

An Insight into the Cultural Significance of Indigenous Bowls in the Cameroon Grassfields Cosmology

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Abstract

Cultures all over the world use bowls in one way or the other. Indigenous bowls are of very immense value to Africans in general and the Grassfields people of Cameroon in particular. These bowls which vary in size and shape are the workmanship of both male and female. The bowls produced are used by the royalty as well as by sacred jujus. Indigenous bowls are equally useful the kitchen, and in the traditional healer's home. Despite these important functions, the bowls are currently undergoing gradual modification due largely to modernity. The questions that this paper seeks to answer are: what is the cultural significance of indigenous bowls to a Grassfields man? 'What is the place of indigenous bowls in the lives of the Grassfields people? and 'What are factors that influence the dynamics in indigenous bowls? The paper therefore is out to illustrate the cultural meanings which Grassfields people give to bowls, and highlight the value of the indigenous bowls. Despite the changes which are ongoing in the production of indigenous bowls, there are some artists who still continue to produce bowls in the tribal style. These bowls can be used to portray the socio-political organisation of the Grassfielders. They are elements of social stratification, cultural identity and heritage. Indigenous bowls therefore have roles in politics, social, religion, economics and healing. They (bowls) belong to and reflect the system of thought of the people. Data for this paper was collected using both the qualitative and quantitative methods and my analysis and interpretation are based on the theories of symbolic anthropology of Geertz, functionalism of Malinowski and Brown, and cultural evolution of Tylor and Morgan.

Key words: *indigenous bowls, insights, cultural significance, Grassfields cosmology*

Introduction

A bowl is a deep rounded container or dish, open at the top. It is typically used to prepare and serve food. The interior of a bowl is characteristically shaped like a spherical cap, with the edges and the bottom forming a seamless curve. This makes bowls especially suited for holding liquids and loose food. The exterior of a bowl is most often round but can be of any shape, including rectangular (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowl).

Bowls play an important function in all cultures. In many African cultures, food and drink are shared in a communal bowl or cup. In Mali, the name of the town of Bandiagara (French pronunciation: (bãdjagaʁa) refers to the communal bowl, meals are served in. The name translates roughly to "large eating bowl." In Zimbabwe, *sadza* is traditionally eaten from a communal bowl, a tradition that is still maintained by some families, mainly in rural areas. It is generally eaten with the right hand without

the aid of cutlery and often rolled into a ball before being dipped into a variety of condiments such as sauce/gravy, sour milk, or stewed vegetables. Lakh is a popular boiled porridge made with rolled millet flour pellets (araw/arrow) typically topped at serving with sweetened fermented milk. It is usually served in a communal bowl or platter in Senegal (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowl).

In the Grassfields of Cameroon, bowls are manufactured with different raw materials ranging from wood, grass to clay got from the immediate environment. These bowls produced vary in size and shape and they fulfil varied functions. There is sexual division of labour in bowls production. Wooden bowls are produced only by men, the woven bowls are fabricated exclusively by the women folk meanwhile bowls made from clay is the activity of both sexes. These bowls be they wooden or clay, most of them are adorned with emblematic motifs which match the status of their owners and users. These motifs are anthropomorphic, zoomorphic as well as geometric. Bowls in the Grassfields are used in both profane as well as sacred ceremonies. The Grassfields is that part of Cameroon which comprises the three culture areas of the Western Grassfields, the Bamilekes and the Bamouns. These parts correspond to the North West and West regions of Cameroon. They are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests at an average altitude of 4000 feet above sea level. All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of varied sizes.

The people of the Grassfields of Cameroon have Tikar, Widikum and Chamba origins. The Bamilekes, the Bamouns and the majority of western Grassfields are of the Tikar stock meanwhile most Ngemba speaking *fondoms* such as the Mankons, *fondoms* of the Momo Division and some *fondoms* of the Santa Subdivision claim origin from Widikum and the Balis are the Chambas (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982)

Many of them are independent and the political structure of most, if not all, Grassfields *fondoms* are, basically similar. The *fon* has very great executive authority followed by chiefs and notables. The quarter heads also make up part of the political structure. The political system is based on hereditary traditional authority and access to power is highly determined by direct descent (Warnier, 1975: 42). On the political strata of these *fondoms*, the *kwifon* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables and quarter-heads. Almost everywhere, *fondomship* is hereditary and the *fon* is a sacred figure. And only him (the *fon*) and a few notables have the privilege to use sculpted and clay bowls with specific status motifs.

Bowls are very prominent as well as instrumental in the Grassfields woman's kitchen and in the hands of traditional medical practitioners. Women use clay bowls to prepare food which is served in woven and wooden bowls. Traditional doctors use two main types of bowls; clay bowls to prepare traditional medicine and woven bowls to store powdery medicine.

Grassfielders are polytheistic, they believe in religions such as the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Most Grassfielders are animists who believe that spirits inhabit some natural objects and such spirits control the lives of these people. They equally have many gods and each has a specific role in the society. If these gods are venerated they will be very benevolent (nice) but if neglected, they are capable of punishing the living. Sometimes bowls are used in religious rituals to commemorate spirits and gods. Christianity is the religion of many people of the Grassfields unlike Islam which is found mostly in Sabga in the Tubah Sub Division, North West Region and the Noun Division in the West Region.

The production of bowls has endured many important changes in relation to the shape, function, decoration of the products as well as production techniques. Changes are equally witnessed in the quality of the artists or those involved in the carving of these bowls. The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the cultural significance of indigenous bowls and the secondary objectives are to illustrate the functions of these bowls as well as examine changes which have occurred in the production and use of indigenous bowls.

The bowls I have concentrated on in the article are small bowls and not pots. These are the most prominent bowls which cut across all the different facets of life in the Grassfields area. These bowls are in three types: wooden, woven and clay bowls.

Methodology

Data for this paper was collected using the qualitative and quantitative methods. I used the qualitative method, through observation, in-depth interview, focus group discussions, life histories and photography. Under observation, I attended cultural ceremonies such as traditional weddings, succession, enthronement of the *fon*, and even death celebrations to see how indigenous bowls are used. I equally visited the workshops of artists engaged in the production of these objects to witness first hand, the raw materials employed, the techniques used in production and to understand the category of people involved in the domain. Several visits were paid to the *fons*' palaces and the homes of notables to observe how these bowls were being used. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with many people, commoners and notables alike to comprehend the functions of indigenous bowls, interpretation of the motifs engraved on them and understand the factors which influence dynamics in these objects. A digital camera was used to snap indigenous bowls, as well as ceremonies in which these bowls are used. Questionnaires were established and filled by forty (40) respondents and the questions formulated around the themes: production (procedures and techniques), usefulness of bowls and the changes that have taken place in this invaluable indigenous object called the bowl. Data was interpreted using the symbolic anthropology, functionalist and cultural evolution approaches. The researcher uses the symbolic anthropology approach to illustrate how indigenous bowls could be used to gain a better understanding of the Grassfields societies. The functionalist approach was used to illustrate the place of bowls in Cameroon Grassfields chiefdoms meanwhile the cultural evolution approach was employed to demonstrate the changes which have taken place in indigenous bowls production and use.

Presentation of Findings

The indigenous bowls like most of the native vessels are found in all aspects of every African society. They are in types and fulfil varied functions as discussed above. The findings presented in this paper are under three major headings: typology of indigenous bowls, the place of indigenous bowls in the lives of Grassfields people and indigenous bowls in the face of modernity.

I) Typology of Indigenous Bowls in the Grassfields of Cameroon

There are three major types of bowls produced and used in the Grassfields of Cameroon. The type depends on the raw materials used in its production. These bowls include wooden, woven and clay bowls. Some of these objects are decorated with animate as well as inanimate motifs. The bowls have different names in different Grassfields fondoms as seen in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Types of indigenous bowls and their names in some Grassfields languages

Fondoms	Kom	Bamoun	Bafut	Bamendjida	Kedjom	Oku
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Bowls						
Wooden bowl	<i>feke'eh</i>	<i>pap'che</i>	<i>aqceu</i>	<i>tetoh</i>	<i>kebole</i>	<i>fevay</i>
Woven bowl	<i>kuel</i>	<i>palah</i>	<i>menka</i>	<i>tsale</i>	<i>Kieh</i>	<i>kel</i>
Clay bowl	<i>felumi</i>	<i>ncombou</i>	<i>ntor chier</i>	<i>toun</i>	<i>lurme</i>	<i>nton</i>

A) Wooden Bowls: These are bowls carved out of wood. Wood best for their production are fresh wood. Jefferson (1974), Mveng (1980), Bohannan and Curtin (1995) and Knopfli (1999) all asset that sculptors work with wood in general and green wood in particular, so that objects will not crack too much when dry although cracks appear in most pieces. To Mveng (1980), Bohanan and Curtin (1995), Kassam and Megerssa (1996) and Knopfli (1999), good carvers know exactly which species of tree to choose for a particular piece of work, and almost every type of object requires a particular kind of wood. Wood for carving is got from individual as well as community forest. Wood carvers in the Grassfields as demonstrated by table 2 use the following trees for carving:

Table 2: Names of the different trees used for carving in some Grassfields languages

Tree	Language	Pidgin English	Bamoun	Kedjom	Bamendjida	Bafut
<i>Cordia platithyrsa</i>		gum tree	<i>ham</i>	<i>fueh</i>	<i>fabeg</i>	<i>ambweh</i>
<i>Ficus oreodryadum</i>		fig tree	<i>nfuire</i>	<i>kevem</i>	<i>da'asse</i>	<i>agem</i>
<i>Pochylobus edulis</i>		bush butter tree	<i>asap</i>	<i>abuh</i>	<i>mbele</i>	<i>ati mbeure</i>

Informants, especially wood carvers listed three main tree types used for carving in general and the carving of wooden bowls in particular. Out of these three, the most used tree for carving is *Cordia platithyrsa* or *fueh* in Kedjom or *ham* in Bamum or *fabeg* in Bamendjida or gum stick in Pidgin English. This type is preferred by most carvers because it is one of the most resistant trees. Insects do not attack it, it does not crack easily and it is not very heavy. There exist two kinds of *Cordia platithyrsa*: the white and the red types. This tree which is propagated through seeds and cuts take about 17 years for the white type to become mature for carving. An object produced from a mature *cordial platithyrsa* can last for more than a century without needing any repairs. Carvers prefer the white type for carving for two reasons: it gets mature very fast if planted and then it is easier to carve. The red cordial *platithyrsa* takes a longer time to mature and it is very difficult to carve, that notwithstanding, magnificent and set pieces could be produced from it.

The next type of tree used in sculpturing wooden bowls is *Ficus oreodryadum*. This tree known in Kedjom as *kevem* or *da'asse* in Bamendjida or fig tree in Pidgin English is heavy and also resistant to insect bite. It was and is still highly respected in the Grassfields today for many reasons. The tree like all trees according to the Grassfields people, houses the gods and this is one of the reasons why it is found in most, if not all, compounds in this region. They are planted either in the centre of the compound or in the back yard, and considering its high religious value, the tree cannot be cut carelessly.

Different types of fig tress exist but the major ones found in this area are *ficus elastic*, the rubber fig or rubber tree, *ficus salicifolia* and mistletoe fig (*ficus deltoidea*) (<https://www.houseplantsexpert.com>). *Ficus elastic* or the rubber fig has large leaves but not very common in the Grassfields area so, it is rarely used in carving. The next is *ficus salicifolia*, this type has slender and long leaves and is mostly planted in the shrines and at the limits to act as boundary demarcation. This is the most used fig free for carving. The last type of fig tree common in this region

is *mistletoe fig* (*ficus deltoidea*). This is classed as a perennial variety of *ficus* that has thick waxy delta-shaped leaves (<https://leafyplace.com/ficus-tree/>). This type does not grow very tall and it is also planted in shrines.

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

Abuh or *pochylobus edulis* is of two kinds the male and the female. The male type is preferred to sculpt due to the fact that it is more resistant to insect bite. The male could be distinguished from the female for the fact that it does not produce fruits and carvers believe that its fruitlessness makes it possess some substances which prevent insects from attacking it so much. The female *abuh* produces fruits and a bowl fabricated from it is easily attacked by insects. To stop this from happening therefore, items carved from it are seasoned intensively, that is, put on extreme heat and then poisoned with insecticide. The fruits of this tree are equally of great importance to craftsmen. They are used to bead objects or to produce necklaces and other objects which they use to augment the beauty of their articles. The seeds are very hard and hollow; carvers usually cut them into three and use the middle portion to produce a necklace by linking them with a piece of string.

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

Rituals surrounding the cutting of trees for carving among the majority of Grassfields fondoms is similar to what obtains in Dogon as Willett (1973: 168) notes:

It is usual for the act of carving itself to be hedged round with rituals, since the tree which provides the wood is generally regarded as the home of a spirit which needs to be placated. In the case of sculptures which are to be a home for a spirit, such as the masks and ancestor figures of the Dogon.

Another reason why rituals were performed and are still done today before the cutting of a tree for carving is their location especially in specific places like the shrine. A shrine is a place where a god is found. This god could be a family, clan or village god. A shrine is always protected by the person responsible for the performance of rituals there. Before a tree for carving is cut at a family shrine, the head of the family has to perform some rituals. If it is the shrine of the clan, the clan head has to placate the gods and at the village shrine, the chief priest or the *fon* himself has to perform the rituals.

Most very experienced wood carvers, that is, carvers who have been sculpturing for forty years and above, testify that they had witnessed cases where a sculptor will want to cut certain trees especially *kevem* for carving without performing any rituals and blood will flow from the tree which is being cut instead of water. When many of such trees were cut, they will stand again as if nothing had happened to them. One of the carvers confirmed that a fig tree was fell by a carver and the following day, the same tree was found standing as if it was not cut at all. This tree was finally cut after the conclusion of certain rituals by the family head.

Centres of production of the carved bowls are Kedjom Keku (Big Babanki), Kedjom Ketingu (Small Babanki), Oku and Kom. Different motifs can be observed on Grassfields bowls. These comprise the lizard, scorpion, chameleon, crocodile, and human head/figure (see figures 1 and 2).

Figures 1 and 2: Bowls carved from wood



Source: Tikere's archive (20/04/2018)

These bowls which fulfil several functions are sculpted by special group of artists who have had several years of experience. This activity is performed by the men who hand down the knowledge of wood carving to their boy children and other male children in the *fondom*. In the past, it was very rare and almost impossible to find the son of a commoner engaged in the profession. Carvers had to come from the royal lineage (Knopfli, 1999). Today, the situation has change for it is common to find the sons of both commoners and notables engaged in wood carving.

B) Woven Bowls: Woven bowls are made from grass (specifically the spear grass, *heteropogon contortus*, see figure 3 below) and from fibre. This object is produced in two major centres, Kom and Kedjom. Its production is done by women especially those who are above sixty years of age. Most women of this age are tired and cannot perform the usual tasks that require a lot of energy like farming. The woven bowl is usually produced with a lid, and its major function is to put cooked food as well as preserve uncooked food.

Figures 3 and 4: Spear grass for weaving and a woven bowls



Source: Tikere's archive (09/10/2018)

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

C) Clay Bowls: They are bowls made with clay. Clay is a type of soil which is soft, sticky. It can be moulded when wet to make bricks, pottery and ceramics. Clay is plastic when moist but hard when fired. Articles produced from clay are in different sizes and range from statues, bowls, pipes, pots to jars.

Figures 5: A bowl made of clay



Source: Tikere's archive (09/10/2018)

Clay objects with bowls inclusive are mainly produced in the North West and West Regions of Cameroon. In the North West Region, they are mostly produced in the Ngoketunjia Division with the main production centres being Babessi and Nsei (Bamessing). These containers are equally

manufactured in Foumban, in the Noun Division, West Region. This activity carried out by both the male and female folks is an ancient art in these areas. According to Forni (2001), cooking bowls ‘wang ku, ku bang’ and serving/eating bowls ‘keyo, ku to, ku beko’ of different sizes and degree of elaboration constitute the most common items produced by local potters in Nsei (Bamessing) and Babessi. Cooking bowls are produced mainly by women and elder male potters (who often specialize in the production of *bun ku nchi* - cooking bowls with handles and lid. Eating bowls, on the other hand, are produced prevalently by men, especially the *ku to* and *ku beko*, whose decoration can reach the highest degree of refinement and complication. The production of bowls *ku beko* decorated with human or animal heads is restricted to male potters. The abundance of clay in these areas has greatly influenced this domain of art.

II) Bowls in Everyday Life in the Grassfields

Indigenous bowls are containers which cut across all the facets of the culture of the Grassfields, they fulfil social functions (they are used as kitchen utensils to prepare as well as to store food), they are used in healing and they are fundamental instruments in the hands of sacred jujus.

The Social Uses of the Bowl

Endogenous bowls be they wooden, clay or woven, they are omnipresent in many Grassfields households used in the kitchen. The woman’s or mother’s kitchen is the power house of the family. This is the place where all food is cooked and bowls constitute part of kitchen utensils. Until a few decades ago according to Forni (2001) these bowls were the common dishes in which the relish accompanying the corn porridge (*fufu* in Pidgin) was heated and served. Every woman in this area possessed a number of these dishes in her kitchen, which would be used daily by family members and their guests.

Bowls especially the clay bowls are used to prepare food and many inhabitants of the Grassfields note that food cooked in the clay bowl is different. An informant in Bamessing fondom had this to say about the clay bowl.

the food that I, like many women cook in the clay bowl are roasted irish potatoes, plantain or banana. This food is first of all roasted and when it is ready, I pour some palm oil in my small bowl, put some salt and then put either the roasted plantain, banana or irish potatoes in it (the bowl) and then I pound it with a small pestle. I mix the pounded food properly with the fingers and I serve it in another clay bowl. These bowls are very common here in Bamessing like in Babessi. Food prepared and served in this container taste very different. It has an extra flavour that one cannot have when one prepares and serves food in other containers (informant, 10/07/2020).

This informant like many other natives of the Grassfields of Cameroon have the believe that hot food served in either a plastic or aluminium plate or dish, may absorb unknown chemicals from such containers since they do not know the materials with which they are fabricated.

Also important in the kitchen is the woven bowl. These bowls which are very prominent in Kom, Kedjom and Oku fondoms are used to serve and store corn *fufu* (porridge corn flour) the traditional meal of these people. This container is produced in varied sizes. Small ones which can contain one to two loaves of corn *fufu* are used mostly for eating meanwhile bigger ones which can hold as many as fifteen loaves are used to store cooked corn *fufu*. When corn *fufu* is removed from the pot, it is first of all put in the large bowl as demonstrated in figure 6 below. It is removed from this bowl and then

served in smaller ones to be eaten at the moment. Any corn *fufu* which is not eaten is properly covered with a woven lid, this means that all the woven bowls especially the large ones are manufactured with their lids.

Figure 6: A large woven bowl containing corn fufu



Source: Tikere's archive (11/11/2020)

Corn fufu which serves as profane and sacred food is eaten with huckleberry, a vegetable commonly called in Pidgin English *njama njama*. *Njama njama* is prepared differently by different fondoms. In the Kom, Oku as well as Kedjom fondoms, the people enjoy it more when the vegetable has very little palm oil with no salt. Bafut, Bambui, Nkwen and other Grassfields fondoms prepare it with plenty of palm oil and salt. In some parts of the Bamenda Grassfields, this vegetable is served in the clay bowl.

Unlike the woven bowl which is not regularly cleaned with water, the wooden and clay bowls are always properly washed with water and soap and hung on the wall in the kitchen in the case of kitchens which do not have shelves for utensils. This means that in most if not all Grassfields kitchens there is usually a special place prepared for the storing of utensils like bowls, spoons, plates and others.

It is important to note that these woven bowls are used during traditional weddings to serve food which is eaten by the couple on the one hand and by all those present in the occasion on the other hand. Eating in a single bowl is a symbol of unity and love. The two people from different families have been brought together by love to form a union of marriage which is cemented by the symbolic act of eating in the same bowl in the midst of witnesses (those present), and the ancestors who oversee the activities of humans.

The union around the bowl is not recognised only in the couple, other participants present equally eat from a large woven bowl. These are people from the family of the man (bride groom) and of the woman (bride). This shows that marriage is not only a union between a man and a woman but a union between the two families which have accepted that their children should become one. Henceforth, a new social relation has been created such that an incident be it happy or sad, which concerns one of the families, will concerns both families and all of them have to work together to succeed in the case of a happy ceremony (birth or wedding) or to overcome them in case of a sad event (death or any misfortune). A mere bowl in which food is eaten acts as a bond which unites individuals and group of persons.

In addition, carved bowls are used to serve kola nuts. Such bowls are possessed mostly by notables and the *fons*. These are the custodian of culture, and closer to the ancestors. When any of these traditional personalities is visited, he breaks kola nuts and puts in the bowl and shares with his guests. Kola nut is very symbolic in the Grassfields like in other parts of Africa. It is a symbol of love, friendship, unity, and much more. The Igbos in Nigeria believe that the kola tree was the first tree on earth and therefore its fruit, the first on earth. (<https://medium.com/@uzoanyadominic/the-big-deal-about-kola-nuts-and-the-people-34487d2c543d>).

In Igbo cosmology like that of the Grassfields, the presentation, breaking, and eating of the kola nut is an act that symbolizes peace, unity, and openness. When the kola nut is broken, it is put in a wooden bowl, inviting the spirits and ancestors to the gathering: family meetings, village meetings, funerals and land dispute meetings. During such occasions, there is a guiding spirit accompanying them. Kola nuts is broken into parts and the smallest part is thrown on the ground for the spirits to eat their share.

Bowls, Twins and Power

Bowls especially the clay type are used in twins' celebrations. Twins are two or more children born as a single birth. In the Bamenda Grassfields in particular and in the Grassfields in general, 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 (Moffor, 2022). Most fondoms in the Grassfields take the birth of twins as an event out of the ordinary, this explains why twins in these fondoms are treated with fear and care. They are referred to as 'God's gift'. In Mbei they are called *menyeh*, in Bambui they are known as *benyi ngong* and in Kedjom they are called *Mve nye ngon*. 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.

When twins are delivered therefore, there are special items and ceremonies organised in their honour. Some of the special items used in twins' celebration and/or stored in twins' shrine are clay bowls, calabashes, and the peace plant. Figure 7 below illustrates twins' shrine in which we can see clay bowls, calabashes and twins' peace plant (lemon surprise dracaena) and others. The number of bowls in the shrine depend on the number of twins which are born. The main use of these bowls are to hold palm oil which is eaten by participants in any occasion organised for them as well as to prepare their food.

Figure 7: Twins shrine



Source: Tikere's archive (11/11/2020)

The use of this bowl or bowls is usually seen during any ceremony concerning twins. In some parts of the Grassfields; in Bambui and Bamendakwe for instance, when twins are sick or when there is a serious problem in a family where there are twins, 'their food' which consists of mud fish, *igussi* pudding mixed in palm oil is prepared. Among the people of Bamandjida in the Bamboutos Division, West Region, this food is made up of two items; palm oil and fish as illustrated in figure 8 below. This food is prepared by one of the twins' mothers and shared to people present in the ceremony to eat.

Figure 8: Twins' food in a clay bowl



Source: Tikere's archive (10/08/2019)

In the case where a family has problems such as frequent illness of family members, stagnation in business, education, and infertility, this food is eaten by all the family members present at the ceremony, irrespective of the status. And as gods or gods' children, if the ritual is properly conducted and accepted by the gods, the problems of the family in question will be resolved.

If it is an occasion where only palm oil is prepared as illustrated in figure 10 below, the twins' mother preparing it, mixes palm oil and adds a little salt which she collects from the salt on the fresh leaf. The twins' occasion in the pictures below is carried out by 'les megni' or twins' mothers in Bamendjida. Les megni is an association of twins' mothers and twins. This association in many parts of the Grassfields can easily be identified from their regalia and dance. Figure 9 below portrays some of the

items used in twins' ceremonies; clay bowl, calabashes and the peace plant (dracaena). The next figure 10 is an illustration of a twin mother mixing palm oil as part of the ritual.

Figures 9 and 10: A display of some items of twins'



Source: Tikere's archive (10/08/2019)

When the palm oil and salt are properly mixed, the bowl is passed round for all the members present to have a taste of it. These members who are all twins' mothers collect some of the content with a finger and lick. After licking the palm oil, the camwood on the green leaf is used to anoint the mothers on their foreheads as demonstrated in figure 13 below. This is a symbol of power, peace and protection as can be seen in the redness of the camwood.

Figures 11, 12 and 13: Preparation of palm oil in twins' celebration and the anointment of twins' mothers with camwood



Source: Tikere's archive (10/08/2019)

When the bowls of twins are not being used, they are kept in the shrine. And sometimes they can go for many years without being used. Each time they have to be used, they are taken from the shrine, cleaned by a special twins' mother before they are used.

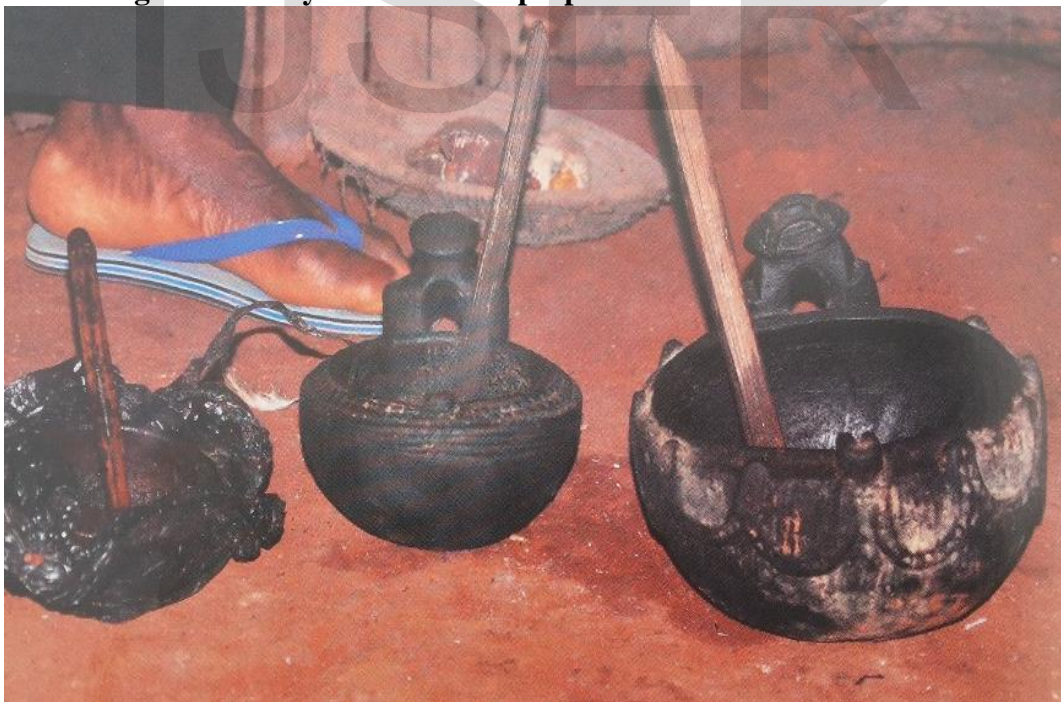
Bowls in Healing

Bowls in the Cameroon Grassfields as seen above serve diverse functions. Traditional medical doctors make use of them either to prepare or to store medicines. The most used bowls by these practitioners are the clay and woven bowls. In figure 14 below, we find clay bowls in which traditional medicine is prepared. The treatment is prepared based on the problems of the patients. But once prepared, this medicine is put in another small container and handed to the client. One of the 'native doctors' or traditional medical doctor told us that:

what I prepare in this bowl is some burnt medicine. I also prepare pounded or ground (powder) medicine in this bowl. When I put the medicine in the bowl, I mix it with palm oil. It treats stomach ache, snake bite, poison and many more. I usually put this mixture in a small container in case the patient does not bring his/her own container (juju owner, 10/12/2020).

In each of the bowls as we can observe in figure 14 is a wooden pestle which is used to mix pounded and ground leaves, roots and backs of trees in palm oil. Majority of medicine prepared in this bowl as one of the healers has said is done with palm oil, reason why the containers look oily.

Figure 14: Clay bowls used to prepare traditional medicine



Source: Tikere's archive (10/12/2020)

When these containers are not in use, they are properly cleaned and hung on the wall. This explains why all the bowls have handles. This method of storing bowls is equally common with other containers like pots.

Figure 15: Clay bowls hung on the wall



Source: Tikere's archive (10/12/2020)

There are other practitioners who use woven bowls in which they either store dried and ground medicine. This container is best suited to store powdery medicine because it is made of grass. It cannot hold oily or watery medicine. When medicine is put in this woven bowl, it is properly covered either with a plastic bag or with another bowl to stop rats and insects from getting into it.

Bowls, Dances and Symbolism

Dance plays an invaluable role in the social, spiritual as well as political life of the Grassfields people. Dances in this area could be classified under sacred and profane. All sacred dances or *jujus* or *mukums* (as most Grassfields people call it) and some profane dances use the bowls in their performance. The bowls of *jujus* bear motifs depending on the status of the each *juju*. There are sacred *jujus* owned by the palace, others by princes and others by notables. Each of such *jujus* is represented by a special motif which at the same time symbolises the spirit of the *juju*. The container's content (concoction) is sprinkled as the *mukum* are ushered in the ceremonial ground. One of the functions of the concoction is to calm the spirit of the *mukum*. This indispensable object of the *mukum* and the manifestation varies from one sacred society to another.

Other bowls like the one in figure below carry some title objects such as the red feather (feather from the bannerman turaco bird) and the pine from the porcupine. These are objects which are used to demonstrate the social position of notables (sub chiefs and fonmakers). Their association with this bowl is to demonstrate ownership of the dance, the dance group owned by a notable.

Figure 16: Wooden bowls used by *mukum*



Source: Tikere's archive (10/02/2019)

During occasions like *kebien ke ndong* or the *fon's* dance in Kedjom, the *fon* and sub chiefs prepare a concoction and *camwood* and put them in two carved bowls, one containing the concoction and the other *camwood*. Before the dance closes for the last day, the *fon* uses the concoction and the *camwood* in the wooden bowls to bless the people. He rubs *camwood* on the foreheads of notables and on the wrists of commoners while the concoction is sprinkled on the people with the use of *nkeng* or peace plant or dracaena. This is done to link the people to the cosmic energy. The annual dance therefore, goes beyond mere dancing, it involves some religious ceremonies.

I noticed that dance groups in the Grassfields are stratified with dances owned by the palace, princes and notables occupying a higher position than ordinary dances. And because of their high position, their bowls and other instruments are adorned with motifs.

Still under bowls and dances, during fieldwork, I found out that some *jujus* use sculpted bowls to collect money that spectators and host of the occasion give as encouragement fees to the dance groups. According to a traditional dance owner, the use of wooden bowls to collect money is very recent and this is what he had to say:

in the past, this money we collect in the carved bowl was simply thrown on a fresh banana or plantain leaf which was provided by a member of the dance group. Such a leaf was cut in the compound where the celebration was taking place. This leaf was placed in the dancing area and at the end of the performance of this dance, the money on the leaf was picked and counted by a trusted member selected from the group. After counting the money, the leaf was taken away to allow another dance group to dance (traditional dance owner, 10/02/2019).

The figures 17 and 18 below are a demonstration of what the dance owner has said. In one of them, we see the jujus dancing and a fresh plantain leaf is thrown on the ground. The next picture portrays how a member of the dance group is counting the money which is on the leaf.

Figures 17 and 18: A demonstration of *mukum* using fresh leaves to collect money



Source: Tikere's archive (12/11/2018)

Another informant still a dance group owner testified that:

as time went on, many owners of dance groups thought that instead of using the leaf which will get dry and bad, they could buy a piece of cloth which will last for long. This piece of cloth which many groups preferred the red colour was stored among the property of the dance group which include masks, xylophones, drums, rattles, gong, to name only these few.

In figure 19, we notice a red piece of cloth on the ground on which money is thrown. This cloth replaces the fresh leaf which used to serve the same purpose. At the end of the dance session of this juju, the cloth and the money are carried away and counted where the dance is lodged.

Figure 19: A display of *mukum* with a piece of red cloth on the ground for money collection



Source: Tikere's archive (12/11/2018)

Today, neither the fresh leaf nor the piece of cloth is used by dance groups to collect money. Many jujus have invented the wooden bowls which they use for this purpose.

Figures 20 and 21: *Mukums* using wooden bowls to collect money



Source: Tikere's archive (12/11/2018)

Looking at figures 20 and 21 above, we notice that the sculpted bowls bear several motifs, human and elephant symbols. The choice of each symbol depends on the category of the juju. These motifs are all those reserved for royal dances and dances owned by notables.

Figures 22, 23 and 24: Other wooden bowls used by *mukum* to collect money



Source: Tikere's archive (10/14/2019, 12/11/2018)

In most Grassfields cultures, a human figure carrying a bowl is a symbol of generosity. This is due to the fact that the bowl he/she carries holds food stuff which because of his generous nature shares out to the needy and neighbours. In the pictures 22, 23, and 24 above, the human figures carrying bowls do not signify generosity but bearer of a container (bowl) in which money is put. The human here is used to portray the importance of the owner of the juju in his fondom. The mukun owner is important because he owns such an indispensable dance group which during manifestation links the living and the departed. One of the human figures is putting on a feathered cap decorated with cowry shells, a symbol of royalty or nobility. The next human statue's head is anointed with camwood which represents power (see figure 22).

The next bowl used by jujus is an elephant bowl (see figure 25). The selection of this motif by the juju may be because of its characteristics; it is gigantic, powerful, intelligent, and so on. When this animal is represented on a bowl, it incarnates the indomitable forces that is expected to protect the juju.

Figure 25: A wooden bowl with the elephant motif used by *mukum*



Source: Tikere's archive (12/11/2018)

A juju owner has this to say about the power of the bowl.

It is important to note that, each of these bowls is empowered by the spirit of the juju. Its empowerment is done by the owner of the juju. Anyone who is responsible to pick and count the money in the bowl, must give an honest or true mount raised else he will be hunted by the spirit of the juju (informant, 12/11/2018).

Bowls which are owned by palace dances or those of princes, are usually anointed with camwood every time they have to be used. The camwood applied reinforces the power of the spirit which is in the object. The bowls of jujus therefore symbolizes power.

The bowls used by profane dances to put concoction is either carved out of wood with no motifs or simply made of calabash. It is important to note that the bowl used by such dances are as simple or ordinary as the dances themselves. These are dances that can be danced as well as seen by all, irrespective of sex and age.

The bowl is equally instrumental in the production of music. Some sacred dances in this cultural sphere use it to produce music. A good example of such a dance is the *chong* dance in the Kom fendom. The bowl is used together with the trumpet to produce music for the *chong* dance. This dance is owned by *bochong* meaning the father of *chong*. According to Ngam (2002:45), *chong* is the highest social institution in the Kom society. The right to own or create the *chong*, is given by the *foyn* – the ruler of Kom. Its creation is done in the company of leaders of the *chong* society known in Kom as *bochongsi*. At such an occasion, the *foyn* is represented by the *atongli-a-ntoh*. The *foyn* must be represented here because the most respected *chong* in Kom is found in the *ntoh* or palace, known as *chong ntoh*.

As seen above, *chong* is a dance, and as a dance like many other dances in the Grassfields, it uses musical instruments to produce music. To produce its music therefore, the trumpet is blown in the bowl. It is blown in a special way to produce the rhythm which is required by *chong*. This music is produced by a member of the group who has had numerous years of initiation (see figure 26). The handling of these instruments is reserved only to initiates.

Figure 26: The *chong* dance of Kom



Source: Tikere's archive (03/11/2019)

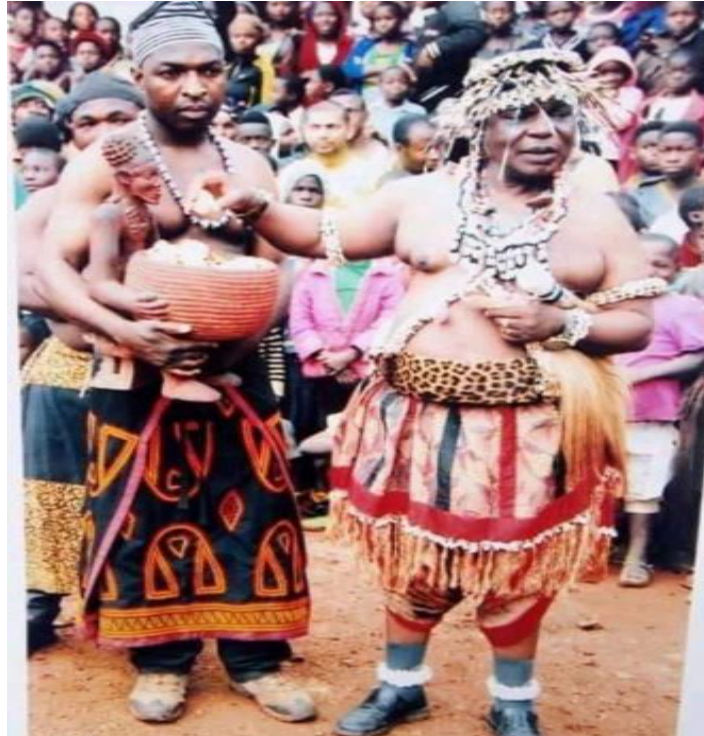
This music is played on specific occasions some of which include the funeral and death celebration of its initiates. Chong display usually holds on the eve of the burial, a dance which is intended to prepare the grounds for the ushering of the deceased into the land of the dead.

The Bowl in Rituals

In the Grassfields of Cameroon like in most parts of Africa, most if not all cultural events are linked to the people, the palace, and the gods. One of such ceremonies is the grass cutting festival in the Oku fendom. During this celebration, the population has the privilege to receive blessings from the *fon*. All who take part in this occasion do not only receive blessing from the *fon*, they equally have the blessings of the gods who will continue to guard as well as provide them with children and high yields. This blessing is kola nut from a sculpted bowl that the *fon* himself shares to the people. The kola nut is put in a bowl known in Oku as *fevəy* (see figure 27).

This kola nut that he shares to his people is a motivation known in Oku as *mome ntok* for their participation in the grass cutting festival (*əbghuy kembaa*). Grass cutting is an annual ceremony performed in the month of April, the second month after the return of the rainy season. The grass cut is used to renew or repair the *achum* 'house of the gods' so that rain should not enter or wet the gods.

Figure 27: A photo showing a bowl of kola nut used for the grass cutting ceremony



Source: Tikere's archive (15/02/2013)

The house of the gods is a common characteristic to all Grassfields *fondoms*. This house is constructed by the entire village with local materials such as mud, bamboos, sticks, stones, and roofed with grass obtained from the immediate environment. In the Bambui *fondom* for instance, there is a special hill known as *ntah kwifon* (the *kwifon*'s hill) reserved for the cutting of grass for the roofing of this house.

The fact that the *fon* shares kola nut to his people portray him as a generous father who takes good care of his people and the *fondom*. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 59) one of his numerous duties is to bring villagers together from time to time and give them food, drinks and palm oil, especially during very important cultural festivities. Here, we see that the *fon* does not give his people the food, drinks or palm oil as listed above, but he gives them kola nut, a symbol of fraternity or togetherness, attachment and peace.

It is important to highlight that the sculpted bowl which contains the kola nut bears a human motif. Although this sculpted bowl is carried by a palace retainer, the human representation on the bowl is an important personality in the Oku *fondom*, surely a notable as demonstrated by his regalia; his title cap as well as the beads on his neck. This bowl which must not necessarily be heavy, has to be carried by him (notable) to show how grandiose the ceremony is.

Figure 28: A designed with a human motif containing kola nuts



Source: Tikere's archive (15/02/2013)

In addition, at the end of the grass cutting ceremony, the *fon* offers cooked food to his people (men, women and children alike). The food demonstrated in figure 29 below is put in both woven and sculpted bowls. The woven bowls containing corn *fufu* and sculpted bowls holding the vegetables (huckleberry) or *njama njama* in the Pidgin language are placed at the centre of the palace yard. This food is shared by an elderly male member of the *fondom* to all those present. This again illustrates the *fon* as a generous ruler who has to cater for the people whenever there is work in the *fondom*. The meal is equally a symbol of unity, showing people who have to eat as well as work together for the wellbeing of the entire *fondom*.

Figure 29: A photo illustrating bowls containing food for the grass cutting festival



Source: Tikere's archive (15/02/2013)

The Bowl in the Economy

One of the major functions of the bowl is that it is a source of income to the producers. To those involve in their production, they are in the first place commodities; products which can be traded, bought or sold mainly to acquire income. But before pre-colonial times, carvings were not manufactured for economic purpose – they were mainly to serve the *fondoms* in varied domains, political and magico-religious. This explains why many of the palaces in the Grassfields of Cameroon

had to ordain those who carved objects in the tribal style, articles which conformed to the tribal tradition of designs, motifs and symbols. Furthermore, in the pre-colonial era, the *fons*, nobles and secret societies served as the major market for sculptors since the majority of these objects were made for them (Knopfli (1999). To Notué and Triaca (2000/2005), notables and customary societies are the patrons and the main clients of artists. Ironically, such producers were not rewarded handsomely: they were usually brought together each year and a feast organised at the palace by the *fon* on their behalf. With colonisation, carved items were highly priced by tourists and art collectors and this made these cultural artifacts including bowls to become highly in demand that many sculptors and *fondoms* to start using them as commodities.

More so, elaborately carved bowls and other articles made for both daily and ceremonial use, were and are objects of frequent exchange among the various *fondoms* of the Grassfields. The commercialisation of bowls especially carved bowls is done exclusively by the men just like the activity itself. The female do not take part in this line of business because of the taboo that surrounds the production and usage of such articles. But the latter are highly engaged in the production and commercialisation of woven bowls since they are the major producers.

The marketing of most bowls is done at the local as well as external level. The daily and weekly markets are not the only outlet for local carvers, who are usually capable to commercialise these vessels directly from their workshops, to art shops, handicraft centres, museum owners and to tourists.

Some of the artists told me that they produce most art objects including bowls on order and as a result, they never go to the market to sell their goods. People come from far and near to collect their objects at their workshops. Those who do not work on order, carry their goods to the market, where they have to bargain their prices with clients. Others supply to some handicraft shops in Bamenda such as the Presbyterian Craft Project (Prescraft) and Bamenda Handicraft Co-operative Centre. These two handicraft centres are non-governmental organizations that are aimed at encouraging art in the Western Grassfield in particular and the Grassfields as a whole.

The costs of bowls vary from one type to another, from size to size and from one producer to another. Large bowls no matter the type are more expensive than small ones. Woven bowls are generally more costly than carved and clay objects. The cost is rated according to the material use and the time used for their production.

Bowls as Status Symbol

Forni (2001), commenting on the pottery bowls and pots produced in Babessi and Nsei notes that:

“ ordinary or simple *beyo* (sing, *keyo*) bowls could be used by anyone on any occasion, richly carved *ku beko* - eating bowls with handle, decorative spout (*toh* - navel) and elaborate *ajoure* pedestal - marked the importance of the individual to which they belonged. Only high ranking notables in the *fondom* could eat out of *ku beko* decorated with human or animal heads.”

The use of different bowls by different groups portray Babessi and Nsei (Bamessing) societies in particular and the Cameroon Grassfields in general as stratified. Those who occupy the upper strata of the society use prestigious objects - richly carved eating bowls. These valuable bowls are adorned with human and animal heads. Villagers who occupy the lower echelon of the society use simple bowls with no designs. The prestige in this part of Cameroon is not limited to bowls along but encompass statues, stools, thrones, walking sticks, necklaces and bangles.

III) Bowls in the Face of Modernity

Indigenous bowls like any other aspects of culture change with time. In the domain of wooden bowls, the modifications could be seen in production and use. In the aspect of production, the raw materials, techniques and procedures of production and even the producers have changed. As mentioned above, artists engaged in wood carving in general and those producing wooden bowls in particular had some traditional trees such as *Cordia platithyrza* or gum stick, *Ficus oreodryadum* or fig tree and *Pochylobus edulis* or bush butter which they use in producing objects. But these trees have become scarce, by so doing, wood carvers have switched to the use of soft woods like pear and mango. Bowls carved with soft wood have two main problems: they split when exposed into the sun. The sun is not very friendly to carve objects but objects carved from the traditional woods used for carving do not get crack as much when left in the sun. Objects produced from soft wood can sometimes crack beyond repairs. Secondly, the pear and mango trees as many sculptors note, get contaminated by insect very easily.

Concerning the techniques of production, those engaged in the production of bowls today, do their finishing to look like real objects; they place great importance on realism. That is if they want to produce carved dishes as portrayed by figure 30 below, they lay a lot of emphasis on the finishing, to enhance their aesthetics qualities. The fine polishing or quality of the bowls also demonstrates the artistry of the artist. In the past, such bowls will be produced only to serve the purpose for which they were made and not for the sake of beauty.

Figure 30: Modern wooden dishes



Source: Tikere's archive (14/02/2016)

The usefulness of bowls are gradually changing as the days go by. Bowls be they wooden, woven or clay, were very prominent in the Grassfields. With the introduction of 'foreign' containers made of aluminium and plastic, the people are abandoning their 'own' indigenous containers for western objects. Reason being that people of today, do not want to identify themselves with 'old fashioned'

utensils. These old fashioned utensils according to the young generation are associated with the old mothers and fathers. This way of thought is not limited only to indigenous bowls, it is common to hear a young boy or girl say today that, you dress like an old father or mother, making allusion to the dress worn. Same goes with music and dance and even sometimes the mother tongue.

In the past when twins were born, there were special ceremonies carried out in their honour. Only a few are conducted today while others have disappeared. When twins were born, they had a shrine where their 'things' were kept.

This shrine is usually built with bamboo as illustrated in figure 7 above. The shrine was and is a special place in their parents' house, where items such as calabashes, clay and carved bowls were or are kept. In some of these shrines, one will find the *nkeng* or peace plant (*dracaena*) either dry or fresh. In the past, if a family had a crisis which could be many people falling sick or even when there was recurrent death, a special ritual was performed which was expected to cleanse as well as placate the gods to reverse the situation. In such an occasion, palm wine was poured in a carved bowl and two spiral snail shells put in the palm wine (see figure 31 below).

Figure 31: A bowl used for twins (H. 30cm)



Source: Vitensi Francis (14/06/11)

The palm wine from this bowl was drunk and some used to bathe the twins, their mothers and other family members. The wine which had the power to wash off any disease and ill luck in the family was used by the eldest twins' mother in the family to perform the rituals. These bowls are decorated with the peace plant called *nkeng* in most parts of the Grassfields and a climbing plant known in Bambui as *ndoh*, in Mbei as *noreh* (see figure 32 below). The *nkeng* (*dracaena*) and *ndoh* or *noreh* signify blessing. It was believed that if the ritual was properly done and accepted by the gods, peace would return in the family and the members of the family would be blessed.

Figure 32: *Ndoh* used in twins' ceremonies



Source: Tikere's archive (10/11/2018)

Today, many people especially young people in the *fondoms* where these rituals are conducted think that wine that comes from this carved bowls is unhygienic therefore not good for consumption. Most people are gradually being converted to Christianity, so they say that conducting such practices is against the preaching of the Bible.

Conclusion

The Grassfields of Cameroon have had a long history concerning the production and use of indigenous containers. Such containers among which are bowls are produced with materials got from the local environment. There is sexual division of labour in bowls fabrication. The male produce wooden bowls, the female manufacture woven bowls meanwhile both male and female produce clay bowls. These bowls fulfil several functions which include the preparation and preservation of food by mothers in the kitchen, and the processing and storage of traditional medicines by traditional medical doctors. Indigenous bowls are equally used in twins' celebrations and by traditional dance groups (mukums). This traditional and emblematic object is recently under going some changes in production (materials used and techniques) and in the use. In addition, the introduction of aluminium and plastic containers have made many Grassfields people to abandon their indigenous bowls in favour of the 'modern' containers. The indigenous bowls are a major part of the cultural identity and heritage of the Grassfields people. Such objects preserved jealously and used regularly, this may enable the people to avoid certain diseases caused by the use of aluminium as well as plastic containers.

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