

**THE ARTISTIC FUNCTIONS AND SYMBOLISM IN HISTORY:
RECONFIGURING HISTORY THROUGH UNCONVENTIONAL SOURCES OF
ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL WORKS IN UPPER NGEMBA, BAMENDA
GRASSLANDS OF CAMEROON IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA**

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ABSTRACT: *The conventional sources of History include recorded data, tape-recorded information and oral tradition where information is handed down from one generation to the other by word of mouth. Historians in trying to constitute and reconstitute the colonial history of Africa have largely depended on these sources. Some scholars on African History have relied on intelligence and assessment reports that were left behind by the colonialists. One of the major contentions of this paper is that the artistic functions and symbolism have played an integral role in the re-configuring and recording African historical facts. The scarcity of indigenous sources of historical recordings made some European scholars to argue from a Eurocentric perspective that African history started with the coming of the Europeans to the Continent. This paper debunks this parochial contention and argues that African History existed long before European contact and that the people had alternative ways of recording their own history. History was transmitted through works of art which included carved objects, clay productions, weaved items, songs, legends and myths. All these are artistic and symbolic sources of historical facts. Recorded data also has a history and their history can be reconfigured through alternative sources like works of art that constitute an important way of recovering a people's history. A typical example of this kind of society is upper Ngemba where their rich artistic background portrays a rich history.*

KEYWORDS: Artistic Functions and Symbolism, History, Unconventional Sources, Artistic and Historical Works, Ngemba, Bamenda, Cameroon, Pre-Colonial Era

INTRODUCTION

The Ngembas are a clan of about Fifteen Villages that are located in the North West Region of Cameroon. They occupy part of the present day Mezam Division. The Upper Ngembas are a sub-group of the Ngembas and this group is made up of nine villages that fall under Santa Sub-division. The Ngembas share a common history of origin and culture. The origin of this polity can be traced as far back as the Sixth Century. The Ngembas like other communities in Cameroon have myths and legends that explain their origin, migration and settlement. The migration of the Ngembas from Widikum was said to have been provoked by the quest for fertile lands, wars, and differences in culture, (Nkwi, 1987). Oral tradition has it that the people who today constitute the Ngembas in North West Region of Cameroon migrated from

the North East of Congo and settled in Widikum via Tadkon near Batibo and finally moved to their present location.¹

Legends further corroborate this position that they originated from the Bantu roots of East Africa. Even though there are different schools of thought that attempt to shed light on the origin and migration of the Ngembas, the point of convergence amongst these different schools is the fact the different views all point to a common origin of Tادكون and it is for this singular reason that the Ngembas are sometimes referred to as the Tادكون Fondoms. Tادكون is located near Aghwi about Three Kilometers South of Batibo and was a border market in the pre-colonial period that served the densely settled neighbourhood, (Chilver, et al, 1968).

From Widikum, the Ngembas migrated into the Bamenda area that they today occupy. The colonial administration met them around this location. When the British eventually took over from the Germans, they divided the Ngembas into two administrative units so as to ease administration. There was the Lower Ngemba which constitutes those villages that make up the Bamenda Central Sub-division today. These groups include Mankon, Mbatu, Chomba, Mundum, Nkwen, Banja and Mendakwe. There was also the Upper Ngemba made up of villages occupying the present day Santa Division. They include Awing, Pinyin, Njong, Akum, Alateneng, Baforchu, Mbei, Baba II and Baligham. The division into Lower and Upper Ngemba, was for purely administrative convenience because in terms of culture and artistic outlook, the people remain the same stock.

Ngemba traditional arts, like its beliefs and customs were all a typical reflection of their different socio-economic as well as political institutions. European arts in the medieval period focused on the aggrandizement and deification of the Gods as givers and takers of life while African arts were mostly linked with spiritual connotations as displayed in sculpture, music, dancing, myth and legends that attempted to explain the religious and spiritual convictions of a people.² Artistic creation in Africa has been and remains the true sensitive sign of dynamic reality of its culture.³ Generally speaking, in the whole African continent art is defined by different styles varying according to the societies when keeping a common base on functional aspects. Arts is an object, but not just any kind of object, rather it can be an aesthetic object.⁴ Britannica Online dictionary defines art as “ the use of skills and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environment or experience that can be shared with others”⁵.

The traditional African Art objects were often used to express values in order to explain the cosmogony of the universe. The traditional African Art is thus a large popular encyclopedia reflecting the wisdom of the past, the scientific knowledge, and the concepts of humanity and universe; religion the everyday activities and trades; the games and leisure and above all the story of humanity creating its immortality through ages. Thus it can be observed that African Art reflects in its entirety the understanding of people, their customs and traditions and their entire civilization. Many great traditions of art have a foundation in the art of one of the great ancient civilizations: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China, Ancient Greece, Rome as

¹ Smiling Awing Cultural Heritage: Educational and Development Magazine. SOPECAM, 2010. P.9

² Basil Davidson. *African Kingdom*. Canada Times Inc, 1966, p.143

³ Joseph-Marie Essomba. *L'Arts Traditionnal au Cameroun; statues et masque*. Austria, 1982, p.13.

⁴ H.W. Janson. *History of Art*. Japan Inc. 1982. P.9

⁵ Ploto. Stanford-edu/entries/artifact/similar 2.00pm 24/05/2011

well as Inca, Maya and Olmec. Each of these centers of early civilization developed a unique and characteristic style in its arts. As a result of the strength and duration of these civilizations, much of their artistic works have survived and their influence has been transmitted to different locations of the world. Long before Europeans set foot on Tropical Africa, the powerful nation of Benin had an imposing art culture in what is now Southern Nigeria. Benin did, however leave an eloquent record of their civilization in bronze plaques commissioned by the Oba to adorn the pillar of his palace.⁶

The Ngembas have a strong, centralized, politico-administrative and judicial system which developed during the pre-colonial period. This centralized kind of political organization was enshrined in the very secular kind of regulatory societies that were used to implement justice, regulate peace and order and ensure social wellbeing that was the main goal of African community life. Regulatory societies like the Kwifon and the Ngomba were common among the Ngembas. The people's ethical values were determined by their ethos (customs and tradition) and this was reflected in their artistic display in form of songs and carved objects that represented great figures, events and their entire civilization, (Essomba, 1983). The current paper moves away from the conventional historical records of oral tradition, intelligence and assessment reports to reconstitute the history of Ngembas using creativity of the people as reflected in their art designs. In this light the paper examines the different artistic works of the Ngembas and how these works replicated their culture and historical traditions. In other words, the artistic function and symbolic implications of these artistic works are underscored in this paper.

The Royal Staff and Stool and a Reflection of History among the Ngembas

The Royal Staff and stool were very relevant artistic designs among the Ngembas because they were not only deemed as symbols of authority but they carried with them other important potentials that reflected the status of the Fon and his entire Fondom. The wood that was used in producing the Royal Staff and Stool varied from one Fondom to the other. But it is important to mention that the commonly used wood among the Ngembas that signified authority was the *camwood*, (Knopfli, 1997). This wood was of great value; it was durable and expensive. All stools carved with the *camwood* belonged to the Palace or to Royalty. The long and short of it is that *camwood* in the entire Ngemba belonged to Royalty and the Fons had the right to seize any object that was made of *camwood*. This was part of the tradition that was reflected in carving. *Camwood* in Ngemba land was therefore used only during important ceremonies like for example a newly wedded woman was often robbed with *Camwood*. The belief was that this *camwood* was to invoke fertility in the in the woman. The Fon's wives equally applied *camwood* on their bodies when leaving the palace for important public ceremonies.

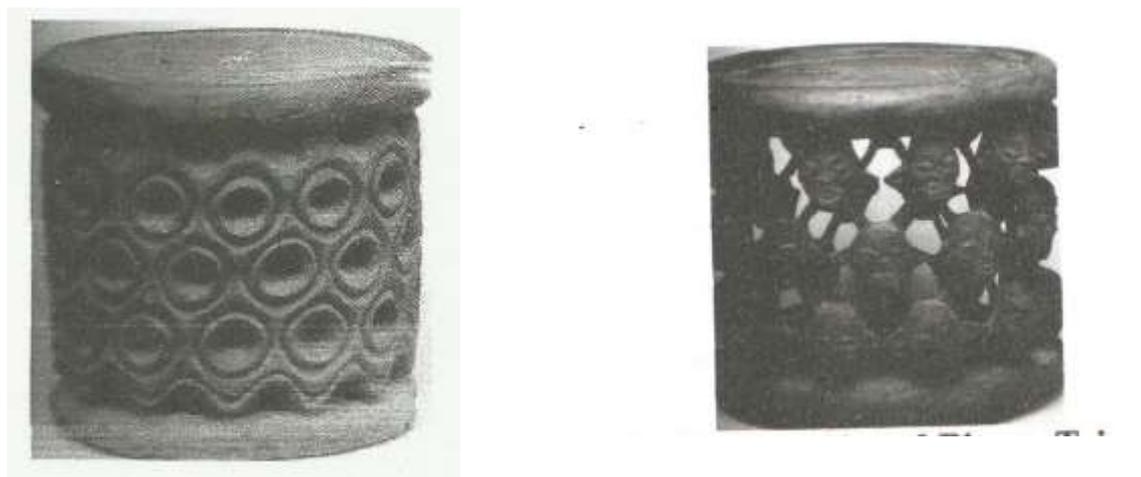
It is not only the quality of the wood that depicted royalty but also the kind of things that were carved on the Stool. For example, Royal stools were designed using the symbol of very wild animals like the Lion, Crocodile, Elephant, Leopard, Panther, Lizard, Antelope, Buffalo and the Python. Carvings that carried these animals symbolized royalty. Any sculptor whose works represented these animals offered it to the Fon as a gift and in return he was honored with a *Red Feather* or Traditional Title-*Nefru Nguh*.⁷ Stools that were meant for commoners

⁶ Basil Davidson. *African Kingdom*. Canada Times Inc, 1966. P.109

⁷ Paul N.Nkwi and Warnier J.P. *Elements for a History of Western Grassfield*. Yaounde, 1982. P.78

could not carry these important symbols. The symbols that were reserved for notables and commoners were different. The different classes that existed in Ngemba society were therefore represented in their carved objects especially the stools. These styles, themes and models of objects created by artists in the past in Ngemba land represented the people's history and how their society was hierarchically stratified. For a sample of the Royal Stool of Awing that is one of the Ngemba groups see Fig.1 below.

Fig 1: Depicting the Royal Stools of Awing, a Ngemba Group



Source: *Jean Paul Notue' and Bianca Triaca, p.191.*

The stools above were symbols of authority in Awing and they were restricted to the royal family. They were carved using the *Camwood*. The different designs symbolized different objects. The one on the right carries the head of an important ancestor of the land.

The Royal Staff was equally a very important carved object that portrayed the people's history. A starve was the walking stick that was held by the Fon. In most if not all of the grasslands, this staff was usually designed in a special way with different decorations inscribed on the stick. In some cases the head of the stick was designed to picture the head of a crocodile or a snake. Others carried the head of a Lion or Tiger. What is important to note here is that these different items that were inscribed on the walking staff carried different meanings and actually portrayed the level and authority of the Fon. Fons who were considered to be warriors decided to make their walking staff to be a spear. The spear symbolized the warlike nature of the Fon and his people. It was therefore not surprising that historians and other social anthropologists could make meaning out of the objects that were carried by Fons. Apart from the stool and staff, traditional cups that were made out of wood and animal horns also constituted important historical symbols.

Traditional Cups and Historical Symbolism

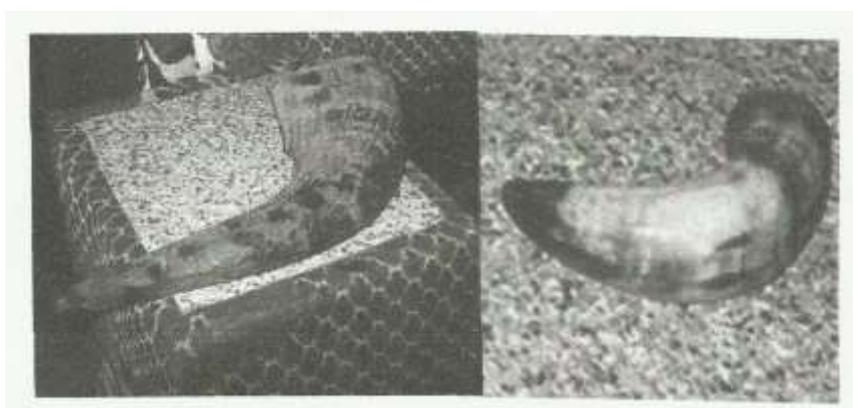
Traditional cups were equally specially designed items that carried different symbols and the symbols that were carved on the cups varied from one class of the society to the other. Traditionally, a man's drinking cup reflected his status in society. Cups that were made out of the horn of a Buffalo were reserved for the Chief or notables. Commoners were not allowed to carry such cups around. Thus carving a cup required an extraordinary specialist whose age

and experience in choosing the material used for production played an important role. Cups that were made of the dwarf horn were commonly used by princes and princesses only and this reflected nobility.⁸

Traditional title cups were considered the most precious and sacred insignias of the land. It was a symbol of power and any person who possessed it was considered a family head with a very important role to play at the level of his family and the entire village. The traditional cup was therefore a delicate heirloom⁹ that was handed down from one generation to the other and often to the most honored member of the family. These cups were used to perform libations and important rituals with regard to the survival and good health of the family. They were used for reconciliation in the event of family disputes. These traditional cups were also used to place a curse on a person or family member who decided to bring shame upon his family or an entire community.¹⁰ This shame was in the form of suicide, witchcraft practices, murder and disrespect of a title holder. Abominable acts like adultery were also seriously cursed using these traditional cups that were believed to carry a lot of powers.

Another type of traditional cup was the cow horn that was mostly used by commoners. Traditional cups were believed to be linked to the ancestral spirit and the powers of the predecessor. It was used for blessings of all kinds be it in the case of a new born or a marriage ceremony. Therefore, drinking out of the ancestral cup, a couple had the blessings of the ancestors that were manifested in child bearing and peace in the marriage home, (Nkwi, 1982). These traditional cups were thus very important instruments that were used to convey a people's history. For details on some of these traditional cups that were used by the Ngembas see Fig11 below.

Fig ii: A Picture of Ancestral Cups in Awing, a Ngemba Group.



Source: Nkuma Che Alota. Arts and Culture in Upper Ngemba: The Case of Awing 1889-1961. A Dissertation submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of DIPES 11 in History, Department of History, University of Bamenda, 2012, p.46.

The two cups above are made of two different animal horns. The one to the left is a Buffalo horn that depicts royalty while the one to the right is a cow horn that is use by commoners.

⁸ Jean Paul Notue. The treasures of the Mankon Kingdom. Mbalmayo, 2001p.60.

⁹ Valuable Object that has been given by an old man of a family to a younger one over many years.

¹⁰ Interview with Mathias Mbonglen M. Bamenda, 12 August 2001.

The cow horn can be use by family heads and these cups that are used by family heads are often headed down from one generation to the other. One of the things that a successor will always inherit from his father is the cup and it is believed that handing over this cup to a successor the dead man transfers the powers of his ancestors to his heir.

Talking Drums and Transmission of information among the Ngembas

The Ngembas have a rich history of communication which is reflected in the way messages were transmitted from one location to the other. The talking drum was an important instrument in the history of the Ngembas. It was a wooden object that was designed in a special way that it produced different sounds. The message conveyed through the talking drum was mostly interpreted by the elderly who had a mastery of the language and an understanding of the sound of the talking drum. This talking drum was usually placed at the entrance of the Palace and in almost every home it was at the center of the yard in front of the compound. These talking drums were used to summon the villagers when the need arose. Important messages were conveyed through the talking drums. For example the death of a king maker or an important personality was often announced through the talking drum. The Chief also used this forum to summon community labor. Thus, these drums were used as a traditional form of telephone and the media. History was therefore not only conveyed through legends and myth but carved drums were equally used as historical instruments. When the Chief had to summon the war council, this was done using the talking drum. The various *manjongs*¹¹ also used this instrument to pass across war messages. It can therefore be observed that the Ngembas had a rich history of communication. For a clear picture of the talking drum in the Ngemba land see Fig.111 below.

Fig iii: Showing the picture of a Talking Drum at the Entrance a Ngemba Palace.



Source: Nkuma Che Alota. Arts and Culture in Upper Ngemba: The Case of Awing 1889-1961. A Dissertation submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of DIPES 11 in History, Department of History, University of Bamenda, 2012, p.43.

¹¹ A manjong was the military regiments of the various Chiefdoms that were constituted according age grades. Thus there different categories of Manjong within the same chifdom. Every age group had its own manjong.

Fig.iii above is indicating the picture of a talking drum at the entrance of a Ngemba Palace. There are specially trained individuals in the palace who use these talking drums to convene community labour and send out other important messages as ordered by the Fon.

Symbols, Masks and Historical Reflections

Masks were wooden objects that were produced using soft sticks called *aponwing*, which does not crack easily. The masks were meant to be seen in action during traditional performances. Masks were quite outstanding in terms of designs and outlook. They were elements of long traditional history in Africa. In African traditional set-ups, the use of masks has been associated with agricultural rites; funeral and initiation rites and they equally explain the kinds of gods that are worshipped by the people. In Awing, masks were used during important traditional occasions and festivals like the *Ndong*¹² Festival and even initiation rites and death ceremonies which are still very common today. Masks were images of a spirit but not the spirit itself. Thus it was designed to capture the strength of a human being or an animal at the point of death.¹³ The use of mask for traditional performances was generally devoted to men while the women were not allowed to see some of these masks especially pregnant women.

In addition masks were made of different shapes and sizes carrying different animal face like Buffalo, Elephant, Leopard and a panther bird and human faces. The harrowing quality of this dancing mask came from wearer's belief in the spirits represented by the masks, strange forces that were supposed to flood through him.¹⁴ (For details on some of the different masks objects among the Ngemba see Fig v below).

Fig IV: Showing some carved mask objects of the Ngembas



Source: Jean Paul Notue and Bianca Triaca, p. 223-224.

¹² The Ndong Festival was an annual Dance that brought Awing People in and out of the Village together to deify their ancestors.

¹³ Interview with Lucas Laah, Sub-Chief Awing, 17 September 2011.

¹⁴ Interview with Mbantén, Notable in Bafut. Age 80+ 20TH August 2011. (For Details on the samples of masks in Ngemba land see Fig. iv below.)

The mask to the left is an elongated wooden helmet mask symbolizing the carved head of a Buffalo. The one to the right is an anthropomorphic wooden mask surrounded by a curved band engraved with vertical lines used during traditional ceremony.

Statues, Door Posts and Historical Reflections

Statues and Door Posts of all shapes and styles were used during the pre-colonial period and up till date some of these carvings still exist in many if not all of the Ngemba chiefdoms. These carvings on the Door posts represented human images especially important figures in the history of the Ngembas. The statues sometimes had pearls and cowries which represented or commemorated kings, Queens Princesses, Notables, Servants or Protective Guardians.¹⁵ Some of the statues were used for various purposes in performing rituals by the community, for ancestral worship, divination, healing justice, worship of twins and fertility rites. The statues that were placed around the throne were believed to be symbols of protection and security. Some also symbolized greatness, loyalty or war. The statues of great War Lords were equally produced and preserved for posterity. (For details on some of the statues and Door Posts See Fig vi below).

Fig V A: Showing the carved statute of Ngemba Fon holding a Royal Cup and a pipe and his notable.



The above picture in Fig VA represents a seated Fon, holding a pipe with the left hand and in his right hand is a drinking horn. Around his neck is a necklace of boar's tooth and beads. Besides the Statute of the Fon is the Statute of *Chinda*¹⁶ carrying wine that is meant for the Fon. The last statute to the extreme right reflects a notable in a traditional outfit.

¹⁵ Interview with Tata, Carpenter. Aged 51+ November 2011

¹⁶ A chinda in Ngemba is simply the servant of the Fon.

Fig VB: Showing a Traditional Door Posts in Pre-colonial Awing



Source: Ndong Awing Executive Cultural Diary 2009.

Fig VB carries the picture of some designed door posts in the Ngemba ethnic principalities. In some instances the door post will be designed to carry the image of the purported founder of the land. Others will reflect important heroes in the history of the Fondom. In summary, the door posts of various designs and symbols carried different historical meanings.

Stone Carvings and History among the Ngembas

The geographical location of a majority of the Ngemba chieftaincies in the valleys provided stones from the hills and quarries for sculpture. Stone carvings were an important activity in the area during the pre-colonial and early colonial eras. Items that were chipped out of stones were lumpy pieces of stone trimmed to give a rough point or cattery edge down the sides as well as bladelike point and land axe. Stones were used by the Ngembas in the pre-colonial period to produce local instruments used for carving like local hammers, axes that were chiseled out of stone to give a sharp, rough pointed edge. Sharp pointed stones were used to produce spears for hunting and to fight inter-ethnic wars. Important dates and remarkable events in Awing were also inscribed on stones and these stones carried historical data that was preserved in special locations in the palace. This depicted a traditional method of recording history that was famous among the Ngembas. Apart from the carving and stone work artisanal activities that were used to convey the people's history, the weaving industry was equally an important sector.

The Weaving Sector as a Medium of History among the Ngembas

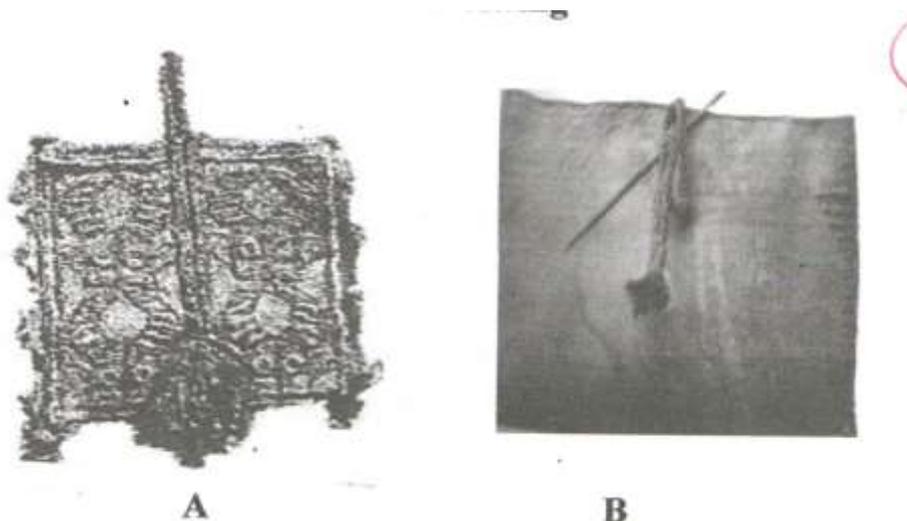
Two renowned centers for weaving in the Western Grasslands were the chiefdoms of Bamessing and Meta. However, some of the Ngemba ethnic groups were also noted for their

weaving prowess. Weaving was common among the Ngembas and it is still highly practiced today. The most common raw materials used by weavers were bamboo and fiber that were gotten from raffia palms. Those involved in this activity were women, men and children and it was a close family activity. It was mostly carried out during leisure time. Some of the weaved articles included things like rain-hoods, baskets, bags, caps, mats and cloths. The rain-hood was a local flat umbrella that was mostly worn by women in their farms. These local umbrellas were mostly produced by women and it was highly demanded in Ngemba land where agriculture was a principal occupation.

Baskets of all kinds were also made during the pre-colonial period. Prominent among these baskets were those used for farming and the special baskets that were used as dishes for storing food. The *Akah* was a specially designed basket that was used to serve food to notables. Both men and women were involved in the production of these baskets. The men mostly produced *Akekah* that was a special basket that was used in the harvesting of coffee. This basket was produced seasonally depending on when coffee was ready for harvest.

Bags of all kinds were also produced but the most common ones were the raffia bags. There were also specially made raffia bags made for the chief and that used for family shrines called *Apemah-shiwe* in Awing language. What were remarkable about these bags were the different objects that were inscribed on the bags using special designs. Some of the bags carried the effigy of important personalities like the founders of the different ethnic groups. The different families sometimes designed bags that carried the portrait of their family ancestors or gods. Important shrines and cultural sites were equally designed on these bags. From these inscriptions on the bags, a historian could be able to recover some important elements of the people's history. Apart from using fiber to weave bags, some of the bags were designed using animal skin. Bags that were made of tiger skin or the skin of the lion were restricted to royalty. A commoner was not allowed to carry a bag that was made of leopard skin or that of a tiger. For samples of these bags that were weaved in Ngemba land see Fig.vii

Fig VI: Samples of some of Traditional Bags that were produced in Ngemba



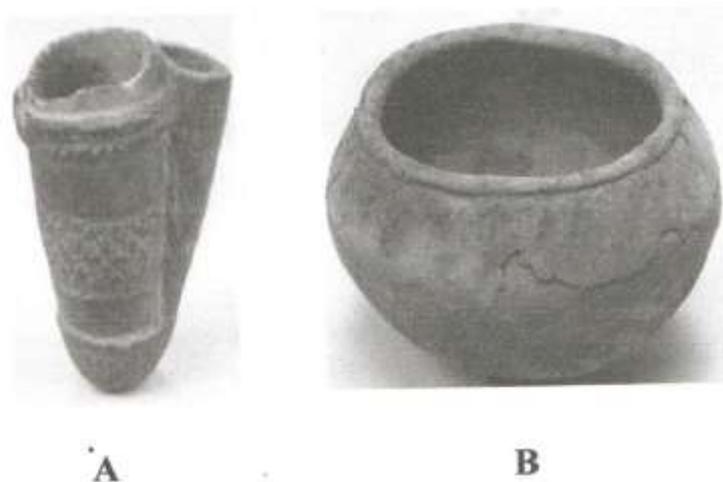
Source: *Ndong Awing Executive Cultural Diary 2009 and 2010 and Jean Paul Notue' and Bianca Triaca, p.207.*

Plate A represents a pre-colonial royal bag used only during the coronation of a young prince as chief. Plate B represents a secret bag usually kept in the family shrine. This bag usually contained varied secret objects, which perform different ritual functions. It was a routine to see a porcupine spine attached to the main surface of the bag underneath the handle.¹⁷

Pottery Objects and Expression of History

Pottery was an aged-old activity that was performed by the Ngembas. With the discovery of fire, man saw the need to prepare his own meals. To do so, there was the need for creativity and this resulted in the fabrication of vessels using clay. Farming and pastoral communities needed pots for carrying and storing water. Basic clay vessels were made for different purposes and functions. The clay deposits around Bamunkumbit, Awing and Bamessing were used to make pots and pipes. The clay that was used in molding of pots was thick, red and whitish in color.¹⁸ The most luxurious items made of much finer clay, were palm and raffia wine mixing and serving jars, eating bowls and cooking pots used during traditional festivals. A special pot was also made specifically for the boiling of herbs and palm wine. This pot in Awing was referred to as *Abangha*. There were two types of pottery: an ordinary one for daily use in the kitchen and on the farms and a *de luxe set* for the wealthy. Women exclusively made simple cookery items while the men produced mostly figurative objects. Clay pipes were carved by men out of a lump of refined clay- small ones for women and bigger ones for men. The bigger pipes were often elaborately decorated especially at their base using all sorts of geometrical patterns or animal heads. For a sample of some of the clay objects that were produced in Ngemba land see Fig.vii below.

Fig VII: Reflecting some clay objects that were commonly fabricated in Ngembaland



¹⁷ Interview with Juliana Ngekum Alota, farmer, aged 52+ Bamenda, 21 August 2011.

¹⁸ National Archive Buea (NAB) File No.1078 Ab25 p.201.

Source: Nkuma Che Alota. Arts and Culture in Upper Ngemba: The Case of Awing 1889-1961. A Dissertation submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of DIPES 11 in History, Department of History, University of Bamenda, 2012, p.54.

Fig. A represents a pre-colonial clay pipe that was generally used by men for smoking tobacco. **B** reflects a pre-colonial clay pot that was used for cooking food for the family. Other clay objects that were manufactured included serving bowls from which soup was distributed after cooking.

Blacksmithing Sector and Historical Expression in Ngemba Land

The art of iron production in the world was first discovered in Asia Minor around the Second Millennium BC.¹⁹ The knowledge of iron production later developed and spread to Assyria, Meroe in Nubia and Nok in Northern Nigeria around the Third Century BC.²⁰ Iron Age cultures of the South and Central Africa (Zaire) are dated flexibly from about 0-500 AD. By the 5th Century A.D, most people of the forest culture of West and Central Africa were using iron products. The knowledge of iron works was carried on and spread to different parts of Cameroon by migration and population movement and it reached the Bamenda grasslands on or before 300 AD.²¹

This scientific revolution ushered in a process of rapid cultural change, wherever and whenever it occurred and this provided the basis for all sophisticated technologies.²² For Sub-sahara Africa whose economy depended primarily on cultivation and hunting in the pre-colonial era, the advent of iron technology was an important innovation because of the basic but relevant items that were produced for different kinds of productive purposes. Experimental studies carried out by J.P Warnier, M. Lowlands and I. Fowler on iron works in the Bamenda grasslands indicate that the Ngembas did not constitute leading centers of iron production in the grasslands but they were involved in iron works. They operated iron centers at a small scale compared to leading centers like Babungo, Bamessing and Bamengam in the Ndop plain.

Smithing was the act of processing bloom smelts to usable iron tools. The knowledge of Ngemba smithing could be traced back to their history of migration. It was believed that as a result of their movement, the art of smithing was copied from Bamessing and Babungo people of the Western grasslands. This activity was mostly performed by men. For one to become a blacksmith, he was obliged to learn the act from his father or others who were specialists in iron works. During his apprenticeship, he helped his father in the industry by gathering fragments of iron that fell on the ground during production. When this was done, the young apprentice gathered experience in the process. There existed two types of iron ores-the black and red types.²³ The black was the most common that was used at the time. It

¹⁹ Nkwi and Warnier p.125

²⁰ Ibid., p126.

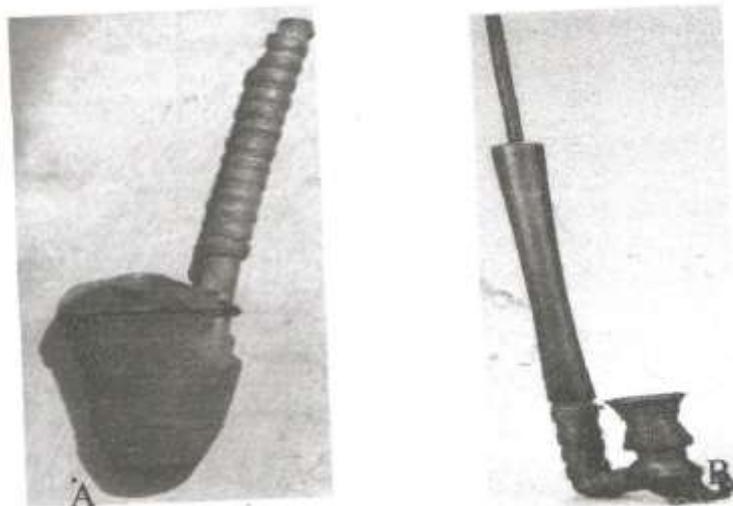
²¹ Ibid.

²² J.C. Anene et al. (eds) Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1966, p.51.

²³ Northern T. *The Art of Cameroon, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service*. Washington DC 1984, P.4

was used for the production of tools like farming hoes which were made in varying sizes like cutlasses, spears for hunting and warfare and walking spears for men. Brass was used to produce objects like pipe that was used for smoking tobacco (for details see Fig VII below). Ankle-bells were also produced that were used to encourage young children of the ages of one to two years to walk. Bells were also produced to identify dogs in the bush during hunting. This was done to avoid a situation where a hunter could accidentally gun down his own dog.

Fig VIII: Illustrating different shapes of Brass pipes that were designed in Ngemba Lang



Source: Jean-Paul Notue' and Bianca Triaca, p.232.

Fig **A** and **B** reflects pre-colonial Brass pipes that were fabricated by blacksmiths. **A** was decorated using a geometric motifs. **B** was decorated with elephant motifs made of metal (bronze and brass) with a geometric decoration to figurative art representing royal animal reserved for the Fon.

Labour in the blacksmithing centers was manual and manufacturing literally meant manual production. It was believed that the number of itinerant blacksmiths in pre-colonial Ngemba were many. They sometimes covered long distances to purchase iron for their smelting activities.

The Clothing Industry and Ngemba Historical Values

A distinctive feature that makes the Ngembas different from the other ethnic groups in Cameroon and specifically the forest inhabitants is their style of dressing. Ngembas were manufacturers of items like cotton cloth, silk cloth, woolen and raffia cloths long before the colonial era. Hides and skins were used to manufacture bags, mats, shoes (slippers), hats and many other things. These different items produced varied in shapes and sizes from one ethnic principality to the other. Dressing could therefore be used to distinguish a particular ethnic group from the rest. Each community had people that were specialized in cloth production. Locally made cloths among the Ngembas had different appellations. Some were called

Ngwashi and other brands included *Jikija, Awondo, Muso, Ndem and Nto'o*. Ngwashi was tied around the waist just to cover the private parts. Those who specialized in the production of Ngwashis among the Ngembas were mostly the men. This style of dressing among the Ngembas could be compared only to the Zulus of South Africa. It was a distinctive feature of the people's history. The cloths that were worn by women was held on by strings of beads or coils of the same cloth tied round the waists, while girls went naked until they were married at the age of seventeen and eighteen.²⁴ Cloths from animal skin were worn by the Chief. It is important to note that cloths that were made of leopard and tiger skins symbolized royalty. The most common traditional dress among the Ngembas was the heavily embroidered gown worn with a four tailed skirt of two separate sides tied round the waist.²⁵ Historical sources hold that the Ngembas copied some of their dressing styles from the contacts they made during migration. Some of their production techniques were copied from the Bamessing while others especially marking and dyeing techniques were copied from the Bororos. Some of these dressing styles are no longer practiced but they are usually displayed during traditional festivals. After looking at these different aspects of art display it is important now to establish the link between these art productions and the history of the Ngembas.

Artistic Works as Mediums of History

The above African artistic works mentioned above involve different pattern, designs and reflections. They reflect different aspects of a people's culture and way of life. African cultural values can therefore be preserved through works of art. Therefore apart from the conventional sources of recording history, the Ngembas can also recover certain missing elements of their history through their recovered art works.

The survival of a people's culture depends on the rich cultural heritage that is handed down from one generation to the other. The rich culture of the Ngembas was partly stored in their artistic works, some that have survived till date. This holds true for some traditional stools, statutes and masks that represented different aspects of the people's cultural values. Masks are reflections of many different things in African history and culture. Apart from their cultural survival and identification, they were very important to the Africans as they showed honor to their ancestors. The design of the masks varied from one Ngemba chiefdom to the other depending on the different objects that they symbolized. Masks were used in ceremonies, generally depicting deities, spirits of ancestors, mythological beings, good and evil spirits, the dead, animal spirits and other objects that were believed to be having power over humanity.²⁶

Statutes were also used convey a people's belief pattern and way of life. The statute sometimes had pearls and cowries. They were used to commemorate kings, Queens, Princes, Princesses, notables Servants or Protective Guardians. Some of these statutes were used for various purposes in rituals by the community like ancestral worship, divination, healing, and justice and fertility rites while others represented nobility. Ngemba artistic works though of much relevance, it was as a result of the people's commitment to their belief system, arts, symbols, knowledge of law and custom and habit of the people that is responsible for the cultural survival of the people and the rich cultural identification.

²⁴J.A . Ngwa. *An Outline Geography of the Federal Republic Cameroon*.p.88

²⁵ Ibid.p.89

²⁶ www.africaguide.com/culture/artcraft.htm. 730am 15 October 2011.

CONCLUSION

Styles of sculpture and other art works varied widely among the Ngembas but all these works shared a common purpose. They express in material form the mystical spirits and life characteristics preached by a unique religion.²⁷ Artistic works in the Ngembaland symbolized their cultural practices especially in the pre-colonial, colonial and independent periods. Their decorations often had deep spiritual significance. The most frequent symbols of Awing traditional art works were carvings on stools especially royal stools. Most of these carvings depicted animal images like Elephants, Buffalos, Lions and Leopards. According to Knopfli there were Five Royal animals. These Five Royal animals were the most common symbols on traditional wood carvings of the Ngembaland. These symbols and their usage reflected the importance of the patriarchal leadership as a basic stabilizing force in the hierarchical structure of society. The symbols also reflected an understanding of the environment especially the nature of a large number of wild animals. Other decorations carved on stools and other works of art included things like human images and animal symbols like bats, frog, lizard, spider, chameleon and tortoise. All of these signified different things at different times to the people of Awing in particular and the entire Ngembaland.

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²⁷ Jean Paul Notue. *The Treasure of the Mankon Kingdom*, p.46