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PEOPLE IN RECEPTACLES: THE CASE OF THE INDIGENOUS BASKET OF THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The people of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon are incredible artists, producing invaluable objects in all the domains of arts; basketry, sculpture, embroidery, pottery, paintings, etc. People in receptacles: the case of the basket in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon examines the usefulness of this culturally valuable object in the daily lives of the people. It raises the problem that as days go by, some of the values of the baskets are being modified because of the introduction of alternative containers. Although the basket like most indigenous receptacles still play very important functions in rituals and healing, if this domain of art is not conserved, in the next two to three decades, the generations to come will know nothing about the baskets because they might completely disappear. Before the arrival of the ‘whiteman’ or before the Bamenda Grassfields people came in contact with the outside world, the basket could be seen in all the different parts of the peoples’ culture, it could be used to identify different groups as their production style and materials varied. In the Nkambe area, more and more compact baskets were and are being produced unlike in areas like Bambui, Bafut, Mankon, Kedjom etc, where loosely woven baskets were and are manufactured.

Data for this paper was collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The researcher conducted fieldwork where he observed, interviewed key informants as well as took photographs of the different baskets and how they are being used. Information collected was analyzed soon after the fieldwork and interpreted using the theories of cultural ecology, functionalism as well as cultural dynamics.

KEYWORDS: receptacles, indigenous, baskets, Bamenda Grassfields, rituals, healing

INTRODUCTION

The use of armor (armor) continues to increase and even dominates armor designs for combat vehicles in the future. Optimal ballistic performance is closely related to the material strength, hardness, and high strain rate behavior of this steel material [1]. At the time of World War II, the determination of steel material was chosen not only because of its resistance to bullets but still limited to its availability

[2]. Figure 1.1 shows the impact of World War II on the accelerated development of armored steel materials, focusing on the thickness factor.

Baskets like any other container play an invaluable function in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people. A basket is a light weight container, round, open at the top and tapering toward the bottom. Baskets in this part of Cameroon are used in different ways and in different cultural ceremonies. They are used by the women in the farms. They are equally used in the kitchen as a storage container for ingredients and other items needed in the kitchen.

The basket is produced by both men and women. The men especially the youths are engaged in the production of the basket known as *keka* (baskets fabricated with the marrow of the bamboo, see picture 5) and the *nkem* (loosely woven basket manufactured with the cork of the bamboo as seen in picture 4) in most Bamenda Grassfields languages. The women especially the elderly, produce those which are used to store food. They equally fabricate the baskets which are loosely woven and meant for carrying food stuff.

In the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, the baskets can be seen in the peoples' daily activities. The Bamenda 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 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 oil and raffia palms serve as raw materials to weavers who use them for the production of baskets, bags, caps, mats, chairs, tables, cupboards and thatches. In some parts of the Bamenda Grassfields, cane is available. It is this cane which serves as the major raw material for the making of cane baskets, chairs, jars, etc. The Indian bamboo is common in many parts and it is used to produce containers meant for carrying heavy items.

All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of different sizes. Most of them are independent (Warnier, 1975: 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 chiefdom to chiefdom as well as the degree of concentration of power, the less centralised being probably the Meta is among stateless societies (Warnier, 1975: 32-3). 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 *kwifon* in Bafut, Bambui, Mankon, and in

¹ 'Bamenda Grassfields' after World War I, 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.'

Nkwen. In Kom it is called *kwifoin* and in the Nso 'country' it is referred to *nwerong*. Fons, notables and quarter heads also form part of the political structure. Most Bamenda Grassfields fondoms are patrilineal (apart from the Kom and the Aghem societies which are matrilineal) 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 *kwifon*, *kwifoin* or *nwerong* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables and quarter-heads.

The Bamenda Grassfields people in particular and the Grassfielders in general are polytheistic, they have varied religious beliefs; there are people who are animists, others are Christians meanwhile some are Muslims. Those who are animists believe that supernatural powers reside in objects and such spiritual beings could be benevolent (nice) or mischievous (naughty) or downright evil. The natives deal with these spirits according to the mentioned qualities. Sometimes these spirits could be reached through specific rituals in dances or sacrifices performed using objects like baskets for instance the case of twins' celebrations. Christianity is the religion of most people of the Bamenda Grassfields. The Islam religion is noticeable mostly in Sabga in the Tubah Sub Division.

The people of Bamenda Grassfields are engaged in many economic activities one of which is basketry. The people's creativity here is seen in the ways they turn raffia bamboos, cane and Indian bamboos into tangible objects which demonstrate a lot of ingenuity. Both sexes are actively involved in this activity producing varied articles ranging from baskets, thrones, chairs, mats, jars, are very invaluable in the lives of the local people.

METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to highlight the cultural significance of the basket in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people. To collect data for it, the qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The researcher used the following research techniques; direct observation, indepth-interview and questionnaire. He (the researcher) visited many fondoms of the Bamenda Grassfields where he saw the fabrication of varied indigenous receptacles among which were baskets. He accompanied some weavers in the bushes where raffia bamboo, cane and indian bamboo were harvested. He also visited many cultural ceremonies where baskets were being used. He interviewed many natives both men and women on several occasions to know when they use these baskets, and which baskets were and are used during what occasions. With the women, he was out to find out the type of baskets used in storing and carrying food items. He also interviewed traditional medical doctors to understand in what ways they use the indigenous baskets. Questionnaires were equally used and among some of the information that were provided by the questionnaire was on indigenous baskets' production, marketing, and societal perception of these baskets.

Data management analysis

Data analysis of this paper began soon after fieldwork was over. Information recorded during observation and interview sessions were transcribed and arranged according to the different categories of people interviewed.

Baskets in the Bamenda Grassfields are produced with raw materials from three different plants namely raffia palm (*raffia vinifera arecaceae*), cane (*arundinaria*), and the Indian Bamboo (*bambusa tulda*). Indigenous objects produced from these raw materials range from baskets, beds, chairs, jars, mats to cupboards. The object this paper focuses on is the basket, demonstrating its typology, and functions in the lives of the people. The paper also examines the effect of modernity on these indigenous baskets.

Typology of Baskets in the Bamenda Grassfields

As already introduced, there are three main types of indigenous baskets used in the Bamenda Grassfields fpondoms: baskets made from raffia palm bamboo, those made from can, and those made from Indian timber bamboo. Below are the different types and their names in some Bamenda Grassfields languages.

Table 1: Typology of baskets, their names in some Bamenda Grassfields languages and uses

Local Name		Kom	Bafut	Kedjom	Bambui	Lamnso	Uses
Raffia palm Bamboo basket	Tightly woven with cork	<i>ifu'h</i>	<i>nkie</i>	<i>ifu'h</i>	<i>nkiye</i>	<i>nkou/ nkinsoi</i>	<i>To Carry maize for planting, food to ceremonies. To Transport corn flour for celebration especially by the women.</i>
	loosely woven	<i>nkem</i>	<i>nko-o</i>	<i>nkem</i>	<i>ankem</i>	<i>nkem</i>	<i>To Carry animals, birds, fruits and food stuff from the farm.</i>
	tightly woven with marrow	<i>aka'leh</i>	<i>nko-o</i>	<i>keka</i>	<i>kaa</i>	<i>nha'ah</i>	<i>To storage coffee, food, fruits and kolanut.</i>
Cain basket		<i>nkouh</i>	<i>nkie</i>	<i>nkem</i>	<i>nko'o</i>	<i>nkou</i>	<i>To carry cooked food.</i>
Indian bamboo basket		<i>nkem</i>	<i>nkie bo-oti</i>	<i>khieh</i>	<i>ankem</i>	<i>nkou</i>	<i>To transport food and firewood from the farm from the farm.</i>

i) Raffia Palm Bamboo Basket: These are baskets manufactured from the raffia palm bamboo. Raffia palm bamboos are natural materials commonly used for the construction of buildings (especially the royal houses known in Bafut and Mankon as achum) and household furniture. Raffia is a kind of palm tree from the family arecaceae, found mostly in swampy areas and along rivers. The raffia bamboo, a part of the raffia palm is a composite material, consisting of a fragile marrow (matrix) inside a thin shell (reinforcements), smooth and hard which protects the marrow. The stem or bamboo consist of a cork which has a green coloration when fresh and gray when dry.

The raffia palm bamboo baskets production is done by both men and women. This type can be classified under three types: those which are tightly woven. The production of this type is done only by the women folk. To fabricate it, women use the hard outer cork of the raffia bamboo stem and fibre (produced from the palm leaves). The fibre is employed to produce the handles and as well as to reinforce the basket itself. Some of these baskets are decorated with dyed fibre meanwhile others are produced with lids.

Pictures 1,2 and 3: Tightly woven raffia bamboo baskets with lids. Photo Tikere (12/09/2018)



The next type of raffia palm bamboo basket is that which is loosely woven. This basket is produced only by the men and they equally use the outer hard cork of the bamboo. The bamboo they use is best when it is fresh. When the bamboo is fresh, is very elastic and can be twisted in any direction and it will not get broken.

Picture 4: /nkem/ Loosely woven raffia bamboo baskets. Photo Tikere (01/11/2019)



The last raffia bamboo basket is a temporal one, manufactured with the inner soft part, the pith or the marrow of the bamboo. This type which is commonly called keka is equally produced by the men. This basket is closely woven and is used very often in the storing of food and the carrying of perishable fruits like tomatoes.

Picture 5: /keka/. Photo Tikere (12/09/2018)



ii) Cane Baskets: As the name implies, these are baskets manufactured from cane. Cane is any various tall, perennial grasses with flexible, woody stalk from the genera arundinaria. It is actually a specific part of rattan, which is removed from the thorny outer skin of the plant. It is naturally very light in colour, somewhat shiny. The raw material, the cane used here is obtained from Widikum in the Momo Division and from the South West Region of Cameroon. The major centres of the production of the cane baskets are Mankon, Bafut, Nkwen and Kedjom (Babanki). Babanki is a degenerated form of the nickname Banki that is derived from 'nki'. During their war with neighbouring villages, apart from traditional weapons of guns, bow and arrows, cutlasses, they used occult powers too. A critical code phrase could be used during the war, 'vulu a vu-nki' or vu-nki lu' which means 'let's attack them like the whirlwind'. The word 'Nki' means whirlwind'. Later on, neighboring villages also nicknamed the Kedjom people as 'Ba-nki' – 'those people who attack like a whirlwind'. The name further degenerated to Babanki. When Germans came to Cameroon, especially in the Grassfield, they attached the prefix 'Ba' to most villages to mean 'the inhabitants of' in the Mungaka (Bali) language. The original name of these people is Kedjom. The misinterpretation of Babanki to mean 'basket makers' as would be translated from Mungaka is false (Mundi, 2000: 55).

Cane baskets are produced by the men and in most of the centres, there are apprentices who learn this trade. The production of cane objects is more developed in the two Kedjoms - Kedjom Keku and Kedjom Ketinguh. Cane basket production is considered the traditional craft of the Kedjom people, a skill that everyone in the fonom ought to know. This trade is learned free of charge because when it was introduced by the missionaries, it was taught to the first persons free of charge so too it has been handed down from generation to generation. Those engaged in the cane basket production also manufacture objects such as beds, chairs, jars, cupboards.

Pictures 6, 7 and 8: Cane, cane basket production and cane basket. Photo Tikere (13/10/2019)



iii) Indian Bamboo Baskets: Indian bamboo (*bambusa tulda*) is also known as the Indian timber bamboo and the Bengal bamboo. It is considered to be one of the most species of bamboo. It is native to the Indian subcontinent, Indochina, Tibet, etc. There are two main types of Indian bamboo in the Bamenda Grassfields; *bambusa tulda* and *dendrocalmus strictus*. The former is the large type meanwhile the latter is slender. The slender type, *dendrocalmus strictus* is the kind used in this area to manufacture objects with the basket inclusive.

These baskets which are predominant in fondoms like Kom, Kedjom, Nso, Aghem and many others are produced by both men and women. Producers of these baskets use only fresh and mature bamboos. Its design, colour and form depends on its function. There are some (baskets), manufactured with two handles meanwhile others are made with four handles. Some of the baskets are fabricated with no handles, the owner can put the handle if he or she can and deems necessary. This basket is carried on the back. It is important to mention that this basket as we can see in the pictures below are either tightly or loosely woven.

Picture 9: Cane baskets which are carried on the back. Photo Tikere (28/04/2014)



I must note that the people of the Bamenda Grassfields like people elsewhere are capable of imposing themselves on nature. They transform the different raw materials found in their environment to their benefit. This is a demonstration of Julian Steward's theory of cultural ecology which focuses on how cultural beliefs and practices helps human populations adapt to their environments and live within the means of their ecosystem. It contributes to social organization and other human institutions. Cultural Ecology also interprets cultural practices in terms of their long-term role in helping humans adapt to their environment.

Baskets in the Socio-Culture of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

The basket has varied uses in the Bamenda Grassfields. They are used in agriculture, funerals, death celebrations, twins' ceremony, healing, in beauty salons, in religion, in the kitchen and it also fulfils economic functions.

a) Baskets and Agriculture: Agriculture is one of the main economic activities of the people of the Bamenda Grassfields. Most of them are engaged in it in one way or the other; there are people who grow only crops, others keep animals while some keep bees. There are equally people who are engaged in all three. Those involved in crops cultivation and animal husbandry use the basket in some of their activities. The women who are involved in farming for instance, use the basket to put seeds which they plant in the fields. The basket used here is the very small type which is tied on the waist during the planting season which takes place in the Month of March. It is usually tied on the left side of the waist if the farmer uses the left hand to remove the seeds. The cereals put in the basket are maize, beans and groundnut. The basket is preferred because it has an open mouth which permits the farmer to easily remove the seeds.

Indian bamboo baskets are produced by the men and women but used mostly by women. These baskets are used periodically, during preparation of the fields and during harvesting of crops. In February and early March, women put their farm tools in these baskets and take to the farms and return with them in the evening filled with food stuff such as maize, cocoyams, cassava, and yams (see picture below).

Picture 10: A basket filled with maize. Photo Tikere (13/11/2018)



When the basket is filled with food stuff, it is carried on the back on the handles or the ropes. When carried on the back, the weight of the container is not so heavy as compared to when carried on the head or handled in the hand.

It is common in the month of August to find women and young girls returning from the farm with maize filled in the basket on the back. Sometimes, they will spend the whole day carrying maize in this manner. In this part of the country, maize harvesting is a serious issue. People who possess large farms usually need external assistance. They will therefore, invite friends and neighbours and others people for maize harvesting. On the day of the harvesting, the people present are divided into two groups; those who do the harvesting and those who transport to the home. The harvesting is mostly done by the females while the males transport. The few females who will join the transportation team usually carry maize in the baskets meanwhile the boys load theirs in bags which they carry on their heads.

The baskets also serve as a useful instrument in the transportation of firewood from the farms. It is important to mention that the woman's day in the Bamenda Grassfields is a very busy one. A woman gets up from bed very early in the morning. Some get up as early as 6 am, prepare food for the home and then prepare the children for school. When the children are gone to school, she leaves for the farm. Once on the farm, she works for the entire day and can only stop work at about 4 pm to start collecting food stuff that she will cook as soon as she gets home. This food will serve as dinner. It is worthy to accentuate that what she collects from the farm, either food stuff or firewood depends on the need of the home for that day. If there is no firewood at home to cook, she will concentrate on the fetching of wood. This wood is put in an Indian bamboo basket and carried home on the back.

Picture 11: A mother carrying firewood in a basket on her back. Photo Tikere (10/11/2019)



In the dry season when there is no rain, many women fetch much firewood and stuck at the back of their kitchens. This is possible on such days when they do not have serious or major farm work. The rainy season is characterised by rainfall and when this happens, not only are the roads slippery, rain water enters in the wood making it difficult to hold fire. In the dry season therefore, the basket is an important tool to the rural women who use it to transport wood from the farms to the home.

In a fendom like Santa Mbei and in areas like Ndawara and Ndu where tea is grown, the basket plays an invaluable role as it is used to collect leaves of tea. The basket used in this activity is the large basket which is carried on the back (see picture below). One informant told the researcher that:

At the Ndawara Tea Estate where I have worked, the containers or baskets in which we put harvested tea leaves are not provided by the estate but by the workers themselves. That is, this is one of the tools that a worker has to bring along as he or she is coming to harvest or plug tea. A worker who does not possess one has to buy one either from the weavers who bring them to the estate for sale or go to the Babungo market where they have to buy one. The cost of the basket is determined by its form and size. The tightly woven large baskets are more expensive than those loosely woven. To purchase a tightly woven basket at the estate costs five thousand (5000) francs CFA meanwhile at the Babungo market it costs four thousand (4000) francs CFA. The loosely woven basket in the Babungo market costs two thousand (2000) francs CFA and two thousand five hundred (2500) francs CFA at Ndawara Tea Estate. The weavers who bring them to the estate add their transport fare to the costs of each basket (Geh Hans, 14/12/2021)

Another harvester still at Ndawara Tea Estate had this to say; *tea harvesters are not paid per the number of baskets of tea which they harvest but the number of baskets of tea harvested by each harvester is weight and payment done. That is, workers are paid per the number of kilograms they harvest or quantity of tea harvested (Koin Regina, 14/12/2021)*. The picture below shows a woman in a tea farm harvesting tea and putting it in the basket hung on her back. A hard working harvester can plug up to fifteen baskets of tea per day.

Picture 12: A woman harvesting tea and putting in a basket. Photo Ndu Tea Estate (05/11/2010)



Coffee was one of the main cash crops cultivated in Cameroon in general and in the Bamenda Grassfields in particular before the 80s. Many parents depended on it to educate their children as well as take care of their other needs. But the drop in the price of this important crop after the 80s brought a lot of destabilisation in the lives of the people, and many farmers had to abandon coffee farming for some other economic activities. But before this could happen, coffee cultivators made use of the basket to harvest ready coffee. When harvested coffee was ground and fermented, it was washed in the basket. The basket was used here because when the coffee beans were poured in it, it held the beans meanwhile dirt filtered through the holes.

After washing the coffee, the baskets which were usually made from raffia palm bamboo were washed and put in the sun to get dry. These baskets were properly dried because it is not water or moisture friendly.

Tomatoes farmers use the basket to collect ready fruits which they carry to the market. The basket use in storing tomatoes are in sizes; the small ones which cost two hundred and fifty (250) francs CFA and the large ones which cost about four hundred (400) francs CFA per basket. The small baskets are common in the Santa area while the large ones are frequent in Bambui and Bambili area. In Santa especially, these small baskets filled with tomatoes and are kept at the road side to sell to travellers who could easily pick them up and put in the car as they pass. The larger baskets of tomatoes are usually carried to the markets and are mostly bought by the buyam sellam - retailers or traders who buy and resell.

In big cities like Yaounde and Douala, it is common to find small trucks going round the streets selling tomatoes in the big baskets. This tomato is cultivated in the Bafia area and in the West Region. These baskets of tomatoes are covered with some dry grass to prevent the fruits from falling off. The basket in effect, protects the fruits put inside from getting bad.

Picture 13: A basket of fresh tomatoes fruits. Photo Tikere (08/01/2022)



In the rainy season, the price of tomatoes per basket drops as low as one thousand five hundred (1500) francs CFA as opposed to the dry season when the prices sometimes rise as high as seventeen thousand five hundred (17500) francs CFA. This can be explained by the fact that in the rainy season, there is abundant water which waters the crops unlike the dry season, a period when gardeners have to irrigate their farms using machines.

As mentioned earlier, there are some farmers who keep animals and birds. The majority of these farmers do so for commercial purposes. Piglets and pigs as well have to be transported to the market. Chicks and chickens also have to be taken to the market for sale. The most secured tool these farmers could use in the transportation of these animals and birds is the basket. The picture below portrays a basket of chickens destined for the market. Some basket can contain as many as ten chickens depending the sizes of the birds and the basket as well.

Picture 14: A loosely woven basket used in carrying chickens. Photo Tikere (10/12/2016)



Farmers who cannot possess this container, use the bag which they must perforate. But such bags are dangerous as some of the animals or birds put in it die before reaching their destination, the market. The bag will not permit free circulation of air like the basket will do and as a consequence the animals will suffocate. Yet some farmers who cannot have the basket, chose to tie the animal, the case of the pig on the ankle and treks to the market. By the time the animal reaches the market, it is already tired and weary. Due to its state, it will not fetch much money for the farmer because buyers may interpret it as being sick.

b) Baskets in Funerals and Death Celebrations: A funeral is a ceremony to honour and remember a deceased person meanwhile a death celebration is an act or event designed to commemorate someone's death. In the Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, during such occasions, people condole with the bereaved or those who have the death celebrations. To do this, the female usually prepare food which they carry to the ceremony meanwhile the men take along wine especially palm wine. Wine is linked to the men while food is associated with the women.

The food prepared depends on the fondom and the period of the year. Fondoms like Bambui, Bafut, Nkwen, Mankon prepare *achu* and the yellow soup. *Achu* is a paste produced from pounded cocoyam. In fondoms such as Kom, Oku, Kedjom, Nso and those of the Ngoketunja area, corn fufu (paste produced from maize) and eaten *njama njama* (huckleberry) and *kati kati* (roasted chicken mixed in palm oil) is prepared. These foods, the *achu* and corn *fufu* have the ritual character in sacred ceremonies.

Women who carry food to funerals and death celebrations, put it in either the closely woven raffia bamboo basket or in the cane basket. If the basket does not have a lid as demonstrated by the picture below. The food in the basket is covered with a clean piece of cloth to hide it from public view.

Picture 15: A covered cane basket containing food. Photo Tikere (20/08/2019)



It is important to note that when this food is carried to the occasion, some of it is used to entertain the visitor and other visitors meanwhile a few loaves are put in the basket that she will take back home. In the socio-culture of the Bamenda Grassfields, a woman who carries a basket to a ceremony should not carry an empty basket home. These few loaves which she takes back home is a sign to show that she was at a ceremony and she was honoured. The act therefore is a symbol of honour.

The gesture of food carrying to a ceremony has to be paid back the day that the visitor has an event. The ‘pay back’ ceremony could be funeral, death celebration, twins’ ceremony or even a wedding occasion. The people in this cultural universe practice the gift and counter gift of Marcel Mauss. Mauss comments that because gifts are inalienable, they must be returned: the act of giving creates a gift-debt that has to be repaid. He argues that gifts are never "free." Rather, he noted that human history is full of examples that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange. To him, gift entails three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. In her forward to *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Mary Douglas summarizes Marcel Mauss’s argument succinctly: “no free gift” as gifts entail maintenance of mutual ties. In terms of potlatch in North America, this meant that each gift is “part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged” and failing to return means losing the competition for honour.”

During a funeral for instance, the bereaved family usually needs the assistance of friends and neighbours in food preparation since much food will always be needed in the ceremony. Very often, those who come for the food preparation do not do so on invitation but see it as an obligation to mourn with a fellow kin who mourns and be happy with those who are happy. This is to demonstrate the fact the people in the Bamenda Grassfields are one another's keeper. When this ceremonial food is prepared, it is put in baskets.

Picture 16: Women preparing food for a ceremony. Photo Tikere (12/09/2018)



This ceremony takes place in Bambui and as the picture portrays, the food which is cooked is achu. It is the staple food of the Bambui people. The food as we can see is stored in large baskets or keka depending on the number of loaves or quantify of food.

c) Baskets in Twins' Celebrations: Twins are two or more children born as a single birth. In the Bamenda Grassfields, two, three and even four children born as a single birth are called twins. That is, there is no separate name for three, four, or five children born simultaneously from the same mother. They are called in Kedjom for example as Mve nye ngon. Kedjom and many other fondoms in the Bamenda Grassfields take the birth of Mve nye ngon as an event out of the ordinary. Therefore, Bamenda Grassfields societies treat twins with fear and care. They are called 'God's gift' as is denoted in the way they are called Mve nye ngon. In Mbei they are called menyeh and in Bambui they are known as benyi ngong. No matter the fondom, all of them have the same meaning: 'gods' better still 'children of God or heaven.' Mve nye ngon were and are believed to have special powers: powers to curse as well as to bring good luck. They are believed to have powers to predict or see into the future.

This special group of people are usually honoured by a ceremony which are organised in their honour. They are given special names, their parents awarded a special title. In some fondoms, their father is given the ‘red feather’ – a special award in recognition of what he has done, a name is also added before the father’s name so too the mother.

Due to their special nature, in some socio-cultures in the Bamenda Grassfields, a shrine is prepared where their ‘things’ objects used in their celebration are kept. Among the things found in the shrine are baskets, clay pots or bowls, calabashes etc. The number of items are usually two no matter the number of children born. The clay pots may contain some salt or palm oil. As the picture below portrays, the leader of the twins’ dance prepares some products which she puts in the calabash next to the basket and in the calabash cup which is in the basket. The peace plant (*dracaena massangeana*) which is prominent in every twins’ celebration is found in the basket. (Although twins’ use *dracaena massangeana*, the type associated with these special children is the *dracaena reflexa*. The peculiarity of the latter is that it has mixed colours; green and white). Some of the concoction in the cup and the calabash is poured on the lady who is being cleansed. The lady here is not dressed in uniform but ties only a loin around her chest, showing that she is not a twin and she is probably in search of a child.

Pictures 17 and 18: Twins’ celebration in which baskets are used. Photo Tikere (04/08/2017)



As mentioned earlier, the twins have a special celebration organised in their honour. During this ceremony, there is usually a twins’ dance. The dancers who are twins’ mother and the twins themselves dress in red meanwhile the leader of the dance and one other twin mother each tie a small basket on the waist. The red in their dressing is the symbol of life and religious favour. Here, it is intended to appeal to the gods and ancestors to show mercy and love to the participants first and then to anyone present to have a child or many children.

Pictures 19 and 20: Twins' dance in which baskets are used. Photo Tikere (04/08/2017)

This ritual dance is therefore aimed at blessing the young woman we see here and all the young women in the group who have not yet had a child or children. That is why they sprinkle the concoction which is in the calabash on those present. The concoction is believed to have the power to cleanse a barren woman, that is, open her 'womb'. The basket signifies abundant blessings as the people regard a child as absolute favour from the gods and ancestors.

Child birth is very important in Africa in general and among the Bamenda Grassfields in particular. If a wife remains childless, the husband either gets married to another wife or sends her back to her family and demands the return of the bride price. That is, if a woman does not have a child, she can never find favour from any of the husband's siblings especially her mother-in-laws. A childless woman because of her situation is always ready to welcome a co-wife or she could leave the husband's house if she pleases. In other parts of the country, it is common for a young girl to have a child before getting married. The child in this case is a sign of fertility and criteria for choosing a spouse among most fondoms of the Central, South and East Regions of Cameroon.

d) Baskets and Healing: The basket is a good instrument to traditional doctors. They use it to put leaves, barks, and roots of trees they harvest from the forest to produce medications. When the leaves especially, are dried in the sun pending grinding, they are stored in this container. Once ground, the powder is put in bags or any appropriate container as the healer deems necessary. When no longer in use, the basket is hung on the wall in the traditional doctor's healing home (see picture below).

**Picture 21: A traditional healer's healing home showing baskets hung on the wall.
Photo Tikere (04/08/2018)**



If one enters the home of a diviners, one can find many other objects apart from the basket used in divination and healing. Some will possess painting, cowry shells, calabashes, bowls, pots, statues and even snail shells. Small objects like the cowries, snail shells and other miniature items used in divination are stored in baskets and bags. The paintings which they have is identified as Christ, as some of them will note that they only treat but its Christ who heals. Their work is therefore reinforced by the healing power of Christ.

e) Baskets in the Beauty Salon: Today, many women who work in beauty salons are increasingly engaged in the production of wigs. They are more involved in this activity because fewer and fewer women go to the salon to style or plait their hair. Many women hold that going to the salon once or twice a month is very costly and also time consuming. Some of them prefer to go for the wigs which they will use for many years.

To produce the wigs therefore, these hair dressers use small cane baskets which have the form of the human head. They turn the baskets upside down and use the bottom which is rounded to serve as the measurement of the head. Here, different sizes of baskets are used considering the fact that human heads are in sizes. The prices of these baskets vary depending on the sizes; small ones cost one thousand five hundred (1500) francs CFA while big ones cost two thousand (2000) francs CFA. It is

important to mention that these hair dressers have the opportunity of using imported head forms designed for wigs making but they cannot afford them because they are more expensive. The consumption of the locally made basket according to some beauty salon owners is not only due to the fact that it is cheaper, it is equally a way to encourage home artists.

Picture 22: Cane baskets used by beauty salon owners to produce wigs.

Photo Tikere (04/11/2021)



f) The Basket in Churches: Many Christian groups use the cane basket to collect offertory in church. In some churches, such baskets are decorated with beautiful clothes. Big churches, have a number of such baskets and they may be of different sizes. These baskets are not handled by just anybody. In some churches, they are handled by the ushers. The latter are the ones to send the baskets round for offerings to be collected and then they count the amount of money in the basket or the baskets.

The assistance of the usher is needed because if anyone is assigned to collect money, some untrustworthy Christian will go away with ‘God’s money.’ An informant told me about a church leader who was actively involved in the collection of offertories and this was because each time he counted money which was raised for the Sunday, he cut some of it and put in his pocket. This church leader was discovered the Sunday when there was thanksgiving and one of the invitees put five hundred thousand (50,000) francs CFA in the offertory baskets but at the end of the service when the amount raised during the thanksgiving was announced, it was not up to the amount given by one Christian.

After investigations, it was found out that it was a church leader who stole the money, and it was not his first time of doing so.

g) Baskets in the Home: In the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, baskets is present in the kitchen. In the kitchen, they are used in varied ways; to dry and store food and ingredients, to store plates and dishes, to wash corn for ‘corn chaff’ (porridge corn and beans), to store cooked food, to collect dirt etc. To prepare corn chaff, either fresh or dried maize is needed. In the case where dried maize is used, it is boiled in lime stone otherwise known as akanwa. This dried maize can also be boiled in potash. Potash is the juice obtained when wood ash is mixed in water. It is allowed to boil for about 45 minutes, then after, it is removed from the fire and washed. To wash the boiled maize, it is removed from the pot with a plate and put in a basket (see picture below). When this is done, clean water is poured in this basket during which he or she uses his or her hand to wash the maize as if he was washing dresses. In this process, the pilings of the maize come out. More water is poured in it to permits the pilings to filter through the holes found on the basket. The process is repeated until all the pilings come out. If the cook is sure that all the pilings have been removed, he or she then mixes it with beans and boils for the final time. When the maize and beans are soft enough or ready, he or she then puts the ingredients and palm oil.

Picture 23: A basket used in washing boiled corn for corn chaff. Photo Tikere (10/10/2017)



The tightly woven baskets have been fabricated in a way that they can hold fine substance like corn flour and garri. Rats and insects can hardly get into these baskets due to the hard nature of the material used in their production. Before the introduction of plastic containers like buckets, many mothers in

Kom, Kedjom for instance, stored corn flour in the tightly woven baskets with lids like those in pictures 1, 2 and 3 above. These fondoms mentioned above are those whose main meal is the *corn fufu*. Corn flour stored in the basket according to these women could last for longer since the holes on the basket permitted the corn to ‘breathe’. This is unlike corn flour which is put in the plastic bucket. That kept in the plastic bucket is always put in the sun else it will go bad easily. Some of these mothers noted that *corn fufu* cooked with flour taken from a bucket taste different from that removed from a basket. *Corn fufu* cooked with flour from a plastic bucket will have a funny taste as if the corn flour used was fermented. This is because the bucket is airtight.

Other women use this tightly woven basket to store cooked *corn fufu*. *Corn fufu* in these fondoms is harder than in fondoms that do not have it (*corn fufu*) as their staple food. Because of its hard nature, this basket can hold it without any problem. This indigenous receptacle is preferred because of two major reasons: first, food put in it does not get bad easily like the food flask. Food put in this container can last for two days and more. Secondly, the taste of *corn fufu* put in this locally made basket is enhanced. Many of the women in these areas say that they fear putting their cooked food in the flask, aluminum container and plastic containers because they do not know the nature of the materials which have been used in their production.

If we enter the kitchen of many mothers in the Bamenda Grassfields, we will find a basket above the fireside. This is usually the bamboo basket which is closely woven or the *keka*. This basket is always black in colour caused by the smoke in the kitchen. Some of these objects are very old but do not get bad because they are not in contact with water or moisture. I visited one elderly mother and she told me that:

This basket that you see over my fireside is more than 20 years, older than her last child who is 18 years. This ‘grandmother’, uses this basket to calculate the age of her children. To her, her first child is four years older than the basket, the second is a year older than the basket and the third who is also the last child is two years older than the basket (Aboh Angelina, 13/09/2020).

Picture 24: A basket over the fireside. Photo Tikere (16/02/2012)



In this basket, one can find ingredients which the mother needs for cooking. The proximity of this basket prevents her from displacing herself to a distance place in the kitchen to get salt, maggi, pepper and any other ingredients which can be put in the basket. Many of these elderly women live alone, and due to age, some have difficulties in walking. They do not still have the ‘legs’ like young girls which will permit them easily go around the house to collect the things they need. To avoid this stress of going round, they have this ‘fireside’ the basket which contains all the ingredients which they require to prepare each meal.

Some mothers use the basket in the kitchen or in the home as a trash can. This basket which was originally a container for tomatoes is transformed into a trash can. This is how many objects in this cultural universe adopt a second function when it stops to play its original function. This trash can cannot last for long as an object to collect dirt because food which has moisture or water may come in contact with it and it will get bad easily. The basket I must emphasise is made from the marrow of the bamboo and this part is not water or moisture friendly.

Picture 25: A baskets used as a trash can. Photo Tikere (04/11/2021)



When this basket, the trash can is full, it is always emptied by the children especially the male children above eight years. This responsibility of clearing dirt in the house and compound is a way of bringing up the child to become responsible and know when to take care of his environment. The children are enculturated at this early age; a knowledge they will inculcate or pass down to others.

h) Economic Functions of Indigenous Baskets: The functions of baskets may be obtained through use. For 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 the Europeans came to Africa, baskets like all other art works were not manufactured for economic purpose. They were mainly to serve the fondom in varied domains, with most of them having social and magico-religious functions. Furthermore, in the pre-colonial era, the ruling class and secret societies and the kitchen served as the major market for woven objects since the majority of these objects were made for them. Ironically, such producers were not rewarded handsomely. With colonisation, some woven items were highly priced by tourists and art collectors and this made these cultural artifacts to become highly in demand that many weavers and fondoms started using them as commodities.

The economic importance of trade in woven objects in general and baskets in particular is therefore a very recent development per say, and this could largely be due to the fact that African baskets including those of the Bamenda Grassfields are famous for their aesthetic qualities. These objects were and are still highly commanded and sought after throughout the region, both for their superb craftsmanship as well as their special metaphysical power they were believed to possess.

More so, elaborately woven articles, be they baskets, chairs, thrones, jars, made for both daily and ceremonial use, were and are objects of frequent exchange among the various fondoms of the Bamenda Grassfields. The commercialisation of these baskets is done by both the male and female folk just like the activity itself. The female take part in the commercialisation of woven objects unlike sculptures because of the taboo that surrounds their production and use. That is, the females are highly engaged in the production and commercialisation of objects in the likes of embroidery and basketry.

The marketing of baskets is done at the local as well as external level. The weekly markets are not the only outlet for local weavers, who are usually capable to commercialise baskets, thrones, jars, chairs directly from their compounds, to art shops, handicraft centres, museum owners and to tourists. Although most basket producers are not full time workers, majority of them, notwithstanding their ages, are able to contribute substantially to the household income. They can take care of medical expenses of family and relations (children, wives, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles among others), school fees and pay for the apprenticeship of their children and other relations who are not engaged in arts and other activities.

The costs of baskets vary from one producer to another, from size to size, from raw material used to the form and style of the container. The cost of a basket used in putting harvested coffee for instance,

ranges from two thousand five (2500) francs CFA for loosely woven baskets to five thousand (5000) francs CFA for the tightly woven ones. Most of these objects are sold at the artists' workshop to those who buy and resell or to arts collectors who go round buying objects.

Baskets in the Face of Modernity

The indigenous baskets of the Bamenda Grassfields have witnessed some changes in both production and use. As I undertook this study, I found out that many elderly women who used to manufacture baskets two decades ago are either no longer strong enough to perform the activity or some have died. Young girls are not interested in learning the trade calling it waste of time and a job reserved for the elderly. This is common with most if not all the young people of today. They do not want to struggle to earn money, they look for the fastest means of getting rich. This explains why today we find many young boys involve in the moto bike business. Many of them have abandoned trades like moto mechanic, plumbing, building etc. to become bike riders because the latter generates fast income.

In addition, with the introduction of nylon ropes in this cultural universe, there are people who now used their ingenuity to produce baskets with these ropes. As a consequence, the natural raffia palm bamboo and Indian bamboos are gradually being neglected. Many of those who produce baskets today with the nylon ropes testify that it could be manipulated easily than the raffia bamboo cork. The picture below shows a producer of nylon baskets engaged in intensive production. He is capable of fabricating between seven and nine baskets a day meanwhile those who use raffia bamboo can produce maximally five a day.

Picture 26: A weaver using nylon ropes to produce baskets. Photo Tikere (15/12/2021)



Baskets made with natural raw materials for instance the raffia bamboo are more expensive but less durable as compared to that made with nylon ropes. The cost of a loosely woven indian bamboo basket is between two thousand (2000) francs CFA and two thousand five hundred (2500) francs CFA. And such containers will get bad easily if they are exposed to water or moisture. A completed nylon basket costs eight hundred (800) francs CFA and this receptacle can last for very many years depending on the care the owner gives to it.

Due to its durability, many villagers are increasingly departing from the use of their indigenous baskets made with the raffia bamboo to the nylon baskets. The latter can be used to carry animals and birds such as pigs and and chickens. A large nylon basket can carry up to two large pigs and thirty fowls or chickens. This basket cannot be destroyed easily.

I have mentioned above that due to cultural dynamics, more and more nylon material is used in basket fabrication, baskets for the transportation of animals and birds. Below are two picture portraying baskets all made with nylon material. These are containers meant for the carrying of food. These baskets although more expensive than the cane or raffia palm baskets, many mothers especially young or 'endriod' mothers prefer them because of two reasons: first, the baskets are modern or fashionable, decorated with lovely designs unlike the indigenous basketts which are old fashioned and good for the elderly. To add to their beauty, some of these baskets are produced with ropes which could be used to hold the mouth close and firm. Secondly, they are durable since the nylon material made from can last for very many years without getting bad even if washed with or in water.

Pictures 27 and 28: Modern baskets produced with nylon ropes. Photo Tikere (14/06/2021)



Food put in this basket can be taken to any celebration; it could be a wedding, birth ceremony, funeral or death occasion and even to visit a sick person in the hospital. A clean piece of cloth is used to cover the contain of a nylon basket which does have a lid. The colour and texture of the piece of cloth used depends on the taste and appreciation of its user.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous receptacles be they baskets, pots or bowls, are produced from natural materials got from the immediate environment. These materials which include raffia palm bamboo, cane, Indian bamboo, wood, grass are manipulated by specialists to manufacture magnificent tangible objects which serve in the daily lives of the people. Such containers especially the basket cuts across all the facets of the culture of the people. It is used in funeral as well as death celebration. It is equally seen in twins' ceremonies, and in most part, it shows the social organisation of the Bamenda Grassfields. But like any other aspect of culture, basketry is gradually witnessing some modifications in the aspects of production and usage. Although these modifications, the basket continuous to play its invaluable roles in the lives of the Bamenda Grassfields people.

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Name	Age	Sex	Marital status	Occupation	Date of interview
Aboh Angelina	57	F	married	Farmer	13/09/2020
Atenui	55	M	Married	Traditional doctor	05/03/2020
Geh Hans	40	M	Married	Farmer/weaver	14/12/2021
Koin Regina	51	F	Married	Trader	14/12/2021
Manka Rose	47	F	Married	Weaver	10/08/2019