathers.

### Becoming a Title Cup

According to pa Joseph Maka, a title cup is a special drinking object used by a titleholder in drinking palm wine, and also in performing important family rituals (pers. comm., March 2006). The title cup is made from one of the following materials:

- the buffalo horn – used mostly by traditional elites such as the *fon*, subchiefs and *tah-kwifor* or head of *kwifor*,
- the dwarf cow horn – used by quarter and family heads,
- the deer horn used by nobilities of the shrine and other traditional elites,

- the cow horn used by modern urban elites and commoners,
- the gourd head used by commoners, women, and youths.

The title cup is born out of the dead of a traditional elite, such as the *fon* or a subchief, for example. Some title cups are a reward from the traditional ruler or *fon* to a member of his community in recognition of the person’s contribution to the development of his people. As noted by Knöpfli (1997: 17), it is “one of the most precious heirlooms handed down to the most honourable member of the family from one generation to the next.” Every family in Bambui and by extension the Cameroon Grassfields has a title cup of some sort because it is one of the most important instruments that distinguishes a family head, otherwise known as a titleholder from the other family members. The title cup carries the secret of each family in possession of one. Because of the secret nature of the title cup, some knowledge or information relating to title cups cannot be easily revealed to people who are not titleholders. The essence is to promote and preserve the integrity of the family. This view is echoed by Joseph Nevadomsky, when he notes, “[w]here knowledge is of absolutely crucial importance to the survival of the [Benin] kingdom and the well-being of its caretakers, secrecy is paramount and precautions against reckless revelation are uppermost” (1984: 42).

The question of secrecy in African art has been raised and discussed repeatedly, but it continues to play a central role in articulating cultural difference between and among Africans and their art. The book “Secrecy. African Art That Reveals and Conceals,” edited by Mary Nooter (1993) is one notable source where Africanist scholars have demonstrated their views about secrecy. The book is a collection of thirteen essays by scholars from diverse intellectual backgrounds. The essays were written to accompany an exhibition at the Museum for African Art, New York, in 1993. The book and the exhibition were centred on two main points: first, that “art is intimately related to knowledge in Africa, being fundamental to processes of teaching and revelation that confers status and disclose information, meanings, and symbols; and second, secrets are often central to the making, ownership, use, and interpretation of art” (Nooter 1993: 23). Secrecy is an important instrument in the construction of power across Bambui in particular and the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole.<sup>3</sup> To own the title cup in Bambui (and, therefore, a secret object and

<sup>2</sup> Kaberry (1952); Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Notué, Ndenge, and Triara (2000: 30).

<sup>3</sup> For both a traditional and modern point of view on secrecy, see the study by de Jong (2001).



**Fig. 1:** Buffalo horns carved by pa Mbighobong. They are decorated with earth spider, human face and geometric designs such as dots. One of the horns is undecorated, may be because the person who commissioned it did not ask for any form of decoration (Kedjom Keku, November 2010).

knowledge) and to show that one owns it, is a form of power. Having access to secrecy is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion used by members of the traditional elites to define their status and to distinguish themselves from ordinary (those without traditional titles) men and women of their society. This is done through the use of objects such as the title cup. Secrecy can also be the preserve of a traditional association where members share a common meeting ground, language, a collection of special objects whose meaning is only known to the members or those who are initiated into the group. As noted by Ravenshill (pers. comm., 1991, quoted in Nooter 1993: 24, 33), “the visible functions to keep the invisible invisible.” In the context of this article, the title cup functions to keep the invisible ancestors and spirits of the Bambui people invisible. But, how exactly is the title cup initiated?

One of the major traditional religious rituals performed when a notable or titleholder dies in Bambui is to initiate the title cup before he or she is buried. This is done by placing the deceased person’s cup on his forehead in order to transfer whatever power he/she possessed to the cup he used during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup> It is believed that the dead person’s power

comes to add to any other form of ancestral power that was in the title cup since most of them are inherited. In a situation where the deceased person does not own a cup or title cup, one is purchased and used in this ritual in order to ensure that he/she leaves behind an ancestral cup that will eventually be handed to his/her successor. A major weakness with the new cup is that it does not possess the wear and tear of the old title cup, and may be considered inauthentic by some commentators. However, the extent to which the age of an object or its wear and tear is significant in rituals of this nature in Bambui is a matter of opinion. To some of my informants, the new title cup does not represent or possess the power of all the ancestors of the family because it was never used by the deceased. To others, it represents the entire family because the deceased whose power has been transferred to the new title cup was the overall representative of his family or families under him. What my informants mean here, I think, is that power cannot obviously solely depend on the wear and tear of the cup or the deceased as the overall ancestor. It can also be negotiated. After all, “the authentic is not a fixed property of an object or a situation, but is a negotiated attribute with multiple dimensions whose status is evaluated differently by different assessors” (Xie and Wall 2003: 111).

<sup>4</sup> Weber (1962: 152, cited in Arens and Karp 1989: xiii) defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in the position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.” Across Bambui in particular and the Cameroon Grassfields in general, traditional medicine is considered a source of power and is used either to protect humans against

witches and evil spirits, or to protect traditional space. It is believed that titleholders and family heads possess a kind of power that allows them to see what ordinary family members and commoners cannot see.

The initiation ritual is performed by elderly men with ranks similar to those of the deceased. For instance, the initiation rites for a title cup belonging to a traditional elite is performed by a member of the traditional elites; that of a modern urban elite is done by a modern urban elite, and the same applies to *manyis* or twin mother, women, and commoners. The placing of the title cup on the deceased forehead is usually followed by incantations, inviting the deceased to go with “dry or empty hands and leave behind fresh hands” to look after his family, and their descendants (Pa Maka, pers. comm., December 2004). The “fresh hands” in this context refer to the power transferred from the deceased to the title cup, while “dry hands” stand for the deceased continuous role in keeping the “fresh hands” even more fresher. Put differently, the deceased or ancestor should never relent his/her effort in looking after the family left behind. Outcomes of rituals performed using the title cup must always be positive. Negative outcomes of rituals performed in times of illnesses in the family suggest the illness is either natural and require modern treatment or is the fault of the sick person and requires him/her to rethink his relationship with friends and colleagues.

Once the ritual is complete, the title cup is put into a special bag and stored in a secret location in the deceased’s house until after his second funeral celebration. It is eventually handed to the rightful owner or successor together with other throne objects at a traditional religious ceremony attended mostly by titleholders and successors. It is worthy to note that the title cup is not the first part of the traditional initiation of a titleholder. The ritual is performed in the following order: first, a traditional dress and cap, second, a traditional stool for the titleholder to seat on, and, finally, the title cup. The significance of these four throne objects is that they distinguish the titleholder from other family members during important family meetings. They form the core of his throne. Family meetings chaired by a titleholder without a title cup, for example, are inconceivable in Bambui. It is believed that the title cup mediates between family members and their ancestors during family meetings. The title cup is used by the titleholder during or after the meeting to communicate with the ancestors, telling them exactly the state of the family as discussed in the meeting. Where there is no title cup, family members will refuse to drink from another cup, forcing the titleholder to explain or face the wrath of his ancestors. Their fear is that their problems will not be communicated to the ancestors because of the absence of the title cup. As noted by my informants, the absence of a title cup during important family

meetings may be a deliberate attempt by the titleholder to press forward a point not supported or accepted by the entire family. In such a situation, the titleholder hides the cup as an expression of his dissatisfaction with his people, thereby forcing them to change their minds and support his view before he brings back the title cup and continues to perform his role as titleholder. If the family is adamant and refuses to support the family head or titleholder, he might adjourn the session, giving his people and himself some time to reconsider the decision.

### Form, Function, and Meanings

The title cup in Bambui is a reflection of the titleholder’s social status. Symbolic figures are some of the most depicted and recognizable traits of Bambui royalty and are used in distinguishing one social class (and therefore one title cup) from the other. According to artists and some members of the traditional elite, iconographic motifs, especially those of animals, human beings, and geometric designs are used on throne objects to reflect the importance of the patriarchal leadership, as a basic stabilizing force in the hierarchical structure of society. Sculptural depictions on Grassfields throne objects, observed a Bambui notable, are considered as “figurative transference to the *fon* or some members of the traditional elites of the essential features of the royal animals such as their power, might, dignity, wisdom, and authority” (Interview, March 13, 2005; see also Knöpfli 2001: 30–35). In other words, it is the transfer of the qualities of the royal animals to the *fon* or a member of the traditional elites. Various plastic motifs and themes are depicted on Bambui objects to show different traditional spaces, traditional religious rituals, the customary groups associated with these rituals as well as members of the traditional elites involved in each of them. For example, throne objects such as facial board, doorposts, and house posts found on *indiabesie-eh* or *atsum*, carry motifs showing various ritual scenes involving the *fon*, queen mother, the entire community and, in exceptional cases, motifs of royal animals associated with each. Some of these scenes relate to royal death celebrations, initiation rites, fertility rites, and the protection of traditional space. For instance, fiber above the carved wooden framed and horizontal bamboo push door on *indiabesie-eh* or *atsum* symbolizes royal initiation shrines and the protection of space. As noted by my informants during the fieldwork, the five royal animals (python, buffalo, elephant, leopard, and lion) are among some of the commonly depicted animals on Grass-

fields throne objects such as the title cup. The section that follows considers in greater detail the role of each of these animal motifs on the title cup.

### The Python Motif on Bambui Title Cups

Bambui legend relates the depiction of python motifs on Bambui title cups and other throne figures such as the stool to the association of the snake with the Bambui *fon*. Throughout the Bamenda Grassfields, and Bambui in particular, it is believed that *fons* and some titleholders have the power and the ability to transform into any of the five royal animals. In the case of anything that threatens the authority of the *fon*, he is expected to transform himself and swallow his opponents or destroy their property in order to render them helpless. By so doing, *fons* and titleholders in the region are considered forces that protect their people from aggressive neighbours. Most people will flee from a python, but the *fon* and the python are expected to slow down as a sign of respect for each other if they meet accidentally.

The strength of the python as a royal animal is also based on the fact that the hide extracted from the skin of the python is used by *fons* across the Bamenda Grassfields either to rest their feet on or as an ingredient in some royal rituals. In villages across the Northern Mezam Area (NMA) or Tubah region, for example, the bile of the python is considered one of the most poisonous parts of any royal animal. Although *fons* and some titleholders in this part of the Bamenda Grassfields are generally considered as poisonous as the python, the depiction of the python on the title cup is not meant to protect the community from these dangerous creatures. Instead, it is meant to portray the ability of the *fon* or titleholder to protect his people. By making the python a royal animal, ordinary members of the public are prevented from having access to the poisonous bile, which may be used as a weapon against their enemies; the public is also prevented from having access to the title cup which can be misused, thereby putting the fate of the family in danger. As an informant hinted, *fons* and titleholders have a duty to protect the people they govern because without these people their authority is baseless. Using poison from the python's bile to destroy these people will mean destruction of the very meaning of his *fondom*, he concluded (interview, March 13, 2005).

### The Buffalo Motif on Bambui Title Cups

The Northern Mezam Area is noted as one of the few regions in the Bamenda Grassfields where the trapping and hunting of animals still continues, resulting in the almost complete disappearance of all species, including the five royal animals. It has been blamed for the absence of game reserves in the Bamenda Grassfields. Hunting and killing royal animals is one way of achieving traditional recognition across the Bamenda Grassfields. According to Bambui oral history, in the past, a hunter or hunters who killed a buffalo were expected to leave the carcass on the spot and report to the *fon*, who then assigned some of his notables to go and bring the dead animal to the palace. The hunter or hunters were required by traditional law to wait in the palace with the *fon* to share the buffalo meat and to be decorated with traditional medals before returning home. Such traditional medals included a red feather and a title cup, for example, automatically making them notables.

The buffalo, commonly referred to as *ihbong* in Bambui, was feared and respected by hunters because it was the fastest, wildest, and most aggressive animal in most of their forests. According to Hans Knöpfli (1998: 33), Grassfields hunters claimed that "if you go near a buffalo you must be prepared to fight." For these reasons the depiction of the buffalo on Bambui title cups is a symbol of might, power, and danger. These features apply directly to *fons* across the region because they expect everyone approaching them or in their midst to behave following traditionally accepted royal standards. Bambui tradition also attaches value to the buffalo horns and its skin. Buffalo horns (Fig. 2) are worked upon, decorated with traditional symbols and given power that allows them to serve as title cups used by *fons* and their subordinates. The hide is used in the palace either to make bags or as carpets for the *fon*'s sitting room, or parlour, or on his stool. Because the buffalo no longer exists in Bambui and the Bamenda Grassfields, most of these customs are outdated, but there are still some *fons* who will go to great lengths to obtain buffalo horns and skin as a way of portraying their wealth or superiority over others. Buffalo motifs are still depicted on Bambui title cups, especially those meant for newly crowned *fons* like the *fon* of Bambui in 1996.

### The Elephant on Bambui Title Cups

Otherwise known as *ihsei-eh* in Bambui, the size of the elephant and its bodily features, including the

**Fig. 2:** Pa Mandzie cutting and parking the cow horns in bags ready for transportation to his workshop where they will be carved into drinking horns and some initiated into title cups (Nkwen, November 2010).



two curved ivory tusks and long trunks, and its reputation for having a quick ear and good eye, as well as its retentive memory, are associated with *fons* who are considered to possess all these features. The depiction of elephant motifs on the title cup is meant to symbolize might, majesty, wealth, and dignity and ivory is a valuable material and part of the royal treasures. The elephant's two tusks were and are still used as footrests by Grassfields *fons*. In Bambui, the elephant tusks are also used by *manjong* houses as a signal on *manjong* Sundays. In Bambui, Mankon, and Bafut, the elephant tusk is associated with the annual dance, because it is the main traditional instrument used in announcing the opening of the annual festivities. The traditional hierarchy of Bambui, ranging from the *fon* and members of *kwifor* society to the queen mother and others, are identified by ivory bangles worn on their left arm. The depiction of the elephant and all its features on Bambui title cups and the use of the objects by the traditional hierarchy symbolize superiority and wealth over the rest of the community. In recent years, however, such traditional superiority and wealth has been replaced by modernization and the money economy. It is not unusual to find people without any royal connections using cups with elephant motifs to decorate their homes as well as wearing ivory bangles to look distinguished in society. Often these have been sold to them by *fons* who need money to keep up with the changing needs of contemporary society.

#### The Leopard on Bambui Throne Objects

The leopard, otherwise known as *ihnoghwo-o* in Bambui language, is considered one of the most dangerous flesh-eating animals in the entire history of the village. Hans Knöpfli (1998: 34) describes the leopard as “a large feline, powerful, fast-running and flesh eating animal, active particularly at night and very unpredictable.” Villages around Bambui, including the two of Kedjoms and Bambili, have a long history of mixed feelings about the leopard because its prey is both animal and human. Even though it is extinct in the Northern Mezam Area, traditional legend continues to hold that hunters or a hunter who succeed in killing one deserve traditional recognition and rewards in the form of a title cup and a red feather. Hunters are not allowed by traditional law to hunt alone because of the dangerous nature of the leopard. It is also believed that hunters who kill and then hide and eat the meat of a leopard alone risk developing leprosy. An informant in Kedjom Ketingo told me that the disappearance of leprosy in the Northern Mezam Area is not due to improvements in medicine but is a result of the fact that the forest no longer harbours leopards that cause people to disobey traditional law and be punished with the illness.

According to Knöpfli (1998: 34), the tawny yellow coat with black rosette-like spots are valuable royal items and are left in the palace for the *fon* to put his throne on and rest his feet in order to absorb the leopard's power. The leopard's teeth are also highly priced by traditional rulers as a means

of reinforcing and strengthening the importance of the bead necklaces worn by some members of the traditional elites. Over all, *fons* across the Bamenda Grassfields are likened to the leopard because it is the royal symbol for strength and vigilance usually depicted on royal sculptures like the title cup. Visitors to most Grassfields palaces (for example, those of Bafut, Bali, and Mankon) are welcomed by images of leopard painted on walls to indicate that they are entering the home of a leopard and that they must be ready for the unknown.

### The Lion on Bambui Title Cups

Although lions no longer exist in Bambui in particular and the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole, the name *bikem* is still used, especially when someone makes a very loud and strange sound. I remember some Bambui women shouting at their children to stop crying like *bikem*, the sound that used to come from lions. It is simply addressed as lion in most Bamenda Grassfields villages, and this seems to relate to the history of the extinction of this particular species. It is believed, based on a story narrated to Knöpfli by the Bali-Nyonga people that lions existed in the Bamenda Grassfields right up to the turn of the early twentieth century. While leaving her farm to relieve herself, a Bali woman who died in 1992 at the age of 80, fell into a lion pit. Assuming that the woman was born in 1912, Knöpfli concluded that people were still hunting lions in the Bamenda Grassfields in 1920, but that since then traces of the lion have not been heard or seen in the region (1998: 35). The lion is now extinct in the Bamenda Grassfields.

Although extinct and rarely depicted on throne figures, in the past the lion was not meant to symbolize might and power like the other royal animals. Informants pointed out to Knöpfli that differences exist between the five royal animals: that the elephant and the buffalo constitute one unique category while the leopard and the lion form another. While the former are the most powerful and intelligent, yet peaceful because they depend on grass and leaves for subsistence, the latter are considered as predators because they hunt and kill other animals for food. While the two flesh-eating animals are generally considered as unintelligent, on the one hand, they are seen as courageous and cunning, on the other. As such, *fons* are always likened to the notable features of the elephant, such as the massive and majestic skin, and the powerful buffalo in its entirety as opposed to the mere courage and fine appearance of the lion and leopard, which the society

considers an unpredictable beast that feeds on other weaker field and bush animals (Knöpfli 1998: 36).

However, because of the special characteristics of the lion, some royal patrons still commission title cups with lion motifs (I was refused the privilege of getting a photograph of one of the stools with lion motifs). This is in contrast to the views of some elderly craftsmen, who continue to argue that carvers were forbidden by tradition to carve lions in pre-colonial times. They base their argument on the fact that as “king of the forest,” the lion has always been marked off as simultaneously sacred and forbidden as a motif on royal figures. Its depiction on title cups today, therefore, can be associated with the fast fading traditional values and the forces of modernization. Unlike the past, when artists were recruited and trained in royal camps following traditional standards, they are now trained in schools that have little or no regard for traditional values. What they produce reflects the society in which they live and not one which no longer exists.

Despite these reservations about the lion as a motif on Bambui title cups, the five royal animals remain the most commonly depicted motifs on Grassfields throne objects because the *fon* and some of his subordinates are considered to possess all the characteristics associated with these animals and can transform themselves into anyone of them. This is usually thought to happen when the *fon* is old and too physically weak to go about his daily routine. Any royal animal seen wandering around the palace of a *fon* who is above seventy years old is understood to be the *fon*, and in such cases villagers are expected to cooperate because as *fon* it will not harm any of his citizens. The presence of royal animals around the palace premises is also an indication that the *fon* may pass on in a couple of weeks or days.

Apart from the depiction of the royal animals on Bambui title cups, there are other categories of title cups with motifs such as the palm tree which symbolises prosperity, and wealth; the frog which stands for fertility, prosperity and life; the earth spider which symbolises knowledge and wisdom; the double gong which stands for the supreme authority of the *fon* or titleholder; the hunting net which symbolises unity of the family or village as a whole; and the lizard which symbolises abundant life. Even though certain motifs on title cups in Bambui, especially those of the royal animals, are restricted to certain members of the traditional elites and cannot be used by some titleholders and commoners, Grassfields artists still use these motifs as decoration on cups meant for the market or people who are not titleholders. Such cups, if acquired by Bambui men, cannot be used in public gatherings or tradi-



tional associations across the village. They can only be used in the cities or places where traditional authority is not paramount.

### Title Cups and the Bambui Society

As is the case in most African countries, one outstanding feature of the Bamenda Grassfields is the organization of social relations along ancestral lines. Across the Bamenda Grassfields, it can either be paternal or maternal. A solid foundation for the social norms of each family, and by extension the village, is constructed during childhood, when children are educated in good and bad practices within the family and community at large. In Bambui, for example, good practices such as traditional respect to the *fon*, *meufo*, and other members of the traditional elites and elders are encouraged. However, children grow up with the mentality that control over economic and symbolic capital is in the hands of men rather than women. Children see women as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters who belong to the farm and kitchen and whose independence rest solely in these places. It is believed that women are weak-minded and cannot keep some secrets which are essential for the well-being of the society. Again, “secrecy protects and defines the spaces of the highest government authorities” in the village and it “underlines the differences between men and women” (Forni 2001: 89). As a result, women are exempted from major traditional functions such as libations at *nifoube*, shrine, and titles in the traditional government. They are not allowed to own title cups, especially those carrying motifs of one of the five royal animals. Land ownership and control is also exclusively for men, because it is believed that girls will get married and leave their parents at some point. The secrets of the family must not be given to women because they may sell it to their husbands or friends and put the family at risk. The title cup must not be given to a woman because she might misuse it and bring havoc to the family, as observed by an informant.

It is good to keep women out. Women talk too much, they do not know how to keep a secret. If they knew a secret, they would immediately want to tell it to someone. That is why secrets define the space of men (Clement Chongwaie, cited in Forni 2001: 89).

Not allowing them to participate is a way of protecting women. If they were to share that mimbo, raffia wine, and then would reveal the secret, it would certainly affect them, may be they could become sterile, so it is better if they don't know (Francis Keng, cited in Forni 2001: 89).

Different individuals, families, and quarters are rewarded on the basis of their attitudes toward these norms. In like manner, antisocial behaviour is considered a taboo and those who practice it are isolated and punished either by jungle justice or mob action, or are handed to law enforcement officers to face judgement. Responsibility for the teaching of good practices in Bambui is in the hands of parents or the elderly. A parent or an elder in the society is not necessarily a brother, sister, or family relative. It is any person who has children or is mature and versed enough with the customs and beliefs that he or she is considered fit to advise the younger ones. These practices cut across the different facets of traditional Bambui society, enabling children to understand the traditional structure of their respective villages and to be able to match throne objects such as the title cup with these structures. However, understanding the role of different categories of throne objects in the Bambui is not only a matter of being a parent or an elder in the society. It has also to do with the environment and way in which children are brought up. Those who are brought up in a traditional setting understand the parameters of the traditional society better than their counterparts in the cities, who in most cases can only gain superficial knowledge about village tradition during intermittent visits. What these city children understand better are some of the new genres of art, produced by modern institutions in the cities and that are more often than not associated with the tourism rather than being a reflection of the real customs and beliefs of the people of the Bamenda Grassfields. In other words, title cups serve as “critical agents in the conceptualisation of self and in defining one's relationships with others” (Ntole 1996: 136). They represent not only the boundaries of socialisation but are also seen as a mirror for “reflection, recognition and self-identification of personalities” within the community (Ntole 1996: 136).

Having many children in the Bambui is a sign of power and happiness (Notué and Triaca 2001: 34) but also a sign of wealth and authority in the community. It is interpreted as success emerging from the tactful and responsible use of the title cup by the titleholder or family head in promoting and preserving the welfare of his people. The birth of twins to any family in the Bamenda Grassfields is “given great consideration and respect” (Notué and Triaca 2001: 34) by everyone, including members of the traditional elites and commoners. In fact, it is a reward from the ancestors to the successor, who would have otherwise been barren and his wife or wives sterile, if he was misusing the title cup. In Bambui, as in many other villages in the Bamenda

Grassfields, *bennui*, twins or children of god, are considered special and extraordinary children with supernatural powers, capable of controlling the destiny of the families to which they belong as well as that of the village. Similarly, titleholders and their title cups are considered to possess supernatural powers that allow them to communicate with ancestors and the gods of their families, thereby controlling the destiny of people under their leadership. In other words, they constitute the “hands” that steers the ship of the family or village. As a result, “their innate powers are likened to those of the *fon*, to whom the titleholders and twins are not obliged to show the same level of humble respect as ordinary people” (Forni 2001: 196, emphasis added), but are still closely monitored because of the belief that they have the potential to harm themselves or their relatives if not well looked after. In Bam-bui in particular, it is believed that if twins are not respected and treated well, they may bring misfortune to their siblings, parents, and relatives or may become ill and die. Similarly, if the title cup is not treated with dignity and respect, it will bring misfortune to the family.

As is the case with *fons* across the Bamenda Grassfields, most titleholders, and by extension title cups, are believed to have the power to transform themselves into animals such as snakes and chameleons, and they are also believed to have special powers that enable them to see what ordinary people cannot (see also Forni 2001: 195–203). These special powers relate to *eshee-h*, sorcery or witchcraft, a common belief and practice across the Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon, and Africa. It is not uncommon to hear someone accusing his sibling of using an evil spirit to bewitch him or her; a chief or *fon* accusing some members of his village or community of using evil spirits to destroy crops or houses of their enemies; or even the village accusing the *fon* or traditional ruler of belonging to an occult group that provides him with power to subdue his opponents. Cases have been reported of young people migrating from the villages to cities because of rampant witchcraft in the villages (cf. Rowlands and Warnier 1993; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998). Witchcraft, special or magical powers in the Bamenda Grassfields can either be hereditary or acquired from herbalists and friends. Witchcraft is a title in its own right and its symbol, like that of most titleholders across the Bamenda Grassfields, is a title cup. As is the case with royal or throne objects, witchcraft is an instrument of inclusion and exclusion – it signifies power to those who possess it.

The power of titleholders and their title cups continues throughout their existence, with annu-

al or periodic rituals performed at the ancestral shrine in order to appease and control them. The ancestral shrine in Bam-bui in particular, is a special place where the ancestral stone is placed. It contains throne objects such as a bag with ritual items such as cam wood, title cup, gourds and the peace plant in the case of a twin family. It is located in the queen mother’s, family head’s or titleholder mother’s kitchens. Like other aspects of Bamenda Grassfields customs and beliefs, titleholders and the title cup have undergone tremendous changes over the years, so that most of what has been described here is no longer practiced in the same manner. For instance, titleholders can now transfer throne objects from the “big compound” or family house to their own homes without any fear of misfortune from their ancestors. One notable reason for this is the exposure of the region to the rest of the world.

### Title Cups and Change

The genesis of change in the way African throne objects, such as the title cup, were used dates back to the period of first contact with the West. For Bam-bui in particular, and the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole, 1884 marked the beginning of a gradual but steady change in what is now mere replicas of some of the great treasures of the kingdoms of the region. Change was predicted across the African continent as early as the 19th century, following the discovery of Western-style wares and imported utensils in West Africa by Western travellers (Barley 1994: 14). It is believed that Western glasses, mugs, and pottery were easily absorbed and adapted to suit local needs by Africans. One example is the discovery of “Western Chamber pots that were used for serving food and the enthusiasm of the coastal people for Staffordshire ware and blue Venetian glass” (Barley 1994: 9). The introduction of these Western items easily gained grounds, slowly but steadily replacing some traditional objects. One notable reason for the interest in Western items such as glasses advanced by Ndoh Neya, a Kedjom Keku artist to Knöpfli is that:

Buffalos are no longer found in any of the Grassfields forests and so the horns are not found in most of the villages in the region. Besides, the horn alone is costly and carving difficult. That is why only rich big men can afford to buy and use a carved buffalo horn as their drinking cup. Moreover, there are very strict laws in our tradition with regard to the use of such a cup. Only the *fon*, sub-chiefs, kingmakers and “chop chairs” or successors are permitted to use it. This is so even up to today (quoted in Knöpfli 1997: 20).

Though it might be true that Africans developed interest in Western glasses because buffalo horns were scarce and expensive to acquire, questions arise not only because buffalo horns were “items of law” in the traditional setup and needed to be preserved and promoted, but also because of the rate at which they were so easily replaced. As noted by Michael Rowlands (1996: 203), “in the postcolonial era in Cameroon ... the greatest illusion has been the incredible esteem bestowed on Western credentials.” While the title cup may be seen as a reflection of the social status of a traditional elite in Bambui and the Bamenda Grassfields, Western items, such as glasses and mugs that have come to replace the title cup in most modern households, are a reflection of the social status of modern urban elites in the region.

Acquiring Western items across Bambui in particular and the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole, is a measure of the success of each family either through education or business. It is not uncommon to find some Grassfields traditional elites and titleholders using modern items such as glasses and mugs in drinking tea, coffee, wine, or beer. Homes of both traditional and modern urban elites are well furnished with modern items such as a “dining table and chairs; a cupboard for storing plates, glasses, cups, cutlery” (Rowlands 1996: 206). Western items in Bambui, as is the case with Western items elsewhere in Cameroon and Africa, are a unifying force because they can be used interchangeably as opposed to the title cup, such as the buffalo horn, that was and still is used exclusively by titleholders. Most households in Bambui now have two parlours or living rooms – one for traditional items such as throne objects and the other for modern items such as those mentioned above. Parlours with traditional items are meant for traditional family meetings and rituals while those with modern items, such as dining tables and chairs, are meant for visitors, the general public, or modern *njangi* groups. In generic terms, the change from title cups to Western glasses, mugs, and rubber cups in Bambui is not a break from the traditional way of life of the people. Rather it is a reflection of continuity because glasses have been accepted as they can play a similar role and the raw material used in producing them seems readily available and affordable which is opposed to the scarce buffalo horn and other royal animals whose motifs are used on title cups. Moreover, Western glasses, mugs, and rubber cups serve as “a response to the realities of the present cultural and economic situation of these societies” (Shiner 1994: 229). As noted by Graburn about contemporary Inuit carving, “this *is* tradition; it is as real to the peoples now as the spirits of skulls and amulets were to their ances-

tors one hundred years ago” (1976: 13). Undoubtedly, buffalo horns may never return to Bambui or the Bamenda Grassfields – what then will happen with rituals that were performed using the buffalo horn? Will the rituals cease to exist?

### Conclusion

Throne objects, such as the title cup, traditional gown, cap, and stool, are still widely used across Bambui today. This suggests that despite the introduction of Western items, e.g., glasses and mugs, some throne objects are still so indispensable in traditional religious rituals that the society cannot so easily replace them. Often, both types of objects are used for similar purposes, but title cups are better known to ancestors rather than Western glasses and mugs. The title cup is what ancestors handed down to their progenies and successors – it is the object that carries their power, the hands they left behind to run the activities of their families, rather than the white man’s glasses and mugs. Most unsuccessful rituals in the Bambui are associated either with the misuse of objects handed down to the successor and his family or the use of wrong objects such as Western glasses in communicating with the ancestors. For instance, my fieldwork in Cameroon gave me the opportunity to visit and network with some members of the traditional elites in the Bamenda Grassfields, not only because I needed information from them but also because some invited me to their homes in order to learn about my experiences in the developed world. A notable in Bambui, (who happen to be the head of a group of families), invited me and offered palm wine in his title cup as a sign of recognition for what he termed my “academic achievements” and also a blessing for the work I was doing in Bamenda. I summoned courage and asked him to enlighten me on the importance of the title cup and palm wine – whether using a glass and Western wine would have meant something different. He murmured in the local language *bi ta – ah- ba- be –eh-quo-sewah* (meaning all those ancestors – men, represented by the cup he was using and the palm wine) should help him explain to me. He then poured some of the palm wine as libation saying:

Because the Whiteman invented the motor car does not mean we should cut our legs. Giving you western wine in a western glass will not only be an abuse of our very rich tradition but also an unforgivable crime to our ancestors. What makes me head of the Abongbang family in this village is neither the western wine you brought for me nor the glasses you find in your friend’s parlour.

It is this traditional cup and the palm wine because they are known to the gods and ancestors of this village. All other things that we now enjoy in this village as a result of our exposure to the rest of the world are not known to them and that is why when it comes to issues of tradition, not only traditional items are used but the traditional language is also spoken. *Melu-uhmieh te-eh meh fe-eh mbu-u -gho-o leh meh keh nye-se-eh me-i muo-o echea-eh me-eh be-e nuo-o la-ah kali-la-ah.la-ah*. The palm wine that I am giving you will open your eyes better than what you have been drinking in foreign countries for the last couple of years. It will not only signal your return to our ancestors but will remind them to keep an eye on you in whatever you do (pa Abongbang pers. comm., November 2004).

Pa Abongbang's message is that, in order for peace and harmony to reign in his family, he must not use objects such as Western wine and glasses. He should ensure that he uses traditional objects, such as his ancestral or title cup and local wine, in traditional religious rituals because they not only symbolize his position but are also a language of expression understood and venerated by everyone, including the members of the society, their ancestors, and the gods of the land. By doing this, it is believed that members of the families under his jurisdiction are blessed and protected traditionally in all they do, both at home and abroad. This contrasts sharply with the use of Western glasses and mugs which are a reflection of the social status of modern urban elites and have little or nothing to do with traditional religious rituals.

However, some commentators believed consciously or unconsciously that power can still be transferred from title cups to Western glasses and mugs, and so used in traditional religious rituals, especially now because most or all of the royal animals have completely disappeared from Bambui and the Bamenda Grassfields. As noted by an informant, what matters concerning the title cup is the power it carries rather than its mere use in traditional religious rituals (Abong, pers. comm., March 2006). This perspective is approvingly captured in Shanklin's experience with Fon Yibain of the Kom Kingdom in 1985. I quote:

I remember a day in 1985 when James Yibain (now Fon Yibain) showed me a calabash that he said was part of the original migration to Kom territory. At first, I was awestruck. Then, as he threw the calabash casually on the floor and I thought of the fragility of all organic matter in a tropical environment, I asked whether it was indeed *the* original calabash. Of course not, he responded impatiently. When that particular calabash wore out, another would be substituted for it. But all were the representatives of the original calabash used on the migration three

hundred years ago; once the substitution was made – by what means he would not say – the old calabash could be discarded. When the object's power had been transferred, the old object was no longer useful or valuable (Shanklin 1990: 67).

Even though the emphasis here is on the transfer of power from an old to a new calabash, it is highly likely that the same power can as well be transferred from a buffalo horn to a glass in the case of the title cup. After all, there is no reported case of failure in transferring what Africans consider power from a traditional to a Western object that can be used for traditional religious rituals. Of course, the logical relationships which exist between African societies and their objects are so strong that any study which does not take these complex relationships into account is impoverished (Ntole 1996: 140). Therefore, understanding the complex relationship that exists between throne objects such as the title cup, the Bambui society, for example, and the environment, is indispensable for examining change in societies that are undergoing transition.

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## Zu einem ungewöhnlichen Diorama, das den Handel von mumifizierten Maori-Köpfen (*mokomokai / upoko tuhi*) darstellt

Georg Schifko

Unter den polynesischen Völkern übten einzig die Maori Neuseelands die Praxis der Mumifizierung von Menschenköpfen aus (Te Hiroa 1962: 424).<sup>1</sup> Die Maori haben sowohl die Köpfe der eigenen Stammesmitglieder als auch jene getöteter Feinde mumifiziert. Allerdings wurde den Köpfen (*mokomokai* bzw. *upoko tuhi*)<sup>2</sup> nach erfolgter Präparation<sup>3</sup> eine unterschiedliche Behandlung zuteil: Während man nämlich jene der eigenen Verwandten und Stammesmitglieder gesondert verwahrt und nur zu spezi-

1 Orchiston (1967: 298) vermeint zwar, dass auch in anderen Bereichen Polynesiens Köpfe mumifiziert wurden, stützt sich meines Erachtens jedoch dabei auf unzuverlässige Quellen.

2 *Mokomokai*, die früher gebräuchliche Bezeichnung für die mumifizierten Köpfe weist in den Augen der Maori zunehmend eine pejorative Konnotation auf und wird daher immer öfter durch den Terminus *upoko tuhi* ersetzt, wie aus einem Statement der Maori-Anthropologin Te Awekotuku (2004: 91) ersichtlich wird: "‘Mokomokai’ may be translated literally as an inferior, pet, or enslaved person with *moko*, or facial tattoo. Many of the *upoko tuhi* collected were beloved memento mori, purposefully stolen and traded for gain, and thus neither enslaved or subordinate, as this word implies."

3 Für einen Überblick zu den Präparationstechniken siehe Rooley (1896: 148–165) und Orchiston (1967: 318–326).