

## Arts, Visual History and the Mores: Typifying Palace Relics and Sculptures of the Grass field Region of Cameroon

Donatus Fai Tangem (Ph.D.)

Department of Arts and Archeology  
Performing Arts and Cinema Section  
University of Yaounde 1

**Abstract:** *The broad perspectives of the tradition and culture of the grass-field region of Cameroon as perceived through palace relics or artifacts and sculptures, embody much more than visual history and a synoptic recapitulation of the cosmology of the people. Often appreciated basically from their face values, palace artifacts serve as historiography and associated material for the representation of societal lore and mores. This is to say artifacts are more or less historical/ literary, as well as archeological representations begging for a critical attention beyond their surface fascination. In essence, grass field palace arts underscore the crucial place of signs and symbols in the articulation of cultural and traditional practices that characterize a people in space and time. Through the compact and systematic use of codes, the extensive and intensive zoomorphic symbols effectively capture the values and beliefs embedded in the politically stratified cultural systems. This paper is thus premised on the hypothetical assumption that grass field palace artifacts, together with their precast motifs, recapitulate the collective world views of the people. The objects and their associated paraphernalia speak to the dynamism of their cultural insights. In this regards, the pictographic representations do not only define the depth and scope of the people's public informative medium, but also point to the hidden power of the indigenous knowledge systems. Significantly, this paper underpins both the value and the need to formulate policies for the protection and preservation of the complex practices and depth of indigenous systems. Our analyses are anchored against the theories of structural functionalism as propounded by Bronislaw Malinowski and also the theory of social semiotics by Hodge and Kress.*

**Key words:** *Art, visual history, mores, relics, grass field palace.*

The dynamics of grass field culture with its perceptive systems and practices are represented by both material and non-material forms. The non-material components include myths, folktales and proverbial expressions commonly used principally by the elders. It has been argued that a selection of young people who consistently interact with the elders, end up benefiting from the wisdom of ages and turn to also use proverbs and traditional slangs that carry deep meanings. Additional forms of immaterial cultural matter include play-songs and dances that capture history and collective memory. The material representation of the culture and belief systems is evident through curved objects like masks, thrones, stools, beats, bracelets and related royal paraphernalia like royal bags, calabashes, vessels, and other accessories used by notables, princes and princesses. The curved objects, be they utensils or prestige items, are often adorned with symbolic motifs that are not fortuitous. The motifs and representative symbols captured on any object is often laden with deep belief and are meant to tell a story that touches either the social status of the person or item concerned.

A careful analysis of the hard wares employed to showcase grass field culture and belief indicate that there is effective exploitation of the natural environment. (Griffin 1991; 280) could not be more succinct in his argument that man is the symbol – using inventor of the negative separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making goaded by the spirit of hierarchy and rotten with perfection. This explains why

trees, tree barks, roots of plants, as well as animals, birds and reptiles, all fall among a collection of the environmental resources and fabric that serve tradition and culture. Made manifest through belief systems and practices of the people, the fauna and flora are configured according to the specificities of societal perceptions. In several instances some of the myths that are captured in folktales, also appear either partially or fully in the representative objects that convey the mores of a people and their community. When the insignias are not out rightly represented independently, they are used as motifs either on household utensils, door posts or window frames. The entrance to most grass field palaces are garlanded with fastidious objects that demand more than average attention beyond their face value. Also, the entrance into secrete community cults, grooves and even some public spots are “decorated” with objects that harbor facts and belief systems about which visitors or onlookers ought to pay greater attention.

In a context of war or conflict and combat, the totemic symbols of various animals are meant as warning to potential assailants who are beforehand, informed of what wrath they stand to confront in any such eventuality. Explaining the motivation to link nature and culture, Schneider (2010) opines “The ability to observe nature and turn it into art requires a kind of imaginative metaphorical thinking or a way of describing one thing in terms of another” (14). It is to be understood therefore, that, palace arts, like curved objects on display in and around palace courts, markets and some public spaces, are meant to serve socio-practical functions about the community and the people’s perceptions and worldviews. What remains is for relevant adjustments or action that may be undertaken as result of the proper appreciation of the information on display.

From a hypothetical premise therefore, this paper argues that palace arts, sculptures as well as relics are an ocular representation of the belief systems and perceptions of the grassfield people. This is to say, the ensemble of the objects point to the incontestable and irreplaceable book-value of folk tradition and indigenous wisdom that communicates a complex systematic order. Significantly, this paper underpins the power and value of indigenous practices as a sustainable factor in the service of the preservation and protection of traditional wisdom and belief systems. There is no gainsaying that through its pictographic representation and the commemorative status, folk arts remain a salutary tool that is also amenable to historiography. The pictographs clearly recapitulate memorable events, reigns and historical periods worthy of special attention by individuals, families and or communities at large. In a nutshell, grassfield palace gallery represents a platform for the showcase of the values as well as perceptions of the people who reserve no efforts in upholding and propagating the forte of their proud and complex heritage. No doubts therefore, that, at the Mortala Mohamed International Airport is posted the following warning;



Such and injunction is a strong indication of the Nigerian government’s commitment to protect and preserve indigenous relics, arts and crafts that epitomize the proud material heritage of the nation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The dual theoretical frameworks employed for this research are Functionalism and social semiotics. According to initiators of functionalism, culture exists to meet the basic biological, psychological and social needs of the individual. Therefore, as Malinowski surmises, culture is utilitarian, adaptive and functionally integrated such that the explanation of culture involves the delineation of function. Functionalism as a theoretical frame, undertakes to analyse culture and its representative properties from what and how they

contribute to societal welfare. Given that culture is the overall adaptive strategies employed by man in his daily operations, the different properties thereof are carefully chosen, patterned and redirected to achieve specific objectives. The general belief that societal equilibrium is dependent on constituting functions working together, makes the place and role of functionalism much more primordial.

The explanation that society is comparable to a human being whose body parts play complementary functions further justifies the functionalist perspective. In the present context, the design and creation of art objects, like the preservation of relics, have a definite purpose as an auxiliary of social control mechanism in society. From an ontological perspective the members of a given community adhere to the belief systems and work for the preservation and protection of that which define them. Grassfield arts and crafts together with relics carry profound values as ocular representation of the beliefs and practices of the people. This means a cowry shell, peace plant, and even pictographs of various animals and reptiles all harbour complex information systems far beyond the physical appearances. Such phenomenal practice further justifies the liaison between ecology and culture as two sides of the same coin employed by the community for the wellbeing of man. To a Grass lander, sculpted objects with varied motif, only highlight the belief systems and highly guarded practices that have survived generations after generation. (Crapo, 200: 46) underscores that "People in each society have their own distinctive patterns of thought about nature of reality. These beliefs reflect what those who share a culture regard as true". This is how the perceptions of truth and the reading of the world and humanity varies. As a matter of fact, a people's wholesome ideology and practices are conditioned by their perceptions of values, morality, etiquette, piety and aesthetics.

The attitudes to the foregoing concepts are thus what determine the material representation either through sculpted object, painting or relics which the people guard jealously. This logic boils down to Malinowski's profound and deep seated conviction that man has needs that are only reliably met by cultural adaptations. By meeting the needs of man, society eventually adopts what man has already as prove of his mainstay. It is against this explanation that cultures turn to play great regulatory functions in time and space. From an ethnographic perspective, grassfield palaces together with their arts, crafts and relics communicate hard information that logically point to expected feedback as a way to dignify both the conception as well as provenance of the stated objects.

The proponents of social semiotics like Thibault, Hodge and Kress on the other hand, are quite unanimous that social semiotics essentially focuses on how signs and symbols are generated, produced and used in society. Accordingly, every human society operates on an agreed and recognizable pattern of signs and symbolic aspects that convey both belief systems and perception of a people and the community. To this end, every social agent operating within the precincts or context where in such signs are generated, is automatically a participant in the frame of intercourse that takes place as a result of his presence in space and time. Thibault goes on to explain that the text is the means in and through which meaning making practices of social agents are made visible. Within the context of art objects or artefacts, the symbolic objects become the means by which the "specialized interaction – practice" is realised in the material form. In affirming such truism Thibault adds that the text (objects), are the products or records of social meaning making practices. In the final analysis, they are the fundamental data on which all the higher order or macro level hypotheses about a given social formation are built (216).

Within the context of social interaction, members of a community view the signs and symbols as strong communicative intents whose response or interpretative reactions are clearly anticipated. This effective visual symbols, according to Griffin were twisted the moment "the literary man exchanged an eye for an ear" The implication is that the décor or palace setup with its representative material speak to the views and perceptions of the community, thereby pointing to the expected action, except where the societal agent is bent on contesting or challenging the system. Even so, such action is equally an authentic response to the codes on display. After all as Griffin adds:

The available means of persuasion are based on three kinds of proof; logical (logos), musical (ethos) and emotional (pathos). Logical proof comes from the line of argument in the speech, ethical proof is then revealed through the message and emotional proof is the feelings that words draw out of the hearers. Some form of logos, ethos and pathos are present in every public presentation (267).

Explaining the ominous representation of lion's statue or effigy at the entrance to his palace, the Fon of Nkambe notes that it is his royal responsibility to notify the public including potential assailants that the lion spirit, above all, is one of his many totemic agents.



Visitors are thus expected to immediately tune themselves away from any action that may tantamount to daring the wrath of a lion. Hodge and Kress underscore the relationship between competing forces in the context of social intercourse when they explain “Traditional semiotics live to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral and universal for uses of the code” (12). Since signs cannot be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse, any action or reaction in view of existing codes are a confirmation of premeditation or an informed choice and line of action. This is especially so because signs are above all, a part of an organised social intercourse and thus cannot exist outside it. Hodge and Kress affirm the fact that any reaction to existing signs and symbols are equally resourceful in the interplay of what is intended and how it is received in the optimum of interactive social discourse. Those views also authenticate the fact that everything in a cultural setting can be a form of communication that is organised in ways that are very similar to verbal language. This language as a material fact is understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles.



*Walking stick to show the fon sees both in front and behind at the same time (Kungi Palace)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2014

The concept of visual history as well as a perception of a people's mores and lore can, for example, be gleaned from the life-size statues at the entrance to the Bali Nyonga, palace or from the earth spider and or chameleon motifs on door and window frames at the Nkambe palace. Beyond these, the picture of a gong as well as the prominence of a peace plant – “*Nkeng*” – planted on a piece of disputed land carries more than the weight of a written injunction order. In other words, a cowries and beads worn on the ankle, wrist or the head by a lady, however young or old, is a strong indication and serves as deterrent to adventurous wooers.





*Fon's wives (Kumbo palace)*

Cowries on the left ankle

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2018

Any persistence or insistence on such a lady is an automatic invitation of sanctions or punitive measures that may be far reaching. It is against such principles that traditional systems and the laws operate on strict terms that are non-negotiable. In this regards, Hodge and Kress explain that;

Logonomic system is a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings which specify who can claim to initiate (produce communicate) or know (receive, understand) meaning about what topics under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why) (4).

In all, functionalist analysts recognise the complementarity of social semiotics as co-patterns that work for the wellbeing of the culture and tradition of a people. While culture is definitely responsive to man's needs, social semiotics, precede the appropriation of signs and symbolic objects that are amenable to functionalists' analyses. The power and fortified value of these twin theories remain incontestable complements on how artefacts and culture of the grassfield serve the dynamics of cultural practices that are sustained and safeguarded jealously. It is obvious therefore, that what sustains grassfield tradition and cultural patterns is both the symbols of their arts, artefacts and relics, as well as the functions that artefacts serve in the community and in the lives of the people.

Unarguably, the traditional and cultural operatives in the grass field palace setups essentially offer up-to-date information systems that inherently point to the power of African civilizations that more than equal western standards. Through them, information and comprehensive orientations of the required behavioural patterns, are put at the disposal of the public. To a large extent, the multiple objectives of court art may be said to systematically capture the power/authority of the Fon as well as encapsulate history and collective memory even as while embodying the myths, belief systems and practices of the people.

Anthropological studies, like varied research have established with incontestable evidence that palace arts, among other things, serve as pretext for the projection of leadership/ regal authority of the Fon. Appraising the essence and characteristic features of palace decorations, Knofli (1998) affirm that the varied constituents and symbols employed point to power and regal authority that the Fon wields. In the traditional setting and specifically, the grassfields of Cameroon, the researcher holds that the palace is the official port of call for visitors as well as strangers desirous of information or community activities or services. In this regard, all collection of sacred objects, sculptures and paintings on display in and around the palace have a direct bearing, prestige as well as politico-religious functions of the Fon or King. As the headquarters and central point for the co-ordination of varied community affairs, the palace is often designed to showcase royalty, force and authority. In doing so humans, as well as zoomorphic motifs are generously employed. More often than not, thrones and royal stools are adorned with human features in the exercise of different functions. On the royal thrones, humans, often representative of the king makers, are seen to be carrying the seat on which the Fon sits. Such a frame is a telling indication of the fact that the occupant of such a seat symbolizes consensus and collective community support. As a matter of fact, it indicates that the notables of the community have agreed and elected the occupant as representative of the community. In which case, the actions of the Fon are seen as the will of the

people whose desires simply become law in the community. Through the arts and artefacts, societal principles are projected in the open. A point J M Essomba (1985), elucidates when he says :

L'art africain n'est pas un art fantastique ni un art de l'imaginaire. C'est la valeur éminente attachée à l'existence physique et ou surnaturel qui lui confère sa solidarité et sa force (47). Ce que nous savons, c'est que dans les sociétés traditionnelles, l'ancien statut de l'artiste l'intégrait, d'une manière fonctionnelle et harmonieuse, aux besoins de la société (55).

The power of the arts and artifacts to consolidate peace and harmony in society is the direct result of strong belief and consensual regards and respect for laid down principles.



*Royal throne (Mankon palace)*



*Royal stool (Kungi palace)*



*Royal throne (Foumban palace)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2014

In order to complement the illustrative outlook of the grass field, their Fons are often represented as having several spouses and off springs. Therefore, a Fon who is married only to a single woman and consequently has few progenies is not usually associated with as much royalty as the one that has many wives and children. This means that many wives and children are considered natural attributes of royalty and prestige.

Apart from the use of human motif to represent royalty, symbols of giant wild life like the elephant, lion, tiger, leopard and buffalo are associated with majesty and authority. In the grassfields, these animals are considered to have various qualities such that valiant and charismatic leaders are often metaphorically referred to either as lion, tiger, elephant or related animal whose extraordinary qualities are well known to the community. Schneider is of the conviction that such metamorphic "translations" as well as the symbolic and metaphorical capacity of the human mind, are necessary faculties for the creation of art and are clearly that which gives birth to the actual and imaginal life – (double life). This means the Fon is both human and non-human, as per the non-natural, human factors he has. This double posture is what makes the Fon in the imagination of grass field culture to be extraordinary. This is same reason the Fons opt for certain totemic symbols. No doubt effigies of animals, birds and reptiles are seen as mythic recapitulation of their hidden qualities. In the grass field therefore, symbols are more spectacular and profound. For this reason the political stratification in traditional society is represented by both the artistic configuration, as well as the motif employed. Grass field art on the whole has a more anthropological function than is obvious at passive observers.

The entrance to the palaces of Nkambe in Donga Mantung or Bali, in Mankon (Mezam Division) display the totemic symbols with which the Fons of these communities associate. A combination of both the lion and the elephant at the entrance to the palace of Bali-Nyonga is quite symbolic of the crushing strength of the Fon. In the grassfields the elephant is revered for its mighty size and renowned strength that it uses to crush obstacle on its path. So also is the roar and fearful strength of the lion. Considered as king of the forest, the lion is depicted on royal objects as indication of who or what the bearer of such object stands for. It is for this same reason that a successful lion hunter is rewarded with a distinctive title for both his courage and skill. Because of the supreme regard and perception of the lion, its head, teeth or claws are preserved and or represented on royal outfit and related accessories used by the Fon or some notables. This is same with the body parts, bones or

above all the tusks of the elephant which is often used to symbolise power and wealth. Where the tusks are not physically placed on both sides of the royal throne as symbol of power, carvings or paintings of the rare objects are prominently displayed in and around palace courts to boost royalty. Referred to in Limbum among Nkambe people of the North West Region, as “*bvereh*” the lion, tiger “*mbaa*,” and elephant “*joo*h” among other animals are classified among the praise names reserved for the Fon, notables or some important elites who distinguished themselves by certain worthy action in the community.

Like the lion and elephant, the leopard and, especially leopard skin, is represented in sculptured objects as royal attributes. Used sometimes as door mats or foot rest, the leopard or leopard skin is especially reserved for the king. The use of the body parts and skin of the now almost extinct and highly protected animal species, is an indication of the existence of such animals in the grassfield. The Fon of Nkambe argues that the people of Nkambe only had names of animals that existed in and around their areas. Animals unknown to the community were neither represented on household items nor cited in tales or songs in the communities. Therefore, through the artistic representation of various fauna and flora, ecological guards had good chances of understanding the animal types, as well as their mystical implication and perceptions among the various communities of the grass field. Although the elephant, lion and tiger may no longer be easily available, the grassfield folklore reserves prominence for the value and perception of these animal types. This reality only further boosts the use of the names of such animals in description of rare achievements and as praise names for Fons and traditional authorities.



*Fon of Nso Against the background  
of leopard skin and elephant tusk on  
both sides*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2018

Apart from the human and animal motif employed on objects, grassfield art equally profile certain reptiles, and bird types to recapture composite features of leadership. Among the Bamuns of the West Region, the double-headed python is a symbol of invincibility and supernatural strengths. Ngintir in his PhD thesis observes that the icon of a python depicted with a head or either ends of the body is a prominent symbol in Bamun. Historically, the use of the icon is traceable to legendary personality of Mbuembue the king of the Bamuns who reigned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like a serpent with two heads, his army of warriors is reported to have attacked simultaneously from two fronts and succeeded in repelling their assailants. Among the mystical powers with which serpents are associated is the myth of its ability to cast off its skin during which time it also renews its strengths and potentials for continuous survival and self-defence. This aura of invincibility that is derived from rebirth makes the snake unique in its very strange qualities. Above all, a snake is either a friend or enemy depending purely on the action or intended action of its companion. Knopfli (1998) underscores that:

The python is particularly revered in the traditional religion of the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria and the Grassfields of Cameroon. It is considered symbolic of the earth being an animal that travels so close to the ground. Even among many Christian Igbos, these pythons are treated with great care whenever they happen to wander into the village or into someone's property (44).

Although certain communities eat pythons for food, the legendary qualities of this specie of reptile make them also prominently represented on palace objects and royal prestige items such as stools, walking sticks, bangles, necklaces and royal outfits. According to Ngintir:

The Bamenda Grassfields Fon was and is like the python in two ways. When “pushed to the wall” in very difficult situations, and when all other alternatives had failed, he transformed himself. He then swallows his opponent together with everything he owned – the money, family, compound and raffia bush, thus crushing him to death. Secondly, the Fon was like a fortress around his people, protecting them from being crushed by neighbouring ethnic groups for instance. (234)

Ethnographic analysts have been able to establish that ethnic groups and communities owed their safety and security to the essence to their defence system. In traditional Africa, power, authority and self-defence were the major yardsticks for measuring strengths. Even economic power depended on security for sustainability. Resistance as well as victorious incursions of certain tribes and ethnic groups were major deciding factors in the formation of alliances and the forging of sisterly relations between communities. This is how arts, especially folk art and related aspects became major signposts for showcasing both physical and magical powers. In several communities of the grassfield, some birds are represented as symbols of peace or war. During certain moments, bird masks are worn either by the Fon or notables or better still by certain masked figures to recapture the legendary forces that are operational in the land. Some palace masquerades often showcase different masks as a profile of magical forces employed in combat.

Apart from the bird masks, there is the prominence of the red feather which in the grassfield is a symbol of honour and dignity. Equitable to a medal in contemporary setting, the red feather among the grasslanders carries special significance. Obtainable from a particular specie of bird, Fon Jabvu Nfor of Nkambe explains that, a red feather is a sign of distinction conferred on any individual by the Fon or some authorized notable. In palace court the “Nfuh” which is the military wing of “Kwifon” displays its history of resistance and victory by the display of sculpted figures on door posts. By and large, the use of animals, birds and human motifs in grassfield art gallery is often a showcase of royalty and prowess that covers the mythic and mystical forces in the community

Palace art also enjoys the reputation as embodiment of belief Systems and Practices common among grasslanders. Therefore, besides the representation of the politico-religious and related functions captured through the palace arts and relics, the question of myths and belief systems are equally prominently established. Cowry shells for example, are also symbols of wealth, respect and dignity such that any objects; stool, throne, vessel or prestige items bearing them carry an aura of dignity and reverence. Beaded items decisively convey esteem because bearers invariably represent the royal lineage. Queen mothers, like the “Wintoh” or Fon’s wives and princesses are identified sometimes by them. In different communities of the grassfield, the distinction between queen mother, princess or “wintoh” is made by how the bearer wears the cowry shell.

His royal highness the Fon of Kungi explains that in Kungi Fondom, the queen mother usually wears the cowry shell as a head gear or decoration on a hair scarf. The prominent position is meant to signal to any onlooker that the woman in question is connected to royalty and hence not available for unsolicited social interaction with men. The beads are thus meant to signal and also deter young people from any sacrilegious attempt at courting the wife of a Fon. In very similar circumstances, the cowry shell is offered to a lady as courtship symbol for her to join the bevy of other women in the royal bed. As a practice in some grassfield communities, a mere offer of a cowry shell is clear indication that the attention of the said lady is needed at the palace. Although refusal or objection to the offer is not punishable, the lady who accepts the cowry shell needs no further notification when the palace messengers show up and “abduct” her.

On the other hand, the peace plant otherwise known as “Nkeng” in Limbum is another very symbolic item often prominently represented in court arts. In the palace of Kungi, the statures of a male and female stand prominently on either sides of the raised platform where different thrones are displayed. On the male stature is the “Nkeng” hanging out a bag. When need be, it is from this bag that the leaf is plucked and served as convocation to a community member or visitor. The twin statues besides all else are the palace guards.



*Commemorative stature  
(Shey Ntoh) (Kungi palace)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem,  
2014



In Nkambe, like in and Kom, the “Nkeng” plays the same role and function like the coloured bamboo pole either sent to a community member or planted on a piece of disputed land. Ngintir underscores that:

Anyone who saw blades of palm leaves or variously coloured bamboo pillars pinned on a piece of land immediately understood it to mean a Kwifon, Nwerong or Ngumba injunction. The owner of the land in question immediately fetched a calabash of palm-wine which he took to Kwifon to find out what was wrong (53).

The multiple functions and symbols of the “Nkeng” as well as the bamboo pillar are better defined by the prevailing circumstances. In certain situations, the same bamboo pole signifies the entrance to a cult or sacred society. In other situations, the bamboo pole is carried along in public ceremonies as show of strengths and authority. In yet other situations, the bamboo pole is handed to a community member as an indication of banishment either for witch craft practice, theft or for some heinous crimes against the community or individual. In the grassfield, banishment is a common regulatory principle and punitive measure understood and recognised by all. To forewarned potential witches and or wizards, most grassfield palaces have nurtured strong regulatory networks of various forms and structures to monitor and possibly check the activities of the wicked people. The painting or sculptured portrait of a retinue of notables punctuated with mask figures, send clear signals that regulatory powers are available and operational in the land.



*Kumbo palace, 2018*



*Relief sculpture(2014)*



*Nwerong, Kungi palace (2014)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem

Occasionally, the Kwifon undertakes a cleansing ritual to clear the land of malevolence and forestall impending catastrophic happenings. During such occasions, the sacred pot, bag, horn, cup and related items are used for libations and other ritual practices considered germane. It is during such events that the charms and protective amulets of the community are brought out and used in the interest of peace and solidarity in the communities. The different animals, birds and reptiles that the communities in the grassfield uphold with special regards and which feature prominently on their artistic frameworks include the earth spider, the chameleon, the bat, scorpion, lizard and the tortoise. In addition to these is the diminutive human carvings that are believed to possess unbeatable mystical powers.

In the collective understanding of the people of the grassfield, the scorpion, like the earth spider, are symbols of inescapability, and strict surveillance. Their representation on doors and window frames is a recapitulation of the available mystical forces at work in the community. They are meant to send a signal that witches and wizards have no hiding place in the community. Because they are known to crawl noiselessly through cracks, grassfield communities know scorpions as deadly insects endowed with such patience that it can wait on a spot for months to capture its prey on which just one sting is enough to do everlasting damage. While no serious effort is made to distinguish the earth spider from the scorpion, grass field palace art groups the creatures as agents of safety and security.



*Spider and lizard motifs  
(Nkambe palace)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem,  
2018

As for the chameleon, the general belief in the grassfield is that, it is endowed with inimitable powers that enable it to adjust its colours according to the prevailing environmental properties, a force that makes the reptile almost invisible to its attackers and its preys. Above all, the chameleon is surrounded by various myths and perceptions that cause it is both feared and hated. In Africa, the chameleon is believed to be a harbinger of death and as an animal that nurture serious relationship with the spirit world. In Kungi, the chameleon is considered the most efficient agent needful in a context of reprisal or revenge for a heinous act committed in the community. Mythically, it is perceived as the agent that helps locate a criminal and is endowed with powers to decide what punitive measure is appropriate for wrong deeds. Known among grass fielders as an animal that goes straight for vengeance, Ta Fai Kibo of Moh village argues that it does not pardon any wrong doing. Once sent on a mission, the chameleon does not need instructions on how to carry out an act of vengeance. For its unpardoning or unforgiving character, the chameleon is more hated than feared. Several myths exists among communities in the grass land on the special power of the chameleon and its extraordinary ability to identify a wrong-doer, even several years after the incident. Its effigy on palace accoutrement was viewed as effective deterrents to lies-telling, witchcraft practices and related deviant behaviours in the community. Vessels and ritual items often carry the chameleon image to scare evil people and promote peace, safety and security.



*Palm wine calabash and palm wine pot (Nkambe palace)*



*Camwood vessel (Babugo)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2018

Similarly, the lizard, that is variously represented on different palace items equally carry awful mythical and mystical beliefs. Represented on door frames as well as windows and pillars, the lizard is associated with fables that profess their power to chase witches and wizards. Often evoked or at least mentioned in cleansing rituals, the lizard has a reputation of being one of the most hated creatures among witches. While witchcraft and magic were formally difficult to combat with reliable results, the lizard gained popularity in the grassfield owing to its ability to act faster and even more immediate than the magic of the evil people. Commenting on the positive attributes, J P Notue opines that there exist several types of lizards in the grassfield. Specially gifted in scaring witches, the lizard is equally associated with the power to cause rainfall and rainbow. In yet other grassfield communities, the lizard is considered as the hidden totem of the Fon who, depending on the circumstance, could turn into one so as to better monitor the community for the sustenance of peace.

Therefore, lizards embody both life and death; life for the community and death for the evil-doer. Among its many laudable characteristics, the lizard is welcomed for its ability to get rid of mosquitoes and insects that are harmful to humans. Among some communities like Babungo in the North West, the lizard is respected as an aid of the Fon. Fables, thus, exist in Babungo where the lizard is said to have saved the Fon from the onslaught of an enemy community by directing the Fon on how to slip away in safety.

Other versions of the myth hold that the lizard, like the chameleon was able to be in all places at the same time. For these special regard, the lizard appears in the grassfield palace art as a quick reminder and symbol of the multiple forces, abilities and skills with which the Fon and the community are endowed. In some communities, nobody intentionally killed the lizard for fear of destroying an agent of safety and security on which the people and the community depend. This globally positive outlook of the lizard does not however cloud its perception in and around Ako Subdivision, as a monitoring spirit. According to Abe Kiteh Louis, the lizard has an ambivalent regards in the social psyche of Ako people. The people of Ako believe that evil and ill-intentioned people are known to have used the lizard to accomplish their evil plans in the life of some people and families. However, as he continues to say, its representation on objects is a call to be alert so as to decipher the reality from falsehood.

Related ambivalence is also discernable in the image and the representation of bats. In the grassfield, bats are a peculiar creature considered neither birds nor animals. In their ultimately weird nature, they neither sit nor stand, they actually rather hang upside down when they stop flying. Active more at night than during the day, these highly nocturnal creatures live in caves trees and sometimes in abandoned buildings. Their very complex nature makes their prominence in various tales only more profound. In the grassfields, the trees or other natural habitats of bats were generally considered sacred. It is thus forbidden to hunt them in their abode. Preferably, hunting of bats is authorized only when they go out in search of food. While bats fly like birds, they are also known to bark like dogs. In Nkambe bat hunters are considered magicians or even witches.

However, focusing on the complex qualities of bats, Ta Fai Kibo argues that, "these unpredictable qualities of bats are just reason Some Fons and kings opt to use and adopt them as a totemic symbol. Because the Fon has to be mysterious, the strange features of bats offer him the desired totemic awe inspiring character he needs. According to the beliefs of the grass fields, being predictable is akin to being vulnerable. Therefore, the Fon ought not to be transparent and easy to comprehend. Thus, complexity about a creature that refutes classical categorization only valorise its qualities as fitting for the Fon who ought to encapsulate awesomeness and mysticism. The representation of the bat motif on stools, thrones, door or window posts, clearly depict the adoption of the creature's nature to better manage the complexities and challenges of traditional administration.

Other creatures with strange features about which people in the grassfield have varying myths is the tortoise. The slow moving, four legged land and water living animal, with a hard shell, is associated with profound mysticism. Its adoption and use together with other related animals that are considered royal is explainable by its somehow mystical qualities. Featuring prominently in folktales of the grassfield, the tortoise is especially reputed for its exceptional brilliance and trickery that most trickster tales have it at the centre of action. Considered harmless and peaceful, the tortoise is looked at in the grass field as an animal that sits and causes all other animals and birds to work for its interest. Ta Fai Kibo corroborates the account of Pa Abe of Ako Sub-Division that Mbembe Community associate the tortoise with a complex mysticism and gentleness behind which it conceals its true nature.

The tortoise is reputed in grassfield myths as an animal that knows how best to camouflage in its shell during dangerous moments. Recognised for its exceptional wisdom, the tortoise features in most tales as chief counsellor to most of the animals. In like manner, grassfield Fons invoke the wisdom of the tortoise to negotiate safe exit from difficult and life threatening situations they confront. Also viewed as an animal that moves along with its house and hideout, grassfield Fons revere themselves for their ability to make or find a safe home wherever they go. Because a tortoise never lacks a safe harbour, no matter whether it is on land or in the sea, tortoise above all, is quoted in myths as an animal that never complains of accommodation problems. In like manner, the Fons make their palaces where ever they lodge.

The slow, majestic, but sure movement of the tortoise leave the impression that no obstacle is ever strong or tough enough for the tortoise. Without fear or favour, the tortoise sets goals and achieves them sometimes by manipulating other animals that gladly help in achieving every task. Pa Mbencho Robert Cho, a

reputed carver in Small Babanki concurs that the choice of which item to represent the image of a tortoise is in most times purely accidental. He intimates that not all carvers always succeed in representing the tortoise motif on their works. Without “asking” the tortoise itself for authorization, a carver may start off with the intention of designing a tortoise but ends up with a lizard or other animals. Pa Robert Mbencho concludes that in communities where the tortoise is attacked, killed and eaten on regular bases, representing them on objects turns more daunting and sometimes without appreciable results. Also often represented as symbol of protection, safety and wisdom, the tortoise does not allow itself to be cheated by communities that recognise its mystical powers and yet hunt it for food. Opting for the tortoise as totems, Fons of the grassfield set out to warn against double standards and pretence that they may face from dubious and malevolent members of the community.



*Palace of Akum with varying totems*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem,  
2014

From a general perspective, nature in its wholesomeness is appropriated and employed to serve man in his strife for survival and for comfort. This explains why animals, birds, trees, streams, soil and fire are all properties of mystical and mythical manipulation that are used to serve man. Grassfield belief systems and practices, make sure to highlight the complex dichotomy of how what is seen is only a tip of the iceberg. Therefore, the horn of a buffalo, like the tusks of an elephant or teeth and skin of the lion and leopard carry greater weight and represent even more than the live animals themselves. In the same light, a flowing stream and a standing pond have different implications beyond the imagination that a non-grass field person can entertain. Therefore, birth, naming, circumcision, marriage and death are crucial points in the rites of passage about which the grassfield associates with special rituals and around which certain myths are crafted. At the centre of all these, is the belief and process of enthronement, the procedure for the selection and initiation of members in existing secret and sacred societies in the land. The forte of the belief and life preserving practices that define the grass field is often only implied through the sacred bag, vessels, bugle, horn, cups, grooves and other relics and sacred that are jealously preserved.

The use of cam-wood on a newly married woman as well as its use on a newly enthroned Fon, underscores different levels of initiation. The vessels used as well as the notable or notables empowered to perform such rites, are determined by a set of conditions that are hardly perceptible or representable in and around the palace courts. Yet the prominence of certain masks as well as motifs there on, speak to the dangerous spirits and powers associated with the object. Pa Robert Mbencho could not be more succinct when he explains that:

Our belief systems, like our practices follow along predefined cannons of existence that we only have the option to uphold. In the palaces, what we see on display is hardly meant for entertainment as it is an invitation to regulate our impressions as well as our attitudes and reaction. It is deadly not to understand the warning signs and to overlook the values of a people’s viewpoints and their reading and reaction to the world around them.

It stands to reason that court arts, like relics, put on open display in the grassfield palaces have even more than equal status with signposts that we see in the social sphere. Through them, a careful observer and inquisitive visitor gains complete understanding of what and how the grassfield considers relevant in the social, political and religious interactions.



Beyond the purview of the political and religious functions, the irrefutable status of the grass field palace arts as recapitulation of history and collective memory, is more or less rather well established. How historiography is configured, interpreted and understood is one more reason that indigenous knowledge is endowed with as much potential as modern systems. Over and above the mystical powers often associated with sculpted statures and diminutive figures, experience and profound studies have shown that many of the carved objects especially human statures were meant to play the role of modern day photography. Since photos are made to capture important moments, personalities and events for the sake of posterity, so was the primary motivation for many existing statures in and around the palace. Contrary to the argument by Notue (2002: 130), that “The custom of producing a statue to commemorate a Fon’s reign was originally not a unanimous practice in the Bamenda Grass fields”. Martin B. Tugoh of Mankon Museum refutes the claim by stipulating that the production of statues is as old as the grass field palace. The art, the curator explains, was initiated to commemorate exclusively the reigns of traditional leaders who performed certain extraordinary feats to protect the land and save the lives of his people. According to Tugoh, the motivation to make statues came about long before the advent of the Fulani incursions that only further boost the practice following valiant repelling attack by some grass field traditional authorities. The first stature in the grass field dedicated to the memory of a warrior of Mankon origin, was designed as a surprise present to the fondom by one of her vassals. When he died of natural causes, the community initiated a move to have his effigy planted at the main entrance to the community.

To continue benefiting from the late Fon’s invincible powers, the elders agreed to “fabricate” an image and went on to trim the finger and toe nails which were fitted on the stature. Other suggestions that the hair of the late Fon be cut and glued on the stature won popular acclaim. In line with such practice, Schneider emphasises that “Derivatives of the transitional object recur in funerary art, where it symbolically prolongs the life of the deceased. Such art reassures the living because they believe it reassures the dead” (238). Accordingly, the stature of the Fon of Mankon was historically among the pioneer commemorative stature in the grass field. Pa Tugoh, adds that the said stature was major motivation for Mbuembue of the Bamun dynasty who enforced it as a law in his community that every recognized notable be represented on carved wood and placed at the palace. His royal highness the Fon of Nkambe adds that where good community carvers were inexistent, the royal orchestra was mandated to create songs and dance groups in honour of a revered leader. According to Pa Robert Mbencho, the popularity of carvers and members of the royal orchestra was sufficient motivation for some young people who opted to relocate and live with carvers in order to learn the trade.

In palaces of the grass field, elites, as well as notables of some social standing, saw their effigies on royal musical instruments or relief portraits. The practice of human motif as well as live size statues gained grounds in an effort to document and profile prominent personalities who distinguished themselves in their different trades. In Kungi, Fon Bundi II notes that the image of a prominent hunter that was reputed for consistent victorious hunting expeditions was later represented negatively as greedy. Sadly enough, the said hunter committed suicide out of frustration. In the Kungi Fondom, songs and dances in honour of the said hunter become popular in in the community. Till date, hunting expeditions in Kungi are preceded by rituals meant to invoke the strength and ability of hunter Bambeh Nko.

At the entrance to the palace of Bali-Nyonga, huge and live size statues of three of Bali legendary rulers are planted in commemoration of their reigns. It will be a serious mistake to assume that the three statues are a comprehensive account of all Bali warrior leaders. The three are thus a way to immortalize those of the leaders that left indelible marks in the sand of history.



*Sultan Njoya and wives, 2018 Life-size statures Bali Nyonga, 2014 Diminutive statures Nkambe palace, 2018*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem

Similar historical recapitulation is true of the Fumban palace. While the legendary warrior, Mbuembue is remembered for his valiant exploits, the centre of the Fumban palace is adorned by the huge cavalier stature of Sultan Njoya whose mysterious and ingenious qualities led to the creation of the “Shumon” alphabet. The effigy of Njoya at the palace of Fumban has not been contested by successive rulers of the dynasty. Rather, the image and stature of their founding father is preserved and protected as a symbol of their collective heritage. In the Fumban royal orchestra, a repertoire of songs, music and dance are exclusively reserved for the royal family. In the collective psyche, Fumban indigenous know and recognize the music, song and dance when it is played. During special ceremonies and festivals like the “Nguon”, certain trumpet sounds precede the arrival of the Sultan and specific songs and music are meant to save as questions on major happening in the land. At the end of the session, royal music is played during which the Sultant dances amid ululation to the amusement of his people.

In Nkambe, Nso, Kom and beyond, the people need no other instructions as to what to do when the sound of various masquerades such as “Nkoh” (Kibaranko), “Mabuh”, or “Wan Mabuh” are perceived. The artistic representation of collective memory and history is easily comprehended. Since collective memory goes hand in hand with belief systems and practices, it is obviously forbidden to call anyone, even a family member or friend by name, once he is part of the retinue of masked figures on a public display. In tandem with expected practices as befits respectful members of the Kumbo Community, the masked figure – “Mabuh” is lavished with praise names and ululation. If satisfied by the eloquence of the praise singer, the mask figure could approach the particular person and exceptionally execute dramatic display and blessings as reward for the praise singer. Artistically, this is usually represented showing the people either in squatting position or lying prostrate before the masquerade.



*“Mabuh” Dramatic display in  
reward of a praise singer*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2018

In terms of social compartment and the representation of customs that are well known, the red feature, the peace plant, like the coloured bamboo form part of community accessories and the traditional symbols that call for immediate attention. The same way cowry shell bracelet communicates to an onlooker, is the same way the sound of the rallying gong communicates the members of the community. Similarly, the ululation that announces the birth of a baby is inherently distinctive from that which announces misfortune. In terms of artistic representation, a title-holder with a cap in hand and blowing the royal bugle, is an indication of tragedy. In Kumbo for example, a particular masquerade emerges only when a sacrilegious act has happened. Its appearance is often meant for cleansing and purification. In this, its passage is followed by the dead of whoever might have been responsible for the sad happening

As regards secret groups and sacred societies, the grandeur, prowess or registered exploits of the different structures are often preserved and promoted as resources that aid in the showcasing of tradition and culture. For example, the history of the exploits of *Nfuh* is often marked by the human head motif projected on the door and window frames. Where this organ has record history of attack and capture of title-holders, women or children, the representative and respective effigies are seen on the door frames. Additionally bereavement as well as vacancies in secret and sacred societies is represented by the suspension of the traditional stool on the veranda of the secret house. This image qualifies for public announcement as well as a call to tender, for those interested in becoming members of the said secret society.



*Hanging Nfuh stool (death announcement of a member) and vacancy notification (Kungi palace)*

**Source:** Donatus Fai Tangem, 2014

As a follow up to the announcement, a newly recruited member is initiated using both the animate as well as inanimate objects for fortification. At the Centre of the initiation rites are palm wine, buffalo horn cup, calabash or wine pot and camwood. The vessels into which either the palm wine or camwood is put prior to application by rubbing on the body of the initiated, is often decorated with very symbolic motif. The container of the palm wine which has knopfli (1998) refers to as “Mimbo Pot” like that of the camwood is adorned with significant iconographies. As a matter of fact mixed representation of both human and animal motif on the mimbo pot” like the lizard motif on the camwood vessels is intended to send clear signals as well as warn anyone who may want to dare the initiated person(s)

In the case of a Fon, the investiture ritual empowers the new leader to be able to function in ways he could not ordinarily have done. In Wimbun land, the installation ceremony rallies all existing powers that are vested on the Fon, who on his part, takes an oath of loyalty and respect of the culture and tradition of the people whose wellbeing he must work for, and never against. The throne or royal stool often supported by five human figurines, most often, king makers, as already noted, is presented to the new Fon as indication of consensus by the people who look up to him in return for his objective action of protection and preservation. The overall objective of grass field palace art is to represent and uphold these basic realities.

### **Conclusion**

In the grass field region of Cameroon, traditional art, and especially palace artistic representation embody profound ethos that translates the percepton and practices of the people. Comparable to modern and or western systems of information production and propagation, the collectivity of palace arts seek to represent the multi-dimensional framework of indigenous knowledge system. While the dynamic and structured pattern of cultural outfits owe no apology or explanation to conservative western scholars, indigenous African arts summarily represent the manner and matter that define African world views beyond the resistance and hesitation by some western ideologues. African Anthropological and some western researchers have increasingly argued in favour of the dynamic systems and values of African arts that need to be correctly decoded. With due consideration for the obvious stratification of the structures of society, the arts speak comprehensively to the deep issues of common concern. Therefore, the arts, crafts and relics of the grass field make neat delineation between commoners and notables, and between notables and the overall crowned head, the Fon, and all that he incarnates. Through the representative configuration of the properties of nature, culture and traditional patterns, grass field traditional art underpin the triple imperatives of royalty, leadership and the general believe systems, as well as history and collective memory of the people. Through the periscope of art gallery, the grass field indigenous wisdom and the practical orientation of its values concretize the power of the multifaceted signs and symbols that make for an inviting decoding system.

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