

**THE SYMBOLISM OF STONES AND MEGALITHS IN THE BAMENDA-TIKAR
FONDOMS OF CAMEROON**

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ABSTRACT

A megalith is a large stone, sometimes forming part of a group or circle, thought to have been important to people in the Stone Age. A stone can mean different things and have varied functions to different people in the world in general and to Africans in particular. In the majority of Bamenda Grassfield societies, there are stones of different categories ranging from the very simple to the most sacred. The simple stones have varied uses. The sacred ones vary in nature (shape, size and colour); they are found in diverse places and perform different roles. These stones range from the long, round to very big hills. They are produced and consecrated by diverse sacred societies under the supervision of the *kwifon*. Different stones and megaliths are associated with different sacred institutions. Stones are a symbol of power and authority, representations rooted in the people's ancestor veneration. The objective of this paper is to uncover the symbolism and roles of stones among the Bamenda-Tikars with a special interest in sacred stones or megaliths. Data for this paper was collected using the qualitative and quantitative methods and the data was analysed as soon as the research was over.

KEYWORDS: symbolism, stones, megaliths, Bamenda-Tikar, fundom, Kwifon,

INTRODUCTION

A stone is a piece of the hard solid substance found in the ground which is used for building. A stone can mean different things and have varied functions to different people in the world in general and to Africans in particular. In the majority of Bamenda-Tikar fondoms, there are stones of different categories ranging from the very simple to the most sacred. The simple stones have varied uses; to build the foundations of houses, decorate houses and used by women to grind spices for the cuisine. They are also used by traditional medical practitioners to convert backs and leaves of trees into drugs. Such are handled just by anyone among the Bamenda-Tikars.

The sacred ones also vary in nature (shape, size and colour); they are found in diverse places and perform different roles. These stones range from the long, round to very big hills. They are produced and consecrated by diverse sacred societies under the supervision of the *kwifon*. Different megaliths are associated with different sacred institutions. The difference in the simple and sacred stones is at the level of preparation, location and the functions they perform.

The study is conducted in three Bamenda-Tikar fondoms; Kedjom, Bafut and Bambui. The choice of these fondoms is due to the fact that we visited many compounds, markets and the palaces and most of them have stones which are decorated and treated differently. We interviewed some notables in

these fondoms to understand why stones are not given the same treatment; where megaliths are located, who visits them and at what time of the year and the different rituals performed on them. The Bamenda-Tikars are just a part of the Bamenda Grassfield or the Western Grassfield. The Western Grassfields is a region that corresponds to the Anglophone North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. The part of Grassfields that was under English Administration known as the 'Bamenda Grassfields'¹ (Warnier, 1975: 43). The Bamenda-Tikars are grouped into a number of independent fondoms, differing in size, language and kinship organisation. In the Bamenda Grassfields, those who claim Tikar origin include Nso, Kom, Bum, Bafut, Oku, Mbiame, Wiya, Tang, War, Mbot, Mbem, Fungom, Weh, Mmen, Bamunka, Babungo, Bamessi, Bamessing, Bambalang, Bamali, Bafanji, Baba (Papiakum), Bangola, Kedjom Keku (Big Babanki), Kedjom Ketinguh (Babanki Tungo), Nkwen, Bambili and Bambui. Each with a strong central authority called the *fon*.

According to historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and oral tradition, the Tikar originated from north-eastern Cameroon, around the Adamawa and Lake Chad regions (present-day Adamawa, North and Far-North Regions). Tikar migration southwards and westwards probably intensified with the raid for slaves by invading Fulani from Northern Nigeria in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, there is reason to believe that such migration was ongoing for centuries long before the invasion. The pressure of invasion by the Fulani raiders certainly occasioned the movements that led the Tikar to their current locations in the Western Grassfields (Bamenda Plateau) and Eastern Grassfields (Fumban) and the Tikar plain of Bankim (Upper Mbam) (Mbuagbaw, Brain & Palmer, 1987:26; Mbaku 2005:10-12). Upon arrival in the Grassfields, the Tikar found other populations in place, populations which had either migrated from elsewhere or had inhabited the region for centuries. Their arrival occasioned population movements, just as did the arrival of others after them. Pre-colonial Cameroon, like the rest of Africa, was richly characterised by population movements not always induced by conflict or invasion.

Methodology

Data for this paper was collected using both the qualitative and quantitative methods. Underlying the qualitative method, techniques such as observation and in-depth interview were employed. In observation, I visited many ritual sites and compounds of notables and traditional healers to see how stones are treated. I interviewed three groups of people over long periods and repeatedly. These people consist of fons, chiefs and traditional healers to understand the functions of stones, to comprehend how stones and megaliths are prepared and their significance or symbolism. The data was analysed as the research was going on and interpreted using the functionalist and cultural evolution theories.

¹ 'Bamenda Grassfields' after World War 1, Cameroon a former German colony was divided into two: one part (the greater part) was put under French administration under the League of Nations Mandate, while the Western remaining part was mandated to the British who administered it as part of Nigeria. The part of the Grassfields that was under English rule was called 'Bamenda Grassfield.'

Findings

Stones are very symbolic and play a valuable role in all Bamenda-Tikar fondoms. In these fondoms, the centre of political as well as religious power is the *ntoh* or palace. The *ntoh* - palace is the heart of the fondom. Each of the *ntoh* is composed of a series of buildings and courtyards which define restricted levels of access. They have many external sections, one reserved for notables, one for quarter heads and one for the reception of villagers. The latter is opened to all, both men and women but women can only get into this quarter with bare foot in certain fondoms. They must remove their shoes at the door leading to this courtyard. The palace thus, comprises different quarters the living quarters of the royal wives, the quarters of the main regulatory society (*kwifon*), the living quarters of the *fon* built close to the shrines that shelters the graves of his ancestors, and a few utilitarian buildings (kitchen, shrines, latrines). Access to the inner palace, where the *fon*'s residence is located, is accessible only to important titleholders, visiting *fons* and other guests of honour.

One feature that characterises Bamenda-Tikar palaces is the presence of some symbolic stones. These emblematic stones which are either planted at the entrance leading to the palace or at the palace square or those found at the house of the takumbeng are managed by the different powers found in the palace: the *kwifon* (political control group), the *fon* (an individual), and the takumbeng in Bafut or the *fem* in Kedjom (a society that retains ritual powers).

The *kwifon* is the government and the highest authority in this area. It is the keeper of traditions and maintains order, it has very important judiciary and ritual functions and its judgements are without appeal that is definitive. It takes part in the administration of the fondom, in the enthronement and initiation of a new *fon* and burial of chiefs. Its executive members are exclusively men including the *fon* who is also part of the *fem* or takumbeng. Being the only member informed of events in the takumbeng and *kwifon*, his opinion is often decisive and respected by the two lodges when affairs of the 'country' are concerned. The *kwifon* is an institution that regulates social life – it assures public relations. It purifies people involved in certain crimes like suicide, murder and treason. It carries protective libations when serious situations or disasters threaten the lives of village folks. The *kwifon* is made up of several independent lodges specialised in varied aspects – customary laws, medicine, justice and policing, religion and agricultural rites.

The *fon* among the Bamenda-Tikars is far above the others. He is called *mfor* in Bafut and Bambui, in Kom he is called *mfoin* and Kedjom he is known as *fon*. The *fon* lives in the palace, the storage place of village property and cultural heritage. He is sacred; he performs rituals or ensures that they are appropriately conducted to guard against outside threats. The *fon* embodied the society, and to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 62), he is hyper-social and hyper-cultural. The *fon* is assisted by a few senior titleholders to consecrate stones which are found at 'god places' or ritual sites and those found in the *ntoh*.

Takumbeng retains ritual powers as seen above. Its role is to conduct rituals to ask the gods to provide the people with good health, fertility, abundant harvest, peace and protection from drought, famine and diseases. The symbol of this society is a small thatched house at the palace and in every quarter in the case of Bafut.

Plate 1: Takumbeng house in Bafut. Photo Tikere, 12/12/2012



The takumbeng house in the palace and the market have a large talking drum each, placed on some symbolic stones. These stones do not only support the gigantic talking drums but they are aimed at carrying this cultural element of immense religious and political value to the people. The talking drum found in the takumbeng house located in the palace is played as the takumbeng members perform their rituals.

We have discussed in the introduction that there are two categories of stones in the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms – simple and sacred. Simple stones are ordinary and are handled by just everyone in the society. Such are owned and used by commoners in their daily activities. The simple stones therefore have varied uses; to build the foundations of houses, decorate houses and used by women to grind spices for the cuisine. They are also used to grind fresh maize for the preparation of ‘koki corn.’ Traditional medical practitioners used them to convert backs, roots and leaves of trees into drugs. Before the advent of the grinding mills, dried maize was ground into powder on the stone in some parts of the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms. This corn flour was used to cook corn ‘fufu’ the main meal of many Bamenda-Tikar fondoms.

We have mentioned above that there are all sorts of stones in the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms and such fulfil varied roles. We shall examine the ordinary stones in the following paragraphs beginning with those used in the kitchen. In the majority of kitchens especially in the hinterlands, stones are used to grind spices which are used to prepare food. Spices as the name implies make food tasty, have a good

aroma and attractive. These stones are small and flat in nature accompanied with the 'grinding stone' which is round and smaller.

Most of the grinding is done often by women and at times by boys and girls above fifteen. Children below fifteen can perform the exercise but they will not do it well. They are initiated into this by their elders and mothers. This is one of the ways that the mother prepares especially the girl child to become an exemplary housewife. A housewife who will be able to prepare food for her husband, some people note that food is one of the main causes of problems in many families in this area.

Still in the Bamenda-Tikar woman's kitchen is a bigger stone which she grinds maize used in cooking 'koki corn.' Koki corn which is common among the Bamenda-Tikars of Cameroon is cooked predominantly in the months of July, August and part of September when there is abundant fresh corn. Considering the fact that the corn is grind on the stone, half dry or hard corn is not needed because it will be very difficult to crush on the stone. This is the same method that was used to also prepare pap before the coming of the grinding mill. Even with the invention of the grinding mill, there are people who still grind this maize on the stone. It is true that the machine can be regulated to have the desired finest of the maize but it is easily done on the stone than the machine. Many villages point out that, that which is ground in the machine does not really have a nice taste because particles of other food stuffs ground in the machine could find its way in the maize ground in the machine.

Many villagers note that the best position to use when grinding maize is by knelling down. Some people use other stones to raise the height the stone on which the maize is ground. This is down in order for the person who is grinding to do the exercise while standing. The grinding must be done with both hands to enable the maize ground into paste. It is important to note that some people like it when the paste is very fine while other prefer that which is not too fine.

This food, 'koki corn' is eaten in any other occasion in most Bamenda-Tikar fondoms besides the traditional 'achu' and corn 'fufu' which are the staple of many of these societies. It is common to find people eating koki corn during cultural ceremonies such as traditional wedding, funerals and death celebrations. Koki corn comes in to give a variety to other meals.

On the same stone fresh corn is ground, she grinds 'koki beans' or 'eggusi' which she uses to prepare koki and 'eggusi' pudding respectively. Some people may call this a 'traditional' method of grinding but this people value food ground on the stone to that ground in the machine. To them, the stone gives an extra taste because all the nutrients of the maize, koki or eggusi are maintained. Eggusi we must note is very invaluable in the cultural universe of Bafut and Bambui. In many cultural manifestations, women carry 'achu', the sauce (the staple of these people) and eggusi pudding in the basket. This food is given to very important personalities; a family head, a clan head among others. The food of ordinary persons does not contain eggusi pudding. The pudding therefore is a mark of respect and honour shown to those with greater responsibilities in the society.

The different foods that we have listed above are cooked on stones. These stones are usually three in number. Their primary role is to support the pot so that fire could be fixed under it. The stones are very symbolic – they represent the three members of a nuclear family who are the father, the mother and the child or children – that is the father stone, the mother stone and the child stone. So, the pot can stand for the house which is supported by the father, the mother and the children with each person having a specific function to perform for the smooth running of the house.

Plate 2: Three stones fire site. Photo Tikere, 09/07/2019



In some of the kitchens, the stones are differentiated. There is the major stone which faces the door, which represents the father, the pillar or the head of the house. This stone is planted in the ground and it is usually bigger and higher than the other two. The big and high stone plant signifying the pillar of the house is the father who is the pillar of the house. He protects the mother and all the other members of the household. This also is the symbol of power. The two other stones with the mother stone slightly bigger than the child stone are not planted but they are placed in a way that they could not be displaced easily. The mother stone is place facing the band where food is kept. And the mother sits near this mother stone where she can quickly climb to the band. This is symbolic in that the mother who is the one that cooks for the husband and the entire house has to sit where she can easily collect whatever she needs for the kitchen. If the mother needs to cook in a small pot, there is always a small stone (still called child stone) which is placed on the father to support the pot. This shows that the father as the head of the family, has to support family members, his relations as well as those of his wife.

Many grand fathers and mothers use stones to break maize into small pieces that they use in feeding their chickens. These chickens which serve for ritual and commercial purposes are usually kept in large quantities. If we visit the weekly local markets, we will find many local chickens being sold by the

elderly. They do this to raise money for some of their needs and also to help their children or grandchildren. They strive to be always financially independent; they regardless their ages will not want to totally depend on their children or grandchildren for their little needs. In the majority of Bamenda-Tikar fondoms, chickens are used in funerals and death celebrations to give out to the different traditional dance groups that come out to commemorate the departed.

Before the introduction of grinding mills, dried maize in many Bamenda-Tikar fondoms was transformed into flour on the stone. The same large stones on which fresh corn and koki beans is ground. The process was tedious as the corn had to be ground as many times as possible to obtain very fine powder. This was an activity that needed very strong and experienced hands to succeed. The men were mostly the ones who performed it since they are stronger.

The flour obtained from the ground maize was used to prepare ‘corn fufu’ or porridge corn that served as the daily meal in many homes. This meal which is eaten most times with huckleberry is the main dish of Kedjom and other Bamenda-Tikar fondoms. During funerals, death celebrations and traditional wedding ceremonies it is eaten with roasted chicken which has been chopped into small pieces and mixed in palm oil.

Stones are a good instrument in the hands of traditional medical doctors. They use them to convert leaves, roots and barks of trees into drugs which are consumed by patients. Although some traditional practitioners use mortars for the process, others think that the stone will grind hard substances like the barks and roots of trees easily. These traditional medical doctors play a major role among the Bamenda-Tikars, the people trust in their medicines – they are reliable, less expensive and easily accessible.

Grinding on the stone is an important theme among the Bamenda-Tikars that is why it is represented on sculpture. It demonstrates the method the people used to prepare certain types of food. This therefore is a good source of information to some people today and to the generations to come. They will never have the opportunity to see let alone eat food ground on the stone. As much as this statue portrays the artistry of the carver, it also demonstrates the cultural life of the Bamenda-Tikar people.

Plate 3: A sculpted work showing a woman grinding on the stone. Photo Tikere, 02/10/2016



The statue above is a woman who is grinding some food stuff on the stone. This could be fresh maize or koki beans or eggusi. She handles the grinding stone with both hands as it is usually done. Looking at her posture, we see that she is knelling down, the best position to use when grinding. The majority of grinding is done by the women as we have seen above and this demonstrated by plate 3.

When a deceased person is buried, stones are placed all-round the grave. In many fondoms, the black hard stones used for the foundation of houses are used. To most people, the stones are used to protect the earth so that goats, pigs and fowls should not scatter it. In some areas a cross is formed on the grave using stones while in others, a small stone is placed on the 'head' of the grave. This small stone is the symbolic position which is believed to be the mouth of the departed where certain rites are performed. The stone therefore is a means through which the living can communicate and also reach the death person.

When the head of a clan or family dies and is buried, a small stone or stick is put on his "head" just like Christians will put a cross on the grave. This is a symbolic head through which the deceased could be reached using the title up. The presence of the dead person could manifest itself in the head or skull, where part of its essence comes to life again. The title or ritual cup that was once used by the deceased is related to the head of the deceased since the people believed that the drink or any drink poured into the cup must be impregnated with hereditary forces, preserving a bond of communion with the ancestors. Pouring palm wine from this cup on the symbolic head is very important: this must secures not only the favour of the spirit of the ancestors but must guard against all manner of evil forces that threaten the compound and the inhabitants that may bring illness and at times death.

The people believe that the dead are not yet dead, that life is somehow more than the body, and that the body possesses a soul which continuous its life after the body has died. Many cultures among the

Bamenda-Tikars, see the dead joining the ancestors of the living and staying near the family home site; they retain an interest in the behaviour of the living, both rewarding and punishing them.

The departed person is still part of his human family, and people have personal memories of him. He is still a ‘person’ and has not yet become ‘a thing’ or ‘a spirit.’ He returns to his human family from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically. He knows and has interest in what is going on in the household, he inquires about family affairs and may even warn of impending danger. He is the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Because he is still a person, he is therefore the best intermediary between men and God: he knows the needs of men, he has ‘recently’ been here with men, and at the same time he has full access to the channels of communicating.

Ritual stones or megaliths

A megalith is a large stone, sometimes forming part of a group or circle, which is thought to have been important to people in the distant past for social or religious reasons. There are a number of megaliths in the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms with the majority of them located at the palace. The palace has holistic powers: political power, power to manage the environment, power to control and manage health, religious power and economic power.

Although houses in the fondom are built with stones sometimes, most of the lodges in the palace are built on stones. Cases in point are the royal house of the palace known in Kedjom as *ntish* and in Bafut as *ashum* and the house of the takumbeng society. The *ashum* in the Bafut palace is built with special stones – black, long and slender in nature.

Plates 4 and 5: A partial view of the royal house in Bafut. Photo Tikere, 12/12/2012



These stones are the symbol of power not only due to its nature but because of the house it carries. It is worth noting that the *ashum* of Bafut is about 600 years old according to some Bafut informants. So, before they are used, they are prepared (special rituals are conducted on them) by the *takumbeng* society to fit the purpose for which it is desired. When the stones are laid, another set of rituals are performed still by *takumbeng* to bring the spirits to inhabit the place.

Plate 6: The *ashum* of Bafut. Photo Tikere, 12/12/2012



It is important to mention that housing among the Bamenda-Tikars is shaped by life styles, by needs, by possibilities and of course by social standing. Each house is a portrait of its owner. *Ashum* is a traditionally built house found solely in the palace. It is constructed in a purely traditional manner. The walls and roof are constructed with materials got principally from the immediate environment - bamboos, sticks and grass. To construct one therefore, the four walls as well as the two ceilings and the four triangular roof sections, all made of raffia pole lattice work, are prefabricated on a level patch of ground and then assembled by the men of the village. The four walls, are put in position and the corners joined with bush ropes and bark stripped from fresh raffia poles. On top of the walls a ceiling of heavy construction is laid over and tied down to the walls. This ceiling is larger than the ground plan of the house. It extends beyond the walls and creates the typical overhanging eaves of a Grassfield house. About one metre below a second ceiling, which is known as the *banda* is fitted in between the walls (Knopfli, 1990: 75). Above this house is a high pyramid with a very dense grass roof. A lattice of raffia palm-leaf ribs is used for building the roof of this house. This is also done on the ground before fitting it on the building later. Bundles of grass are then tucked into this and beaten down firmly. Grass is got from the *ngumba* or *kwifon* hill.² These two are specialists who understand the enormity

² A hill reserved for the cutting of grass for the construction or repairs of the *ashum*. This hill is well protected. In the dry season, the borders are cleared all round by the villagers to prevent fire from burning the grass. Villagers can have access

if the grass they are fitting is not well beaten to prevent rain water from oozing through. The *ashum* usually has two thatched roofs, the main roof and a small attachment on top of it. This small attachment is what identifies the *ashum*. Many families thatch their houses with grass due to lack of money to purchase corrugated iron sheets. To differentiate the *ashum* (the emblem of the chiefdom), a double thatched roof is required. The doorframes are fitted at the entrance of the house or ornamented with carvings as well as the houseposts all characteristics of the Bamenda-Tikars.

It is worth noting that this house is not constructed by the *fon* neither does he hire people to do it. The work is done by village folks who bring bamboos from their various homes and sticks cut from the community forest. Different categories of people are specialised in varied aspects of the construction. There is a specific category for the laying of the foundation which is done with stones as seen above, another specialised in the building of the walls, yet another in the production of the ceiling and tucking of the grass. Carvers produce the house poles and the doorframes and the last category is engaged in the installation of the carved works. All these people are from the *kwifon* society.

The building is supported with houseposts bearing human figures. The posts do not serve as a support or a decoration for the symbolic house, but play - a religious role, a link between the supernatural and the living headed by the *fon*. It is a representation of the entire fondom, the heartbeat of the fondom where all the secrets are found. This separate building also plays the role of the sacred hospital where the *fon* is treated whenever there is 'cold in the palace'. Each time the *fon* falls sick which is referred to as 'cold in the palace', he is kept alone. Bamenda-Tikar people never say that the *fon* is ill else this might lead to his early 'disappearance'. When the *fon* is kept in here during the period when he is not well, only very few notables can attend to him since the house is out of bound for many. He stays here until his health is restored by the ancestors and the gods. It is the belief of the people that the gods will heal him through the emblematic symbols designed on the bed he sleeps on and those on the houseposts and doorframes of the building.

For the period of time that there is cold in the palace, it is kept secret known only by the inner core of the palace, he is never taken to the hospital except in very rare and extreme cases. A *fon* does not 'disappear' at an early age. If a *fon* is 'missing' before the age of 90, it is regarded as a penalty from the ancestors or gods. Those who go against the rules and customs of the land such as selling of village land or the neglect of ancestors are all punished in this manner.

The *ashum*, therefore, is very invaluable in every Bamenda-Tikar fondom. As the heart of the fondom, if it goes bad and collapses, the people await a series of misfortunes. The *ashum* is a great asset to the people, it represents power, both political and religious.

to this hill only when there is work on it and if anyone is found here when there is no work there, such is summoned to the palace where he has to pay a fine of a goat and a jug of palm wine.

Other stones that demonstrate the political powers of the palace are *ngoh ke kateh* in Kedjom Ketinguh (see plate 7) and the *mayou* in Bafut (see plate 8). These stones are the symbol of the god of protection, provision and peace. *Ngoh ke kateh*, *ngoh* is stone and *ke kateh* is a house made of bamboo mats. *Ngoh ke kateh* is planted at the centre of the palace, it is regarded as the heart of the fondom. Apart from being the god of protection, provision and peace, it possesses the power to punish any village who goes against the laws of the land.

Plate 7: Ngoh ke kateh. Photo Tikere, 12/05/2017



These stones are prepared by special sacred societies as mentioned above. One of such sacred societies in Kedjom is the *fem*. The *fem* institution is taken care of by chief priests, who equally take care of the different shrines in the fondom. They assembly in the *fem* from time to time, to clear and protect it. It is one of the most highly ranked sacred institutions in Kedjom coming after the *kwifon*. Other symbolic objects linked to the *fem* are a small house made of *quara quara* - mats, leaves of raffia palms and a tree. The plate above depicts the *fem* institution.

Ngoh ke kateh is not a god in itself but the people of Kedjom believe that their prayers could be channelled to the gods through this symbolic object. Concerning protection, it is the belief system of the people that they are protected from disasters and a deadly disease. This explains why before any important cultural manifestation in the fondom, the *fem* performs certain rituals on *ngoh ke kateh* and other ritual stones to ensure that things go smoothly throughout the event.

For instance, each time a new fon is enthroned or before annual dance festivals the palace has to take measures to ensure that no one not even an evil spirit disrupts the ceremony. To stop this therefore, the

kwifon society will deploy some of its members who will dress in special attires, go round and *nsbene loh* - protect the land. That is, plant traditional medicine to guard against evil spirits. These people who perform the rituals like those of sowing, carry a calabash or a bowl carved out of wood containing some concoction that they pour at the entrance and around the palace. This ritual has the ability to stop evil doers from entering the palace, and even if they succeed to enter, they will not be able to succeed in their mission or find their way out (they will die mysteriously). Those who perform the rituals go round bare body and foot but wearing the “*ntum*” a loin tied around the waist. They must dress in this manner for recognition by the gods who are at the centre of every human activity.

Before the *nkouh*³ leaves the palace for an important assignment, it must step on *ngoh ke kateh*. This empowers this masquerade by giving it the protection of the people and the gods. This explains why *nkouh* can climb on any roof top without the aid of the ladder and it can lift up very heavy objects. *Nkouh* is a royal ‘juju’ which comes out only during very important occasions. It is all decorated with fibre from head to knees and face painted black. It goes about with two pieces of wood held in two hands and the arms tied with two long strong ropes each and held by two powerful men, to stop it from escaping and going wide. It is very wild and is never held responsible for any harm or damage done anywhere or to anybody. When seen, people take maximum care of their properties. Once it turns loose, it can only be caught by a pregnant woman.

The *fem* is like a church which has commandments some of which include protection of life (especially that of humans), respect of hierarchy in the fondom, respect of parents (father and mother), no adultery, seriousness or devotedness, truthfulness, honesty, protection of the environment and others. The *fem* is the very first society where young people who like to join secret societies are initiated. The initiate must submit to tests of endurance, courage, and intelligence and a ritualistic death and resurrection. The rite of passage is a symbolic rebirth. During the process, the initiate is given a new name and a new identity. The rite of passage symbolizes a transformation and transition from childhood to adulthood. The initiate pledges allegiance to the tradition and commits to build and maintain the community, because collective work is necessary, for upholding tradition. The rite of passage personifies ancestors who taught the community the tradition. They are symbols of law and order within the community. Initiation takes place every *ajong* – a day before the big country Sunday.⁴ The frequency of initiation depends on the availability of both young and old people to join this group. Here, they are initiated by the head of this institution who teaches them how to pray and be committed in life. At the age of 50 years those of them who are well behaved are graduated and initiated into a higher institution. It is believed that at 50, a man must have learned all the commandments. Therefore, mastery of the commandments is the principal criteria for promotion. If a person fails a commandment,

³ The *nkouh* Nso, Kambe, Kom, Babungo, Kedjom, Babessi, Nsei, Bamessing, Aghem, Isuh and Bum is decorated with fibre from head to knees and face painted black meanwhile fondoms such as the Bafut, Mendankwe, Bambui and Nkwen mask the *nkouh* in a different way: the whole body is painted black with some charcoal-like substance from head to toes.

⁴ A ‘country Sunday’ is a day set aside for sacrificial offerings to the gods and ancestors. On such a day, no work is allowed as people are expected to stay at home. People are not allowed to chop firewood or harvest leaves in which they can store cooked food.

he is being punished by the gods, he might have a swollen stomach, arm or suffer from a dreadful illness. This illness could only be diagnosed by an elderly member of the institution just by looking at the patient. To treat such a patient the head of the society composes some local herbs mixed with some particle scrubbed from the stone and give the patient to consume.

The colour of the stone is black like many other symbolic stones in the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms. Black is a colour which is like night, the absence of light. The colour black represents evil or sadness, suffering or mourning. This is why the colour black is used more in funerals. Sadness, suffering and mourning has to do with the way evil doers are treated in Kedjom. Those who perpetuate evil were put to dead in those days but today they are exiled from the fondom a form of social control. Black is also used when celebrating birthdays of people reaching middle age. The reason for this is that everyone is supposed to be sad that the person is getting old.

Many cultures look at the colour black to represent sadness and mourning but Kedjom belief system associates this colour with the spirits. A colour capable of inviting the spirits, an object with such a colour therefore does not only add its beauty but means to empower it. Stones with this colour are feared and respected tremendously for they may be housing a spirit.

The people refer to anything which is black as a ‘bad thing’ – a thing considered secret and this is always associated with the supernatural, with spirits and it is believed that such stones have forces capable of the protecting palace in particular and the entire fondom in general. The black colour is thus not a cosmetic design, but a representation of power.

In Bafut, another Tikar fondom, like in Kedjom Ketinguh, there are stones of different types belonging to different sacred societies. The picture below shows one of the stones found at the palace court yard known in Bafut as *mayou* meaning ‘strong thing’. This stone is a representation of the village. It protects the village in general and the palace in particular.

Plate 8: The mayou found at the Bafut palace. Photo Tikere, 12/12/2012



During the annual dance, there are particular rituals performed here in honour of past *fons* and the gods. These rituals are accompanied by a prayer made either by the *fon* or the chief priest assigned by the *kwifon*. In his prayer, he thanks the gods of the land for protection and then begs for provision as well as fertility – many children and high yields in the farms. After the prayers, camwood is used to bless all those present.

As mentioned above, these stones are considered as the god of fertility; high yields in agricultural production and increase in the number of children born. This explains why there are agricultural rites performed by the *takumbeng* society at the start of each planting season. In Bafut like in most Bamenda-Tikar fondoms before and after sowing of crops, there are certain rituals conducted, first, to ensure that crops grow well and secondly to stop evil forces from damaging the crops. This therefore means that there are two separate rituals that are performed, the first one comes up a month before crops are sown. The entire chieftdom is informed through the *kwifon* on the date. On the said day, village folks assemble at the village shrine with small quantities of seed crops maize, beans, soya beans, plantain, okra and so on. The *fon* or chief priest will thank the gods for provision for the past year and beg on the gods to bless the seeds that are about to be planted, and also make the crops to grow healthy. Fertility is of vital importance for the people. Fertility rites here are based on the premise that man can conjure up preternatural forces dwelling in the land to promote fecundity in the earth, animals, and human beings. To them therefore, the earth is sacred and belongs to the ancestors. Hence, the harvest is successful if blessed by the ancestors. The objective of these rites is to please and appease the ancestors.

The second sowing rituals are conducted a month and a half after crops are sown. These rituals are done by the *kwifon*. They carry a wooden bowls containing some concoction, cutlasses, and the young leaf of raffia palm that they tie and put in their mouths. The concoction is poured at the borders of the entire fondom and at the entrances of important people in fondom. At the entrances of these dignitaries they plant two leaves of young raffia palm together with half '*fenuoh*'⁵ - plant on either side. They perform the whole exercise without speaking to anyone. The raison d'être behind the second ritual is to stop 'wind dwellers' or evil forces from destroying crops. The role of the two rituals is to ensure high yield depicted in the first and protection in the second.

The rituals performed are also aimed at ensuring that many children are born in the fondom. Children are very valued by all the Bamenda-Tikar fondoms in particular and Africans in general. A home or couple who get married and do not have a child or children is likely going to run into problems. These problems which come most times from the husband's family members make the couple unsecured. That is, when people (a couple) are childless in most African societies with the Bamenda-Tikars inclusive, they are abandoned and neglected by the man's family. The man's mother and father need a grandchild, the man's brothers and sisters need the woman to give them a nephew or a niece.

Again, a woman who gets married but cannot get pregnant let alone have a child is very miserable. No matter other good qualities she may possess, her failure to bear a child is worse than any treatment. She has become the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself. When she dies, there shall be nobody of her own immediate blood to 'remember' her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality: she will be simply 'forgotten.' She will suffer for this, her own relatives will suffer for this and it will be an irreparable humiliation for which there is no source of comfort in traditional life.

Child birth in this area like in many Western Grassfields is a very important issue. It does not only bring great joy to the couple, it strengthens or cements the relationship that exists between the families of the couple. This explains why a child born in a family calls for plenty of celebration no matter where the child is born.⁶ The child is a great joy in every family for several reasons: the child can be sent to carry a basket, a child can be sent fetch water, a child can be sent to run errands. Carrying a basket means helping not only the mothers carry her basket but any other person in the society. This is because

⁵ This is a plant that has thorns everywhere even on the fruits. The fruits are used by traditional medical doctors to produce medicine. When mature the fruits have a yellow colour.

⁶ Child birth is carried out in biomedical setting unlike in the past. In the days of old, even today, in some very remote areas, where there is no hospital or a clinic children were usually delivered by a traditional birth attendant (T.B.A). This T.B.A was or is not necessarily formally trained personnel but someone who had acquired her skills through many years of experience through child birth or had learned it from another T.B.A specialist. To Mbiti, in some African societies, birth generally takes place in the house of the expectant mother, or in the house of her parents where this custom is observed. In a few cases, however, it takes place in a special house constructed for that purpose, either inside or outside the village. For example, the Udhuk custom is that when a woman is about to deliver, she goes alone into the bush to give birth there. She might however, ask a relative to accompany her. After giving birth in the wilderness, she returns home, with her child.

among the Bamenda-Tikars, a child is that of the mother only when it is still in the stomach but as soon as the child is born, he ceases to be that of the mother alone but that of the entire society.

The palace is also responsible for environmental protection. And this is the responsibility of the fem society which is also in charge of cleansing the village and individuals as well. This society controls the gods that provide water in the fondom. The megaliths below are located in another *fem* shrine responsible for water provision. This shrine is found in the palace of Kedjom Ketinguh. It is visited annually (every December) and whenever there is a special occasion such as *kebien ke ndong* the *fon*'s dance otherwise called annual dance and the enthronement of a new *fon*. The visit is led by the *fon* or the chief priest accompanied by some notables. At the shrine, he conducts some sacrificial offering of a chicken or a goat, sprinkles some salt and palm oil while enunciating some words of incantation. The shrine is 'protected' with peace plants planted round to demonstrate sacredness of the place. Women seldom pass around this shrine.

Plate 9: The shrine of the god that provides water. Photo Tikere, 12/05/2017



When there is prolonged absents of rainfall in the village, the fem society performs certain rituals here. This is aimed at making the gods to react and bring rain. Water is very important for life. People, plants and animals need water to grow. That is people need (clean) water to drink, wash things, to cook to build and so on. The plants in the fields need plenty of water to permit them grow. This may be in line with the millennium development goal which states that everyone should have access to potable water.

These stones here are not the granitic type which are used to build the foundation of house. These ones are soft stones showing that water which is a very vital element for life should not be very strong or come from a strong source but from a soft source. Some water comes from the ground, even in hilly areas like Kedjom Ketinguh where we find water flowing, it must come from the ground.

The palace also controls and manages health. Individuals suffering from certain illnesses caused by the gods, could be cleansed by this society, they also performed cleansing rituals in compounds where someone commits suicide. In most fondoms among the Bamenda-Tikars, there are certain acts that are not accepted and if committed, certain cleansing rituals have to be performed. These acts that Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 57) call pollution include suicide, incest, fighting with a clansman, spilling human blood and breaking cultural utensils. Other kinds of events that are also polluting are accidental death by drowning and lightening. To them, all the events mentioned above have one thing in common. Events of the second type are destructive natural events, and those of the first type are human actions deviating seriously from the human norm, and therefore reverting to the natural world. We can analyse Grassfields beliefs by saying that the impingement of nature on the human (cultural) world is seen as polluting and dangerous. This does not mean however, that nature itself is seen as polluting and dangerous. It is only the encroachment of nature on the cultural or human world that is seen as such.

Such pollution is dangerous because it could cause an illness or a misfortune. This misfortune is called *ndoin* (in Kedjom and Kom) and *ndon* in Bambui and Bafut. Misfortune is like a substance that enters the ground where the bad event took place and the people who were involved in it. It is contagious and will spread if it is not removed. For instance, if the compound where a person committed suicide is not cleansed, it is believed that more people may commit suicide. If polluted people are not cleansed, it is believed that fellow lineage members will be affected by diseases; the women will be barren and the children will die. These are, of course, very serious matters and it is understandable that polluting events are considered awful. (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 57)

The people who have the ritual power to remove pollution constitute a very special class in the fondom. In the majority of the fondoms, suicide and other misfortunes such as deaths caused by lightening, commonly called 'thunder' are cleansed by the *takumbeng or fem* society. The persons who came close to a corpse or viewed a corpse that committed suicide or those who saw a dead body caused by lightening were given 'black medicine' – black powder to eat. In the case where a man commits suicide in his compound or in the family compound, certain items are demanded from the family before rituals could be performed where the suicide happened. If it happens that the demands required are not met, an injunction was put in the said family compound. The injunction means that no one, not even the family members, could live there nor obtain anything from there. At times, the compound is taken over by the palace.

The palace maintains order and justice in the fondom. In Kedjom Ketinguh for instance, there is a way of punishing evildoers, people whose activities could be a threat to the society. A Kedjom man who is accused of treason, is banished from the community. But before this is done, the defaulter is brought by the *kwifon* and made to stand besides *ngoh ke kateh*, facing the sun and take an oath that he or she will never do what he/she did in the case of a minor crime. In the case of a serious crime like murder and treason, after taking the oath, he/she is banished from the fondom. This is done by the *kwifon* which lead the culprit out of the fondom. At the borders where the man is asked to go and never return

to the land again some rituals are performed. This event usually takes place in the day and the members of *kwifon* use a mask and process to the border. This mask is possessed with powers that command them in all the actions that they take. They also use the double iron gong to inform non initiates to hide or run away for the procession. Many people have fallen victim to this, when they are exiled, they condemn it, claiming such rituals don't mean anything to them but when they return to the village after some time they will fall sick and die without any illness diagnosed. This is a form of social control, a means to institute order in the village. This is a way to warn the people not to hinder the progress of a fellow kinsman or the fondom. Instead, people are encouraged to be their brother's keeper for an individual's failure or success affects the entire society.

Many of these stones are found out of the palace in places like the market, the compounds of notables and in the premises of traditional medical practitioners. In Bafut, at the market square, there is a stone which plays the function of social control. This stone is part of the traditional house found in the market. The two belong to an institution that protects the market and forgotten items. If a trader or anyone in the market forgets something, the object is kept in this house and it is the belief system of the people that if anyone takes a missing item from the market or from this house, he or she will be punished accordingly. In Kedjom, the punishment is that such a person will give birth to an albino. An albino therefore is a curse from the gods for wrong doing.

Plate 10 and 11: A megalith found at the Bafut market and the house of takumbeng. Photo Tikere, 12/12/2012

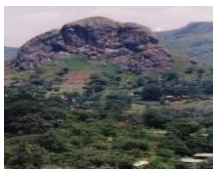
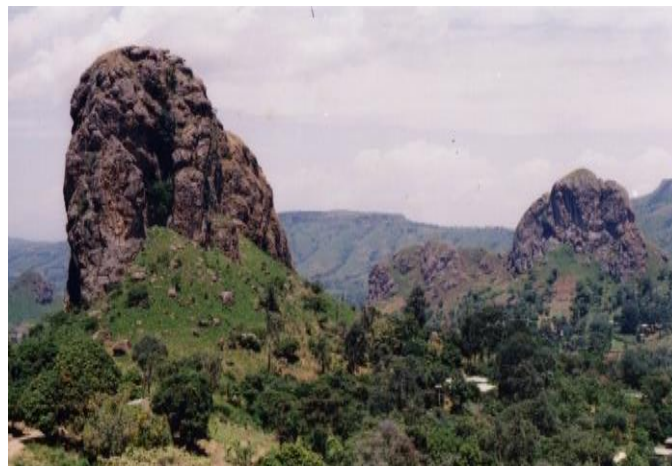


If the *kwifon* has a message to give the public on a market day, it either stands near this stone or enters the market where it will stand near some other stones and deliver its message in the local language. As soon as it starts talking, the whole market observes perfect silence for as long as *kwifon* is there. It will leave the moment it accomplishes its assignment.

Kedjom Ketinguh derives its name from hills or stones. Tinguh in Kedjom means under stones. Kedjom Ketinguh therefore means a 'country' under stones. In Kedjom Ketinguh, there are very many

hills or stones but there are three which are outstanding with enormous religious attributes. Though a physical feature, these hills or stones form part of Kedjom Ketinguh belief system of thought, these stones are named after three persons in Kedjom Ketinguh – the fon (Sheteh), Mbo'oh yan and Koli.

Plate 12: Symbolic hills in Kedjom Ketinguh. Photo Tikere, 12/05/2017



Sheteh is the first hill from right to left. Sheteh is the name of the fon of Kedjom Ketinguh and the hill takes the name of each reigning fon. It belongs to the fon, it is the stone facing the palace. Sheteh is one of the most important of all stones found in the chiefdom due to the person after whom it is named.



a lot of respect.

Ngoh Mbo'oh Yan is the stone in the middle. Mbo'oh Yan being one of the 40s, was the very first person who settled around this stone. It is important to note that “the 40s” is a phrase used to describe the very first people who came to this area called Kedjom Ketinguh. The expression is used to denote the number. The belief system of this fondom therefore associates this stone with Mbo'oh Yan which he treats with



The third and smallest and the third from right to left belongs to Koli. Koli was one of the 40s and the first man to settle around this stone. Some people call this stone nguh mbi – the stone of goats because goats graze around here. But the fact that animals do graze here does not reduce the powers and respect given to it. Ngoh Koli has witnessed a new development; Catholic christians have planted a cross on it. The christians in this fondom commonly believe that the cross which represents the boby of Christ is more powerful than the rituals that are performed there. That notwithstanding, the palace continues to

conduct the annual rituals on this hills. This is a demonstration the traditional as well as Christian religions can operate in the cultural universe without any problems.

These stones occupy a special and crucial position in Kedjom Ketinguh belief system such that annually or during very important cultural events in the fondom, certain rituals are performed here to inform the gods and ancestors who are believed to live here. The people perceive that like the three stones that support a pot on the fire, these stones which are three in number are the stones that carry the entire Kedjom Ketinguh fondom. The three stones therefore stand for the fon, Ndi and Ti. These are the individuals who occupy the highest rank in the entire Tinguh society. They could be likened to the president, the prime minister and the minister. Just like the stones that hold a pot firmly without any problem, these stones or these village pillar are considered as an element of unity, cohesion, solidarity, peace which is obtained when sacrificial offerings are conducted here.

In the Bambui fondom like in many Bamenda-Tikar fondoms, some families have megaliths that they venerate. Such are found in special places that are protected with other stones or with mat. Some of them are found in the yard, others behind the house while others in front the house. Regardless of where they are located, the people of Bambui believe that such stones are very invaluable in their lives thus they cannot be neglected. If neglected, the family encounters numerous misfortunes, illnesses and even deaths caused by the gods.

Plate 13 and 14: Shrines. Photo Tikere, 21/02/2018



This family shrine is taken care of by the family head, who from time to time clears around the place, renovates the materials used for protection and plants some trees that accompany the megalith. The shrine above portrays a megalith, a fig tree and peace plants. The family head does not only visit the shrine annually but also in times of problems or when there is an important ceremony in the family. In the case of illnesses and many deaths, he does this to beg the gods of the family to come to their rescue take away the problems his people are facing. He also prays for protection, good health and fertility.

In Bambui still, megaliths are also useful to traditional doctors and/or prophets. The stones seen below are among the many found in and around the traditional hospital of ‘prophet’ Azenui in Bambui. These two stones are the gate way to Azenui’s shrine. This shrine is a stream which is prepared for deliverance purpose or for washing off illnesses from patients. From these stones to the shrine is considered a holy ground, a place where there is maximum peace and tranquillity.

Plate 15: Holy ground in Azenui traditional clinic. Photo Tikere, 06/09/2012



The traditional doctor calls this place ‘holy ground’ and as a prophet, he is ordained by God to help humanity, preach the doctrine of holiness, goodness and righteousness. He believes that as a Catholic Christian, he channels the peoples’ problems to God and whatever he does he does so in the name of God and for the good of mankind. He used the analogy of Jesus Christ in the Bible which says that he died, resurrected and he is going to come back. He says that the entrance to the holy ground is like the death and resurrection of Christ and when someone comes out of it, it is like the resurrection of Christ. To him therefore, his mission on earth is to preach to people how to live in unity and also love one another like Christ gave his life for our sins.

The stream or shrine contains a pool of water where he washes and heals sick people. This healing place is symbolic, representing the water in which Jesus Christ was baptised. It is seen as an element which can be used to cleanse the afflicted and that is just what he does. This shrine to him could be compared to River Jordan where Naman the captain was cleansed of his leprosy. Neman deepen himself seven times in River Jordan at the command of a man of God and after the seventh time, he was healed.

The researcher wanted to have a snap shot and information about these stones. We were told by the traditional doctor that the spirits must be consulted before we could do so. Being eager to see what

was actually going to happen, the researcher asked him if that could be done on that same day, the doctor replied that it was going to take a few minutes. The doctor asked the researcher to come with him, we entered into the house of the doctor. He took us to a certain place, in front of a thatched house which has been fenced with 'quara quara' - mats. Here he asked us to say why we came there. we said that we were there to take the snap shot of the stones and get some information which could permit us understand their usage in the Bambui fondom in particular and among the Bamenda-Tikars of Cameroon in general.

When this was done, he went to another part of the compound, brought out palm wine in a small calabash and entered in the thatched house, stayed for a while, came out and told us that we could take the snap shots. But he told us to throw two coins of twenty-five (25) francs on each of the stones before snapping.

He made us to understand that the peace plant at the stone and on the road to the shrine is to demonstrate the fact that this place is a holy place and that he does not stop people from snapping the stone but if anyone snaps them without him consulting the spirits, this individual will be cursed by the spirits and if he consults the spirits and they say no, the stone will not be snapped. The spirits can only refuse that the stone should not be snapped if the person's intentions are not genuine. Salt is poured on the stones meanwhile they are anointed with palm oil occasionally. These two elements are used to feed the stones on the one hand and to maintain their powers on the other.

Local and International Perspectives of Stones

Stones are invaluable locally and internationally. They are used for boundary demarcation. In the majority of Bamenda-Tikar fondoms, people use different objects to demarcate their limits. They use a special as well as symbolic tree commonly called fig tree - *Ficus oreodryadum*. In the days of old, granitic stones were used for this purpose. These stones could last for hundreds of years due to their strength and hard nature; they can hardly wear out or easily be broken. Today, because of the scarcity of these stones, people have turned to the use of artificial stones made of sand, cement and iron rods. These stones which are called boundary stones are in varied sizes and heights (see plates below).

Plate 16 and 17: Boundary stones. Photo Tikere, 12/11/2016



They are made by bricklayers to resemble the granitic stones – slime and long. They may be referred to as stones because of their hard nature and the purpose for which they serve – boundary stones. Although many of them end up breaking gradually or wearing out either due to poor production or age they are still regarded to be symbolic, representing power and strength.

Natural physical features could also help too demarcate the limits of fondoms and the commonest of them are streams and rivers. For instance, the boundary between Bambui and Kedjom Keku in the south is at *fengwan* – a river that separates these two fondoms. The cases are abound in the Bamenda-Tikar area. Roads also act as boundary to many people and fondoms. Building of schools and other social institutions constructed by the government in most cases in conflict areas serve to demarcate borders. But in the absence of physical features, roads and buildings, the people use stones to demarcate their frontiers. The stones are planted in the ground or heaps of stones are packed along the borders. After piling or planting of such boundary stones, some of the leaders – the *fons* go a step forward to take a pact in which they vow never to tamper with the boundary stones. This is usually done by spilling human or the blood of any other animal to maintain the limits. The redness of the blood is the symbol of power and unity. Unity in that the two villages are bound to remain friends forever. These pacts were common among the Bamenda-Tikars in the past.

At the international level, stones are also used where natural physical features are lacking. Such stones are not planted by just anyone, it is always done by a representative of the United Nations (U N), in a solemn ceremony. In this case like in the above-mentioned cases, the boundary stones help in conflict resolution. A good example is the Cameroon-Nigeria border crisis which was resolved by the planting of border stones.

The foundation of a house as we have discussed above should very strong and powerful to be able to support the weight of the structure that has to stand on it. But the usage of foundation stone is very symbolic such that any project of high calibre always warrants the laying of a foundation stone. These projects be they those that demand the use of stones in the case of hospitals, dams, schools or those that do not need stones like the road, we usually hear to laying of the foundation stone. This foundation stone is not planted or laid by just anyone, it has to done by the president of the country or the minister. The personality that performs the ritual determines the significance and power of such a project depicted in the foundation stone. The importance of schools, hospitals, roads and dams is not going to be emphasised in the paper but they are all social amenities which help to develop the people and the entire society. The stone therefore is very significant to the people both locally and internationally symbolising strength and/or power.

The stone is also used as a protective object. This explains why certain fondoms of palaces are located behind stones or a large stone. The Bambili palace is located behind a large hill called *ngoh nfan*. *Ngoh* meaning stone and *nfan* means protector thus, *ngoh nfan* is a protective stone. A stone that protects the

palace, a representation of the fondom. This stone is therefore the symbol of a shield that protects the palace in case of any attack by any neighbouring fondom. The stone here stands for power and protection.

Among the Bamenda-Tikar people are associate and groups are associated with stones. But in some instances, a person who is very strong and powerful is referred to as a stone. Someone who performs tedious activities like carrying of heavy objects, till the soil, resistant among others. He is considered a stone because of his strength, the physical power that he possesses.

In the villages and towns, some people use small stones (see plate below) to scrub their feet. This is very common with people who work on the farm. After digging the soil for almost the entire day, they fear that this might affect their feet, so they scrub them very well to stop them from having cracks. Others scrub their feet each time they birth.

Plate 18: Stone used in scrubbing the feet. Photo Tikere, 11/05/2015



Scrubbing of the feet does not only prevent them from developing cracks, it also serves for aesthetics purposes. These stones are brought principally from the South West Region of Cameroon and sold in the local markets for a hundred (100) or two hundred (200) francs depending on its size. Despite the numerous hours that the people of this area put in for their daily activities, they still find time to make themselves handsome and beautiful. This shows that where ever man is, he strives to make himself comfortable, beautiful even if it is not for anybody else but for himself. On the contrary someone with cracks on the feet is laughed at and considered a dirty and careless person, a person who neglects and cannot take care of himself.

The creative energy behind the stone megaliths and the representations is rooted in the people's ancestor veneration. The stones and megaliths reflect the belief system of the people. They can be used as elements of social stratification, cultural identity and heritage. These elements fulfil a fundamental role in cultural continuity, protect and illustrate the past, ensure the present and prepare the further well-being of these fondoms.

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