

Research Article

# Objects as Expression of Power, Religion and Therapy: The “Country” Pots in the Bamenda Grassfields Fondoms of Cameroon

Exodus Tikere Moffor <sup>1\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon

\* Correspondence: [extikeremo@gmail.com](mailto:extikeremo@gmail.com)

<https://doi.org/eiki/10.59652/jcpas.v2i1.149>

**Abstract:** In most parts of the world especially in Africa, people can be identified and distinguished through objects. These objects which some are worn on the body or carried along are decorated with symbols which could be decoded by those who comprehend their cultural connotations. The object this article focuses on is the indigenous or ‘country’ pots of the Bamenda Grassfields, pots which were used in the past by women in the kitchen, by traditional medical doctors and by traditional leaders; notables and heads of secret societies. Today, these country pots are not very visible in the kitchen as it was the case before because of the introduction of other containers. The questions raised by this paper are: What is the place of the country pot in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people? What is the symbolism of the motifs represented on the Bamenda Grassfields country pots? What are the change currently taking place in the production and use of these pots? The objectives of the article are to examine the roles and find out the meanings of the motifs represented on pots. It also explores the changes which are taking place in the production, commercialisation and use of the country pots. Data for this article was collected using the qualitative method and this data was analysed using content analysis and interpreted soon after collection was over. The interpretation was done with the theories of cultural ecology of Steward, functionalism of Radcliff-Brown and Malinowski, symbolic anthropology of Geertz and cultural evolution of Tylor and Morgan. Findings reveal that the country pots are an aspect of material culture of the Bamenda Grassfields. They are of very great cultural value and play a fundamental role in these cultures; they are an expression of power, religion, healing as well as communion. The country pots like any other cultural element, if they are valorised, they will continue to identify the people from generation to generation.

**Keywords:** country pots; expression of power; healing; objects; religion; Bamenda Grassfields; Cameroon

Received: February 11, 2024

Accepted: February 24, 2024

Published: February 28, 2024



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Containers are very invaluable in African societies in general and in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon in particular for they are objects of everyday use. They are used in the kitchen by the women, in healing by traditional medical doctors, and in religious ceremonies by secret societies. These objects also serve as a great source of income to the artists who manufacture them. Containers in general and some country pots in particular are objects which express power. In this paper, the author concentrates on the country pots. Pots are any of various types of containers; usually round, especially one used for cooking food. Any of a variety of containers with or without a lid, especially for storing food or liquids. Indigenous or country pots in this paper refer to the pots which have origins or which are produced in the Bamenda Grassfields fondoms and whose knowledge or technology has been handed down from one generation to another.

Gosselain (1999), Notué and Triaca (2005), Forni (2007), and Carine and Wang (2021) have written on the pots lay particular emphasis on pots produced from clay. Gosselain, concentrates on the processing of clay pots and symbols in Sub-Saharan Africa. He lays particular interest on the prohibitions in pottery production. Notué and Triaca (2000), note that the Mankon Kingdom collection is made up of receptacles and other containers. Among these containers are pots. Forni like Gosselain writes on the production of clay pots. She goes

further to give the functions of clay pots and their symbolism in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Carine and Wang look at pottery as an expression of art therapy in the Western Bamileke Cameroon. This article entitled “Objects as Expression of Power, Religion and Therapy: The *Country* Pots in the Bamenda Grassfields Fondoms of Cameroon”, covers three types of pots; clay, wooden and woven pots. Apart from the functions of pots, the article equally pays particular attention on the cultural significances of the motifs represented on the pots. The last part of the paper concentrates on the changes surrounding the *country* pots.

Country pots in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon exist in three major types; those made from clay (clay pots), those made from wood (wooden pots) and woven pots (those produced from grass and fibre). These objects play diverse roles in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people specifically and the Grassfields people in general. Some masks jujus use the pot to cook protective medicine for the jujus. Large pots serve as containers to store food (cereals like maize and beans). In the Bamenda Grassfields area, production centres of these pots are Kedjom, Kom, Oku, Babessi, Nsei and Bamessing.

The Bamenda or Western Grassfields is a region that corresponds to the Anglophone North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon in Africa. The part of the Grassfields that was under English Administration known as the ‘Bamenda Grassfields’ (Warnier, 1975: 43). The territory is characterised by high plateau with an altitude ranging from 1000m to 1800m which lay on either side of a volcanic mountain range – running south-west and north-east from the Gulf of Guinea to the Tibati, whose highest regional peaks are Mount Bamboutos (2740m) and Mount Oku (3008m). With a surface of roughly 16,800 square kilometres. The Western boarder is separated from the Upper Cross River basin by a sharp escarpment. A range of hills runs north-east to the Gayama gap and divides it from the basin of the Katsina Ala River. It is partially marked off from Takum area and south-western Adamawa by an arc of mountains (Eyongetah & Brain, 1974).

The Grassfields in general and the Bamenda Grassfields area in particular are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests. The natural vegetation of this region consists of short and tall grasses with raffia and oil palms growing along the courses of the rivers and streams and banana trees surrounding the compounds. The trees serve as raw materials to wood carvers who use them to produce a variety of pots. The oil and raffia palms as well as grasses especially the spear grass (*heteropogon contortus*) serve as raw materials to weavers who manufacture woven pots, and the abundant clay found in areas of the Ndop Plain is used by potters to make magnificent earthenware such as pots, jars, bowls, pipes, cups and many more.

Nkwi and Warnier (1982, p. 12) note that most chiefdoms in the Western Grassfields have traditions regarding their origins. According to these traditions, the chiefdoms of the Western Grassfields can be classified under five headings, depending on their origins: the Tikar, the Widekum, the Bali-Chamba, those who claim yet other origins outside the Grassfields and the aborigines.

All the peoples of the Bamenda Grassfields are organised in fondoms of different sizes. Most of them are independent (Warnier, 1975, p. 42). Almost everywhere, *chiefdomship* is hereditary and the *Fon* is a sacred figure. The distribution of power between fons, regulatory societies, lineage and ward heads varied from fondom to fondom as well as the degree of concentration of power, the less centralised being probably the Meta is among stateless societies (Warnier, 1975, p. 32-33). The political structure of most, if not all, Bamenda Grassfields fondoms are, basically similar. The *Fon* has very great executive authority next to the village regulatory society known as *kenifon*. Chiefs, notables and quarter heads also form part of the political structure. Most Bamenda Grassfields fondoms are patrilineal (apart from the matrilineal Kom and the Aghem societies) and highly ranked societies. The political system is based on hereditary traditional authority and access to power is highly determined by direct descent. On the political strata of these fondoms therefore, the *kenifon* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables and quarter-heads. Only the *fon* and a few notables have the privilege to own and use indigenous pots especially those that bear anthropomorphic or zoomorphic or anthropo-zoomorphic motifs.

The people of the Bamenda Grassfields are polytheistic, they believe in religions such as the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Most Bamenda Grassfielders are animists who believe that spirits inhabit some natural objects and such spirits control the lives of these people. They equally have many gods and each has a specific role in the society. If these gods are venerated, they will be very benevolent (nice) but if neglected, they are capable of punishing the living. In Bamenda Grassfields religion, pots are very instrumental, they are used by different societies known to the people as ‘houses’ such as *kenifon* house, *samba* house,

*njub* house and many more. Many of these houses or their members come together once a week or month to discuss issues concerning the house. When they meet, palm wine is heated in the clay pot and then put in the carved pot and then shared out to the members present to drink. Christianity is the religion of many people of the Bamenda Grassfields unlike Islam which is found mostly in Sabga, a small quarter in Kedjom Ketingu in Tubah Sub Division, Mezam Division. In some Christian churches, clay pots are used as musical instrument.

The people of the Bamenda Grassfields are involved in numerous economic ventures, namely, farming, arts, hunting and many more. In the domain of farming, the people are engaged in crops cultivation as well as animal husbandry. The crops which they grow like the animals they keep serve for domestic, commercial and religious use.

In the aspect of arts, Bamenda Grassfields people produce varied articles (among which are pots) using raw materials such as wood, clay, and grasses which they obtain from the immediate environment. These objects in general and the pots in particular are produced by both the male and female folks who transform elements of nature to create culture. Just like farming, the arts objects which the people make are destined for home use, for commercialisation and for use in rituals by secret societies. The artists generate lots of revenue from their products selling them both in the local as well as neighbouring markets. Some of these objects are sold in big towns in Cameroon and others even exported.

The *country* pots of the Bamenda Grassfields like all other aspects of culture is gradually witnessing some changes in the domain of production, commercialisation and use. The activity of wood carving and wooden pots sculpturing was done with special wood types and by a specific class of people in the past but today, many young people are engaged in it using all sorts of wood. The ruling class (the *Fons*, notables and heads of secret societies) were the main clients and users of the indigenous pots in the past. Today, artists do not only sell their products to traditional dignitaries, they expose these objects which they sell to both local and foreign buyers. Some of them carry their pots to the markets, both local as well as neighbouring markets and sometimes such objects are sold at giveaway amounts.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The researcher employed mainly the qualitative method in this article and the method was grouped under aspects such as selection of research participants, data collection, data collection tools and procedure and data analysis.

### 2.1 Selection of Research Participants

The participants who took part in this study were selected using the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where new participants are recruited by other participants to take part in a research study. It begins with one or more study participants and then continues on the basis of references from these participants. The process continues until the researcher reaches the desired sample, a saturation point. The snowball sampling technique was to ensure that a wide range of the study topic was covered.

### 2.2 Data Collection

Data for the study was collected using participant observation, and in-depth interviews. The researcher who is actually a sculptor in wood participated in the carving of some wooden pots. That is, he worked with several artists both in the forests and the workshops where most of the works are produced. In the course of the carving, the researcher got to understand the different wood types and techniques that the sculptors use. The researcher visited several women who produce woven pots as well as the men and women who make clay pots. In some of his visits, the researcher and these artists went to the different places where raw materials are collected. This gave the researcher the opportunity to comprehend how such materials are obtained, transformed into objects and how the objects are commercialised. The researchers equally observed how these pots are used during certain ceremonies which he was allowed to take part in. In-depth interviews were conducted with producers of the different types of country pots. Some of the questions which were established had to do with types of raw materials used in their productions, where and how such materials are obtained. Other questions centred on the symbols on pots and their cultural significance. There were questions on the functions of the indigenous pots in the lives of the people and the last part of the questions dwelled on changes which are taking place in the production, commercialisation and use of the country pots. In all, 20 artists were interviewed, 8 carvers of wooden pots; 6 producers of clay pots and 6 producers of woven pots. In-depth interviews were also conducted with some *Fons*, notables and heads of secret societies. With these category of

individuals the researcher asked questions which had to do with interpretation of symbols on pots, the functions of these pots as well as the changes surrounding the country pots. The interviews with these notables gave a greater insight into the meanings of the symbols used on the indigenous pots, and their roles in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.

### 2.3 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The researcher used the observation and interview guides respectively to collect data for the study. Among the questions that featured on the guides were types of raw materials used in the production of indigenous pots, where and how such materials are obtained. Other questions centred on the symbols on pots and their cultural significance. There were equally questions which focused on the roles of the indigenous pots in the lives of the people in particular and the culture in general. The last set of questions concentrated on changes which are taking place in the production, commercialisation and use of the country pots.

In the course of the observations and interviews, the researcher took detail notes in his exercise books. Most of the interviews with the carvers of pots were carried out in the course of the carving exercise since the researcher also participated in the carving. Interviews with the women who produce woven and clay pots was often done in the evenings when these women had returned from their farms as from 6pm. As regards the men who produce pots from clay, the researcher interviewed them most times at 5pm in the evening. And most of the interview sessions lasted for about an hour. For interviews which did not go to the end, the informants gave the researcher appointments to continue with such interviews on later dates.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Data was analysed soon after data collection was over. Data which was audio-taped using a digital voice recorder was replayed many times and then transcribed verbatim. After the transcription, the voice recorder was replayed over and over to verify the quality and reliability of the transcription. This transcription was done into Microsoft word. It was analysed using content analysis. The data was read, coded, clustered and then sub-themes and themes were developed. The contents of the pictures were interpreted iconographically

## 3. Results and Discussion

Indigenous pots go beyond mere objects used in the kitchen, they cut across all the aspects of the society. They are not only used to store food, water and other items, they serve diverse purposes in the hands of varied individuals and societies. The findings of this paper are presented in the following order: typology of *country* pots, interpretation of motifs adorned on pots, functions of pots and the evolution in the production and uses of these pots.

### 3.1 The Typology of Bamenda Grassfields Country Pots

In the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, there are containers in varieties depending on the raw materials used in their production. In the section of the article, the theory of cultural ecology developed by Steward (1972) was used for data analysis and interpretation. In this theory, he attempts to explain human condition in relation to the environment, the environment determines culture. This article demonstrates how the people of the Bamenda Grassfields transform elements of the environment or nature such as clay, wood as well as grass or fibre to fabricate culture, the *country* pots. Commenting on such containers and the materials used in their production, Notué and Triaca (2005) in a study in the Mankon kingdom note that:

*The Mankon heritage containers are a large variety of pans, vases, cups, pots, bowls, jugs, pitchers, bags and other containers made of earthenware, wood or other materials, with different uses, ritual ceremonial objects, cooking utensils and so on. The pieces that are used to preserve or prepare products for worship or prestige (camwood powder and various drinks for initiations, palm wine and oil for libations, sources, tobacco, etc.) are sculpted, woven or modelled with great care (p.48-50).*

In the field, the researcher found out that there are three major types of country pots. Such pots are categorised according to the raw materials used in their production. These objects have some main centres of production as demonstrated in table 1 below. These pots include those made from clay, wood and grass or fibre (from raphia palm).

**Table 1.** Pots and the main centres of production in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

| Type of pots | Major production centre  |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| Clay         | Babessi, Bamessing, Nsei |
| Wooden       | Oku, Kedjom, Kom         |
| Woven        | Kedjom, Kom              |

*Source: Author's development (20.01.2024).*

### 3.1.1 Clay Pots

These are pots which are made from clay (see figure 1 below). Clay is a type of soil which is soft, sticky. It can be moulded when wet to make bricks, pottery and ceramics. Clay is plastic when moist but hard when fired (Moffor, 2022c). Carine and Wang (2021) comment that the art of pottery needs creativity as they put it:

*Pottery demands a great deal of time and calmness, which motivates one to let go of their thoughts and take the opportunity to discover the depths of themselves. It may be viewed as a type of meditation for some. This is also the tangible outcome that it produces: a bowl, a plate, a vase, or a sculpture that individuals created from start to finish (p. 76).*

Clay articles are produced by potters both men and women who manipulate and transform clay into magnificent utensils of great cultural utility. The production centres are Nsei, Bamessing and Babessi (see table 1 above), in the Ndop Plain in the Ngoketunjia Division. Among these centres, Forni (2000), says that Nsei is without a doubt the largest pottery producing village not only in Ngoketunjia Division but also in the Western Grassfields.



**Figure 1.** A country pot made from clay used for the cooking of food.

*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 20.01.2020 at 10am in an elderly woman's kitchen.*

Pots are often described as the “work of women.” This expression implies that they can be identified as women’s distinctive contribution to the family’s economy and the community’s social life. Until the 1940s - 50s, all Babessi women were taught to mould clay pots. Even though many opted for other kinds of income-generating activities in their adult lives, they were helping with the collection of clay or with the firing of the pots. Young boys and men, on the other hand, would participate in the production of clay pots only as

occasional helpers, and even then, only in activities that are not directly connected to the shaping of the pot or its decoration (Forni, 2000, p. 43). Although women were engaged in pots production, the latter manufactured ordinary pots while the men produce objects used by the men themselves and sacred groups.

Clay pots are in diverse sizes, shapes and importance and Forni (2000) state that:

*Cooking pots (wang ku, ku bang) and serving/eating bowls (keyo, ku to, ku beko) of different sizes and degree of elaboration constitute the most common items produced by local potters. Cooking pots are produced mainly by women and elder male potters (who often specialise in the production of cooking pots with handles and lid. Cooking pots are a good item for women to produce, as a woman can never be sure to be at work place free of interruption. The care of children and the many duties around the compound may, in fact, distract a potter from her clay work and it is thus preferable to engage in the production of simple items that do not require a lot of work for their completion. Eating bowls, on the other hand, are produced prevalently by men, especially the ku to and ku beko, whose decoration can reach the highest degree of refinement and complication found on Nsei pots. (p. 139-140).*

Some of the clay pots are produced together with their stands. The majority of these stands are woven out of grass while others are sculpted out of wood and decorated with some emblematic motifs like the lizard, bats' head, the scorpion and the earth spider. Such pots with stands are used by specific individual and social groups in the Bamenda Grassfields. Those which are destined for cooking do not need any stands since they have to be placed on the fire site.

Commenting on prohibitions in pottery, Gosselain (1999) notes that from a technical point of view, breaching a taboo may affect three stages of the manufacturing process: clay extraction (clay suddenly disappears, it loses its workability or it becomes unexploitable); drying (pots crack, even if sheltered from the sun); firing (pots explode during the process). These accidents relate to external factors such as local pedology or meteorological fluctuations, that is. factors that potters can hardly master regardless of their knowledge or skill (p. 209).

In every area of the continent, the most frequently occurring prohibitions concern sexual intercourse, menstruation and pregnancy. For instance, numerous potters avoid making love on the eve of clay extraction, a prescription that is sometimes attached to the whole manufacturing process and may be followed by all people present. Similarly, menstruating or pregnant women are not allowed to extract or manipulate clay, and sometimes even to touch unfired vessels. If people mostly fear that such persons could harm the clay deposit or cause breakage during drying and firing, some of them also speak of potential danger for the woman or the foetus. Among Igbo of Nigeria, the shaping of vessels could result in a difficult childbirth for pregnant women (Barley, 1994, p. 92). And according to some Balom and Sanaga potters of Cameroon, they could give birth to a stillborn baby if they entered the clay pit (Gosselain, 1999).

### 3.1.2 Wooden pots

Wooden pots in the Bamenda Grassfields are objects produced mostly in fondoms like Kedjom, Kom and Oku. As the name implies, these are objects produced from wood and expert carvers know exactly the type of tree to use in sculpturing the country pot. Wood best for their production is fresh wood. Jefferson (1974), Mveng (1980), Bohannan and Curtin (1995) and Knopfli (1999) all asset that sculptors work with wood in general and green wood in particular, so that objects will not crack too much when dry although cracks appear in most pieces. To Mveng (1980), Bohannan and Curtin (1995), Kassam and Megerssa (1996) and Knopfli (1999), good carvers know exactly which species of tree to choose for a particular piece of work, and almost every type of object requires a particular kind of wood. Wood for carving is got from individual as well as community forest (Moffor, 2022c).

Experienced carvers in Kedjom, Kom as well as Oku use three main tree types for carving in general and for the carving of wooden pots in particular. Out of these three, the most used tree for carving is *Cordia platithyrsa* or gum stick in Pidgin English. This type is preferred by most carvers because it is one of the most resistant trees. Insects do not attack it; it does not crack easily and it is not very heavy. This tree which is propagated through seeds and cuts take about 17 years to become mature for carving. An object produced from a mature *cordial platithyrsa* can last for more than a century without needing any repairs (Moffor, 2022c).

The next type of tree used in sculpturing wooden pots is *Ficus oreodryadum*. This tree known as fig tree in Pidgin English is heavy and also resistant to insect bite. It was and is still highly respected in the Grassfields today for many reasons. The tree like all trees according

to the Grassfields people, houses the gods and this is one of the reasons why it is found in most, if not all, compounds in this region. They are planted either in the centre of the compound or in the back yard, and considering its high religious value, the tree cannot be cut carelessly (Moffor, 2022c).

Different types of fig tress exist but the major ones found in this area are *figus elastic*, the rubber fig or rubber tree, *figus salicifolia* and mistletoe fig (*figus deltoidea*). *Figus elastic* or the rubber fig has large leaves but not very common in the Grassfields area so, it is rarely used in carving. The next is *figus salicifolia*, this type has slender and long leaves and is mostly planted in the shrines and at the limits to act as boundary demarcation. This is the most used fig free for carving. The last type of fig tree common in this region is *mistletoe fig* (*figus deltoidea*). This is classed as a perennial variety of *figus* that has thick waxy delta-shaped leaves. This type does not grow very tall and it is also planted in shrines.

Another traditional tree used in wood carving in general and the sculpturing of pots in particular is *pochylobus edulis*, black or bush butter in Pidgin English. This tree, when dry, is easily attacked by insects and it cracks easily. Carvers mix wood gun and saw dust to fill cracked portions.

The acquisition of wood for the manufacture of objects, especially, wood for carving, required and still requires some ritual performance because these trees house the spirits. Usually, some rituals were and are performed to appease the gods: to beg for permission from them (the gods) to cut 'their' tree as well as infringe in 'their' location. Very often, a branch of this tree in the case of *kevem* or *figus oreodryadum* is cut and planted somewhere else in the compound to replace the mature tree cut (Moffor, 2022c).

The wooden pots are sculpted by the male folk only, this is because there are taboos surrounding wood carving. Women are not allowed to go into where this activity is performed. In the days of old, only elderly men who had had a long period of training in wood carving could be ordained to carve. This was because their age coupled with their long training permitted them to produce objects which were invaluable in the society.

Some of the pots produced by expert carvers were and are decorated with many symbolic motifs with others showing scenes of important ceremonies like dancing, hunting and birth celebration in the fendom. Some of these pots are very large and can hold many litres or gallons of palm wine. A few artists demonstrate their artistry by carving a single pot that has two pots, one beneath and the other above as demonstrated in the figure below (figure 2). Such a pot portrays the ingenuity of its creator. They are made in different sizes to meet the needs of the secret society that owns it; this explains why some of them are black, white and even red.



**Figure 2.** A large two in one sculpted wooden pot used for storing of dry maize.  
Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 10.10.2005 at 2pm at a sculptor's workshop.

### 3.1.3 Woven Pots

These are pots made from grass (spear grass – *heteropogon contortus*) and fibre from raphia bamboo as demonstrated in figure 3 below. Kom and Kedjom are the major production centres of this object. It is the activity of the women and women from sixty years and above can often be seen weaving pots, baskets and bowls. They are tired and many of them cannot perform tasks that require a lot of energy like farming. Commenting on the fact that only elderly women are engaged in woven pots production, an elderly woman, a producer of these pots said that:

*As you must have noticed, only elderly women like myself are doing this work. I used to do it as a part time job when I still had the strength to work on the farms. Today with my age, I can no longer go to the farm anymore. Now that I only stay at home, I take weaving as my main activity. My children help me in the collection of the raw materials I need. I continue in this activity because I cannot just stay without doing something (12.01.2024).*

Unlike the bowls which are produced with lids, generally, pots do not have lids. Most of the pots woven have three handles (see figure 3) on which the object can be handled. Such pots are meant to hold or store dry food stuff like maize, beans and groundnuts



**Figure 3.** A woven pot with three handles used for storing dry food stuff.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 14.08.2019 at 10am in Oku Palace Museum.*

This container is often kept in a clean and dry place because the materials with which it is made are not humid friendly. Once it is used, it is carefully cleaned, dried and stored in a clean place to avoid it from getting bad (Moffor, 2022e).

### 3.2 An Insight in the Motifs Represented on Indigenous Pots

Pots like many sculpted objects are splendidly decorated with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, anthro-zoomorphic symbols as well as some geometric figures by wood carvers who have a mastery of the culture in which these objects have to serve. These artists do not only invest time and energy to carve, they also do so in painting their objects with symbolic colours of black and red. Such colours are used according to the aspirations of the users. Some of the motifs which are conspicuous on the Bamenda Grassfields country pots include human heads and figures, the elephant, the frog, the lizard, the scorpion, the double gong and many more. This portion of the article which concentrates on the cultural significance of human heads and figures, the elephant and the frog motif is interpreted using the theory of symbolic anthropology of Geertz (1973). A theory which focuses on the symbolic rather than material aspect of culture. It is the study of culture through the interpretation of the meaning of symbols, values and beliefs in society.

#### 3.2.1 Human heads and figures

Some carvings present only the human head, others portray humans with raised hands



meanwhile others have a combination of both and each has a specific cultural connotation. The human head for instance is symbolic because the head is regarded as the house of a spirit. Bamenda Grassfields belief system considers the human head as a means through which the people can communicate with their ancestors. Here, when a man dies and is buried, a small stick or stone is placed on his 'head' on his grave. This is a symbolic head which is prepared on his grave. Whenever there is a celebration in his honour, the head of the family performs some rituals where he pours some palm wine on this head while uttering some words of prayer. This head therefore, serves as a communication channel between the living and the ancestors.

Important to note is the fact that the *Fon* alone has the prerogative to use objects with human heads. Human heads on royal objects may be the means through which the *Fon* and his immediate subordinates - the notables (sub chiefs and fonmakers) can reach the ancestors and the gods. This therefore shows why all royal objects such as pots, bowls, houseposts, doorframes, stools, thrones, title cups as well as the masks bear human heads.

One Bamenda Grassfields *Fon* in an interview told the researcher that:

*The human head is a channel which we use to communicate with our ancestors and gods. We believe that those who have 'gone' (died) ahead of us are still living and occasionally, we must venerate them and in order to do this, we have to perform some rituals on their heads. This is a tradition which I inherited from my father and those who will come after me will continue with the same rituals (01.02.2024).*

The Bamenda Grassfields people like most Grassfielders note that the days of old were characterised by wars and each time these societies were engaged in wars, victims' heads were transported back to the *Fons*. The number of heads obtained in a war portrayed the bravery or might of the society and the *Fon* whose warriors brought back such "trophies" - heads. To show a *Fon's* might, therefore, human heads or figures are engraved on sculptures. A *Fon* using a pot (see figure 4 below) or sitting on a stool or throne adorned with human figures and/or heads presents himself as a successful ruler, who has brought many slaves under captivity.



**Figure 4.** A royal palm wine wooden pot adorned with human heads and figures.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 10.10.2022 at 11:35am in the palace of Kedjom.*

The indigenous pot above does not only bear human heads, it is equally decorated with motif of human with raised hands at the base ring. Humans with raised hands supporting a pot has two interpretations; they are persons who have been captured in a war. They carry a pot which belongs to the *Fon* a symbol of loyalty and respect. In the second, it represents the whole fondom, that support their leader or people who have to work for the success of the fondom: The people who always turn out to work on the farm of the *Fon*, repair the palace

and perform many other tasks that lead to the growth and smooth running of the fondom. It is an expression of loyalty and respect to the *Fon* they always have to look up to for help and protection being their 'father'.

The human motif is the most used symbol on the Bamenda Grassfields arts. It could appear just in part or as a complete figure as mentioned above, and this could be due to the fact that humans are animals with a difference, and that difference is culture, a major reason for humans' adaptability and success. Social and cultural means of adaptation have been crucially important in hominid evolution. Humans live in society and society is organised life in groups. Humans like many other animals including apes, monkeys, wolves and ants, live in organised groups but human populations however, are organised not only by their habitual social activities and relationships, but also by exposure to a common cultural tradition.

Humans can communicate with other humans through the use of language. Even though other animals do communicate, the medium which humans use is more pronounced. Humans' capacity to think depends on his capacity to possess language. To Kottak (1991, p. 36) language is an arbitrary system of sound symbols combined in a special way to transmit knowledge and ideas. Other animals may use sounds to communicate but they do not use them as humans use words to signify things or to designate abstract concepts like 'pot', 'house', 'statue' 'woman', 'tree' and so on. The use of language by humans allows them to transmit knowledge to other humans, from generation to generation. This humans' ability to communicate knowledge has been reinforced by writing.

Man has the ability to manufacture and use tools. Man's capacity to use tool, depends on the power to think, to invent just as the knowledge of tool and their usage is transmitted from one generation to another. This ability to make and use tools has made man to be able to control his environment as well as other creatures. Humans have been able to trap down other animals to use as food, clothes and shoes. They cut down huge trees which they turn into tangible objects as beds, pots, stools, poles and construct homes.

### 3.2.2 *The elephant*

They are the largest land animals now living. They typically live for 50 to 70 years, but the oldest recorded elephant lived for 82 years. Elephants are herbivores, and spend up to 16 hours a day eating plants. The elephant's trunk is sensitive enough to pick up a single blade of grass, yet strong enough to rip the branches off a tree. If the desired food item is too high up, the elephant will wrap its trunk around the tree or branch and shake its food loose or sometimes simply knock the tree down altogether.

The trunk is also used for drinking. This appendage also plays a key role in many social interactions. Familiar elephants will greet each other by entwining their trunks, much like a handshake. They also use them while play-wrestling, caressing during courtship and mother-child interactions, and for dominance displays; a raised trunk can be a warning or threat, while a lowered trunk can be a sign of submission. Elephants can defend themselves very well by flailing their trunk at unwanted intruders or by grasping and flinging them. An elephant also relies on its trunk for its highly developed sense of smell. The tusk, also known as ivory, is strongly favoured by artists for its carvability.

Elephants live in a structured social order. The social lives of male and female elephants are very different. The females spend their entire lives in tightly knit family groups made up of mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts. These groups are led by the eldest female, or matriarch. Adult males, on the other hand, live mostly solitary lives. The female's life also involves interaction with other families, clans, and subpopulations. When a group gets too big, a few of the elder daughters will break off and form their own small group. They remain very aware of which local herds are relatives and which are not. The males do live primarily solitary lives, they will occasionally form loose associations with other males. These groups are called bachelor herds. The males spend much more time than the females fighting for dominance with each other. Only the most dominant males will be permitted to breed with cycling females.

Elephants within a herd are usually related, and all members of the tightly knit female group participate in the care and protection of the young. After the initial excitement, the mother will usually select several full-time baby-sitters, or "allomothers", from her group. An elephant is considered an allomother when she is not able to have her own baby. The more allomothers, the better the calf's chances of survival and the more free time its mother has to feed herself. A benefit of being an allomother is that she can gain experience or receive assistance when caring for her own calf.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, the elephant head which is a motif could be seen on pots,

stools, thrones and on masks. Objects like the pots, may portray only the head of the elephant (see picture 5 below). The elephant to the Bamenda Grassfields people is a symbol of royalty. It is also used as an emblem in many rituals and cults of powerful secret societies which use various objects on which the beast appears (receptacles, pipes, drums, masks, seats). When this animal is represented on masks and pipes, it incarnates, in a symbolic synthesis, the indomitable forces of nature that can be harnessed and used for various profitable purposes by an individual or the community (Notué & Triaca, 2000, p. 70).



**Figure 5.** A wooden pot decorated with multiple motifs including the elephant.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 10.10.2005 at 11:36am in the Kedjom Palace.*

Due to its commanding size, most Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, consider their *Fon* to be an elephant. Just as an elephant is the largest and heaviest animal in the forest, so is the *Fon*, the largest and heaviest person in the society. The *Fon* is not that large and heavy but since he is head of his people, it is a way of giving him respect and honour. The perception of the *Fon* being the largest and heaviest man in the fondom may come from the fact that during his coronation, a ritual is performed which empowers him. To empower him therefore, the public throws pebbles or small stones, grass and leaves, at him in a symbolic ritual to show that this is the last time that any commoner would hurt him or be disrespectful towards him. The fortification of the *Fon* with symbolic stoning will chase the new *Fon* from the plaza to the inner chambers of the palace. This stone throwing ritual according to the tradition of the Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, is symbolic in that it empowers the *Fon*, an indication that the entire fondom has given him absolute power and authority over the fondom. It also means henceforth the *Fon* is the custodian of the tradition, an embodiment of the fondom and the link between his subjects and their ancestors (Moffor, 2022a).

The elephant is also regarded as one of the most peaceful animals because it feeds on grass. It does not depend on other animals for survival. It has a retentive memory, a quick ear and a good eye; these are all qualities that are expected from a good leader such as the *Fon*. He ought to be peaceful, alert, bright and commanding. Commenting on the peaceful nature of the *Fon*, Nkwi and Warnier (1982), note that the *Fon*, in olden days, was never involved in repression. Repression and social control must deal with polluting actions, and the *Fon* belonged to the opposite pole of human society, the cultural pole, which is free from pollution and danger. He was therefore, kept away from any polluting contact and was never involved in social control and repression except as a moderator.

### 3.2.3 The Frog

The frog is an amphibian, a small vertebrate that needs water, or a moist environment, to survive. The skin of a frog is permeable to oxygen and carbon dioxide, as well as to water. That is, frogs are often semi-aquatic or inhabit humid areas, but move easily on land. They typically lay their eggs in puddles, ponds or lakes, and their larvae, called tadpoles, have gills and develop in water. Adult frogs follow a carnivorous diet, mostly of arthropods, annelids and gastropods. The morphology of frogs is unique among amphibians. Frogs are unusual because they lack tails as adults and their legs are more suited to jumping than walking.

In the Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, the frog motif is used on varied objects ranging from vessels (pots, cups, bowls), stools, drums, housepoles among others. Pots adorned with this motif as demonstrated in figure 6 below is reserved for the ruling class; the *Fon* and the notables. This design is highly symbolic, representing prosperity and continuity of the clan.



**Figure 6.** A wooden palm wine pot adorned with the frog motif.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 10.10.2005 at 11:36am in the Kedjom Palace.*

The frog is regarded as an animal with two lives due to the fact that it can live both on land and in water. The frog in this cultural universe is associated with human fertility, a concept that is central to ideas of strength and power as measured in the numbers of people that support the fondom and provide it with a work force and an army. They also consider the frog as a supernatural animal owing to the fact that there are some frogs that are nocturnal and can camouflage in times of trouble or to catch prey. Being nocturnal, they are able to communicate with night spirits, spirits that humans cannot see with their naked eyes. These special abilities of the frog, favour their representation on objects.

The major characteristics of the frog are that it stands for life and night spirits. A pot decorated with this emblematic animal - the frog, is like a bond which links the invisible world of ancestors or gods and life here on earth all characterised in the frog. This explains why this pot has a multipurpose function. It is believed that people such as Fons, sub chiefs and fonmakers who use items decorated with the frog motif are able to communicate with the living dead and the spirit world. People who use such objects are able to live multiple lives like the frog, an aspect interpreted by this people as a symbol of long life.

Knopfli (1999, p. 54) notes that the general opinion of the local people of Western Grassfields of Cameroon concerning the frog is that it indicates life, life in various aspects. The above statements contain four reasons for the frog being the symbol of life. Firstly, its ability to live on land and breed in water, secondly, its ability to leap more than man, thirdly, its ability to reveal even the most secret of still waters, fourthly, its ability to produce masses of eggs. That is, it symbolises fertility and new life not only in the sense of pregnancy, but also in terms of prosperity through abundant farm yields.

The frog is often adorned on objects with their hands and legs touching one another. The hands and legs of the frogs linking one another on the pot above, represent unity and togetherness. This means that those who use this object must be united and be ready to work together for the betterment of their society. They have to avoid discrimination, bias, and quarrelsome behaviour and until all these are absent then the society will progress. Holding each other is protecting the people they are heading. They could be compared to the mother hen that also does everything within its power to protect its chicks from predators. Togetherness is a common theme in Bamenda Grassfields sculptures and this is demonstrated in motifs such as the frog, lizard, the bat and others.

There are not only the motifs which are represented on the pots which are symbolic, the objects themselves have great cultural connotations. This is highlighted by Forni (2007) who notes that:

*Cooking in Babessi must be understood in relation to a wider set of socio-cultural practices and meanings. "To cook" (mena) is a verb used in Babessi to refer to a number of literal and figurative transformations that occur daily and on ritual occasions. Cooking transforms*



*ingredients from their “natural” and raw state into a cultural product. This fundamental change is sometimes achieved metaphorically simply by placing crucial ingredients in a clay pot, which even in the absence of *in situ* “cooks” ingredients into a culturally significant product. Pots can thus be seen as instruments of cultural transformation that are likely to be found in all those instances in which critical passages in an individual’s life or in the life of the community need to be culturally sanctioned. Indeed, Babessi clay pots have increasingly become very special cooking containers whose artistic agency has been enhanced by the gradual shift of their use from daily routine to particular events (p. 49).*

### 3.3 Country Pots in the Lives of the Bamenda Grassfields People

The country pots are receptacles of everyday use. They have a multiplicity of roles as they are visible in all the different aspect of life in the Bamenda Grassfields. The data here, is interpreted using the functionalist theory of Malinowski (1944) and Radcliff-Brown (1965) The theory regards culture as an integrated whole and tries to explain how the relationships among the parts of society are created and how these parts are functional that is meaning having beneficial consequences to the individual and the society. The theory sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability; it states that our social lives are guided by social structure, which are relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. The indigenous pots portray the material culture of the Bamenda Grassfields people, they are used in the kitchen, they have a function in religion, politics, economy and in therapy.

#### 3.3.1 Pots in the Kitchen

The indigenous pots are very invaluable in the kitchen of the Bamenda Grassfields woman. They fulfil three major functions – they are used to cook food, store food stuffs and water. The clay pot was one of the main pots which was used to prepare beverages like ‘corn beer’ and ‘guinea corn beer’. These are locally brewed liquors from cereals like maize and guinea corn. Such drinks are common in the fondoms of Kom, Nso and other Tikars fondoms. Although these pots are rarely used today, the producers of the local beer who are mostly women note that beer produced in such pots does not stay so much on the fire, these pots generate a lot of heat which cook their drink in a shorter length of time. A producer of ‘corn beer’ had this to say in an interview:

*I have been cooking corn beer and selling for about 20 years now. I used to own many clay pots in which I cook as well as preserve the drink to cool down before selling. Many of these pots are broken and only two are left. Whenever I cook the beer in the clay pot, I realise that it cooks fast and due to this, I am able to economise the wood left after the cooking to prepare some other drink or food for the home (10.01.2024).*

Different foods are cooked in this container; cocoyams for *achu* (paste obtained from pounded cocoyam), beans, *cornsufu* (porridge cornflour) and much more. Food prepared and served in this container taste very different. It has an extra flavour that one cannot have when one prepares and serves food in other containers. I lived the experience of watching my grandmother cook in the clay pot. As a young boy in the primary school, I used to visit and spend the holidays with her. Her favourite pot to cook food was the clay pot. Some of the advantages I noticed with such pots were that; when cocoyams for *achu* for instance was put in a clay pot and put on the fire, it took a short time to get ready for pounding provided there was fire under the pot. The second advantage was that food prepared in the clay pot usually taste different and every time some of us who were with her would always request that she cooked all food in the clay pot.

Pots are used as containers to store water and sauce. Some of the pots are very large that can hold above forty litres of water. Water from this container is used for kitchen chores and for drinking as well. Although very few people use them today, because of the introduction of plastic containers, those who still use this pots remark that water from this container is very fresh and cold like water from the fridge. Commenting on pots being storage containers, Koreana (1998) notes that:

*Just as humans cannot survive if breathing or circulation is obstructed, the same is true for food. Fermented food such as soybean sauce and fish sauces are representative of Korean cuisine thanks to the crockery that allows such breathing. Modern containers for storing food are airtight and consequently food stored therein will quickly spoil, but food stored in crockery pots will last longer. Moreover, the taste of sauces stored in crockery pots does not deteriorate, rather, it improves with aging. Also, water kept in crockery does not become rancid easily (p. 57).*

Indigenous pots equally serve to store food stuffs like beans, maize and sometimes

groundnuts. When maize for instance is shelled from the cob, it is mixed in some local medicine to prevent insects from entering in it and then poured in the large pot and covered with a basin in case this pot does not have a lid. An interlocutor noted that:

*The kind of food stuff which I store in the country pot is maize. We grow a lot of maize in this fondon and sometimes we find it difficult to store it. To store it therefore, many people like myself shell it, and then put some local insecticides in it and pour it in a large pot. Some of the pots can take as many as four tins or buckets of maize. This method of storing maize did not begin today. I grew up and saw it and I am sure that my children as they are seeing it they will do the same. It is true that the use of such pots is rampant in the interiors of the fondon, but many people still use them (12.01.2024).*

Pots are not only functional in the kitchens, they are containers used in the palaces, secret societies and other quarter assemblies. Forni (2007) states that, the use of some pots refers more to the social importance of the group than to identification with individual members. This is especially true for pots used by palace societies, quarter assemblies, and for other social gatherings. On most public occasions, pots are displayed as signs of unity and community. In Babessi, a palm wine pot is among the first things that the members of a newly formed male association (*samba* house) or rotating credit group (*njangi*) needs to acquire, as it is considered highly inappropriate for a society to meet and share raphia wine out of plastic containers. However, the use of the clay pot (*kub chuo* or *kub meh*, 'group pot') is not just a choice dictated by proper etiquette. Sharing from the pot is an important sign of group unity: Within both age-mate groups and rotating credit associations, each week a different member is responsible for celebrating (or cooking) the meeting (*mena chuo*). The raphia wine brought by the celebrant is placed in the pot and shared among all the members. The pot filled with raphia wine becomes an index of the group's common mind and purpose. For this reason, even though not consecrated with any particular medicine, the pot acquires a very strong power and can be taken as a "testimony" in case of internal conflicts (p. 51).

Gosselain (1999) notes that pottery is associated with other realms of the human experience. Barley has recently compiled a series of examples showing how, in different parts of the continent, pots 'may become an idiom in which the state and the major components of a marriage are expressed' (1994, p. 92). An illustration of this phenomenon is the *imbusa* custom, recorded by Clarke among the Bemba of Zambia:

*When a man marries a girl, she makes a pot called an 'imbusa'. Before they have sexual intercourse, this is filled with water and the leaves of herbs, and each of them take hold of it and carry it and put it on the central fire in the hut. When they have finished their love-making, they go together and take the pot off the fire and wash their sexual organs. If the pot is broken, they are not allowed to have sexual intercourse until the pot is remade. The pieces of the old pot are ground up, mixed with new clay and a new imbusa modelled. (Clarke, 1931, p. 274).*

### 3.3.2 Pots and Power

Country pots are equally very invaluable in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon because some specific types are used by the ruling class; Fons and fonmakers. Such pots are those adorned with emblematic motifs of human heads and figures, elephant, scorpion, lizard, chameleon, snake, double gong and many more. Pots decorated with these anthropomorphic and zoomorphic symbols are used by the traditional dignitaries during state events. Whenever there is an important meeting in some *fons'* palaces, palm wine is poured in a large pot and the *Fon* orders that it should be shared as they discuss state matters.

In Kedjom Ketinguh for instance, there are three palm wine pots in the palace which are associated with the myth of the people - one belonging to the *fon* (see figure 5 above), one to the 40s and the last one to *chinse nyen* society. The *chinse nyen* institution is the group which takes care of the palace as well as the *kwifon*. It is like the watchman of the fondon. These pots which are all carved from *fueh* tree except that of *chinse nyen* society which is made of camwood have lived for so many years. That of the *fon* is decorated with emblematic figures such as the human head, the elephant head, double gong, stylist scorpion and some geometric figures. He can give wine from this pot to someone he cherishes dearly and when this is done, it is interpreted as a mark of blessing. Him alone has his discretion to identify those to whom to give wine from this container with enormous cultural significance.

The next pot which is that of the 40s is black in colour adorned with human heads. It is placed on a carved stand ring bearing the lizard motif. Considering the magnitude of this object it cannot be placed directly on the ground or floor. The 40s are the founding fathers of both the *kwifon* and the Kedjom Ketinguh society. And due to the special position, they occupy in this fondon, they have the privilege to use emblematic objects in general and pots

in particular.



**Figure 7.** A wooden palm wine pot used by the 40s.

Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 10.10.2005 at 11:36am in the Kedjom Palace.

The palm wine pot of *chinse nyen* society is carved from the camwood tree and decorated with motifs such as the frog, the scorpion and some geometric figures (see figure 7 above). This very invaluable object is placed on a specially designed standing ring made from fibre. These institutions; the 40s and *chinse nyen* hold their meetings in the palace once every week and each time they meet, they share palm wine from these pots.

Forni (2007) comments on the types of pots used by title holders when she states that while in other kingdoms of the Grassfields certain motifs (especially those of animals) refer to specific titles and privileges and cannot be used by commoners or women, Babessi potters have the freedom to combine anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images to create their personal decorations. With the exception of anthropomorphic motifs that are generally considered *per se* "frightful" images, to be placed on special pots, other patterns are loosely characterized in relation to their symbolic and emotional impact. Though never explicitly defined by the potters, it became clear that vessels are *mebime* "frightful" not because of any single decorative element. Instead, it is their combination and the elaboration of the design pattern that communicates the "frightfulness" of a pot. A pot identified as *mebime* generally displays an almost mesmerizing decoration, whose design and texture are likely to inspire in the viewer awe and an immediate sense of respect (p. 47).

Pots are used as elements of social stratification. During the annual dance of the Bafut people for instance, princes and princesses carry some objects and also dress splendidly this in order to demonstrate their social status, they are of noble birth. They carry objects such as the clay pot, bag, calabash and whisks as demonstrated in figure 8 below. They equally wear different types of necklaces. These princesses from left to right carry containers such as bags, calabash and pots. These objects which they carry either on their bodies or in their hands are a demonstration of the material culture of the Bafut people in particular and that of the Grassfields in general.

Writing on pots and power, Forni (2007) notes that in choosing to apply images that refer to male hierarchy and political power onto a water pot destined for a woman's kitchen, the potters suggest the profound connection between the domestic and official spheres. Even though men control political power and retain exclusive access to the secret knowledge and objects from which that power originates, women are aware that the images associated with its public display represent a wider notion of power that connects human and spiritual worlds in which they also take part. In the interpretations of the potters, cowrie shells, snakes, frogs, and other zoomorphic and geometrical patterns placed on pots give form to different elements of the social space inhabited by men, women, ancestors, gods, and animals. Many

of these images, such as lizards or snakes, reflect local belief in the transformative power of kings, twins, and ancestors. Others, like the scorpion, refer to the punitive power of the king. Spiders, chameleons, and frogs may be a reference to the ability to communicate with the otherworld, whereas cowrie shells, bracelets, human heads, or skulls are mainly associated with the life of the palace (p. 47).



**Figure 8.** A wooden palm wine pot used by the 40s.  
*Source: Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 17.12.2012 at 7.58 am at the Bafut Palace.*

In most Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, there are groups specialised in different aspects of life. Some are war groups, meanwhile others are specialised in traditional medicine. These groups are identified through their objects and songs they sing. These groups can be identified through their drums, bags as well as pots. In the Bafut *fondom* for instance, the *nda* society has a clay pot which it uses during important occasions and as well as in their meetings. There are eight ndas or war groups in Bafut fondom, and each performs its dances mainly to inform the people of its existence. In the days of old, when there were rampant wars, the Bafut fondom had different war societies specialised in different war weapons; there was a group specialised in guns, another in bows and arrow (see figure 9 below) and others engaged only in traps setting.



**Figures 9 and 10.** The *nda* group of Bafut and its pot.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 17.12.2012 at 4pm at the Bafut Palace.*



This group portrayed in figure 9 above is a warrior society that was usually called to defend the land in the case of inter-tribal land disputes as demonstrated in their indigenous weapons; bow and arrows, spears, and swords. It is important to mention that the migratory history of many Grassfields fonderms was characterised by inter-tribal land disputes. But today with the absence of such disputes and other quarrels among Bamenda Grassfields fonderms, the function of the *nda* society has changed. Today, it comes out mainly during the *fon's* dance known in the Bafut language as *abine-mfor*. During this ceremony, it displays its colourful dance like all the other dance groups in the entire *fonderm*. The *abine-mfor* is an annual jamboree hosted by the *Fon*. The *nda* society has a pot (see figure 10 above) which acts as a symbol of unity and bond that binds the group. During their meetings, palm wine is poured in this pot, the pot put on the fire for a few minutes to hit. When this is done, it is shared to those present in their drinking cups.

### 3.3.3 Pots as Objects of Religion

Indigenous pots play an important role in the religious life of the Bamenda Grassfields people. Bunnet (1996) defines religion as *that aspect of culture which relates man with the sacral and the supernatural*. Religion also concerns itself with man's relation with the profane or the secular, identifying the sacred from the profane, defining how and why a particular object becomes sacred or profane and setting traditions or conventions as to how humans should behave in dealing with the sacred. More specifically, religion may be defined as *a system of beliefs, practices and philosophical values concerned with the definition of the sacred, the comprehension of life and salvation from the problem of human existence*. Religion is a system of beliefs involving supernatural forces or beings that provide shape and meaning to the universe (Opoku, 1978).

Geertz (1973), one of the anthropologists responsible for creating the symbolic approach, defined religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Geertz suggested that religious practices were a way to enact or make visible important cultural ideas. The symbols used in any religion, can be interpreted or “read” by anthropologists to discern important cultural values. At the same time, religious symbols reinforce values or aspirations in members of the religious community.

Pots are used in religious practices. This can be seen in certain ceremonies which hold in the palace like in the residences of sub chiefs or fonmakers. During such an occasion, a sculptured pot is placed at the centre of the room where the traditional dignitaries are gathered. The pot is very large and can contain three to four jugs (a jug is a twenty litres container) of palm wine. All those present have to drink the wine which is poured in the pot. If the occasion is hosted by the *fon* in the *ntob* or palace, before this is done, the *fon* or chief priest has to honour the ancestors and gods by pouring some of the palm wine in his title cup at the door (the main entrance to the house) while making a prayer. His prayer seeks to thank the ancestors and gods for bringing them together, for protection, for provision and the like.

This pot stands for unity as the ruling class of the fonderm sits around it, discuss serious matters concerning the society, take important decisions and put in place mechanisms to execute them. In such a gathering, they are guided by the ancestors and gods they had called upon at the beginning of the ceremony. It is alleged that whoever drinks from the pot must be of exemplary character: must not commit adultery, must not equally take something which does not belong to him otherwise he is going to suffer slow pains and die. This palm wine pot thus serves as a form of social control, which checks the conduct of people vis-à-vis others in the fonderm. It plays the role of a code of conduct where the leaders through their outstanding behaviour will influence the characters of others especially the younger generation. Additionally, being moulded out of clay, the soil of the ancestors, and because they are produced through processes and skills that have been passed on from one generation to the next, ‘country’ pots are the proper containers to be used whenever for the ‘cooking’ of palm wine which directly involves both social and spiritual forces.

To Forni (2007) pots take on spiritually significant roles in life's passages. In Babessi, the *ntieke* is made or purchased to bathe a new-born baby twice a day during the first months of life. The *ntieke* is then kept by the mother in a special place and preserved until the child has grown into an independent adult. Only then is its function fulfilled, allowing the mother to start using the pot as a normal household container. However, if the baby dies soon after delivery, the pot is used to wash the corpse and is broken over the grave immediately after burial. To keep the pot would be a dangerous thing, as the “cooking” process that transforms

babies into fully socialized human beings was not successfully accomplished. This is the only circumstance in Babessi in which pots are broken over the grave. The basin used to wash the corpse of an adult is not broken after burial. In this case, death is not framed as an unsuccessful transformation, but as an appropriate and natural passage to a different stage of life in the ancestral world (p. 50).

Among the Bamilekes in the Cameroon Grassfields according to Carine and Wang (2021) there are purification vases and vessel (*kop sua*), hemispherical shape, is decorated with three stylized mygale figures, arranged horizontally. In Baham, (one of the Bamileke groupings) the container is used during the offering of the sacrifices of the sits and the divinities of the family, during the initiation and enthroned ceremonies of the new king, for the preparation of the meal of the head of the family (p. 77).

Another religious use of pots, regards the burial of miscarried babies and very young twins. Pots are used to contain in their 'bellies' (*bvo*) the excessive 'heat' of miscarriages and of twins who have died before the completion of the *tiene venyi*, the celebration performed to control the potentially dangerous supernatural powers of twins. Whereas miscarriages are just collected in a pot and buried under a plantain tree near the compound and forgotten, the burial of twin who has not been fully celebrated has to be performed by the *gha nchegow*, the titleholder responsible for the control and the protection of the twins. The grave of the twins buried in the *torne venyi* are marked by the bottoms of large clay pots that are buried upside down to contain the supernatural powers of the deceased baby, which could still harm his or her sibling and parents (Forni, 2000, p. 196).

In Nsei, clay pots are receptacles of the 'heads' of important high-ranking ancestors (that is the notables and the *fons*). 'Heads' are generally kept for men and women who die after a full life, leaving children to worship them as ancestors. However, only those heads belonging to important personalities are buried inside pots when officially installed in the domestic shrine. On the day of the burial, before the corpse is wrapped in cloth and placed in the coffin, the head of the deceased is touched with a large stone, which will be kept near the grave until the official day of the 'placing of the head' (*ko' keto*). This day precedes the official death celebration or 'cry die' (*ko tzo*) which can be celebrated one or more years after the death of a man or woman (Forni, 2000, p. 218).

### 3.3.4 Country Pots and Economy

The *country* pots are a great source of income to many Bamenda Grassfields people. Some of the artists work full-time meanwhile others do it just as part-time job. Those who take their art activity as a part-time job carry out other economic activities such as farming. These artists through their art activities contribute to the economy of this region in one way or the other. Recently, so many young men are learning the art of sculpture, pottery making in the different production centres. These youth acknowledge that this is a means through which they can generate income. A young apprenticed in wood carving said:

*Now our days, jobs are very difficult to come by, and due to this reason, I have decided to learn wood carving where I will produce different types of wooden objects. Apart from the fact that I will make money from this activity, I will equally have the opportunity to contribute to the promotion of the culture of my people (04.02.2024).*

Pottery in Nsei is a thriving 'industry' which constitutes a fundamental source of income for numerous families involved in the production and marketing of pots. And Knopfli (1997) notes that the number of young people choosing to pay to become apprentices of specific potters has increased considerably. This is partly explainable by the influence of the Prespot project (Presbyterian pottery project), founded by Swiss missionaries in the village at the beginning of the 1980s, where youths are required to pay a fee for their training, partly as a consequence of the increased local market demand. In terms of importance and income produced, pottery is second only to agriculture and is becoming increasingly appealing also to those youths (mostly boys) who do not come from potting families and did not have the opportunity to learn from their relatives. For most of these young people and for their masters, potting is a full-time activity which structures the week with a variety of tasks.

To those involve in their production, they are in the first-place commodities; products which can be traded, bought or sold mainly to acquire income. But before pre-colonial times, carvings were not manufactured for economic purpose – they were mainly to serve the *fondoms* in varied domains, political and magico-religious. This explains why many of the palaces in the Grassfields of Cameroon had to ordain those who carved objects in the tribal style, articles with motifs which conformed to the tribal tradition. Furthermore, in the pre-colonial era, the fons, nobles and secret societies served as the major market for sculptors since the majority



of these objects were made for them (Knopfli, 1999). To Notué and Triaca (2000 and 2005), notables and customary societies are the patrons and the main clients of artists. Ironically, such producers were not rewarded handsomely: they were usually brought together each year and a feast organised at the palace by the *fon* on their behalf. With colonisation, carved items were highly priced by tourists and art collectors and this made these cultural artefacts including pots to become highly in demand that many sculptors and *fondoms* started using them as commodities.

The marketing of most pots and bowls is done at the local as well as external level. The daily and weekly markets are not the only outlet for local carvers, who are usually capable to commercialise these vessels directly from their workshops, to art shops, handicraft centres, museum owners and to tourists. Some of the artists told the researcher that they produce most art objects including pots on command and as a result, they never go to the market to sell their goods. People come from far and near to collect their objects at their workshops. Those who do not work on order, carry their goods to the market, where they have to bargain their prices with clients. Others supply to some handicraft shops in Bamenda such as the Presbyterian Craft Project (Prescraft) and Bamenda Handicraft Co-operative Centre. These two handicraft centres are non-governmental organizations that are aimed at encouraging art in the Western Grassfield in particular and the Grassfields as a whole. (Moffor, 2022b).

The costs of bowls and pots (be they wooden, clay or woven) vary from one type to another, from size to size and from one producer to another. Large bowls and pots no matter the type are more expensive than small ones (Moffor, 2022b). Although woven pots are generally more costly than carved and clay objects, a wooden pot which is splendidly decorated with multiple motifs is more expensive than the woven type. This is because of the time which has been invested in its production. The cost of a pot therefore is evaluated according to the material use and the time used for their production. A dealer in carvings with the pots inclusive told the researcher that:

*I have been buying and selling arts particularly wooden and woven objects for many years now. With the experience which I have had, woven articles are very expensive but carved pots with finer and multiple symbols like the frog, lizard, scorpion, earth spider among others are generally so costly (01.01.2024).*

Another interlocutor, a sculptor said:

*I carve diverse types of objects. Their prices differ depending on the type of wood used, size and motifs which appear on them. Objects adorned with miniature and multiple motifs take so much time to carve as well as do the finishing. Although the art objects demonstrate the ingenuity of the artists, the primary aim of their creator is to make money (20.01.2024).*

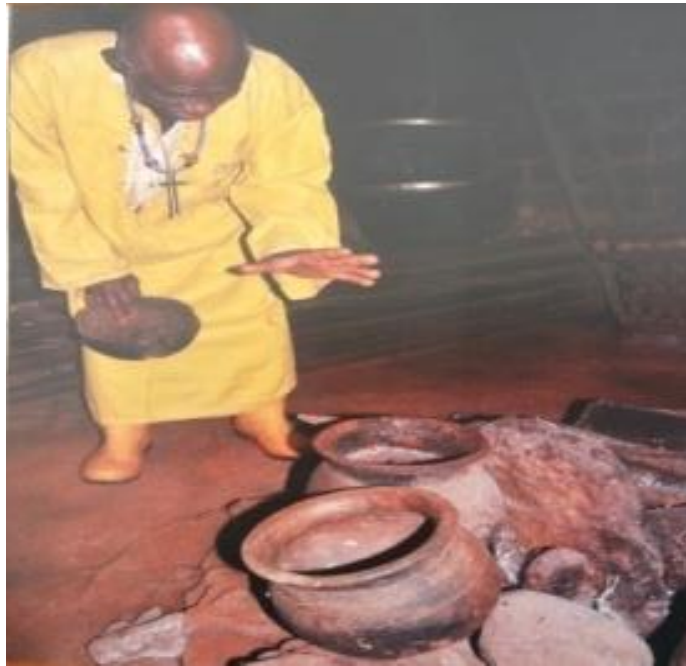
### 3.3.5 Therapeutic Functions of indigenous Pots

Locally made pots have a role in therapy. Therapy simply means treatment intended to relieve or heal a disorder. The pots do not actually treat but they are used to prepare or cook medicine which treats diseases. The most used pots are those made of clay. Forni (2000) remarks that clay pots are also central in many of the healing performances carried on by native healers who generally use clay pots both as 'frightful' medicine containers in their carefully arranged medicine shrines, and to cook herbs used when treating patients. It is generally believed that these remedies would not work if fried or boiled in a metal pot since a foreign container could not effectively release the power of the local herbs (p. 194).

The figures below show the shrine or herbal home of a traditional or native doctor. In this shrine like in many shrines of most traditional healers are pots which are used to prepare medicine. Other objects commonly found in the herbal home are calabashes, statues and many others. Majority of the medicine cooked in these pots are herbs, barks and roots of trees. When such elements are on the fire, the native healer has to speak some words as demonstrated in figure 11 below.

In an interview with a traditional doctor, he told the researcher that:

*When patients come to me with a problem, I consult them and if their disease is within my capacity, I treat them. Their treatment or medicine I prepare for them depends on what they are suffering from. They are some disorders which I treat with ground medicine while others are treated with boiled medicine. The boiled medicine could be from trees barks, roots or herbs or a combination of two or all three. I usually collect the herbs very very early in the morning when the herbs still possess all their nutrients. When I return home, I boil them in the clay pots for many hours for the power of the element to be fully released (05.02.2024).*



**Figure 11.** Indigenous pots used in cooking traditional medicine.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 11.12.2019 at 5pm in a traditional healer's home.*

Some traditional medical practitioners have these native pots in their shrines which are found not far from the home, usually in one part of the compound. Such a pot is usually placed on stones and some concoction poured in it. It is this concoction which is used to bathe patients with spiritual problems. Spiritual problems here are those problems that patients cannot find solution to in other medical spheres. These include cases where someone may work hard, and no matter how hard he/she does, he/she does not succeed. Some people find it difficult having children. Others their children and family members go to school or learn a trade but end up not succeeding. When these people experiencing such hardship visit the fortune teller, their problems are usually attributed to some evil spirit or forces. These patients will then be proposed spiritual bathe. This bathe is aimed at sending out the evil spirits which harbour in the patient consequently stopping him/her from achieving his/her ambitions in life. This bathe is usually performed in the evening on specific days depending on the native doctor. To bathe the patient therefore, the healer may ask the patient to be a male or female, to undress and stands beside the pot and the native doctor uses some fresh leaves of the peace plants, dips them in the pot and then puts on the patient's head. When this is done, he uses a small vessel and carries the remaining concoction from the pot and bathes the patient. When this is done, the native doctor believes that the peace plant which represents peace together with the concoction have restored the health of the patient.

One native doctor said that:

*I treat patients who come with spiritual problems in the shrine behind my home. Patients with spiritual problems are those with issues which have to do with curses, stagnation in life, 'eating' in the dream, 'spiritual husbands and wives' and many more. Patients with such problems and attacks come to me and say that they have being to several hospitals and no illness can be diagnosed but they are really sick. When they say that no illness can be diagnosed, I will carry out my consultations and if I find out that their problems are spiritual then I will embark in attacking the problem spiritually (10.01.2024).*

Other native doctors use the clay pot to prepare the treatment of filaria. Filariasis commonly called filarial among the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon is caused by several round, coiled and thread-like parasitic worms that belong to the family filaridea. The Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon do not attribute the cause of filaria to the natural cause seen above. They believe that this disease attacks someone who either steals something in someone's farm on which filaria medicine has been put. It is important to mention that to discourage stealing in this part of the country, people place medicine on their farms or on anything that thieves can carry away.

To treat filaria therefore, this plants as demonstrated in figure 13 below is uprooted, the roots cleaned and boiled in a clay pot in palm wine and given to someone suffering from the

disease to take twice daily; a cup in the morning and another in the evening. This medicine is hit each time before drinking. Anyone who seeks treatment of filaria, takes his clay pot to the native doctor. The native doctor will put prepared medicine in it for him/her to take home. In the case where the doctor uses his own pot, its contain is transferred in a container brought by the patient. The patient will hit it in his/her home and take as prescribed by the doctor.



**Figure 12.** *Sansevieria laurentii vrouwentong* plant used in the treatment of filaria.  
*Source: Tikere's archive taken on 05.09.2017 at 11am in a traditional healer's compound.*

There are diseases that when their treatments are prepared in the clay pot, this pot is handled by the patient alone, because some illnesses have taboos. If someone else touches the 'medicine pot,' he/she will get contaminated by the same disease. Appendicitis commonly called in the Bambui language as '*mbib*' is one of such diseases whose treatment has a lot of taboos. Appendicitis as a pain in the lower right belly or pain near your navel that moves lower. Appendicitis occurs when the tube-shaped appendix becomes blocked, often by fecal material, a foreign body, or cancer. Blockage may also occur from injection, because the appendix swells in response to any infection in the body. Appendicitis is almost always a medical emergency that requires prompt surgery to remove the appendix. The people of Bambui *fondom* believe that appendix can be treated by taking the medicine of the native doctor. This medicine will cause the appendix to be flushed out. I suffered from appendicitis when I was 10 years old. A native doctor prepared a concoction and put in a clay pot which I took to him. He instructed me to add two litres of palm wine to the herb and roots and then boil the concoction for an hour after which I had to take a glass every morning and evening. I had to hit the medicine each time I had to consume it and the most important issue was that no one else had to touch this pot except me.

### *3.4 Dynamics in Country Pots*

This portion of the article examines the changes which have taken place in the production and use of the native pots. To interpret the data, the theory of evolution was employed. This theory which may also be called cultural or socio-cultural evolution was developed in the 19th by Tylor and Morgan. It is the process of change and development in human societies that results cumulative change in their stores of cultural information. The *country* pots are cultural objects which were used in every domain of everyday life in the past. Although they are still visible today, there are some changes which are gradually taking place in their production, and use. In the past, wooden pots like any other carved objects for instance were produced by the elderly men, young people were not interested in their production because they called the trade old fashion and an activity reserved for the older generation. But today, more and more youths are gaining interest in wood carving since their objects are demanded locally, nationally and internationally as well.

The involvement of many youths in carving and the shortage of trees for carving, have made the young boys to sculpt objects from all sorts of trees, trees which do not only conform to the norms of wood carving but are not resistant to insect attack. They hardly use the

traditional woods for their products. Many of them could be seen in big towns carrying their objects on their heads which they sell at giveaway prices.

Pots are used as a musical instrument in the church. Churches which frequently use such an instrument are the Presbyterian, Baptist as well as Catholic. Such instruments are played to praise God, the creator of the universe. Figure 14 below portrays a dance group which uses some traditional musical instruments with one of such being the pot. The pot is hit on the mouth to produce music. This is one of the choir groups in Presbyterian Church Baforkum in the Bmabui fondom, North West Region of Cameroon. The pot in this figure is made from clay but today, there are churches that use pots made of aluminium.



**Figure 13.** A church group producing music with local instruments including the pot.  
*Source: Tikere's archive, taken on 05.12.2020 at 10:25am at a Presbyterian church occasion.*

Such instrument in the past were associated with the traditional African religion and Christians were discouraged from handling them let alone playing them. Commenting of the use of the *country* pot as a musical instrument in the church, a Presbyterian Church pastor in an interview told the researcher that:

*This instrument (the pot and other locally made instruments) are used to produce music in church to give praise to God. As we know, God is the creator of the universe, he deserves the first place in our lives. He is King of kings, Fon of fons. Using such instruments in the church is to justify the fact that we owe everything we have and produce to him (04.02.2024).*

Before the introduction of the aluminium and metal pots, in the Grassfields' part of Cameroon, the clay pot was a very invaluable kitchen utensil. The pot was used in cooking, and storing water and food stuffs. Although today there are some elderly mothers who cook in the clay pot, many women have abandoned it in favour of metal and aluminium pots. According to Forni (2007), in day-to-day use, locally made pots have been largely supplanted by those of cast aluminum and the most common serving dishes are Chinese or Nigerian made enamel pans. The practical advantages of using such durable containers rather than the local clay "country" pots are obvious. In addition to greater durability, the possession of a good range of "whitemen pans" is a visible statement of status (p. 49). Many women say that although the clay pot is good because cooked and stored in it taste better, the pot is difficult to handle.

#### 4. Conclusions

The country pots are cultural elements which play a great role in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people of Cameroon. These are pots fabricated from diverse raw materials in different production centres by both the male and female folks. The male alone produces sculpted pots from wood meanwhile only the women manufacture woven pots from grass and fibre (from raphia bamboo). The clay pots are fabricated by both men and women; the men produce those used by the men themselves and secret societies while the women make those which are normal. Many of these pots are adorned with a variety of emblematic motifs which range from anthropomorphic, zoomorphic to geometric figures. These articles

decorated with specific motifs are used by the ruling class and their cultural significances can be decoded by those who have a mastery of the culture in which the objects serve. In the past, the carved *country* pots were produced with special wood which had some cultural connotations but today due to the shortage in trees for carving and the involvement of many young boys in the carving activity, the quality of the objects which are produced today has dropped. Despite these changes witnessed in the production of the native pots, their place is inevitable in the cultures of the Bamenda Grassfields. They are still used in the kitchen by a few elderly women and they are very useful instruments in the hands of traditional medical doctors. They are ritual ceremonial objects as well as items of social stratification. The indigenous pots are a good source of income to those who are engaged in their fabrication. This article handles four main domains; typology of indigenous pots, cultural significances of the different motifs represented on the pots, the functions of the pots and dynamics in the country pots. Another study could be carried out to understand the history of these country pots in the Bamenda Grassfields in particular or the Cameroon Grassfields in general.

## References

- Barley, N. (1994). *Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa*. London: British Museum Press.
- Bohannon, P., & Philip C. (1995). *Africa and African* (4th Edition). London: Waveland Press.
- Bunnet, C. (1996). *In Search of the Sacred: Anthropology and the Study of Religions*. London: Cassell.
- Carine, T. M., & Wang, A. (2021). Traditional Pottery as Expression of Art Therapy in Western Bamileke Cameroon. *English Language. Literature & Culture*, 6(3), 74-81. doi: 10.11648/j.elc.20210603.14
- Clarke, H. S. (1931). *Rough Notes on M'wemba Customs*. Man, 31, 274-275.
- Eyongetah, T., & Brain, R. (1974). *A History of Cameroon*. (1st Edition). Longman Group.
- Forni, S. (2000). Molding Culture: Pottery and Traditions in the Ndop Plain (North West Province-Cameroon). A Ph.D Theses in Anthropology and Archaeology. The University of Degli Studi Di Torino, Italy.
- Forni, S. (2007). Containers of Life: Pottery and Social Relations in the Grassfields (Cameroon). *African Arts, Spring issue*, 42-53.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gosselain, O. (1999). In Pots We Trust: The Processing of Clay and Symbols in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Material Culture*, 4(2), 205-230.
- Jefferson, L. (1974). *The Decoration Art of Africa*. London: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd.
- Kassam, A., & Megeressa, G. (1996). Sticks, Self, and Society in Booran Oromo: A Symbolic Interpretation. In M. J. Arnoldi, L. K. Hardin (2nd Edition). *African material Culture* (pp. 145 – 166). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Knopfli, H. (1997). Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grassland of Cameroon. (British Museum Occasional Paper No. 107). London: Trustees of the British Museum.
- Knopfli, H. (1999). Sculpture and Symbolism. Crafts and Techniques: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grassfield Woodcarvers and blacksmiths (part 2). Basel: Basel Mission.
- Koreana. (1998). *Korean Art and Culture: Korean Values Past and Present*. Seoul: Dohwa-dong, Mapo-ku.
- Kottak, P. (1991). *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Malinowski, B. (1944). *A Scientific Theory of Culture*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Moffor, E. T. (2022a). The Making of Fons Kings: An Insight into the Regalia of a Newly Crowned Cameroon Grassfields Fon. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering & Multidisciplinary Physical Sciences*, 10, 1-26.
- Moffor, E. T. (2022b). Arts and Livelihood: The Case of Sculpturing and Weaving in Kedjom Chiedoms in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. *GPR Journals*, 1, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.58425/jrcd.v1i1.75>
- Moffor, E. T. (2022e). An Insight into the Cultural Significance of Indigenous Bowls in the Cameroon Grassfields Cosmology. *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research*, 13, 356-383.
- Mveng, E. (1980). *L'Art et l'artisanat Africains*. Yaoundé: Editon Cle.
- Nkwi, P., & Warnier, J. P. (1982). Elements for the History of the Western Grassfields. Yaoundé: Department of Sociology University of Yaoundé.
- Notué, J. P., & Triaca, B. (2000). The Treasure of the Mankon Kindom: Cultural Objects of the Royal Palace. IFA Publishers.
- Notué, J. P., & Triaca, B. (2005). Arts Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom (West Cameroon). Dartmouth: Trustees of Dartmouth Collège.
- Opopku, K. A. (1978). *West African Traditional Religion*. Accra: FEP International Limited.
- Radcliff-Brown, A. R. (1965). *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Free Press.
- Steward, J. H. (1972). *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Warnier, J. P. (1975). Pre-colonial Mankon: The Development of a Cameroon Chiefdom in its Regional Setting. Ph.D Thesis; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.