Paideuma 31, 1985

PALACE AND CHIEFTAINCY IN WEH (NORTH WEST PROVINCE, CAMEROON)

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Among the numerous palaces of the Grassfields, the residence of the chief of Weh, a chiefdom some 14 kilometers north of Wum in the Menchum Division, belongs to the smaller structures. It is typical of edifices in polities which are located in the orbit of major states such as Kom, Bafut, or Nso, where the most imposing and elaborate palaces can be found. Nevertheless, the analysis of the small Weh palace from an architectural and historical point of view allows insights into the development of the chiefdom and into the role the Weh chiefs acquired in this century. In the following paragraphs, I present data on the earliest Weh "palaces" and trace the architectural transformation and elaboration of the palace from the 1920s to the present. My main sources of information are historical photographs of the palace district, fieldnotes I gathered in 1970, and interviews I conducted during my most recent stay in Weh (1983/84).[1] Can the "building history" of the palace then be correlated to the increases or decreases of the power of the Weh chiefs over the years? Can the palace be treated as a tangible expression of complex political processes concerning the chiefdom?[2]

The Weh palace is located in Uwet, one of the five quarters (wards) of the village.[3] In former times, the roads connecting Weh with the neighboring chiefdoms, such as the Aghem federation (that is, Wum), Esu, and Kuk, all merged near the palace, leading ultimately right into the palace precinct (fig. 1, no. 1). The palace area was thus the center of the village's network of paths. When the Ringroad, a motorable road that loops from Bamenda through the Grassfields, was built in the early 1950s, it passed the village on the southern periphery, and a new pattern of paths had to be added to the previously existing one. In pre-colonial days, there was no market in Weh. The first little market was established in the palace area when a German military post was opened in the Fungom region in 1913 (the whole area is named after Fungom, one of the largest chiefdoms in the region). As a result, weekly markets became a regular event in Weh. A small daily market and the weekly market now take place in a market square with stalls. This area for commercial activities was established in the 1950s at the crossing of the new roads leading to Wum and Esu (fig. 1, no. 11). The traffic passes

1 My first stay in Weh from September 1970 to December 1971 was funded by a grant from the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst. I returned to Weh in June of 1983 to conduct a one-year study on legal change. It was sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

2 The information on the Weh palace was given by many people in Weh, in particular, however, by Mister Joseph Kpwe, one of the oldest men in the chiefly patrilineage. He is a son of Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo. I also thank Fon Nji II for his kind support of the project, and for giving me access to the palace area. I would like to thank my research assistant Mister J.C. Mebeng, and the late Mister Andrew Kum who had assisted me with my work in 1970/71. I am also grateful to Missionary Wilhelm Schneider for allowing me to use his photographs. Finally I thank Dr. Edward Norris for his suggestions.

3 There are five wards (so-called quarters) in Weh: Uwet, Kefuum, Keghe, Azoh, and Mba-Usu. The territory of Weh is divided into "village" (*ina'*) and "bush" (*mvenn*). Each ward has its own bush areas used for farming and hunting. According to the wishes of the publisher, the transcriptions of Weh words have been simplified for this paper.

along the Ringroad now. The village has therefore expanded along the Ringroad and around the market square.

The present occupant of the palace, Fon S.N. Nji II, succeeded Chief Philip Bame-Kom-Ndzang in 1976. The traditional title of the Weh chiefs was *ba'tum*, but the present chief has adopted the title *fon*, which is the designation of many of the important chiefs in the Grassfields. For many years he has been involved in politics both on the local and the national level. He was a minister in a former government of West Cameroon. When East and West Cameroon federated in 1972, he served as a deputy to the parliament in Yaoundé, and more recently he has been the section head of the CNU (Cameroon National Union) in Menchum Division. Before he became Fon of Weh, he owned a two-story stone house with a zinc roof in the village where he used to live when he returned from Yaoundé to his constituency (fig. 1, no. 7). Furthermore he had built several modern structures in towns like Bamenda, thus following the pattern of capital investment pursued by many affluent and educated Cameroonians. The traditional palace with thatched grassroofs, which served his predecessor who was illiterate and barely capable of involving himself in any of the processes that now shape life on a regional and national level, was ill-suited for the Fon's needs and he immediately began to remodel it. He also married several wives, having been monogamous previously.

The palace (*to'*) is the largest compound of the village. In 1984, it comprised 14 buildings including the Fon's modern living quarters. Some of the buildings contained several rooms (which are, in fact, referred to as "houses") for the Fon's wives and wives of the previous chiefs. Other houses were occupied by male members of the Fon's patrilineage or men who work for the Fon. Altogether there were 19 such rooms or "houses." Several other structures serve special functions within the palace area, such as the building where the council of the elders (*ndau tse*) meets.

How does the palace compare to the other compounds in the village? A 1970 survey of 59 compounds (*kebi*) with polygynous compound heads (*muu kebi*) revealed that the average compound contained the residence of the compound head and 4 houses (*ndau*) for wives or relatives compared with the 14 houses of Chief Bame-Kom Ndzang's palace. The second largest compound belonged to De-Nlem, the ward head of Azoh. It had nine separate houses besides the residence of the ward head. These numbers had not changed much by 1984, when De-Nlem's compound was still the largest traditional residence after the Fon's palace. Some big compounds had deteriorated because the former compound heads had died and none of the successors were interested in maintaining a compound in the central parts of the village, but rather preferred to live in more modern houses on the periphery. Other compounds had, however, been extended: the average of four houses per polygynous compound had not changed during a period of 14 years.

If we look at the architectural development of the Weh palace during the last one hundred years, there have been some major changes in the number of buildings, materials, and techniques used in the construction. According to my information the residence of the chiefs has always been approximately in its present location. The general area is delineated by a hill on the south side of the palace and by a small river to the north. The first "palace," which the very oldest Weh men could recollect, was located some 200 meters west of the present complex near the small river behind the palace, according to information collected in 1983. According to another version collected in 1970, it was at the site of the present *ndau tse*.[4] It

4 This information was given by Foo-Mou, the late ward head of Uwet. See also Geary 1976: 99.

was first occupied by Mou-Nyi and then by Ndse-Ika[5] who was chief in the second half of the 19th century. Their chiefships followed after a period of unrest brought about by raiding Chamba groups who intruded from the Jukun area. These so-called "Genyi" devastated the region and ravaged many settlements. Most inhabitants of the Weh area sought refuge in other chiefdoms and returned to Weh only when the raids had ceased.[6] Weh thus only consolidated in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to oral tradition, Ndse-Ika had little authority in the village and was constantly at loggerheads with the leaders of the large patrilineages. Antagonism between chief and elders is a recurrent theme in the history of Weh, and we will analyze some of the reasons for this later on in the discussion. Ultimately, Ndse-Ika was driven from the village and settled at Ngo in Aghem-Bush where he occupied himself participating in the local slave trade. He supposedly only returned to Weh to carry out his ritual duties, such as the palmwine libations at the beginning of the planting season and tasks in the house of the council of the elders. His palace in Weh was only a single house, which would be the most unusual living quarters for any adult man. A "correct" man, a man of status in the village, is supposed to have his own compound with houses for his wives. It is unlikely, though, that Ndse-Ika only occupied one building. Rather, the "palace of one house" seems to be a metaphor for Ndse-Ika's lack of authority and weakness as a chief.

His successor was Mbu-Sou-Tshu whose reign began in ca. 1885 and ended in 1906. While little is known about the reign of Ndse-Ika, information about his successor is more detailed. Mbu-Sou-Tshu moved his living quarters closer to the site of the present palace. His residence was located slightly west of the present palace. He had three houses and shared the area with Bame-Sannge who was his neighbor and friend. When he wanted to enlarge his compound, he begged Bame-Sannge to resettle. His friend agreed, and Mbu-Sou-Tshu erected more buildings. Bame-Sannge was the head of one of the original patrilineages in Weh, that is, lineages which have always been in the territory of Weh and have no tradition of migrating to Weh from anywhere else. The compound of the *waa* Bame-Sannge, the "children" of Bame-Sannge, is now located on the hill to the south of the palace. This tradition indicates that the patrilineage of the chiefs had no historical claim to the site where the palace is now, but rather that Mbu-Sou-Tshu had to beg permission (usually from the ward head) like any other man who wants to build his own compound. With changing patterns of land ownership, the present chief now owns several pieces of land near the palace which are registered in his name. Supposedly, these areas were used as experimental gardens during the brief presence of the Germans in 1913/1914.

The relationship between Bame-Sannge and Mbu-Sou-Tshu was a close one. Mbu-Sou-Tshu gave him the *sou okum*, the cup used to make ritual libations during the meetings of the members of the *okum* title association for senior men in the village. As a chief he was not supposed to carry out the rituals for *okum*, although he had acquired these privileges, and thus the cup, from another owner of *okum* before his installation. The main object among the regalia of the Weh chief is the sacrificial cup for the village (*sou ina'*) with which he performs important ritual libations during the annual cycle.

Why did Mbu-Sou-Tshu expand his palace? According to the narrative of Joseph Kpwe,

5 The names of Weh men and women contain the proper name of the person, followed by the name of mother, grandmother, and sometimes even that of the great-grandmother. They are here hyphenated.

6 See also Geary 1976: 89ff.

one of the oldest men in the lineage of the chief (the *waa* Mbu[7]), the villagers gave many wives to Mbu-Sou-Tshu and he had to enlarge his compound.

There are many indications that the Weh chiefs up to the time of Mbu-Sou-Tshu were little more than primi inter pares, and the traditions relating to the different palaces are among them. The physical characteristics of Mbu-Sou-Tshu's palace are not remembered by any of the informants, although it must have been ultimately a rather large complex, judging by the fact that he had at least 10 wives and 20 children of whom 14 survived into adulthood.

The palace was moved to its present location under the son and successor of Chief Mbu-Sou-Tshu, the young and tough Mou-Sei-Ndoo. When he took over the chieftaincy in 1906, the regional scenario had changed dramatically. The end of the 19th century was marked by a considerable expansion in the sphere of influence of the kingdom of Kom. It seems that Weh's connection with Kom grew closer around the turn of the century. Mou-Sei-Ndoo frequently went to Kom, but it is unknown whether he actually visited the powerful *fon* Yu at Laikom or merely some of the border areas closer to Weh.

The arrival of the first German military officer in 1903 marked the dawn of the colonial era. The visit by Hans Glauning was a brief one and had little direct impact (Geary 1976: 126ff.). Yet it instilled awe into the people. In 1906, he returned for a second time. During the following years the Germans were engaged with the occupation and "pacification" of the area. The chiefs had to supply laborers to the station in Bamenda. While some chiefs cooperated voluntarily with the foreign power, others were hesitant. Among the chiefs who considered it advantageous to collaborate with the Germans were the chief of Kung, Ngwat, and the chief of Weh. In 1910, the Kung chief called in the Germans when some of the neighboring villages had ransacked the farms of Kung. In June of 1910, Lieutenant Fechtner punished the villages of Zua and Belo (Fechtner 1910). This event created a precedent. Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo also called on the Germans for help in 1912, when some of the quarters refused to bring game to the palace. Receiving game such as leopard and python was a prerogative of the chiefs in many of the larger Grassfields kingdoms. In Weh, however, game was brought to *ndau tse*, the council of elders, and not to the chief alone. As the head of *ndau tse* he had to share the game with the members. The refusal to deliver the game meant open rebellion against the chief. The Germans intervened in Mou-Sei-Ndoo's favor, killed 20 Weh and imprisoned 22 men in Bamenda (Smith 1929: 27). The event can be, of course, interpreted in two ways: the Germans restored a privilege that the chief always had, or, they inadvertently created a new privilege for him. Considering the weak position of the chiefs in the Weh polity, I opt for the second possibility. When the Bamenda Station decided to open a post in the Fungom area, in order to better exploit the resources both in people and products (rubber), Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo was among their loyal supporters. The post was founded in April of 1913 (Jungclaus 1913). The Germans had to rely on the help of the chiefs, because they were few in number (only two Germans and some 30 soldiers from other parts of Cameroon).

In 1913, the Germans took a census of the area under Bamenda Station, and the post at Wum, too, contributed. This census may not be very accurate but it certainly indicates

7 All Weh patrilineages have founding fathers. Most of these "fathers" lived in the second half of the 19th century. However, it is customary to refer only to a segment of such a patrilineage when designating compounds. Thus, the chief's patrilineage was founded by Fente, but is referred to as *waa* Mbu, the "children" of Mbu-Sou-Tshu who died in 1906. Only in a ritual context does the chief speak of *waa* Fente.

tendencies and the differences between the chiefdoms.[8] Weh had an estimated 800 inhabitants (200 men, 600 women and children). Incidently, the present population, according to the somewhat problematical figures of the latest counts, is over 8000. Kom, the major kingdom to the East, had an estimated 6116 men, 4686 women, 10850 children, thus 21652 inhabitants. Esu to the North was inhabitated by 1200 men, and 3600 women and children. Wum had a population of ca. 1000 men and 3000 women and children. Weh was, thus, a rather small settlement, compared to some of the others in the area.

Mou-Sei-Ndoo had gained much influence due to the German strengthening of his position. He was more affluent than his predecessors, had 16 wives and was intending to marry two more girls shortly before he died. Yet of all his children born, only fourteen reached adulthood. This high mortality could be partly the result of the 1918 influenza epidemic.

Under his rule, one can speak of a Kom-ization of Weh, which was as much prompted by the new demands of the Germans, as by his own desire for more power (Geary 1976: 136ff. and 1980: 387f.). Following the Kom example he instituted palace servants (*tsetende* = chindas) who were headed by a *bobe. Bobe* is the Itangikom word for "big man", the Weh equivalent being *ngarre wuu*. His efforts to appropriate for his own purposes *kweifo*, a men's secret society with regulatory functions, ultimately failed. *Kweifo* had been acquired by all five ward heads from neighboring chiefdoms. Thus, each ward head owned his *kweifo* society, while the chief possessed the *sou ina'*, the sacrificial cup for the whole village. He also was the head of *ndau tse* (see below) and of *ndau ifa*, a lodge charged with the purification of warriors who had killed an enemy in war. Yet, as in the case of *okum*, the ownership of the *sou ina'* is considered incompatible with the possession of the *kweifo* society. In this respect Weh differs with most other chiefdoms in the Grassfields.

Mou-Sei-Ndoo's rule ended in catastrophe. Ultimately, the egalitarian principles, which had been so pronounced in Weh, were upheld by the influential heads of the large compounds. They employed Mou-Sei-Ndoo's own strategies and denounced him to the Germans. He was said to have misused the sasswood ordeal, which the Germans had forbidden. The poison of the bark of the sasswood tree (*gou*) was administered in cases of suspected witchcraft. This ordeal was a complicated mechanism for witchcraft control. It gave the suspect a chance, since the poison did not always kill. According to many of the old Weh men, Mou-Sei-Ndoo, however, had a lethal poison mixed into the concoction (*gou nto'* = sasswood poison of the palace), so that nobody survived. He then appropriated the dead person's compound and other possessions to enrich himself. The Germans arrested him and planned to try him, but because of the outbreak of war had to leave, before he was put on trial. He hesitated to return to Weh. When he finally dared to come back in 1919, he was killed immediately.

Lom-Sou-Senn, a paternal brother of Mou-Sei-Ndoo, acted as "caretaker," until the British had established themselves in the region in 1920. He headed the patrilineage, the *waa* Mbu, and kept the compound, that is, the palace, together. Another son of Mbu, Ndse-Bii-Ndum, had returned from military service under the Germans and now followed the precedent set

8 This census was prepared in 1913 by Bamenda Station, then headed by Captain von Unruh. The numbers are estimates and had been verified over several years by the station personel. The ratio between men, women, and children was figured at 1:1:2. However, there seem to be exceptions, such as the numbers quoted for Kom. Obviously, a more accurate count had been carried out. The document is in the Public Record Office in London (PRO.W.O. 158/551). A microfilm copy is kept in the Microfilm Archives of the Seminar fuer Voelkerkunde (University of Muenster, Federal Republic of Germany: Fi 45:87–92). These archives contain copies of German colonial documents re. Togo and Cameroon from various European and African archives.

by Mou. With the help of the Kung Chief Ngwat, who had established himself as a paramount chief under German rule, he contacted the new British administration in Bamenda. His efforts were successful. He was officially acknowledged as chief in 1921, and the murderers of Mou-Sei-Ndoo were tried. Once again, chiefship in Weh had been consolidated. Ndse-Bii-Ndum was a clever tactician and an innovative chief whose impact in Weh is felt to this day.

Ndse-Bii-Ndum established the groundplan for the present palace. He followed the outlines of Mou's palace. All later structures have been erected on these original foundations. Several photographs dating from 1927 and 1934 give an impression of his palace which Gulla Pfeffer, a German traveller who crossed the area on her way to the Katsina Ala valley, described with the following words: "His compound is of rare beauty. He received me in a courtyard which is decorated with alcove-like niches on three sides. Carved wooden poles support the overhanging grass roofs."[9] Pfeffer, who is not always a reliable observer, published two photographs of the palace in her 1929 travel report (ills. 3 and 4). The other photographs were taken by the German missionary in Weh, Reverend Wilhelm Schneider who arrived there in 1932 and founded the first missionary station of the Basel Mission in the area. Schneider's photographs (ills. 1 and 2) give the best over-all impression of the palace, while Pfeffer's two images present details in the palace.

A 1934 picture of the palace area, which unfortunately does not show the complete structure, was taken from the small hill to the south of the palace (fig. 1). We see an impressive array of buildings, all constructed in the traditional technique. They were put together more or less like card houses. All walls and parts of the roof structure were constructed from poles of the raphia palm and then tied together, while still lying on the ground. They were then erected and tied into place. The outside walls were then plastered with mud. The roofs were thatched with especially fine thatching grass which grows in certain areas of the Weh-Bush. The palace was constructed according to the techniques and with the materials used for any other house in Weh. All compounds and the palace are protected by medicines which the *ghaa gamme ghei ntei* (= people who bury medicine) inter near the houses.

Schneider's photograph clearly shows that the walls of the palace structures were white-washed, a technique used in other compounds, too, whose walls were occasionally white-washed or decorated with designs and representational images. Frequently women drew such designs on the walls, among them scrolls and line drawings, by using soot from their hearths. Two courtyards can be recognized. Their location roughly corresponds to that of the present courtyards of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang and Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum (fig. 3). According to Missionary Schneider's account, the oblong roof in the center back of the photograph was part of the chief's residence. The large house in front was the resthouse for European visitors. Weh was then the seat of a Native Court with Grade D powers which had been opened in 1921, the year in which Ndse-Bii-Ndum had been officially installed as the chief of Weh. The resthouse sometimes accomodated British personel on tour. Later on, this function was transferred to the Basel Mission Station, and in the years of Bame-Kom-Ndzang's reign, the resthouse had become obsolete and was torn down.

The smaller house to the left of the resthouse seems to be *ndau tse*, the house for the council of elders (*tse*). As mentioned above, *ndau tse* is headed by the chief and, put in very general terms, is concerned with the well-being of the chiefdom. Its members are the leading elders in the village, each of whom represents one patrilineage. The major task of the chief

9 Pfeffer 1929: 42, translated from the German.

and the *wuu tse*, men of tse, is the execution of the annual rituals connected with the agrarian cycle, and the settlement of conflicts in the village. During the planting and the harvesting seasons they meet once a week on "Weh Saturdays,"[10] and close the house when the dry season begins. Closely connected with the activities of *ndau tse* is *fee tse*, a sacrifice which takes place in a sacred grove near the palace (fig. 1, no. 4). *Fee tse* is performed by the chief and the elders, either when a person has been killed in war or a leopard caught and killed. It is a reconciliation and purification ritual, and probably the most important in Weh, clearly marking a transition into a new purified state for the whole village. *Tse* is afterwards dissolved and newly formed, the small forest cut down. It will grow again – untouched by anybody.

The palace looks very compact on Schneider's photograph (ill. 1), an impression mainly created by the walls and fences connecting all the houses. Fences and connecting walls used to be characteristic of all the large compounds in Weh, but are rarely seen today. Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum had many more wives and children than his predecessors. Altogether there were thirty wives whom he had inherited from his predecessors or married during his reign. With them he had 40 children, of whom 29 survived into adulthood.

Pfeffer's photographs from 1927 show two major areas of the palace. One of them depicts the grave of the chiefs (*isai*) located between the women's quarters and the resthouse for the Europeans (ill. 3). On this early photograph, the common grave of the chiefs is a simple raised platform of stones and soil with a small roof. An injunction sign of *ndau tse* leans against it. Such injunction signs (*kelang*), made from the branch of a raphia palm tree (all but the upper leaves are removed), are used to this day. Once they are put up, nobody can enter the area they "protect" without having to pay major fines to the members of *ndau tse*. In 1934, when Missionary Schneider took his photograph of the same area, a more impressive grave house (*ndau isai*) had been built (ill. 2). Possibly, the chief imitated examples he had seen in other polities of the Grassfields, such as the impressive *achum*, the grave house of the Bafug kings. The shrine at Weh was erected on a stone foundation and had – as the only building in the palace – walls made out of the so-called "bamboos" of the raphia palm which were not daubed with mud. In Weh, there seemed to be a clear distinction between the non-daubed house for male activities, such as the meeting houses of the male secret society *kweifo*, or the workshops of blacksmiths, and the daubed, that is residential, house. Finishing the walls of a bamboo structure with mud was a female task. This would explain, why the grave shrine of the chiefs, in which the chiefs perform sacrifices to the deceased chiefs, was originally not daubed. It was part of the men's domain.

Since these two pictures were taken, the grave shrine has undergone several reconstructions. In 1970, there was a smaller house at this location, then, though, with daubed walls and a grass roof (fig. 2, no. 21). The present chief has rebuilt it at least once – most notably after his installation in 1976 (fig. 3, no. 28). It is now a medium-sized structure made of sun-dried mudbricks with a zinc roof. Mudbricks were introduced in this peripheral area of the Grassfields in the 1940s and are now the most popular building material, having long since replaced the traditional bamboo and mud structures. Very few houses in Weh are now built in the traditional way.

10 The Weh week has eight days. "Weh Saturday" is actually *tshu ukpwe*, the day of the Ukpwe, a population that inhabited an area near (probably on) the Weh territory. Many Ukpwe were driven away by the Aghem and were partly absorbed into Weh.

One of the themes in this discussion has been the question whether the palace differed greatly from the compounds of other well-to-do Weh lineages. As far as building materials and techniques are concerned, there was no difference other than size. One major distinction is now the grave shrine for the chiefs. Considering the fact, though, that it was only introduced in its present form in the time period between 1927 and 1934, it might be of interest to compare its early form to the graves in other large compounds in the village. In most instances, a deceased compound head was buried in a two to three meter deep, individual grave outside the entrance of his house. However, there are several compounds in Weh, where the compounds heads are buried in a common grave which is marked by a small stone setting. Here, the libations and sacrifices to the ancestors are carried out. Unfortunately, no other tie could be found between these compounds using a common grave for their deceased elders. But in any event, it should be noted that in its earlier form the grave of the chiefs is not distinct from some burials in the village. When Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum had the grave house put up, he also introduced certain rules pertaining to the shrine. Theoretically, only the chief can enter it, but there are exceptions. When a new chief has to carry out the libations and rituals for the first time, an old man of the chiefly patrilineage will accompany him and teach him. Furthermore, I was told, that the roof of *ndau isai* could never be re-thatched. Instead, the complete building had to be reconstructed. But information on this point is vague.

The photograph (ill. 3) of the grave shows several objects, which are still preserved today: the stone seat of the chief and the smaller stone seats of the members of *ndau tse* (fig. 2, no. 23, fig. 3, no. 30). The members of *ndau tse* sit on these seats, when they judge cases concerning the well-being of the whole village, such as land disputes. They also sit there during the assembly of the village community, the *kokebi* (= going to the compound – of the chief).[11] The *kokebi* is called the case of imminent danger to the village, such as drought, insect plagues, all of which are caused by evil-doers (witches and wizzards) who have to be exposed and dealt with. During the *kokebi* the chief sits on his large stone seat, on top of a bundle of roofing grass. He sits symbolically above the village, at least this is how one could interpret this posture. The stone seat of the chief also plays an important part in the installation of a new chief. Again, he sits on it once he has undergone the separation ritual in his transformation from an ordinary man into the chief. The stones as such are no ordinary stones (*itai*, pl. *atai*). The stones on which the members of *ndau tse* sit are *mbwii* and were collected in *djuu mbwii* (= water of *mbwii*). This small river, located some 5 kilometers southeast of the village in the bush territory of Weh, flows over Eboaboa, a waterfall. Here, in a cave behind the waterfall, which collapsed some 50 years ago, is one of the entrances to the world of the ancestors. The river is thus an important symbol as are the stones carried from there. This is, incidentally, not the only context in which such stones are used. The *mbwii* is the sacred object in the women's society *fe-mbwii* (Geary 1976: 49ff. and 1978: 68f.). The stone seat of the chief alludes to the smithing traditions in Weh. Until recently, Weh was the location of an active smelting and smithing industry. When a Weh man wanted to have an iron object forged for him, he had to provide the blacksmith with the bloom produced by the smelter. For the smithing process, the bloom had to be pounded into small pieces by the client. Thus, every compound had flat stones on which the bloom was smashed into pieces. Through constant use, depressions were worn in it. The chief's stone seat was such a stone for pounding the bloom as the many cavities indicate. It is much larger

11 See also Geary 1976: 193ff.

than similar stones in other compounds. In order to bring such a large and heavy stone (*kenaa*, pl. *unaa*) into the chief's compound, many men would have had to drag it together into the village.

Pfeffer's second photograph shows the courtyard of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum (ill. 4). It was located behind the present assembly hall (*keselli*). The most notable feature were the six carved poles (*feikong*, pl. *meikong* = figure in anthropomorphic or zoomorphic form) supporting the roofs on three sides. While wooden carved poles are commonplace in many Grassfields chiefdoms, these are the only examples known from Weh. They display the characteristics of the style of the Fungom area, such as a certain angularity of form and elongated torsi. They were created by Taa-Mong-Baa, whose nickname was Demm ("the one making struggle"). He was a man from Weh whose father, too, had already carved. While he learnt his trade from his father, he also gained further knowledge when he went to Kom. It may have been there or in other areas of the Grassfields that Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum first encountered such pieces, and then commissioned his own. Only one such post had survived the ravages of time and was kept in the reception hall of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang, the present *keselli*. In 1970, it stood in the middle of the room and occasionally the chief would pour a libation of palmwine in front of it. It was unclear to me then, whether the male and female figures had more than decorative meaning. Pfeffer remarks in the caption of the photograph, that the two poles represent "the two last kings of Wae with their chamberlains above them" (Pfeffer 199: opp. p. 64). Considering the source, the statement seems rather unreliable. In 1984, the last remaining post had disappeared – one of the unfortunate instances of a piece having been removed illegally, in spite of the more effective enforcement of the antiquities laws in Cameroon.[12] No further information could be gathered on the meaning of the pieces. Carved doorposts, which could be found in many compounds in Weh, were also part of the carvings in the palace. There are two left, built into the wall next to a doorway to the courtyard of the Fon. The only other carvings in public areas of the palace are imported stools from the Babanki region.

This same photograph reveals another interesting feature of the chief's courtyard: the walls were decorated with bold geometrical designs. While this technique of decoration is no longer used in Weh, there are some other old pictures of similarly decorated walls. The photographs of the first church of the Basel Mission, built by Missionary Schneider with the strong support of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum, show designs in black on white on the outside walls. Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum supposedly insisted on this form of decoration. Although decorated and whitewashed walls were not unknown in Weh, old informants attribute Ndse-Bii-Ndum's preference for bold, large-scale designs to the fact that he had seen similar decorations among the Germans.

Finally, a few other features of the palace should be mentioned. A large hall served the members of *samba*, a dancing association for warriors. They met there and performed their dance. It was torn down under Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang. As in many other big compounds, certain plants grew in the palace area, such as *kenene*, a euphorbia, protecting the palace from lightning. When lightning struck, it should hit the plant instead of the buildings. The sap of the *kenene* "cooled" the lightning. Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang planted some other medicinal plants in its stead, when it had decayed.

12 The figures disappeared 1981, a few days after a well-known collector of Cameroonian art had visited the palace and inquired about them.

When Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum died in 1949, he left behind a thriving compound. His successor was the rather unpopular Bame-Kom-Ndzang, the last surviving son of Chief Mbu-Sou-Tshu. Conflicts surrounding his installation broke out between a traditional faction in the village, who wanted to adhere to fraternal succession, and younger men who had had western education and thought that a literate and more dynamic chief would advance the village in the competition for benefits from the colonial administration and the missions. In the end, the candidate of the traditionalists won over the young Simon N. Nji, the present Fon, who was then a court clerk.

When I came to Weh in 1970, Bame-Kom-Ndzang had been chief for some 20 years and had lived through difficult times as far as his chiefly privileges were concerned. He was often in trouble with the administration as a result of his incapacity to handle some of the demands that were placed on the chiefs, such as the collection of tax. The palace fell into disrepair (fig. 2); some of the women's houses were near collapse, roofs needed to be fixed. The chief himself complained bitterly about the lack of community spirit. During the years of his predecessor, the men of the village had fixed the palace roofs once a year. Now the men of the wards did not come anymore to the annual "cutting of the grass," as this ceremony was called. The chief was also unable to provide his own workers with appropriate wages. Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang had 11 wives during his life-time who bore him 33 children. Nine of his wives lived with him in 1970. In the 1950s and 1960, the palace had been rebuilt several times and was now a mixture of the traditional building style and the mudbrick constructions favored in recent times. Only Bame-Kom-Ndzang's own residence had a zinc roof, all the other houses were roofed with grass. It was only a pale shade of Ndse-Bii-Ndum's well-kept palace and bore witness to a certain helplessness and to the financial problems of its occupant.

When the present Fon, a son of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum[13], became chief in 1976, the palace was more or less in decay and had been neglected for many years. His remodelled palace is the one I know best (ill. 5 and fig. 3). The palace is now completely built of mudbricks and roofed with zinc. When Weh was provided with a water system, which was constructed by experts of the Swiss organization SATA in 1977/78, a public water tap was installed behind the palace (fig. 3, no. 31). The Fon had a new residence built for himself in 1976 (fig. 3, no. 1) and tore down the old living quarters of his predecessor. The Fon's living quarters furnished in the modern style, contain numerous memorabilia of the owner's previous positions. The Fon receives his official guests and the representatives of the village (secretaries of various committees, teachers, personal of the healthpost) in the parlor of this residence. Ordinary people from the village, who want an audience with the Fon, usually wait on the terrace in front of the house. The Fon very often has his chair put there, too, talks to his visitors and observes the daily life in the courtyard, where his small children play. There are other innovations: a garage for the cars, and, of late, a generator for electricity. The Fon of Weh follows his predecessors' example by creating a palace adequate to his needs.

Some of the basic features, though, have been retained. There are the courtyards of Chief Ndse-bii-Ndum, where some of his wives live, and the one of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang. Under the rule of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang many of his predecessor's wives had left the palace and moved in with their children or other relatives. Some of them have now moved back into the

13 The Fon was born in the 1920s and named Nnga-Tshu. He took his father's name Ndse (= Nji) as his family name.

palace women's houses. The old parlor of Chief Bame has been refurbished (fig. 2, no. 3; fig. 3, no. 10). Here, at the *keselli*, the Fon meets with the members of *ndau tse* and official visiting groups. During the meetings his armchair is placed on a cement platform and he sits above all the other participants as befits a chief.

Another meeting room serves the members of the chief's lineage and the members of *kefab*, a secret society for senior women. This room is called *ndau inee* (fig. 3, no. 21). According to my informants, there was no such meeting room in the palace of the previous chiefs. The Fon has his own seat in *ndau inee* next to the entrance. I attended several meetings there, such as the annual assembly of the *kefab* members. The women bring food from their fields to greet the Fon and in turn receive a meal, for which pigs and goats are slaughtered. At such an occasion, they also complain to the Fon about problems with cultivation. In 1983, for example, the harvest of *egusi* (seeds of pumpkins) had failed, because the pumpkins had rotted in the fields. One of the oldest women of *kefab* bitterly complained to the chief who bears part of the burden for such failures. On another occasion, the death of a member of the chief's lineage was celebrated belatedly, when news had come, that the man had died some 30 years ago in the area of the Katsina Ala River. Important gatherings of the women take place at the house of the *natum*, the senior woman of all the women in the palace.[14] Once, the mothers-in-law entertained their sons-in-law and in return received a splendid meal from them.

One building, slightly east of the palace area, can also be counted among the palace structures: The meeting hall of the Traditional Village Council which is nowadays in charge of civil litigation in the village. This council was officially instituted in 1969 by the Wum Area Council. People take their bridewealth and family disputes to this forum. The members who are approved by the Wum Area Council meet once a week on Weh Saturday. Under Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang, a smaller hall was on the west side of the palace. Now it is a large structure which doubles as official meeting hall, when administrative matters are discussed.

During the dry season of 1983/84 the Fon had a new road dug which leads alongside the hill towards the South. He was becoming tired of disturbances when people passed on the old footpath between the women's quarters and the *ndau tse*. Barriers now keep people from simply entering the palace area. Fon Nji II is a man of modern times and cherishes a greater amount of privacy than his predecessors. There is much administrative work that needs to be done day in and day out, and the older forms or relationships with the villagers, the long meetings with conversation lasting for hours, are mostly a thing of the past. Again, as was the case under all his predecessors, the palace configuration was adapted to changed needs.

It is obvious from the analysis of three palaces and the traditions about three more chiefly compounds that a direct link exists between the physical properties of the palace and the chieftaincy. In the Grassfields, there are political units of varying scale and complexity. Weh should be placed at the end of the spectrum where we find polities with strong lineages and a weakly developed chieftaincy. The explanation for the position of the Weh chiefs lies in the historical development of Weh. The area of Weh has been settled for a long time, but Weh acquired its identity only after the raids of the 19th century. According to oral traditions collected in 1970, the wards formed independent nuclei before they joined together to

14 Senior women in Weh who are members of the *kefab* society bear the title *natum*. Furthermore, the woman who represents all women in Weh (an inherited position), and the senior woman in the palace are also addressed as *natum*.

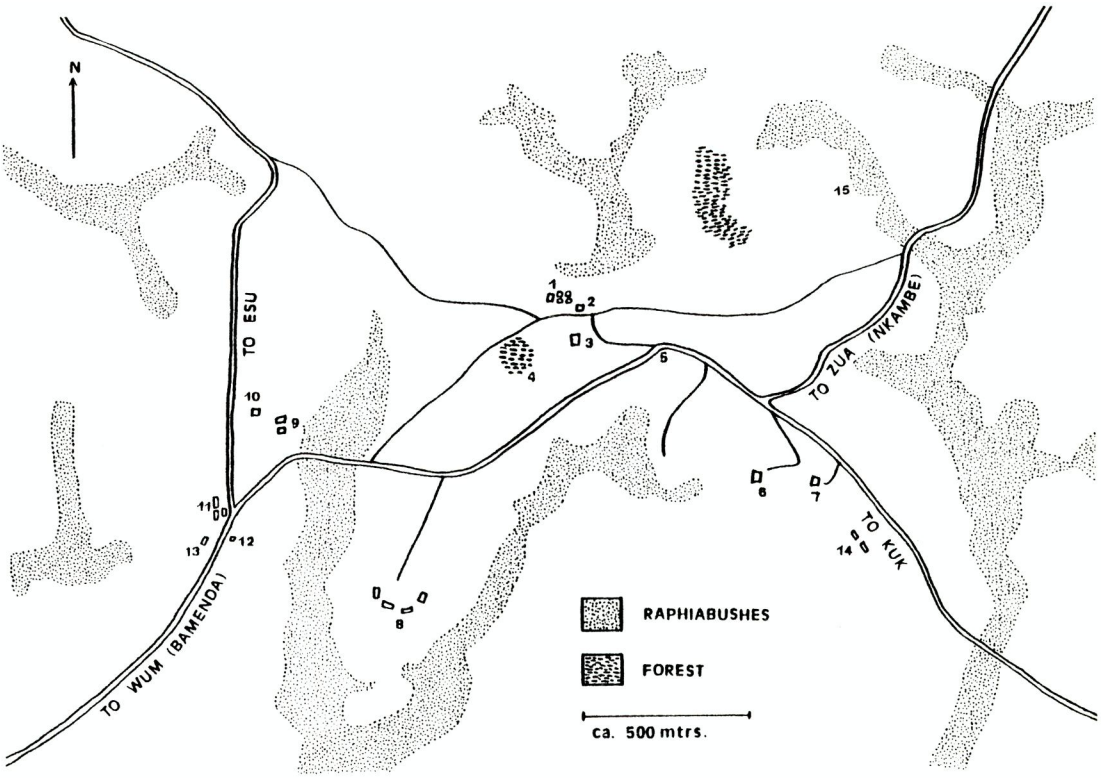
form Weh. Considering the numbers of the German census for Weh, it seems appropriate to characterize these settlements as lineage settlements with the lineage of the later ward heads dominating. There are several "original" lineages in Weh that have no traditions of migration. The other lineages trace their origins to neighboring chiefdoms. Their founders migrated to Weh of their own choice or were driven from their villages of origin. Most of these migrants arrived three or four generations ago in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their arrival and settlement seems to coincide with the beginnings of the palace and chieftaincy as a more influential force. It would be premature and beyond the scope of this discussion to analyse the regional processes which led to the condensation of the Weh polity, but it seems feasible to look at factors such as trade with areas now beyond the Nigerian border (Jukun, i.e. Wukari) and the impact of the iron smelting and smithing industry.

The egalitarian principles that are so pervasive in the Weh case – the role of Chief Ndse-Ika and the fate of Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo were indicators – were successfully maintained until the influence of the Germans and the British shifted the distribution of power in the chiefdom. They still exist now as a strong undercurrent determining everyday life in Weh. The palace, at the turn of the century not much bigger or more elaborate than the residences of rich Weh men, began to grow. In the 1930s and 1940s, Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum, as a mediator between the external authorities and the villagers, had access to more information and resources than any other person in Weh. Consequently, he could accumulate more wealth, build a larger palace with features that made it into an imposing structure.

A comparison of the Weh palace with other large-scale palaces reveals important differencs resulting from the size and the political structure of Weh. There has never been a palace organization of retainers, even though Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo took some steps in this direction. *Kweifo* does not exist in the palace, it belongs rather to the ward heads. Societies of princes or retainers never existed. Most societies in Weh are owned by large patrilineages. Of course, the chief presides in *ndau tse*, the traditional council of elders. Yet, the voices of the elders carry much weight. He also owns *ndau ifa*, an important lodge which purifies the village. Like the women of other large compounds the women of the palace, by the way, have their own dancing association. They dance *ndzang* when women's funerals take place and during other celebrations.

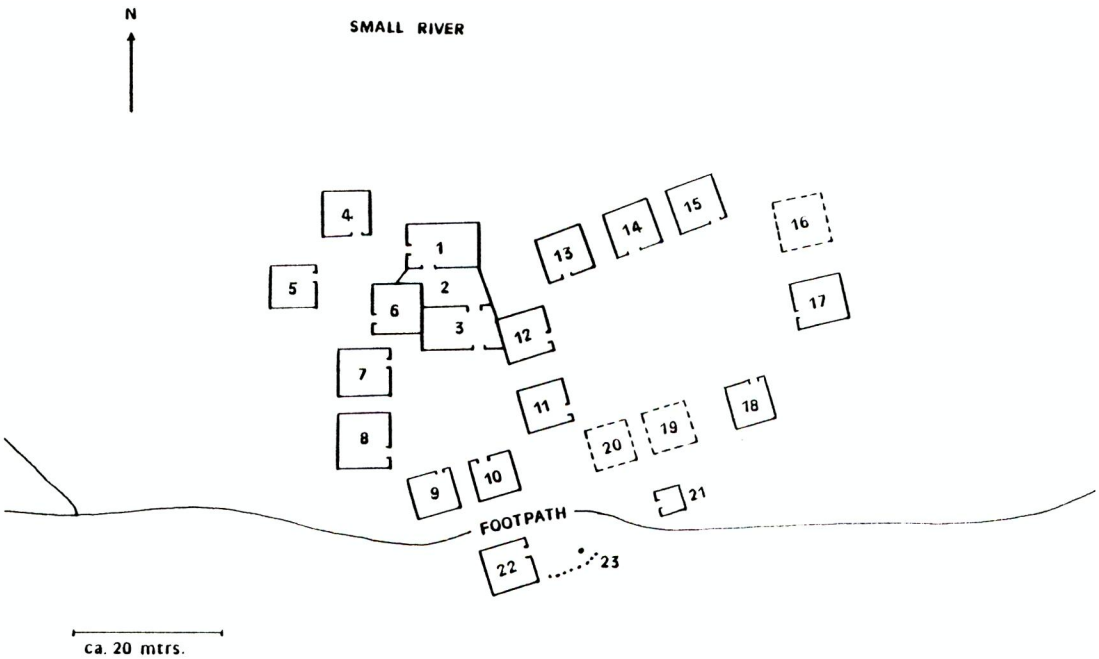
The privileges of the chief were relatively few. Most importantly, Weh chiefs always had to pay bridewealth. Thus, they had no greater access to women and their productive and reproductive strengths than other men in Weh. When Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo started to appropriate women without giving bridewealth, his actions created conflicts in the village. Other prerogatives, such as free labor, seem to have been respected under Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum who had to fulfil the demands of the colonial administration. His weak successor, though, stood no chance of claiming what he thought was his. Finally, etiquette should be considered briefly. There are strong indications that the avoidance of corporal contact with the chief, the address *mbe*, the subservient posture of the people who speak to him or pass in front of him were introduced under Chief Mou-Sei-Ndoo only (Geary 1976: 139).

In conclusion, palace structures in Weh show a characteristic which I should designate as ephemeral qualitites. Their flexibility seems to be an inherent trait, and each chief created a palace that was within the scope of the resources at his disposal. The analysis of these palaces provides one more avenue to the understanding of the processes that shaped the chieftaincy in Weh.



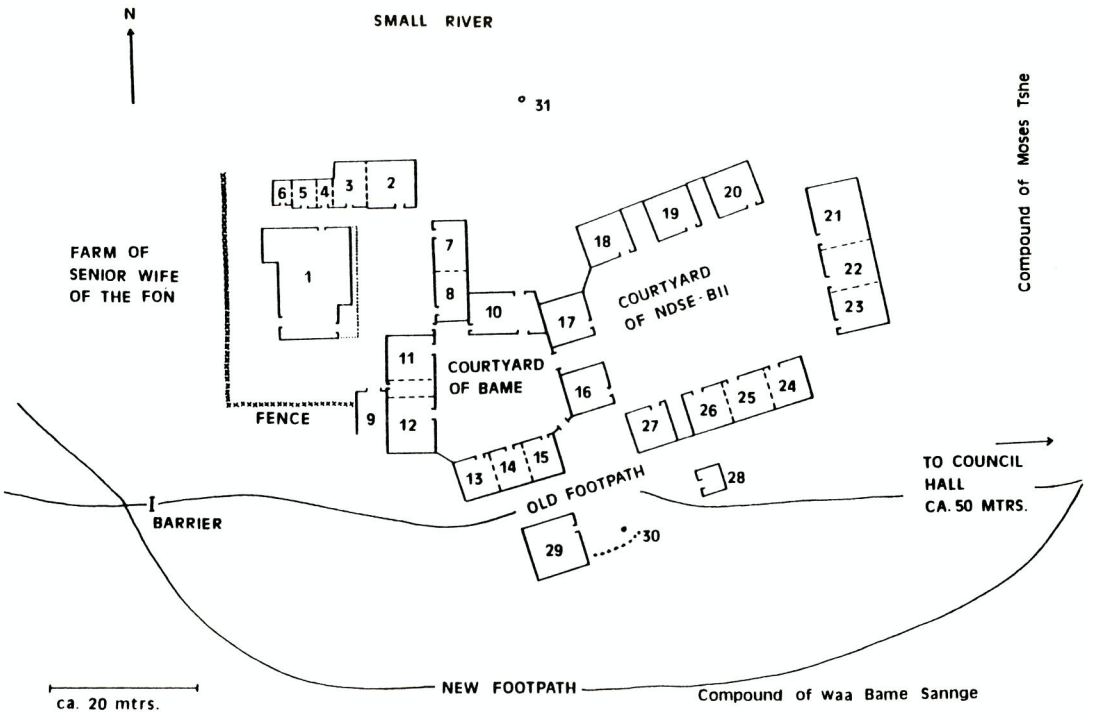
1. Palace of Fon Simon N. Nji II.
2. Meeting hall of the Weh Traditional Village Council.
3. Presbyterian church.
4. Sacred forest for the *fee tse* sacrifice.
5. Small daily market.
6. Presbyterian healthpost (formerly the Presbyterian Mission).
7. Fon Nji's former residence.
8. Presbyterian school.
9. Catholic school.
10. Catholic church.
11. Market square.
12. House owned by Fon Nji, formerly a maternity.
13. Building of the Weh Women's Cooperative.
14. Government school.
15. The chief's raphia bush.

Figure 1: Weh, Menchum Division, North West Province (1983)



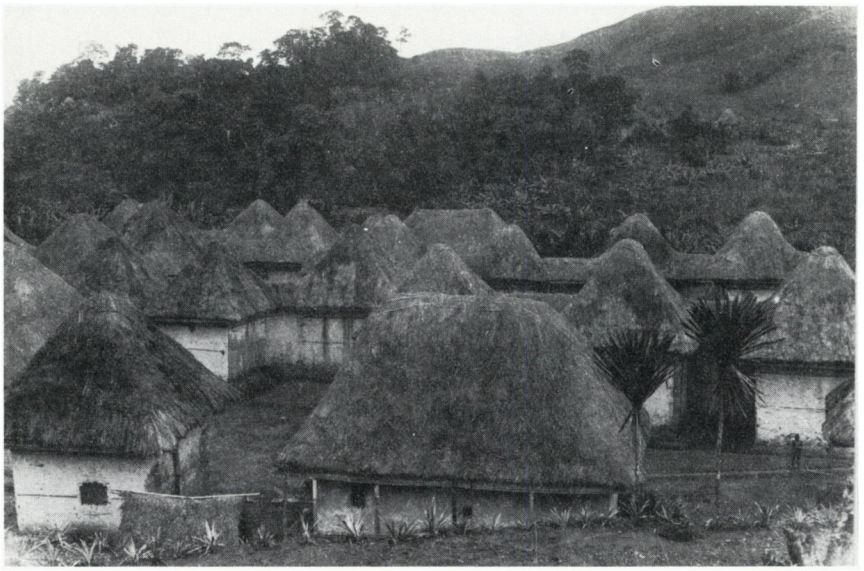
1. Residence of the chief (mudbrick construction).
2. Courtyard where the chief often sat and talked with visitors.
3. Reception hall of the chief, the *keselli* (mudbrick construction).
4. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
5. Former house of one of his wives, now deteriorated and empty traditional construction).
6. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
7. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
8. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
9. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
10. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
11. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum (traditional construction).
12. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
13. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
14. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
15. House of one of his wives (mudbrick construction).
16. Foundation of a house.
17. House of a brother's wife. She did not live in the house in 1970, because it was falling down (mudbrick construction).
18. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum (mudbrick construction).
19. Foundation of a house.
20. Foundation of a house.
21. Grave shrine of the chiefs (traditional construction).
22. House of *ndau tse*, the traditional council of elders (traditional construction).
23. Stone seats of the chief and the members of *ndau tse*.

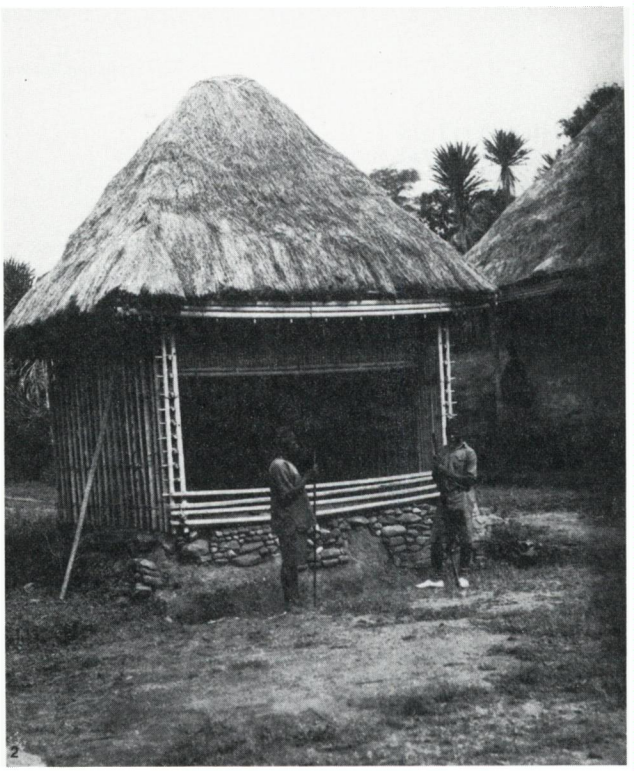
Figure 2: The Palace of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang in 1970



1. Residence of Fon Nji II, built in 1976.
2. Kitchen of the Fon's senior wife, Madame Margaret.
3. Small house.
4.–6. Storage rooms.
7, 8. Houses of two wives of the Fon.
9. Garage.
10. *keselli*, meeting room for guests of the Fon and *ndau tse*, the council of elders, when its house is closed during the dry season.
11. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
12. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum.
13. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
14. House of "children" of Chiefs Ndse-Bii-Ndum and Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
15. House of the daughter of Thomas Bame, a member of the chief's lineage.
16. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum.
17. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
18. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum.
19. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
20. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
21. *ndau inee*, meeting house for women.
22. House of the *natum*, the senior woman of all palace women. She was a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum.
23. House of a son of the Fon's sister (same father and mother). He is a driver working for the government.
24. House of a man who serves the Fon.
25. House of a son of Moses Tshe, a paternal uncle of the fon. Moses Tshe's compound is located to the east of the palace.
26. House of a wife of Chief Bame-Kom-Ndzang.
27. House of a wife of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum.
28. Grave shrine of the chiefs, *ndau isai*.
29. *ndau tse*, meeting house of the council of elders.
30. Stone seats for the members of *ndau tse* and the chief.
31. Water tap.

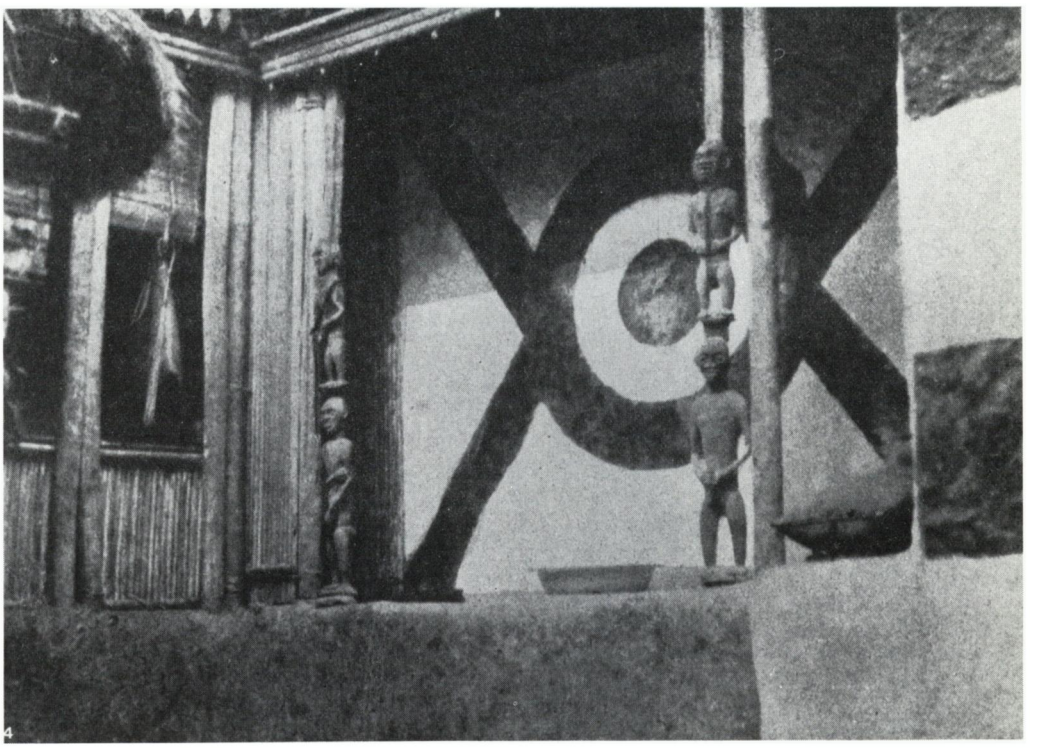
Figure 3: The Palace of Fon Nji II of Weh (1983)





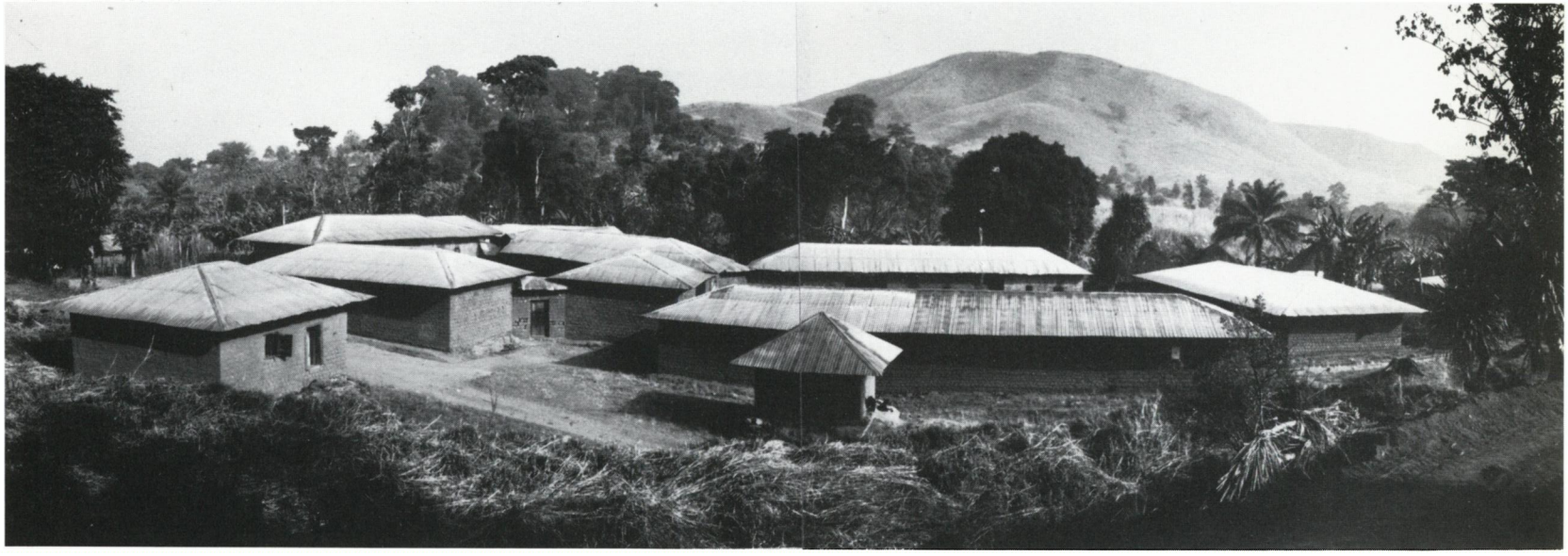
Ill. 1: Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum's palace taken from the small hill towards the South. Photograph: Missionary Wilhelm Schneider, 1934.

Ill. 2: The grave shrine of the chiefs of Weh. Photograph: Missionary Wilhelm Schneider, 1934.



Ill. 3: Grave of the chiefs of Weh in 1927. On the right is the resthouse. Photograph: Gulla Pfeffer (1929: opp. page 64).

Ill. 4: Reception area in the palace of Chief Ndse-Bii-Ndum with two carved posts. Photograph: Gulla Pfeffer, 1927 (1929: opp. page 64).



Ill. 5: Palace of Fon Simon N. Nji II. Photograph: Christraud Geary, 1984.

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