

## NOTES ON THE MATERIAL SYMBOLISM OF GRASSFIELDS PALACES

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### *Introduction*

It is a striking feature of the sociology of the Cameroon Grassfields that so little attention has been paid to the symbolic structure of these societies. The papers in this symposium serve to correct this situation by focusing our attention on the classificatory schemes which legitimised precolonial expressions of power. By using the palace as a starting point one assumes that such expressions were rarely, if ever, experienced in a personalised or secularised coercive form but were revealed through their objectification in concrete, material form. The palace and the *Fon* thus occupy the same iconic space formed by collapsing the classificatory rules which functioned more widely to organise social relations in the societies of the Grassfields.

We have to be satisfied first of all that palaces represented a segregated space that was framed as a semanticised domain in Grassfields cultures. However, if we limit ourselves to the notion that symbols represent something, of the signifier/signified variety, then we shall only produce circular statements about the palace as a representation of social hierarchy, as a representation of the dominant value of the culture concerned (such as "the *Fon* is good") or as a representation of group identity and unity. This is not to deny that the palace, as material symbol, did not perform these functions, only to say that it will not tell us why it had the potency to do so. The point has been made already by Paula Ben Amos (1976) in her discussion of Benin royal art. There, a brass plaque, which depicts the Oba swinging leopards by the tail, can be unravelled as a conventional representation of his power and authority. But she shows that this rests on a more general series of classifications in Bini culture which gives the conventional statement its force and power. Such statements rest upon a classification of materials (brass, coral, ivory, wood), a classification of animals (leopards, pythons, pangolin), and a classification of space (high/low, palace/non-palace) which are collapsed into a single statement expressing the naturalness of unequal relations between men. Whilst a material symbol may represent something, it does so only as a mere statement and to go further requires a grasp of those cultural practices which, so often taken for granted, cannot be expressed in verbal form.

It seems therefore that if we choose to segregate the palace as a symbolic space, it is not palaces *per se* nor their "meaning" that we are interested in. Rather it is the access they provide to these implicit assumptions and practices. The palace is thus an objectification, representing the appropriation in a single material form of a classification of differences which pervade social life as a whole.

### *A System of Differences*

The approach adopted in this paper will be to interpret variant culture and material practices, associated with palace structures and rituals, as the product of a limited number of dichotomous distinctions which can be found as unconscious regulating principles in a much

wider range of social situations. What follows is a preliminary examination of four such distinctions drawn mainly from my own fieldwork in Bafut and, where relevant, using comparative observations from other Grassfields societies.

### *Wet and Dry*

There are several references to buildings in the palace which directly associate the *Fon* with water. In Bafut and Mankon, the *atshum* is called the “lake of the *Fon*” (Chilver and Kaberry 1962: 28; Warnier this volume), in Bangwa (eastern) the *Fon* eats in the “house of water”; in Nso’ he will not drink palace water but only from a special stream (Pradelles this volume; Chilver pers. comm.). In Bafut all past fons are believed to possess double *persona*: one which is buried in the *nefum* and the other (the one that can transform) is a ritual double who wanders from place to place until it decides to settle (at the death of his successor) in a wet place, usually a stream or waterfall. It is to the latter that living fons go to sacrifice before the annual festival; that women and the uninitiated should not visit and where special rites are performed if the country is afflicted with disease or other threats. Running water is thus closely associated with cleansing and with the powers that fons have to transform to defeat sorcery from outside and to cleanse polluting acts inside Bafut. *Takumbeng*, the principal royal cleansing cult to which only the first born sons of a *Fon* can belong, is a shrine located in the palace dancing area. The ritual doubles of past fons are called by their first born sons who go to the stream and blow flutes to escort them to the shrine. The same is done in all quarters with commoner *takumbeng* shrines officiated at by the descendants of princes. The shrines are built with dry grasses and the dry leaves of the raphia palm. The cleansing ritual (*fen’oo*) involves blowing wood ash into the air to drive away diseases and throwing wood ash into the stream so that “all bad things will go downstream”. In Bafut, *takumbeng* mediates between wet and dry which implies that the powers of the ritual double of the *Fon* are at least ambiguous. It would be worth pursuing the idea that the classification of materials used in palace and domestic buildings is orchestrated by the contrast of wet and dry. That the use of dry grass, dry raphia bamboo leaves, dry matting, dried split bamboo stems and date palm trunks is based on this contrast rather than just on technical efficiency. Warnier tells us that in Mankon dry grass is brought to the palace and left until the first rains before re-thatching of the *atshum* begins (Warnier 1975: 344) and Chilver mentions that the graves of the Nso’ *afon* must not be rained upon which may have something to do with the fact that it is the obligation of affines to re-thatch the roof. Both palace and domestic architecture appears to mediate the wet/dry contrast and thus express unconsciously held dispositions of which they are an objectification.

The high/low axis described most fully for Bangwa by Pradelles and also for Mankon and Bandjoun by Warnier and Ghomsi (this volume) is related to high status being associated with closeness to running water and lower status with higher ground. This distinction is also associated with pollution removal and avoidance. Hence *kwi’fo* buildings are on high; bad deaths are left on the tops of hills whilst good deaths are buried under the house and the traditional blessing of blowing water or spitting on a person’s chest is opposed to the curse of blowing dust at him. In Bafut, dryness connotes absence of suppleness, illness is detected by a yellowish-greyish pallor and dull, flaky skin whilst health connotes a shining, reddish hue to the skin. At marriage, a girl will be stripped by her mother’s female relatives and her father

and mother's father bless her by pouring large quantities of palm oil on her body so that she will become supple and quickly have a child. The ideal that heat and dryness must balance with moisture and suppleness thus has strong male/female connotations. In Bangwa, women are seen to be hot and dry and men are wet; marriage is like cooking in the sense that water is placed over a fire to produce food; children are thus the food of marriage (Pradelles pers. comm.). The same appears in traditional ironworking. The furnace is female and the bellows are male and the bloom is food. Hence the significance of Warnier and Fowler finding a pot containing fragments of bloom and an egg(?) placed on top of tuyère fragments as the ritual deposit at the base of the Bakwang furnace (Warnier and Fowler, 1979: 336). Moreover, iron has dangerous associations with heat; in particular with violent death and the spilling of blood in anger. The notion that the *Fon* should not have contact with iron and that, as a material, it is more closely associated with the pollution removal activities of *kwi'fo* suggest that it is part of a more pervasive symbolic dualism.

In Bafut, older people perceive death as a gradual drying of the body marked by wrinkles and dry, loose skin. More deaths are thought to occur in the dry season even though the frequency of respiratory disease and the onset of the hunger period in the early wet season collude in a rise in mortality. The dryness associated with old age seems to connote a distinct kind of potency. For example, when the plants are cut to make the "medicines" to protect the boundaries, they are first placed in front of the *takumbeng* shrine and an old man and old woman roll on them naked to give them extra fortification. The corpse is seen as a terminal state of dryness symbolised by the fact that all offerings to the dead take the form of liquid; in We the corpse is placed on the lap of a young girl rubbed with palm oil (Geary pers. comm.); in Mankon the wives were covered with ashes at the funeral of Ndifuru III.

Water, palm wine and camwood are found together in ritual contexts which emphasise conflict resolution as a pre-requisite for the affirmation of descent group unity and solidarity. Camwood is the meta-sign of incorporation and unity. Successors to vacant titles in Bafut are rubbed with it by other lineage title holders; a girl is washed and rubbed with oil and camwood when received into her husband's compound; a person in exile is accepted back by the *Fon's* rubbing him with camwood; resolution of a dispute is sealed by everyone touching a calabash of water and by the distribution of camwood to family heads to rub on their people. Rubbing camwood on the body produces the healthy reddish hue to the skin which is thought to result from a sense of moral unity and solidarity. It is the opposite sign to throwing ashes and a fruit called *fen'aa* when expelling a person from the village for a misdeed. The combination of water and palm wine is a symbolic focus of ancestral substance and unity through descent. To drink wine from another man's cup without the right to do so is a source of mystical danger; to pour wine from your cup on the husband stone of the hearth (*ndo nechwü*) whilst speaking angrily is to cause misfortune; to speak well whilst doing so is a blessing. Before the annual dance, all standing stones set at road junctions where the spirits of important men are said to rest, are visited and the places cooled with libations of water and palm wine. "Cooling a place down" is indissolubly linked with the capacity that wine and water have to placate resentful ancestors. The wet/dry contrast is therefore a continuous commentary on the moral authority of ancestors and descent as a moral hierarchy ordering social relations. This moral unity has to be continuously defended against the forces which might undermine its coherence. Such forces appear to be disparate: disputes and polluting acts, witchcraft and the use of "bad medicine", disease, relations with affines and the loyalty of wives, and death. This may oversimplify in reducing diverse practices to a single formula but the focus on dry-

ness, heat and outside appears to be the common objectification of another vision of Bafut society. By viewing precolonial Bafut political culture in terms of separation and contrast, it would be logical to interpret the *Fon* and palace as a classic mediation and locus for the resolution of conflict. However, as we shall go on to see, this would oversimplify a more complex whole.

### *High and Low*

The papers by Pradelles and Tardits (this volume) provide systematic expositions of the ordering of space in two Grassfields chiefdoms. Their analysis need not be repeated here although the themes do appear to be of wider cultural significance.

As I have mentioned, at least in the cases of Bangwa and Mankon, the high/low axis appears superficially to reproduce indigenous conceptions of social hierarchy. The contrast may be extended to the spatial organisation of these chiefdoms as totalities. In Bangwa, for example, the palace is both “the head of the country” and situated at the lowest point. Hence, the compounds of important notables are also as low and as near running water as possible and the poorer ones are further away in hot/dry places (Pradelles pers. comm.). A high: dry::low: wet contrast appears to act as an organising principle in both palace and compound internal arrangement and to determine their spatial distribution in the chiefdom as a whole. However there are some counterindications to suggest that this need not be interpreted as a simple continuum from high to low status.

Tardits’ description of the Bamum palace, Warnier’s for Mankon and Pradelles’ for Bangwa concur in placing “*kwi’fo*” as high and near the entrance, and the *Fon*’s quarters as low and furthest inside the palace complex. Structures associated with pollution removing functions are inside the palace but placed on its highest periphery; in the case of Mankon the poison ordeal lodge (*nda ngu*) may even have been left outside the palace itself. In the case of Meta’, oathing shrines, butchering stones and the *ndeuk* platforms are all in the dancing field and outside chiefly compounds. The internalisation of a diverse range of pollution removing functions into the palace is there a feature of chiefdom centralisation; the principles behind which are only vaguely ascertainable. Mankon is a case where the two principles existed in stark contrast to each other with avoidance rules between *Fon* and *kwi’fo*. Bafut and Bangwa represent another tendency in which a certain fusing of the two principles is embodied in the ambiguous and what was often perceived as threatening behaviour of the *Fon*. The high: dry: low: wet contrast does not therefore organise status or its spatial representation in any continuous sense but is dualistic in tendency, although chiefly mediations between the two principles is characteristic of the more centralised forms of precolonial Grassfields chiefdoms. It is also interesting to note that the switch from a dualistic tendency in Mankon (where lineage/clan heads to *Fon* formed one hierarchy and members of *takoengoe* formed another, full of day/night; purity/pollution, etc. contrasts) to a more unified hierarchy of notables as in the Bamileke chiefdoms, is also associated with differing myths of origin in which the Mankon *Fon* is a farmer and the Bafut and Bangwa chiefs are usurping hunters marrying into autochthonous populations.

*Stones and Ancestors*

The significance of standing stones was frequently commented upon in the symposium and is worthy of consideration in its own right. Moreover, they allow us to trace the moral hierarchy of ancestral authority as a physical network linking compounds to quarters and quarters to palace in ascending levels of conceptual resolution.

None of the chiefdoms on the Bamenda plateau practised a skull cult and in the case of Bafut at least, this appears to have been a long standing pattern rather than a disruption due to population movement and concentration in the 19th Century. The Ritzenthalers say that in Bafut, a grave in the *nefum* would be opened after a number of years and the skull detached and reburied close to the surface so that libations could be poured down a bamboo tube (Ritzenthaler 1962: 67). At the death of a prince or commoner, the forehead of the deceased is rubbed with a stone which is kept by the *be'tabatse* (heads of lineages) until a successor is installed. Since there has been no record of segmentation in the commoner lineages in recent times, the stone joins others on a small shrine (*nebeute*) in the hut of the lineage head. It is his role as officiant of the shrine which entitles him to call lineage members to his compound to resolve a dispute or to periodically perform a ceremony called *nleu-tu'tai* (keep-head-father). The shrine is therefore the focus of ancestral substance for the *atse* (lineage) and is central to rites involving the unity of the compound and the lineage. In the same hut are the hearth stones of the compound head; two short stones (female) and a tall standing stone (*ndo nechwii*: husband stone). At installation of a successor or when a new compound is established, other lineage/clan title holders come to "pin the *mechwii*" and in the case of a lineage head (*ta'atse*) this would be done by members of one of the *kwi'fo* houses. "Pinning" means placing "medicines" (thus it may not be moved) under the *ndo nechwii* to protect the compound against witchcraft or people carrying "bad medicines". In addition, a man may *tsam* (pay for) the right to have a pot by the side of the *ndo* stone which contains medicines which are activated for good or bad depending on the nature of his speech. What is of clear importance is that the focus of descent group unity should be kept separate from the rites concerned with pollution avoidance and the transmission of misfortune to others since a lineage head exercises both powers. Hence, when a chicken is sacrificed (e.g. in order to compel lineage members not to continue a dispute) some feathers will be placed on the *nebeute* whilst the blood is sprinkled on the *ndo nechwii*. The stones in both places will be rubbed with camwood but it is the pouring of water and palm wine on leaves of the mollifying plant *mbeum'mboro* laid on the *nebeute* which is seen as cooling and unifying whilst libations at the *ndo* are potentially harmful. It scarcely needs to be pointed out that in elaborated form, this is also a distinction of functions which ideally separates and combines *Fon* and *kwi'fo*.

If we pursue the hierarchy of ancestral shrines, effectively it is limited to the relative size of each clan. A commoner clan head, a descendent of the founder, would be able to call all its members to his compound on exceptional occasions. These are now infrequent but presumably were less so in the 19th century when clan/lineage members would live together in the same quarter. The situation with the royal lineages in Bafut would be somewhat different principally because each is founded by a separate *Fon* and they lose royal status after the death of all the first born sons. Nevertheless the descendents of a past *Fon* in Bafut are only recognised as separate *atse* after his immediate successor has died and they are allowed to independently burn firewood in the *nefum*. This pattern of high royal lineage segmentation,

linked to control of the circulation of women, and the non-fissioning of commoner clans, is thus the principal dynamic of Bafut political expansion in the 19th century. Yet it produces a basic asymmetry in symbolic capital: royal lineages remain linked to a palace in a hierarchy of descent whilst commoner clans of independent origin are excluded from this. They enter the palace only on the side of the *kwi'fo*.

On the side of ancestral substance and the purity of descent, Bafut was thus organised segmentally with each *atse* in control of the conditions maintaining group unity. Whilst competition between *atses* was rife, expressed largely in terms of group size and the control of marriagable women, one *atse* could not claim a superior moral substance to another. Rather, hierarchy was established through appropriating control of the means of pollution avoidance and removal and the causing of misfortune. For example, a *takumbeng* shrine and one or more standing stones (*meubah*) would be found at most important crossroads in Bafut. The *takumbeng* shrines are kept by the descendents of former Fons who have been sent out of the palace to live in the different quarters. The medicines used at the shrines are produced in the palace; first blessed at the *takumbeng* shrine in the palace dance field and then used at the smaller shrines in coordination with events at the palace. Buried under each shrine is a rope made in the palace and similar to the ones used to climb palm trees. As seen, the main functions of the shrine are rites concerning the definition of boundaries i.e. the rite of *fen'oo* to drive away disease and the ritual fortification of the medicines placed on the boundaries of the village. The system of quarters which has grown up as administrative, territorial units in Bafut during the colonial period, were thus in origin ritual boundaries which encompassed individual *atses* and served to coordinate rites of pollution removal at the palace for the chiefdom as a whole. Whilst solitary standing stones are found, a survey of *takumbeng* shrines discovered no case of a shrine without a standing stone. This suggests that the erection of the stones preceded the distribution of the shrines historically. Each stone is said to be associated with one or more "spirits" of important men who once lived in the quarter. At rites at *takumbeng*, the stones are rubbed with camwood and before the annual festival, specially prepared food and wine is taken to all the stones by members of *kwi'fo*. The latter act is explicitly placatory in order to ensure that no resentment felt by these spirits will mar the festival. The ambiguous and polluting aspects of the standing stones are expressed in a number of ritual occasions. The large stone in front of the *takumbeng* shrine on the palace dancing yard broke recently and all the members of the quarter *takumbengs* came to erect a new one. It is at this stone that an *ntche* ceremony was carried out in 1972 to curse unknown persons who were involved in the theft of royal paraphernalia from the palace. The other standing stones on the dancing field are associated with *kwi'fo* activities, e.g. *ngoh menang* (the stone of *menang*) was where in the past victims for execution were tied. It is possible to speculate therefore that the standing stones at road junctions were originally associated with rites of pollution removal and avoidance connected with places where the ritual double of lineage/clan ancestors were thought to live. The fact that such persons may have been witches or proficient in the use of "bad medicines" would exacerbate fear of their capacity to cause misfortune if neglected. At some point, the sequence of *takumbeng* shrines appears to have been superimposed upon *meubah*, and the two conceptual systems linked to form a common defence against polluting acts and misfortune. The explicit dualism between royal *takumbeng* and commoner *kwi'fo* is thus replicated at ward level, whilst within the *atse* the rites of *ndo mechwii* and their links with *meubah* are opposed to rites expressing the purity of descent. In the palace these two dualisms are transformed into a single triadic form: the *Fon* as a unity

of ancestral substance; *takumbeng* as a royal cleansing cult; *kwi'fo* as the subsumption of commoner pollution removal and avoidance rites.

### *Inside and Outside*

The structuring of Bafut symbolic codes is concerned with the resolution of contradictions between the ideal of moral unity through the idiom of common descent and the reality of polluting acts and personal misdeeds. A solution is achieved by maintaining clear conceptual separations between the two at lower levels and a unification of the descent idiom in the person of the *Fon* and the pollution removal in certain aspects of *takumbeng* and *kwi'fo* at a higher level. Logically this should involve a spatial separation of ritual activities of the two domains and a physical separation of the persons involved.

The degree of "political centralisation" was a product of the extent to which this dualism was overcome. Warnier's description of Mankon for example suggests the existence of a more definite separation of powers than in the case of Bafut. *Takoengoe* was a group of men of different Mankon clans who were custodians of a bag containing the equipment necessary for the purification of pollution (Warnier 1983: 470). This was "bad *kwi'fo*" to which no lineage/clan heads would belong. The *Fon*, as a *de jure* member of all palace societies was seen as belonging to *takoengoe*, yet some versions of the foundation myths, and many informants, indicate that this was seen as conflicting with his pollution-free *persona*. A dualism detected at compound and lineage level pervades the whole political culture expressed in an ideal yet contradictory opposition between *Fon* and *takoengoe*. In Bafut, of the last four heads of *nda nggerre*, two were war captives and two were *be'tabatse* but were not direct descendents of the founder of their *atse*. The group of men responsible for carrying out the punishments ordered by *nda nggerre* were collectively called *takoeng* and are said to have been recruited from foreign immigrants to Bafut since no indigenous Bafut should spill another's blood. Hence, at clan/lineage level a similar avoidance of the polluting aspects of *kwi'fo* by clan/lineage heads occurs although there appears to be no explicit avoidance by then of the other houses in *kwi'fo* concerned with the preparation of protective medicines. The position of the *Fon* is similar to that of Mankon in playing an ambiguous role in polluting actions. He belongs to *nda nggerre* and will deliberate with senior *bukum* on the nature of appropriate punishment and is active in the repressive aspects of power. Bafut is thus transitional in the development of a conceptualisation of chiefship as a mediation between the moral unity in the maintenance of common ancestral substance and the control of polluting acts: a dualism which pervades all lineage/clan social relations and their condensation in the palace.

However, by emphasising the resolution aspects of pollution, there is a danger of de-emphasising the extent to which Bafut political culture was and to a certain extent still is, devoted to the fortification and protection of persons, groups and boundaries through the preparation of protective medicines. The need to resolve conflicts and polluting acts is seen as a result of a failure of this protective armature rather than a substitute for it in a meaningless social world.

Ancestral substance is literally seen to be embodied in the ritual materials of camwood, palm wine and water; Warnier makes the same point by showing that abominations in Mankon are always attacks against culturally produced or "humanised" artefacts and resources

(Warnier 1983: 452). It is also the ritual double aspect of the personality which is emphasised in conceptions of ancestral substance i.e. the power of ancestors to transform to combat witchcraft and sorcery on behalf of their living descendents. This is manifested in the masks, dances, songs and music associated with descent group and palace rituals: as Warnier notes, this is expressed in the half human, half animal mixture in songs and masquerades; the separation of night and day; the separation of good and bad *kwi'fo*; and the fact that the masked societies of *kwi'fo* and the *moko* belonging to lineages/clans and persons never speak with human voices (Warnier 1983: 452). The realisation of ancestral substance in social contexts places it in danger of attack by the witchcraft and sorcery of enemies. It has to be protected and fortified by medicines and the most powerful of these are prepared in the palace, using materials like the whiskers and teeth of leopards which only the *Fon* has access to, or else by societies in the palace like *takumbeng* which collect medicines made in all the different quarters, fortify them in the ritual called *fen'oo* and then redistribute them for the protection of the village as a whole. The production of protective medicines thus creates ritualised boundaries which both define and defend ancestral substance. Such boundaries can be personal; for example, the body is protected by carrying a bag of medicines to counteract others' use of "bad medicines" or by incisions into which medicines are rubbed to fortify it against attack. Or it is physical or spatial; a compound and all its cultural contents are embodiments of the substance of its ancestors and this is protected by the burying of medicines at its threshold or hanging bundles of medicine over the door frame so that if anyone enters with evil intentions, they will be attacked and killed. Quarters, as we have seen, owe their origin to the need to create protected boundaries within which members of different *atses* could live as supra-clan units. Finally, the "sealing of the boundaries" at the beginning of the planting season both defines and harnesses all the ancestral substances of the village towards communal protection against outside witchcraft at a period of critical importance. The protection of ancestral substance through medicines is thus hierarchically ordered, both temporally, spatially and ritually. The ideal is to enclose and order a potentially infinite and discontinuous social field with a hierarchically arranged structure of moral unity which ancestral substance promotes. The degree to which this succeeded in the precolonial past lies behind the historical definition of Bafut *contra* Mankon, Bali Nyonga, etc. whilst the obliteration of the palace and the places where medicines were produced, was a symbolic death; a return to an aimless social world and a return to nature.

It is important to stress that in Bafut thought, attacks on ancestral substance by enemies is conceived to be a constant and unrelenting threat. Moreover, the armature holds its position as long as internal conflicts and contradictions are not allowed to weaken it. Hence, the emphasis on resolving conflicts and on the control of divination as a precise means of establishing the nature of polluting acts. Also the prohibition on spilling the blood of clan members being safeguarded through the use of wooden clubs in intra-clan/lineage fighting (Warnier 1983). In other words, there is no "outside" except an opposing armature of another descent group, quarter, chiefdom, etc. whose ancestral substances and medical fortifications act in equivalent defensive and offensive modes. When complaints are made that families are in decline, that in the past, commoner *atses* were "eaten" by the palace, the demographic reality is experienced in terms of weakened ancestral substance and exposure to threat. The antithesis to the hierarchical, redistributive and authoritarian mode which exemplifies ancestral order is thus internal to the group and manifests itself in sorcery acts yet implies collusion with external enemies. The distinction is largely one of intention. A *Fon* will be accused

of being a witch if he “eats” people for his own profit; witches are people who use “bad medicines” rather than “good medicines” and they kill people out of private interest rather than for the public good. It would not be exceptional, for instance, to hear an elderly informant claim that in the past when “chiefs” were strong, witchcraft was kept under control but now it has spread widely and is out of control. Moreover, it is thought that a *Fon* should have the powers and techniques used by witches: otherwise how would he be able to combat them? The difference lies in his use of such powers for the good of all rather than the pursuit of personal gain. Moreover, as we have seen, fons and *be'tabatse* should be on the side of life and avoid repressive acts which may lead to the death of a subject. Life and death in the public sphere of moral unity and communal good is contrasted, therefore, with death and the raising to life of dead people by witches for private gain.

In both modes, spiritual powers are used and it depends on context whether they are judged to be used for good or bad purposes. In the past, transgressions of the boundaries between the two domains – penetration of witchcraft substance into ancestral substance through overtly exploitative acts by fons and clan heads would inevitably lead to witchcraft accusation and their possible execution by *kwi'fo*. Yet the situation is made more ambiguous by the fact that the powers shared by *Fon*, members of *kwi'fo* and *takumbeng* are not essentially different from those ascribed to witches. What distinguishes the former is not only intention but the fact that they have the power (via ancestral mediation) to domesticate spiritual forces which can then be used to control the anti-social acts of the latter. The reality of polluting acts and personal misdeeds is thus a constant threat to the domesticating process, failure in which unleashes such forces brought into society in their “savage” and anti-social guise.

This raises a final point which is that autochthony is idealised as a state in which such circumstances would never arise. In other words, tendencies towards polluting acts tend to be stimulated by external events which rupture the moral unity of ancestral substance. Tensions aroused by marriage and relations with affines; the fact that in Bafut witchcraft substance is seen to be transmitted through women; the extreme deference shown to the mother's father (*tama*) due to the fear that resentment felt by him will cause illness and death to his daughter's children, and the desirability of a FBD marriage rule in royal lineages in the past, are all symptomatic of the close association perceived between witchcraft, marriage and relations with affines. In more recent times, trade and the migration of labour to the coast to work on plantations have been associated with the spread of witch cleansing cults outside the framework of moral hierarchy and authority, with the decline of “chiefs” and the seeking after prominent *nganga* men for protection (Ardener 1970) who, since they expect payment, are neither chiefs nor witches.

### *Synthesis*

So far I have elucidated a set of contrasting themes which lie behind a set of cultural and material practices in Bafut and, where possible, I have tried to draw relevant parallels elsewhere. In structuralist terms, a fairly consistent dualism exists between dry:high:outside:sorcery:hunting:exchange:iron::wet:low:inside:ancestors:agriculture:production:wood. These qualities, at first glance, would correspond to the principles of ancestral substance and witchcraft substance as contrasted models of society with either centralised or egalitarian tendencies (cf. McGaffey 1970). At one level this is certainly the case, yet their realisation in

cultural practice is more complicated. Precolonial Bafut political culture was undoubtedly hierarchical, redistributive and authoritarian. Yet hierarchy was itself dualistic in tendency due to the separation of the holders of titles which embodied ancestral substance from those persons involved in pollution removal and ritual protection. This was not just a feature of palace organisation but was basic to descent group structure. When controlled, spiritual forces served to sustain group hierarchy and moral unity but when used with bad intentions would undermine them. Sorcery was, therefore, a potential of the conditions which sustained hierarchy rather than a devoluting force lying outside of "society". This explains why the capacity for witchcraft is held by descent group members; that the actions of resentful affines will not affect their daughters but the children of the latter; that the means of combatting sorcery are descent group owned rituals promoting ancestral substance or equivalent powers centralised in the institutions of *takumbeng* and *kwi'fo*.

The palace retained the same ambiguity, with the powers of *kwi'fo* regarded as good or bad depending on intention and the powers of the *Fon* regarded equally ambiguously depending on assessment of motives. Perceived in this way, sorcery is best interpreted as a check on abuse and a means by which the ordering principles of hierarchy could be brought into question and put at risk.

I would argue, therefore, that the palace in Grassfields societies is part of a much wider ideology which represents and sustains hierarchy. It does this by saying on the one hand that hierarchy is part of the natural order established and sustained by ancestral substance. And on the other that society is possible only by harnessing and controlling otherwise anti-social forces for its protection and fortification. It is possible therefore that ancestral substance and witchcraft substance are the same thing, distinguished only by intention and motivation. The system of differences we have elucidated as a generative matrix underlying a whole set of cultural practices is thus an objectification of these often contradictory principles in concrete, material form. Such differences are to be found at all levels in Bafut society: in this sense there is no "closing off" from knowledge *per se*. Rather it is the potency of ancestral substance at lineage, clan, quarter and palace and the need for an increasingly powerful armature as one moves from the local to the regional that binds compound to compound, quarter to quarter and the whole to the palace. Like all ideologies the representation was only partial. Even today, witchcraft is a lurking, interstitial presence rather than a systematised force. In precolonial Bafut, it is possible to envisage that it operated as a more articulate and coherently structured response by subordinate groups to the oppressive acts of the holders of such moral authority.

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