



Art from Africa

Long Steps Never Broke a Back

Pamela McClusky

With a contribution by Robert Farris Thompson

Seattle Art Museum

Princeton University Press

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Frontispiece: pl. 98, Seydou Keita, *Untitled (Family with Car
no. 266)*, 1951–1952





Assembling a Royal Stage: Art from the Kom Kingdom

The original owners of the nearly four thousand African objects in the Seattle Art Museum are rarely known by name.¹ Art from one kingdom in Cameroon offers an exception and introduces five owners whose inter-

actions with collectors span the twentieth century. Archival notes and files are full of details about kings who surrounded themselves with artistry. These records offer a perplexing view of royalty—of men who had commanding agendas but were dependent on others, who maintained a private distance from their subjects but allowed outsiders to become confidants. One note embodies these contradictions:

Royal Scepter [see pl. 70]

total length ca. 46"; length of handle ca. 6½" —

wood, copper plate, trade beads, horsetail —

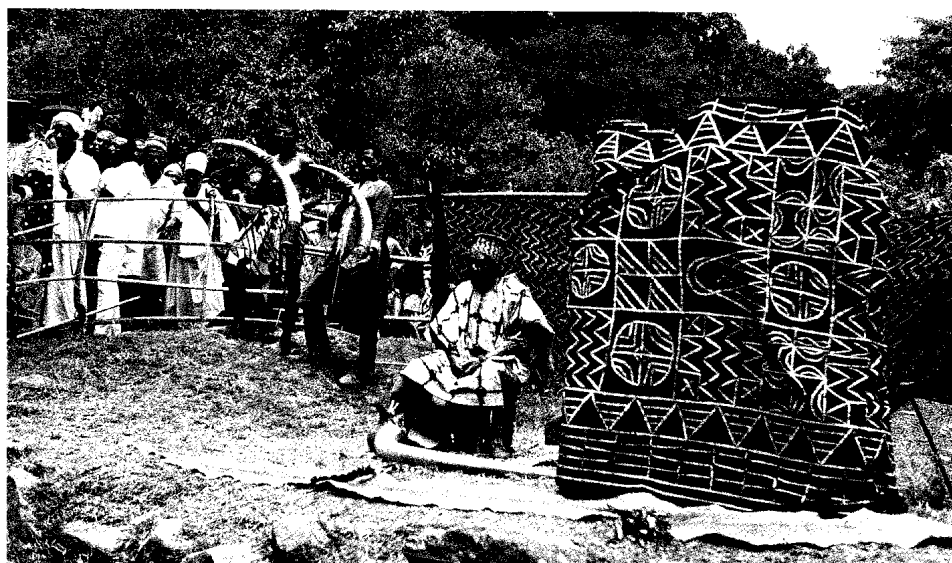
finest example of transformation of the simple fly whisk and its use into a royal insignia of authority —: commemorating the tribal victory of the people of Bekom over the Fulani invaders around 1830 —

history: presented by Fon Ndi of the Bekom [Kom] nation in 1933 to Paul Gebauer for dental services, the making of an upper plate and lower bridge, which lasted the old boy until his death but did not restore to him the power of youth he had expected. . . . He had been told beforehand that no miracle would occur beyond the pleasure of chewing kola nuts once more.²

It seems an improbable exchange: a royal scepter (or flywhisk) for dental services, a symbol of victory over invaders for the chance to chew kola (not to diminish the stimulating pleasure it provides). The museum's records indicate other occasions when the Fon (king) gave away art—a figure was offered in return for help provided to a king's eighty-eight wives; a throne was given because it was admired in a discard pile. Such accounts introduce the close associations between foreigners and the Fons. This closeness creates a puzzle of references: private details, public records, changing governments, two thorough photographic archives, rumors and newspaper accounts—all merge to form a faceted picture of the Kom kings and their art. Anchoring this inquiry are figures designed to sustain a dynasty.

Pl. 70 (detail)

Fig. 23. Preparations for the appearance of Kom royal art, Laikom, Cameroon, 1974.



Over the course of a decade, Katherine White acquired objects that all came from the same closely guarded royal sanctuary high on a mountaintop in Cameroon. To do so, she relied upon alliances with Americans living in the vicinity of the Kom kingdom for up to thirty years. Their accounts of collecting from the hands of the original owner, the king himself, reveal the level of access they enjoyed. Visiting the royal palace on a frequent basis, they built a photographic record that enhances their descriptions of royal life. In the final assembly of objects, White established a ceremonial setting, a stage fit for a king (fig. 23).

A complete array of the symbols known as *ufwu-a-Kom* (“things belonging to the Kom people”) would have been seen only at the palace in the Kom capital of Laikom. There, atop a mountain slope at 6,300 feet elevation, on a long volcanic spur known for drenching tropical rains and severe lightning, a dynasty established a dramatic site from which to rule.

Laikom was worth the stiff climb and the exposure to its bitter cold nights, for it was a jewel of architecture. Artistic rulers made it into a showcase of towering buildings and a maze of courtyards.

—Paul Gebauer, 1930³

No producer could ask for a more spectacular setting for an auspicious public event. Often shrouded in mist, Laikom was perched high above all other settlements on the Grassfields plateau (fig. 24). Entering the palace was equated with walking into a human body—the main gate was the mouth; the central square, the stomach; and the Fon’s quarters, the buttocks or foundation of the palace.⁴ At the turn of the century, as many as three hundred wives lived in compounds considered the limbs of the palace body (fig. 25). The innermost square was reserved for the sacred core of the Kom—an altar defined by a basalt pillar, a cactus tree, and a stone throne. The tallest building in the complex was an audience hall, into which only a select portion of the Kom people would be ushered on their way to a ceremonial occasion. As they entered, palace retainers monitored their every step, and kept royal art apart from the commoners. Just as the Fon was aloof from contact, so his

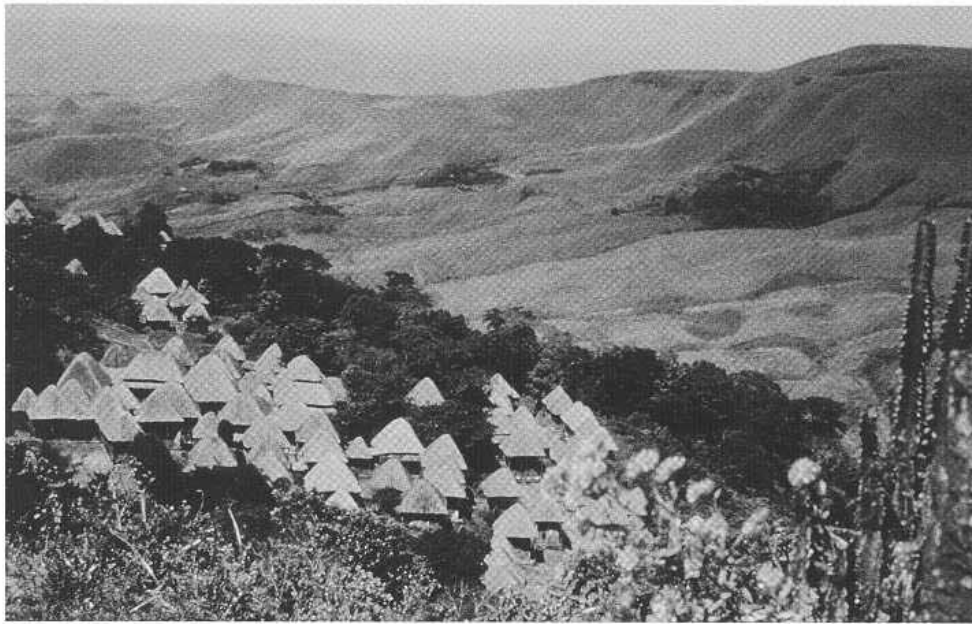


Fig. 24. Laikom, 1950s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photograph Study Collection. Bequest of Paul Gebauer, 1977, G-76.

Fig. 25. Quarter of Fon's wives, Laikom, 1953.



possessions were not to be touched by anyone without special authority. Before dawn, officials would be sent to the sanctuary that housed an entire set of royal family portraits. No one saw them emerge and install the assembly in a corner of the large square.

Symbolism captures their minds and maintains their interest.

—Paul Nchoji Nkwi⁵

One of the most prominent portraits is composed of a life-size female figure standing with clasped hands over a stool adjoining her knees (pl. 67). This memorial figure of a queen mother underwent a drastic change of context at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Laikom, the figure was kept in a repository guarded by palace retainers who permitted only the king's closest councilors to enter. Commoners

Pl. 67

Memorial figure of queen mother

Laikom, Kom Kingdom, Cameroon

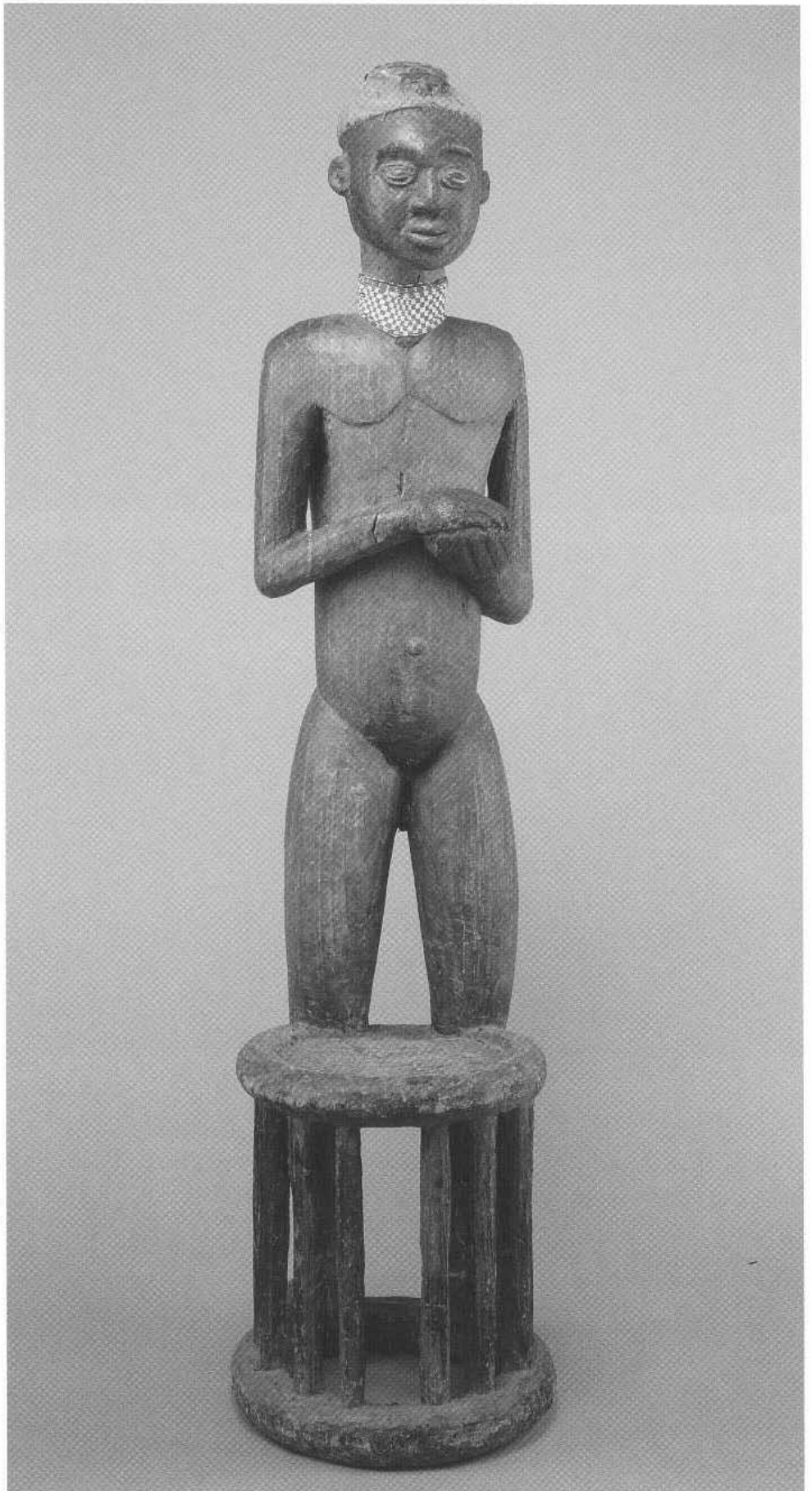
Mid-19th century

Wood, glass beads, brass, human hair, redwood powder

H. 175.3 cm (69 in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,

81.17.718



could view the mother only once or twice in a lifetime as part of the installation of a new king, when the queen mother joined a line of portraits dedicated to ancestors whose rule remained unbroken since the founding of Laikom. Her presence was an essential reminder of the female line of descent, which set Kom rulers apart from all neighboring kingdoms.

Kom eyes would read her features with appreciation. Not young or alluring, she is a middle-aged woman of unshakable stability and dignity. Her hair is shaved in a manner common to women of the nineteenth century (fig. 26). Traces of red powder show that she was properly rubbed and coated with camwood as a protective measure. She cups her hands just as royal women do when they clap to greet the king. No sharp features or angles appear in her face, in accordance with a Kom preference for rounded curves. The only exaggerated feature is her ears, which protrude perhaps to signify her role as a woman who listens for ancestral communication. A coating of copper riddled with slight dents becomes a metal sheath over her face. Beauty for the Kom is embodied less in the face than in the body.⁶ The figure fulfills an ideal body type, with an ample physique of broad shoulders and long limbs that suggest a woman able to work and provide for her family. The stool at her knees extends to remind viewers of the lineage of rulers whose enstoolment or enthronement she presides over. Around her neck, a beaded necklace in checkerboard blue and white hints at the beading that once covered her body.

In the public setting, the Kom portraits invited ancestors of the past to participate and sanction events in the present. Endowed with impressive composure, the portraits were regarded as capable of controlling behavior. Women, in particular, were believed to have close communication with ancestors. Their covert power could produce reactions in people, while men had to rely on overt power. Figures commemorating the mothers and wives of the Fon had to be present. This queen mother has been identified by the name of Naya, the great-grandmother of Fon Yu.⁷ Her strength was imparted to him, the most powerful of all Kom Fons, whose influence on the reputation and extent of the Kom kingdom is legendary.

Just two photographs of Fon Yu are known to exist (fig. 27).⁸ Taken between 1905 and 1910, they are the only direct evidence of a remarkable ruler, then nearing the end of his life. Born in 1830, he was known to be ambitious at an early age, and his older brother exiled him for two years to a neighboring kingdom. While in exile, Fon Yu learned to carve. He returned to establish his reign at the age of thirty-five and ruled over the Kom for forty-seven years until his death in 1912—an unprecedented stretch of time (from before the American Civil War until the eve of World War I). In both his photographic portraits, Fon Yu holds sculptor's tools and poses with a memorial female figure whose size suggests that Yu was relatively tall. Lines on his brow mark many years of leadership.

Memories of Fon Yu, the seventh Kom king, loom large. A forceful innovator, he is credited with making bold moves and focusing increasing attention on himself as the main actor in the prestige system. Forty-five villages came under his control for ritual and secular affairs. Laikom became his showcase for architecture as he established how court compounds were to be distributed over the landscape. Known as



Fig. 26. Babungo wife with shaved coiffure rubbed with camwood, ca. 1930–1960. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photograph Study Collection. Bequest of Paul Gebauer, 1977, J-26.



Fig. 27. Fon Yu (reigned 1865–1912) posing as carver, with the female figure of the Afo-a-Kom ensemble, ca. 1905–1910.

the king who began and ended wars, he invited noted warriors to drink with him weekly at his palace. Fon Yu is also remembered for swiftly punishing by death those who failed to be hospitable to strangers.⁹ To enhance his stature, he surrounded himself with art as symbolic support. A school of carvers produced royal sculpture, implements, and doorposts that set him apart. Portraits of his family sanctioned his right to rule: they underlined the notion that the Fon might be the supreme force in the nation, but he still depended on his family for support. Admiration for Fon Yu's restless enterprise is tempered by memories of his severe tactics of law enforcement, including experimentation with slow poisons.

In 1900, Fon Yu was firmly positioned in Laikom. He aggressively fended off a German explorer in 1889, but by 1904–1905, German expeditions were making the ascent to Laikom. During 1904, a German missionary named Reinhold Rhode acquired a pair of memorial figures—one of them the queen mother—and several other items from the palace. It is not known whether these items were obtained by gift or by coercion. In August 1905, German forces ended a punitive expedition by signing a treaty and enacting a gift exchange with the Fon. Sculptures and masks were taken back to museums in Berlin and Frankfurt. By that year, the Rhode figures were installed in the newly established Museum für Völkerkunde in Frankfurt.



Fig. 28. Performance at Laikom, 1974.

The shift from Laikom to Frankfurt could not have been more radical. In Laikom, the queen figure was situated on a secluded mountaintop, as remote and inaccessible as the Fon. The figure's potency was enhanced by the caution and care exercised by the Kom curators, who watched over the art in secrecy. When displayed, its impression on an audience was enhanced by the sensory overload of music, the excitement of performances, and the effects of abundant food and drink (fig. 28). In the German museum, the figure was stripped from seclusion and brought indoors. A postcard image of the "Cameroon Gallery," issued in 1906, shows the arrangement (fig. 29).¹⁰ The male and female portraits were placed against a wall amid a spray of weapons and a line of masks above. All day, every day, they were on view. No spectacle remained, just isolated objects.

A label for the female introduces a colonial explanation of who she was:

Throne of the Queen, 68½" high. Standing life-size wood figure representing the great-grandmother of the King. Face and hands are covered with copper overlay. The eyes are formed from indigenous resinous substance. Its neck is ornamented with blue and white beads. Both of these thrones were used by the royal pair during festivities and important palavers. Both were held in awe as fetishes by the people.¹¹

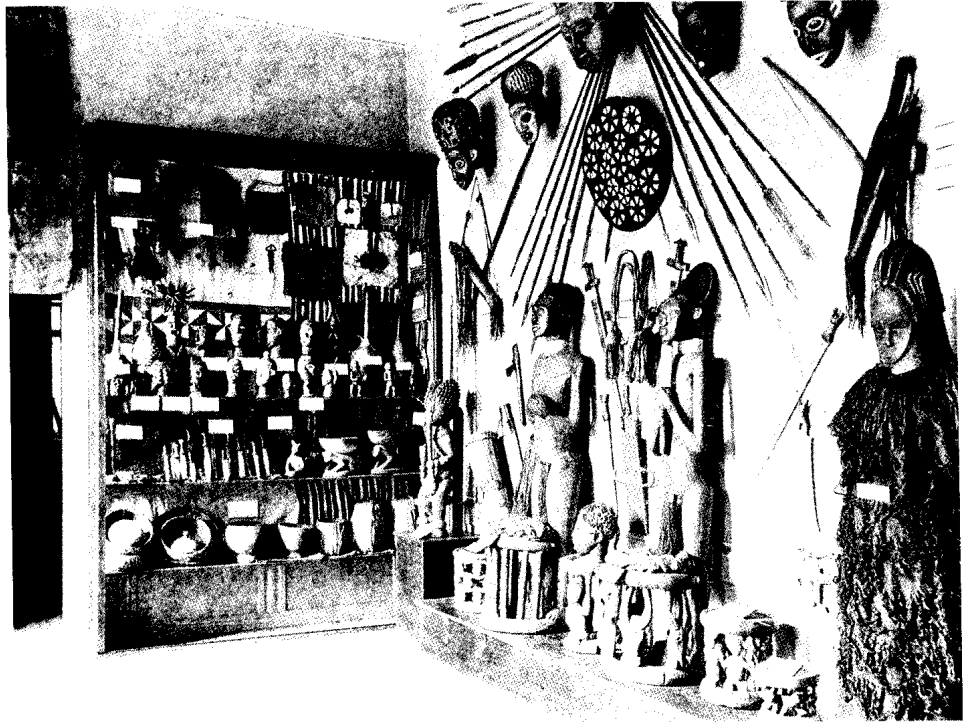


Fig. 29. Postcard of Cameroon Gallery, Museum für Völkerkunde, Frankfurt, 1906.

Calling it a “fetish” throne that a queen sat upon while ruling with her king, the German curators invented a stereotypical role. The queen was no longer a trigger for Kom memories. The curators presented it as a flat statement of colonial fact—Kom kings and queens had their thrones captured and were subjected to colonial rule. What Fon Yu had to say about this queen mother figure is not known. Despite the fact that the Germans had continuing contact with him for the next five years, no dialogue regarding his role as an artistic leader is recorded. The two photographs taken of him were even misidentified for more than fifty years. Fon Yu died in 1912 and was succeeded by his nephew Nggam. German rule did not last long, as British and French forces split Cameroon for a half-century of separate rule beginning in 1915.

The Frankfurt museum sold the queen figure in 1934 to Arthur Speyer, a German collector and dealer. Then, after fifty years in German hands, the queen figure moved to Paris at the height of a growing market for African art. The figure entered the gallery of Charles Ratton, a renowned collector and dealer who had been an advocate of African and Oceanic art since the 1930s. His close associations with the Surrealists bolstered his reputation in artistic circles, but he was denounced for his ties to Nazi leaders when he offered his collection to the Musée du Louvre in the 1980s. Before long, word of the queen figure’s availability reached Katherine White, who was collecting with frenzied enthusiasm after 1961. Her description of a visit to Charles Ratton’s gallery shows how the queen figure has entered another kind of sanctuary—now guarded by the officials of the European art world. Ratton tests her association with two of the leading curators of African art: William Fagg, then at the British Museum, and Margaret Plass, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In a dealer’s maneuver, Ratton waits to determine White’s serious interest and expertise before bringing out objects that are not in open view:

Paris, April 1966

It was nearly 11. I rushed out and got a cab to 15 rue Marignan. The black glass sign said Charles Ratton—Expert. I rang the bell and tried to calm myself. I remembered him as small, spry, white haired. The photographs of the Cameroon Queen stool had been with me for so long that the sale was for me a *fait accompli*: finally someone came. I was shown into a room. M. Ratton came, and we went into his office. There she was. I was afraid to look at her—it was a collision of emotion for me. Her face was still gentle, but grosser than I had remembered. The real hair glued on her eyebrows disturbed me a little. She is still, straight, and awkward, but very shy and proud. I began to recover from my fear. M. Ratton kept up a lively chatter. Many of his casual inquiries were tests. “Do you find negroes like their art?” “When is Mr. Fagg coming to Paris?” “How is Margaret?” He found he approved of me as much as he did the last time. “You have good people to speak for you,” he said. Indeed, I am lucky.

We made arrangements, said goodbye. He wrapped up a dainty Bakuba paint box for me as a souvenir. It was a pleasant episode. He comes to New York Monday to observe the Rubenstein sale—many of her things were his “achievements,” as he calls them.¹²

The queen figure now has three identities. A royal portrait kept in seclusion. A fetish throne in a German museum. A Parisian dealer’s “accomplishment.” Of international stature, the figure would now enter the living room of a growing private collection in Gates Mills, Ohio. In 1966, the Kom memorial figure became a distinguished feature of Katherine White’s assembly. Once unveiled in Ohio, the female figure was reunited with the male from the same royal sanctuary in Laikom (pl. 68). The male figure’s exportation was the result not of German incursion but of American alliance. A note in the museum’s files provides a glimpse of the association that led to its removal from Laikom:

When Fon Ndi of Kom died in 1954 [fig. 30], his 88 wives were, according to custom, put in charge of an impartial party, in this case Dr. Gebauer. He was in charge for a year—it cost him 6 cows and much palm wine. The older wives were allowed to retire on a small piece of land. The others, young enough to bear children, could choose their next husbands. At the end of the year there was a ceremonial bathing so they could be free of their old lives. This stand was brought to Dr. Gebauer by the new Fon of Kom, Law-aw, as a reward for his work. He said it was the oldest thing they had. Dr. Gebauer said the Fon was aware of the sentimental value the piece would have for the recipient.¹³

We might wonder why the Fon would give to a foreigner what is called the kingdom’s oldest thing, a sculpture closely guarded and restricted from sight. For a partial answer we should consider changes in Laikom. Fon Ndi, born in 1866, was instated as king in 1926. He inherited a palace of 252 houses, occupied by 109 wives.¹⁴ His leadership was limited by British colonial policies of indirect rule. One major change





Fig. 30. Mourning the death of Fon Ndi (reigned 1926–1954), with Paul Gebauer (center) taking photographs, Laikom, 1954.

during his reign was the active presence of missionaries. Roman Catholic and Baptist missions had been established in the Bamenda division years before (1838 and 1919), but during Fon Ndi's era, Christians set up schools and hospitals and began to exert new influence, especially on the young men commemorated in this figure.

Not a portrait of an individual, this sculpture is a memorial to a whole system of service that the Fon relied upon. Young men known as *chisendos* formed an elite group of attendants who assisted with many aspects of palace life.¹⁵ A candidate was chosen between the ages of ten and fifteen if he had an aptitude for learning, regardless of his family's position. At the palace, he underwent at least ten years of intensive training, including instruction in diplomacy, trade, security, and ceremonial and ritual preparations. The trainees were supervised by officers of an organization known as Kwifon, or "voice of the Fon" (fig. 31), an intricate system of government common throughout the Cameroon Grassfields. It was said that Kwifon supported the Fon as a taproot supports a tree.¹⁶ Not seen, but ever present, Kwifon members heard everything going on and could exert unlimited power when necessary. They announced orders, enacted regulations, settled domestic disputes, and inflicted penalties as warranted. Outside the palace, whenever acting in the public eye, Kwifon officers veiled themselves in masquerade so as not to be identified as individuals. Behind the scenes, they acted as a democratic decision-making forum. After being trained by Kwifon officers, *chisendos* eventually became Kwifon members themselves.

Pl. 68

Retainer figure

Laikom, Kom, Cameroon

19th century

Wood, nails, fiber fragments

H. 77.3 cm (30½ in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,

81.17.719



Fig. 31. Kwifon group portrait in front of the royal storage house, Laikom, 1970.



Fig. 32. Royal storage house interior, Laikom, 1966.

The sculpture (pl. 68) represents a *chisendo* of high status. As a signal of how extremely close he is to the Fon, he is seated on a leopard stool, a royal prerogative symbolizing the cunning and stealth with which royalty operates. The *chisendo*'s cap also signifies rank. Small holes and nails indicate that his body was originally covered with a beaded coating. Beyond these references, the relaxed display of authority combined with service makes this figure stand out. Symbols of strength are matched by a body that would assume gigantic proportions if he stood. Long arms curve up and end in hands that expand to hold two containers—a gourd and a large bowl. Long legs splay over the seat. In contrast to the endless facets that flicker across the surface of his limbs, his face remains a study in calm, smooth composure. Serenely juggling two vessels while sitting atop a leopard is testimony to the dignity of the *chisendo*.

Photographs record this figure placed on the ground next to other memorial figures, as well as stored in the royal sanctuary guarded by the Kwifon (fig. 32).¹⁷ It would likely have been the task of a *chisendo* to bring out the figure and fill the vessels with palm wine and kola nuts—two essential ingredients for a ceremony, to lubricate and heighten awareness of events as they unfold. This figure has sat through many years of royal ceremonies and testifies to the unique position of the *chisendo* in Laikom.

Fon Law-aw's removal of the figure is a portent of personnel shifts in his palace. Hundreds of *chisendos* were once in residence, enabling the Fon to guard the cultural center of the kingdom and learn the running of Kwifon government. By the end of his father's reign, missionary schools and national government policies were giving parents new choices for their children's education. While becoming a *chisendo* was desirable in the 1940s and 1950s, by the 1960s formal education was one of the changes forging a path through the kingdom. Steadily, recruitment of *chisendos*



Fig. 33. Paul Gebauer saluting subchiefs, Laikom, 1954.

dropped off, until by 1990 only five were left in the palace.¹⁸ Fon Law-aw gave the *chisendo* portrait to a foreigner whose tenure in Cameroon overlapped this period of change.

Henry VIII would have been envious. —Paul Gebauer, 1979¹⁹

Paul Gebauer and his wife, Clara, arrived to work at the American Baptist Mission in 1931 and stayed until 1961 (fig. 33). Their legacy of Cameroonian art is embodied in thousands of photographs and hundreds of documented objects now housed in several museums. Katherine White corresponded with Paul Gebauer for years to seek advice about assembling her own selection. She began by buying the male retainer figure from him in 1964. Paul Gebauer speaks of himself as being “prematurely bald, prematurely blunt, and prematurely initiated into the secrets of missionary-politicians.”²⁰ He and Clara became known for sending home candid reports and participating in studies of local art and landscape. Paul’s descriptions of Fon Ndi’s palace—the Fon seated near the fireplace with attendants nearby, ruling over a kingdom punctuated with ceremony and architectural artistry—are filled with admiration. He launched a study of spider divination that led to a master’s thesis, an endeavor that did not sit well with some of his Baptist brothers. His statement of purpose set a course of acceptance that must have been noticed by the Fons he came into contact with:

We shall not take our culture to them, for they have one of their own. We shall not burden them with our American civilization, because theirs is one of their own.... We shall not laugh at their arts and crafts but encourage them to carry on and to perfect their expression of their appreciation of the beautiful. We

shall not denounce their social and political institutions as sinful and ugly and out of date, for we of the west lack the wisdom to discriminate, nor do we have the right to do so.²¹

The Gebauers backed up this manifesto by establishing a school that was “as informal and individual as possible.” They earned a reputation for hiring artists to adorn building projects with sculpture and for being attentive to a succession of leaders throughout the region.

Kom art and ethics were treated differently by Roman Catholic missions. In the 1920s, Kom Catholics were known to unmask Kwifon masqueraders and spit upon them—an opposition that was to reverse later in the century.²² More pointedly for Fon Ndi, however, Catholic missionaries began encouraging his wives to leave their compounds and marry mission converts. This campaign lasted into the 1940s, and in 1947 reached a crescendo. A Catholic newspaper made a scandal of the issue by publishing “Just Cargo,” a nun’s description of what she counted as Fon Ndi’s six hundred wives. The article included her account of witnessing a girl being thrown on the ground and stepped on by the Fon. This article became the basis for a United Nations investigation, which determined that for the sake of vividness the writer had dramatized Kom custom and made it appear she was describing an actual incident.²³

Although the United Nations and the Catholic bishop backed off from trying to influence the Fon’s private life, a journalist named Rebecca Reyher set out to witness the “heartbreak of polygamy.” Her account, entitled *The Fon and His Hundred Wives*, was published in 1952.²⁴ As part of her journey, she visited Paul Gebauer, who puzzled her with his clear opinions regarding the issue. He commended Fon Ndi’s intelligence and his system of governance, and condemned Catholic baptism for its shortsightedness. Reyher proceeded to Laikom, was invited by the Fon to stay at his guesthouse, and talked with him on numerous occasions. Her focus rarely wavered from the plight of runaway wives or from skeptical disapproval, but her account does provide details about the crosscurrents of Fon Ndi’s time. Reyher left Africa after two weeks at Laikom and several months in Cameroon and Nigeria, while Paul and Clara Gebauer stayed thirty years. And Paul Gebauer was given a sculpture in thanks for his service to Fon Ndi’s eighty-eight widows.

Endowed with two major Kom sculptures, Katherine White continued to look for others. In 1968, she purchased a throne that left Laikom after another long-term American alliance (pl. 69). Gilbert and Mildred Schneider had gone to Cameroon in 1947 as part of the American Baptist Missionary Society and stayed for sixteen years. Stationed for many years fifteen miles from Laikom, they were instrumental in setting up a facility for the housing and treatment of lepers. Gilbert established an extensive archive of photographs and notes of his observations, which led to a doctorate in anthropology upon his return to the United States. His documentary work was carried on by his son Evan, born and raised in Cameroon. Their joint efforts comprise a remarkably thorough record of cultural evolution from the 1940s to the present. During their initial tenure, the Schneiders became close to Fon Lo-oh (ruler from 1955 to 1964) (fig. 34). Gilbert worked so closely with Lo-oh and a Kom adviser and former *chisendo*, Johnson Mbeng, that he was permitted to move around the palace without



Pl. 69

Coronation throne

Laikom, Kom, Cameroon

20th century

Wood

H. 99.7 cm (39¼ in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
81.17.720

escort and to take pictures of royal objects. During one visit, Schneider noticed a figure piled up with other items in a passageway. In a letter to Katherine White, Schneider explains:

The figure which you now have was in the “discard” category. I voiced concern about the piece and other such items and the Fon immediately gave me permission to take a few items. He gave me that particular piece without any strings attached. He was glad that two people took interest in documenting the royal palace. We should be grateful to have the Kom throne in the States. The royal palace burned in the early 1960s and all the “discard” pieces that remained were destroyed by fire.²⁵



Fig. 34. Fon Lo-oh (reigned 1955–1964) in front of main gathering house, Laikom.

This “discard” visualizes the origin of Laikom. It is a stool whose back is formed by a woman grasping a two-headed snake in her hands; each snake head holds a bird in its mouth. Just as this woman is steadfast in holding this large swirling creature about her, so the story behind the stool unites the Kom as the “people of the snake.” Kom people tell and retell the story as their foundation myth.²⁶ The tale begins in a time when the Kom were settled and thriving in Bamessi. The Fon of Bamessi, however, became upset by the growing population and suggested to the Kom Fon, named Muni, that they each build a house for troublemakers and set the houses afire. Muni agreed and built his house in good faith, but the Bamessi Fon built a house with two doors so that his people could escape the fire, while the Kom people burned. Deeply disturbed by this trick, Muni was ashamed and decided to hang himself, but he also wanted revenge. He told his sister to lead the Kom people away and to look for a new lake that would form from the bodily fluids of his rotting corpse. She was to wait and watch the lake sink and disappear, leaving traces of a python’s track. Once the track was sighted, she was to gather the Kom

people together and follow the python until it disappeared. The sister carried out this plan, and the snake led the people to the highest mountain peak, where they founded Laikom.

Laikom’s perch sets it apart as a capital. Colonial administrators often suggested moving it to a lower, more accessible position in the valley. Fueled by a story of betrayal and survival through allegiance to a female, the Kom maintained the position of their capital. The story is reenacted and reinforced whenever a new Fon is installed. In the process of an installation, a man must acquire new powers that elevate him above all others. Unlike ordinary men, he learns to foresee the future, communicate with ancestors, and triumph over evildoers. He acquires sacred powers and changes his character to prepare for leadership.

During the 1960s and 1970s, one corner of Katherine White’s living room was being filled with Kom royal art, rich with significant associations. She continued to

purchase elements that would complete the stage appropriate for a Fon. A flywhisk given to Paul Gebauer in 1933 was purchased from him in 1971 (pl. 70). In turn, he gave her two cloths essential to any royal display (pls. 71, 72), and attached a note saying, “This was used as a back drop behind the king when he was holding audiences.”²⁷ No stage for a king or major ceremony in the Grassfields was without *ndop* cloths. The textiles present slightly fuzzy white lines against a deep blue-black background. This effect of scratchy lines, resembling a chalk drawing, is derived from the process of sewing the fabric in preparation for resist dyeing. Connecting the Kom to their neighbors, *ndop* cloths have been imported from adjacent kingdoms ever since they became a necessary backdrop for royalty after 1914.²⁸

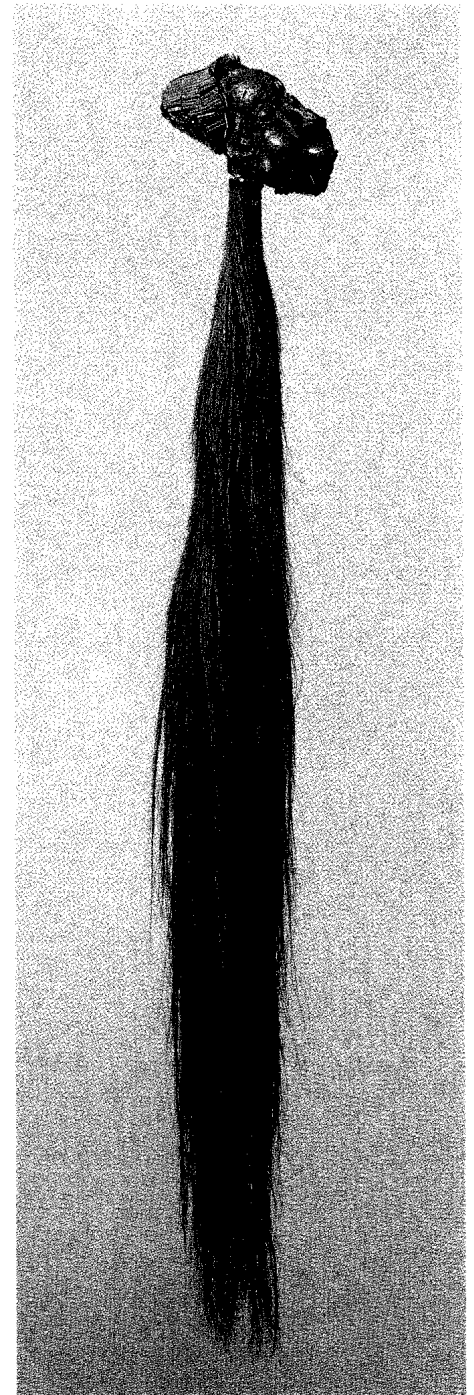
On ceremonial occasions, *ndop* defines spaces for a stage—a place for the ruler to sit and display regalia, for performances to be given, or for assembling ritual objects. Designs on *ndop* broadcast patterns full of royal references. The first *ndop* features meandering stripes and V forms, known as a python pattern for the creature who established the trail to Laikom. The second is loaded with birds, pinwheels, and a web of crossing lines to suggest the work of a spider, a creature the Kom hold in high regard because of its ability to burrow into the ground and thereby communicate with ancestors. Such communication is the premise for a form of divination that makes use of ancestral wisdom. With the stage now well set, Katherine White bought gowns and caps to dress an audience member appropriately to see the king (pls. 73, 74).

Eager to share her accumulation of palace art, in 1973 White sent several pieces to an exhibition entitled *Royal Art of Cameroon* at Dartmouth College’s art gallery. Featured on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue was a figure similar to the queen throne. Known as the Afo-a-Kom, it touched off an international controversy over stolen art. By the end of 1973, the figure was on a plane to Cameroon, but not before giving rise to abundant stories of intrigue and ethical violations. The sensational news coverage took liberties, but in the aftermath many insights were gained into the Kom people’s perceptions of royal art. Years later, the anthropologist Eugenia Shanklin sorted out what she calls the odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom and concluded that it is an object lesson for Kom and Americans alike. She identified two interpretations of the events: the American version (Americans as good guys) and the Kom version (Kom outwits America).²⁹

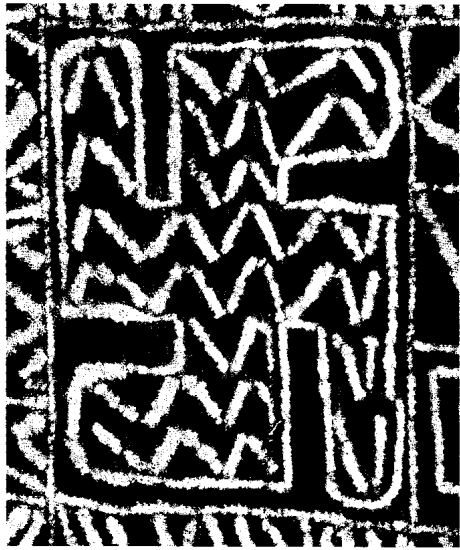
Forever forget your uncomfortable appearance in this sophisticated technology whose achievements tend to overlook human consideration.

—Cameroon Ambassador François-Xavier Tchoungui, 1973³⁰

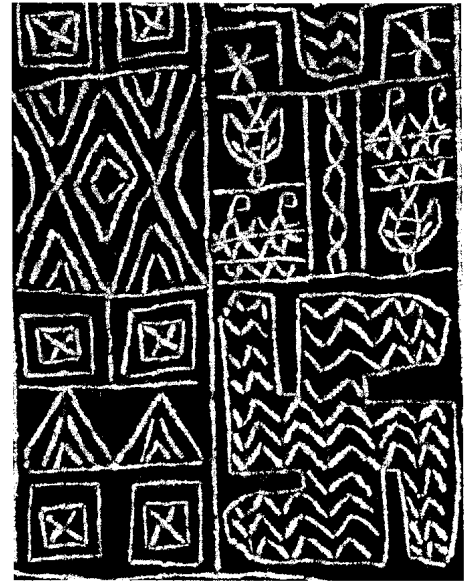
In the American version, the *New York Times* played a key role by breaking the story of a theft. According to the *Times*, a figure called the Afo-a-Kom was stolen from a royal Cameroonian sanctuary in 1966, and then smuggled out of the country before being sold in a New York gallery. American Peace Corps workers noticed it on the cover of the 1973 exhibition catalogue and contacted a former *Times* reporter living in Cameroon. In researching the story, the reporter was told that the Afo-a-Kom was an object of sacred status whose disappearance was wreaking havoc in the kingdom.



Pl. 70
Royal scepter or flywhisk
 Laikom, Kom Kingdom, Cameroon Grassfields
 19th–20th century
 H. (head) 15.2 cm (6½ in.)
 Wood, copper, beads, horsetail
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
 81.17.732

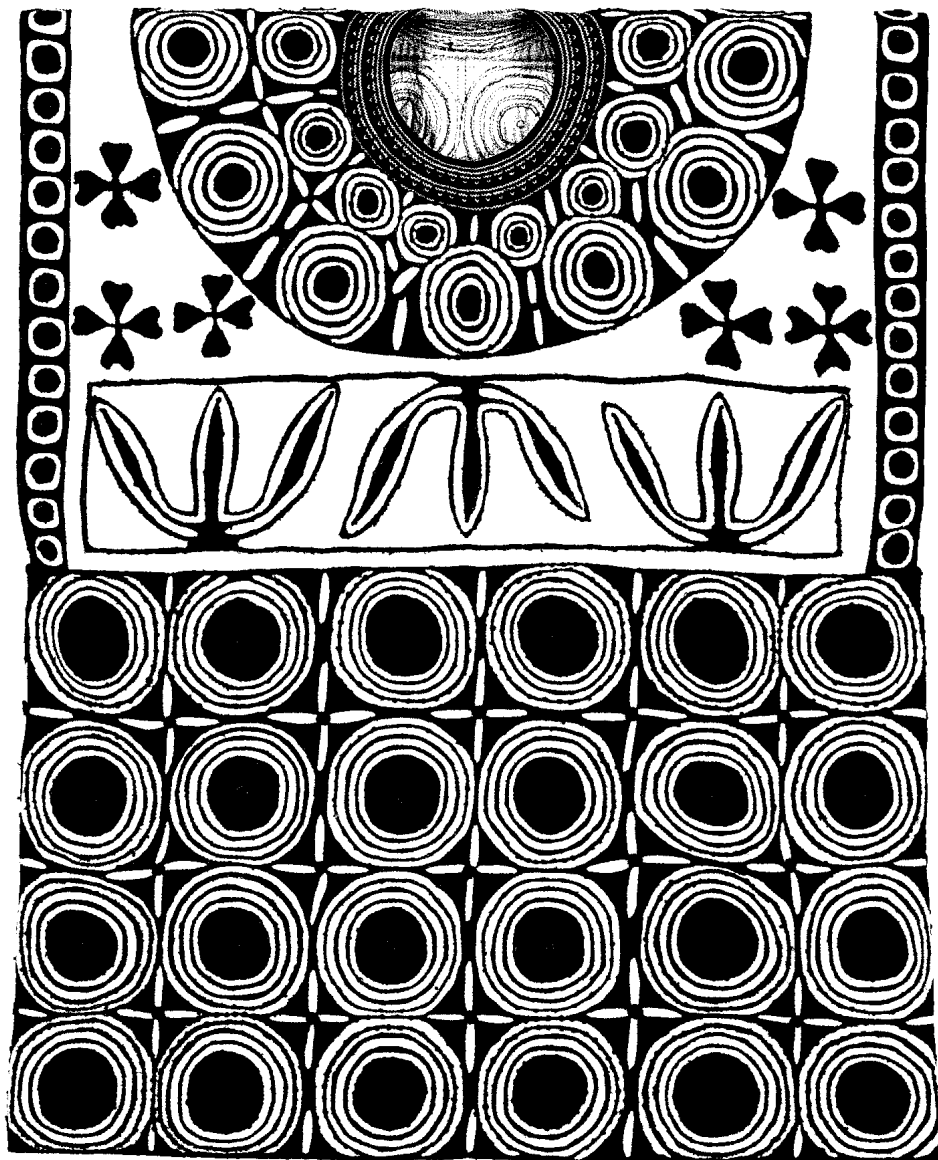


Pl. 71
Ndop cloth
Cameroon
20th century
Cotton (strip woven with sewn resist)
L. 246 cm (87 in.)
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
81.17.778



Pl. 72
Ndop cloth
Cameroon
20th century
Cotton (strip woven with sewn resist)
L. 558.8 cm (220 in.)
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
81.17.774

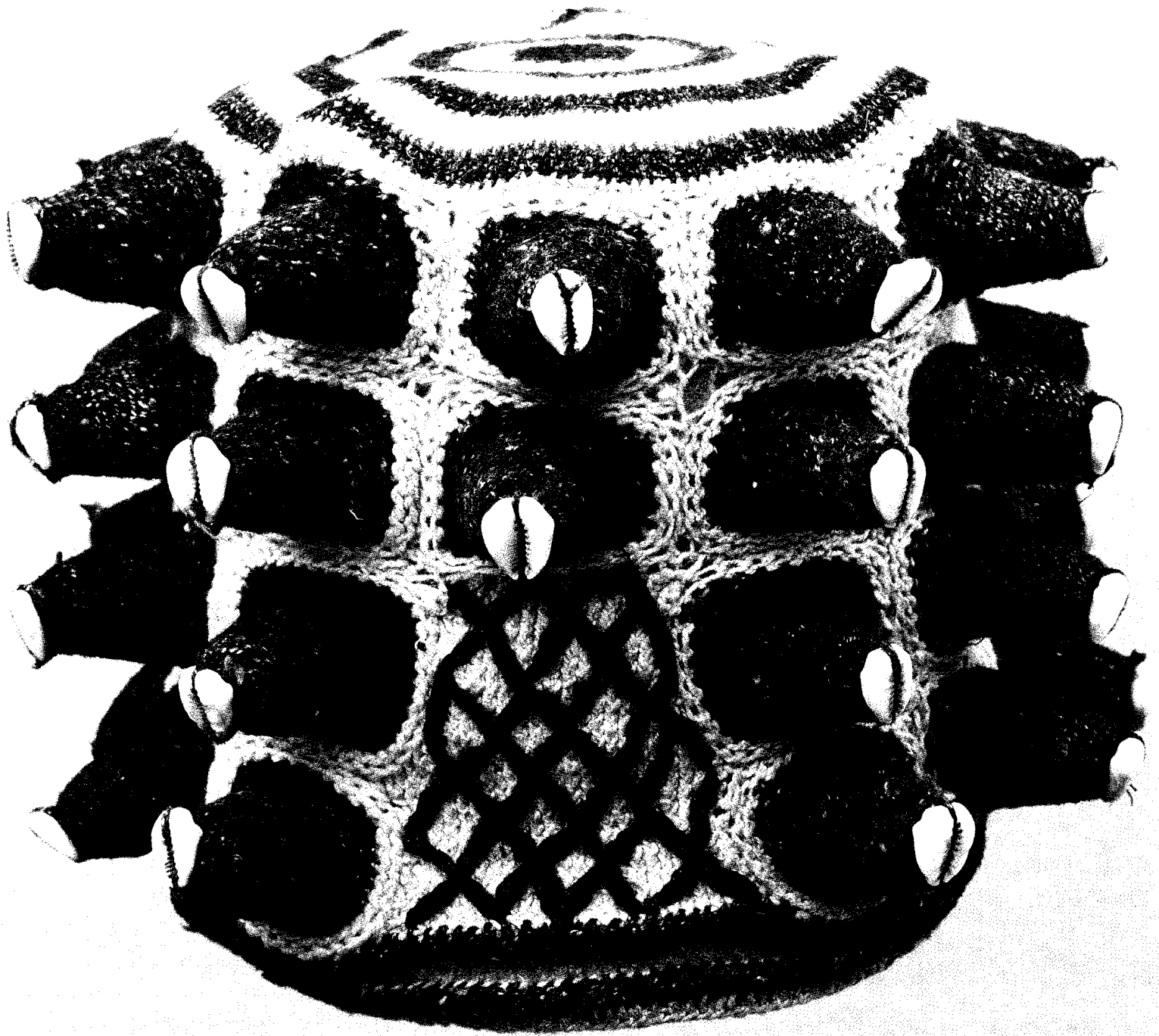
Pl. 73
Man's garment
Cameroon
20th century
Cotton with appliqué and embroidery
L. 116.2 cm (45¾ in.)
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
81.17.769



Pl. 74
Hat
Cameroon
20th century
Cotton (crochet), cowry shells
H. 14.3 cm (5½ in.)
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,
81.17.759

Widespread famine, impotence, fighting, and despair were attributed to the figure's absence. Cameroonian children were said to be collecting money for its return. In all, twenty-two articles appeared in the *New York Times* beginning in October 1973.

Sympathetic American government officials, a corporation, and a private collector pooled resources to return the sculpture to the Kom. A delegation was quickly formed and a plane loaded in December with government representatives, reporters, and the sculpture in a first-class seat. Upon the delegation's arrival, Cameroonian functionaries put obstacles in their path as issues of national politics arose. Among those witnessing the events was Evan Schneider, who documented the occasion. Already so familiar with the Fon and the lay of the kingdom, he recorded in photographs the layers of responses among the Kom audience. The delegation attended seven welcoming ceremonies in seven days, the final one held by the Fon at Laikom (fig. 35). The delegates received gifts of stools and robes during a joyous ceremony, but they were escorted onto the plane to fly home the next day. As an American delegate concluded, "It was simply two different sets of people seeing the same thing in different ways."³¹



The Kom version begins with a letter from an American asking the Kom adviser Johnson Mbeng to steal two statues from the sanctuary where the Afo-a-Kom had been kept. Mbeng, not pleased by this suggestion, showed the letter to Fon Nsom, who proposed that they, a tiny kingdom, try to trick the giant American nation into returning what was rightly theirs. Mbeng wrote letters to Americans inventing a story of famine, impotence, and mourning caused by the removal of the Afo-a-Kom. In fact, when the statue disappeared, the Fon did not express concern about it. And because only a privileged few ever saw the statue, and then only once a year, the Kom people as a whole did not miss it—there was no widespread mourning.

When the American delegation returned the statue, the Fon was put to a test

of his diplomatic abilities. The Minister of Information stepped in to claim it for the nation of Cameroon (established as a united republic in 1972). He announced that the government would make the statue a symbol of national unity and send it around the country until the proper home could be determined. The minister placed it on view in the window of the Office of Tourism with a sign saying “This statue is worth 15 million francs in America.” Fon Nsom challenged the government’s claim to ownership with his own ingenious response to the situation:

The Fon had done one funny thing when we entered the office. He was shown a chair at the side of the room and he refused it, saying he wanted to be directly in front of the Minister. So he sat there while we interpreted all the things that had been said for him. Then he said, yes, thank the Minister and tell him that he was glad this thing is for the whole of Cameroon. Then he insisted that we ask the Minister this question: “If I cut off my ear or pluck out my eye, would it belong to Cameroon or to me?” The Minister said, “If you remove your eye, it is still your eye, it does not belong to Cameroon.” And the Fon said, “Yes, exactly so, and the Afo-a-Kom is still my Afo-a-Kom.” The Minister said the Fon should not be comparing the eyes, the ears, with the Afo-a-Kom.³²

When the minister spoke of sending the Afo-a-Kom on a tour around Cameroon, the Fon stated he would have to stay with it wherever it went. The minister asked, “What are you talking about? You want to stay here?” In reply,

the Fon said he had been living in Yaounde in a hotel for three days with free food and a free bed. He would stay. Soon thereafter, the minister placed a few calls. By the next day, the Afo-a-Kom was on its way back to Laikom, where it was greeted with jubilation (fig. 36).



Fig. 35. Fon Nsom (reigned 1967–1974) with *ndop* cloth in background, 1974.

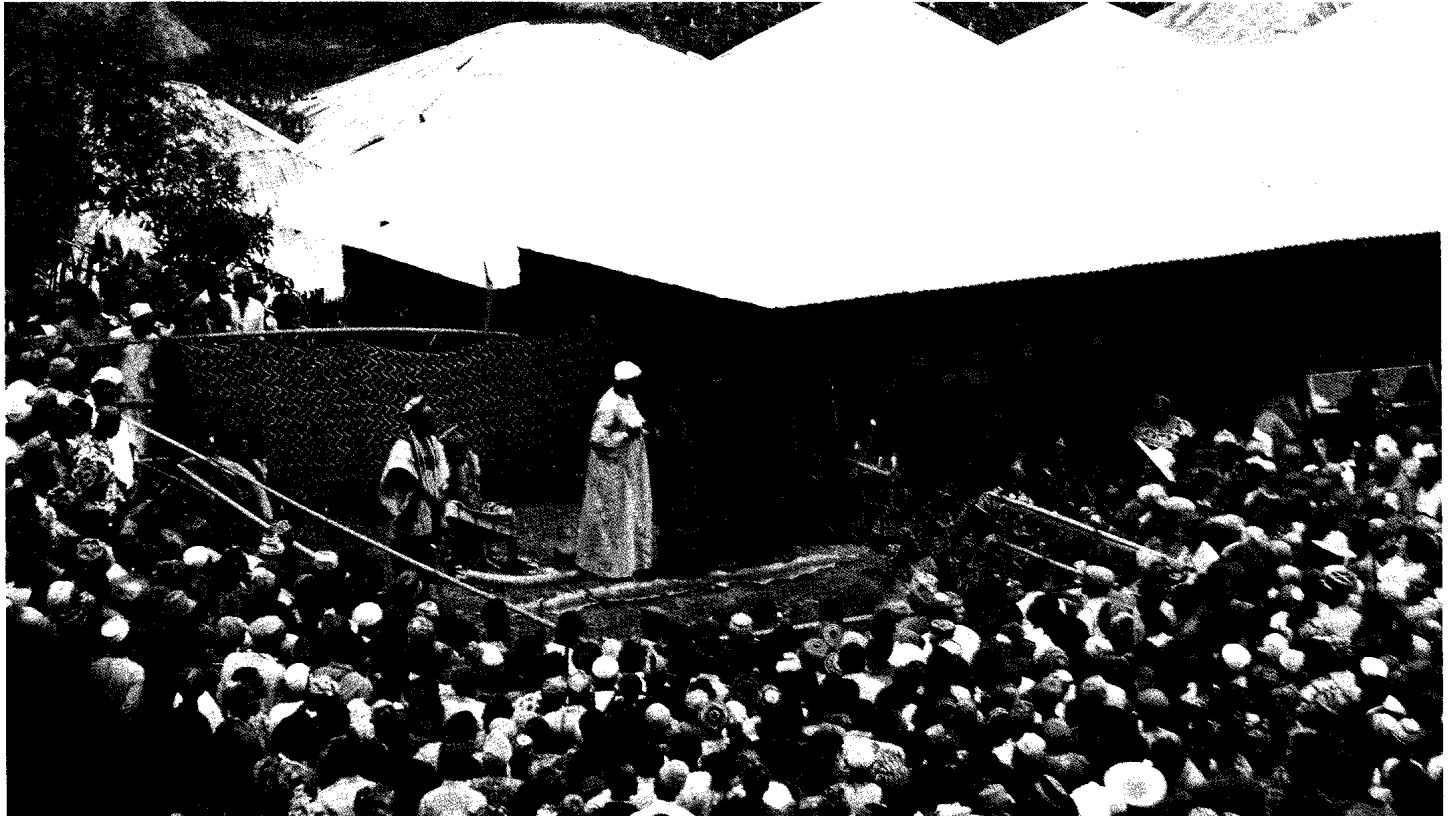


Fig. 36. Crowds viewing Afo-a-Kom, 1974.

In the aftermath of this two-sided story, lessons emerge. Fon Nsom, known in Kom for his fondness for intrigue, was able to assess an American weakness for sensational news. He and Johnson Mbeng adopted the stereotype of a poor kingdom unable to cope without its sacred statue. Jumping on an opportunity to save the situation, Americans responded with amazing swiftness. They were less aware of the complex Kom realities: that a theft from palace storage indicated there were not enough retainers to maintain security; that a Fon is required to negotiate his status in a modern nation state; that a sculpture like the Afo-a-Kom is seen differently by various Kom audiences—as a familiar portrait of Fon Yu by palace officials, and as an awesome reminder of royal power by commoners, but not a sacred god able to cause famine.

In turn, Kom people learned how much Americans value royal sculpture and began making as many copies as possible. Local rumors commended the cleverness of the Fon. Among commoners, the Afo-a-Kom was said to have caused havoc in America by walking around at night and destroying other objects placed near it. The return of the sculpture, in this rendition, was not a gesture of generosity, but was provoked by the need to export the destructive figure.

Fewer than ten years later, the Smithsonian Institution decided to mount another exhibition of Cameroonian objects, *The Art of Cameroon*. Once again, Katherine White's collection was prominently placed on view along with the Afo-a-Kom. Fon Jina Bo II (ruler from 1975 to 1989) had agreed to the loan and relied upon his retainers to carry it out.

Afo-a-Kom toured the United States but again became a beacon for misunderstanding. When the figure was returned by a Smithsonian representative, it was



Fig. 37. Fon Jina Bo II (reigned 1975–1989) at his enthronement with the royal figures, October 1, 1979.

greeted with disappointment. It seems an American impostor, acting as an agent for the Smithsonian, had already been to Laikom. He had promised the Fon a sum of money, a trip to the United States, and the seven vehicles that would bring the sculpture back to Laikom. The Fon, pleased with these plans, had given the man carvings as gifts to take back to the United States. When the true Smithsonian representative arrived, bringing the Afo-a-Kom in a crate and a \$300 loan fee, the reality fell far short of the Fon's falsely raised expectations of what was possible from America.

I have since realized that I am like a worm since I became Fon of Kom.

—Fon Jina Bo II

Negotiating with museums is just one of the difficulties a Fon faces. Jina Bo II, the first Fon to be quoted in publications, began his rule with a test of confidence in the process of “becoming Fon” (fig. 37). One Kom scholar, Paul Nchoji Nkwi, describes a situation in late 1974 when contradictory forces were pulling at the kingdom.³³ On December 13, the previous Fon, Nsom Ngwe, brought a case against his heir, Michael Mbain. Mbain was tried for selling three masks from the royal compound. He was brought before the Fon, and the police threatened to imprison him, but he insisted on his innocence. Senior palace retainers led the charges against him, insulting and jeering him for his misdeeds and rudeness toward the Fon. Three days later, however, Fon Nsom Ngwe died unexpectedly. Michael Mbain underwent the initiation process,

much of it privately enacted, which stressed his new functions and responsibilities. He emerged as a man transformed seven days later. Those same retainers who had denounced him earlier now called out his praise names as he took the identity of a Fon named Jina Bo II. As Nkwi reports, “The entire enstoolment process was believed to transform an ordinary mortal into an immortal being having power over life and death.”³⁴

Fon Jina Bo II is one of many leaders presiding over kingdoms that have survived, but not thrived, in the late twentieth century. Ongoing conversions to Christianity and Islam erode his base of spiritual authority. State government agents strive to dismantle the powers of the Fon in order to obtain access to lands under his authority. Customary Kom laws disregard political agendas and have led the Fon to question:

What makes my land my land? Is it that piece of paper or the fact that I am Fon of Kom? . . . I have since realized that I am like a worm since I became Fon of Kom. I am like a worm in the midst of ants. On my right, the “tiny chiefdoms” are biting me, on my left the Senior Prefect and his gendarmes. Everywhere around me, there are pressures. The land is no longer mine.³⁵

Kom royal sculptures have been removed from their original owners over the course of this century. In an art museum, the intricacies of the Fon’s role are a remote consideration. On the streets of Cameroonian cities and kingdoms today, the reality of the legacies left by such kings have a far greater impact.

Chiefs, more chiefs, always chiefs. —Jean-Marie Teno, 1999³⁶

The documentary film *Chef!* by Jean-Marie Teno concludes the century with a startling look at a ruler within the context of his own family. Teno narrates his changing expectations as a past chief is honored while his own great-uncle is installed as a chief. Two art forms punctuate the film. First is the cement statue commemorating King Kanga Joseph II, who was born in 1900 and ruled for fifty years. Teno observes that this king sought to develop his community by “straddling two traditions with no preparation and no training.” His concrete image presides over a busy intersection. “All alone at the end of the street, he will watch the concrete and beer ads invade his kingdom.” A great chief, he is saluted by masquerades whose importance he preserved. But, Teno says, the masks are symbols that “fewer and fewer understand.” The masquerades fade away as images of urban distress pervade the film. Questioning the role of such leaders in contemporary culture, Teno stresses the need to ask “Who comes first, the people or the chief?”³⁷

The Seattle Art Museum’s stage for a Fon of the Kom kingdom is fairly complete. Most of the objects were gifts from Fons to Americans who worked for years in Cameroon. Memories and photographs provide a record of close associations and meanings, but the stage is still missing the key actor—the patron who inspired the art and the only person ritually prepared to use it. In Laikom recently, the Fon remains the lead curator and principal guard of his own ongoing collection (fig. 38). In this role, he extends the kingdom’s art in new directions. As part of a visitors center, a pole has

Fig. 38. Fon Yibain (reign 1989-) at the palace, Laikom, 1999.



been erected to honor the past kings. Paintings of the succession of kings appear on the palace walls. Just as the Fons adapt their collections to remember the past and attract new visitors, so does the museum. Fon Yibain, the current ruler, was consulted as the museum planned its display of a stage fit for a Kom king. He designated Gilbert Mbeng Lo-oh, named for an American and Kom ancestor, to act as his emissary and conduct interviews with retainers and current members of the Kwifon (defined by Lo-oh as the sacred and administrative arm of the palace). Before bringing the results of his work to Seattle, Mbeng Lo-oh promised “startling revelations about customs and especially myths surrounding Kom art.” Thus, the museum will learn from this venerable kingdom as it guides a royal past into the present.

Notes

1. This circumstance changed with a collection of Maasai art in January 2000.
2. Paul Gebauer, note attached to an accession card created by Katherine White.
3. Paul Gebauer, "Architecture of Cameroon," *African Arts* 5, no. 1 (1971), 46.
4. Eugenia Shanklin, "The Path to Laikom: Kom Royal Court Architecture," *Paideuma* 31 (1985), 111–50.
5. Paul Nchoji Nkwi, "A Conservation Dilemma over African Royal Art in Cameroon," in *Plundering Africa's Past*, ed. Peter Schmidt and Roderick J. MacIntosh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 108.
6. Eugenia Shanklin, "The Odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom," *African Arts* (1990), 62–69.
7. Christraud Geary, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 155.
8. The two photographs of Fon Yu, both taken by Adolf Diehl, are given an approximate date of 1905–10.
9. Eugenia Shanklin, "Missionaries and Witchcraft Beliefs in Kom, Cameroon," in *The Message in the Missionary: Local Interpretations of Religious Ideology and Missionary Personality*, Studies in Third World Societies, no. 50 (Williamsburg, Va.: College of William and Mary, 1994), 56.
10. Reproduced in Tamara Northern, *Royal Art of Cameroon* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, 1973), 10.
11. Reproduced in *ibid.*, 12.
12. Katherine White Journals, Seattle Art Museum.
13. Katherine White's summary, based on Paul Gebauer's undated letter to her, Katherine White Archives.
14. E. M. Chilver and P. M. Kaberry, "The Kingdom of Kom in West Cameroon," in *West African Kingdoms in the 19th Century*, ed. Darrel Forde and Phyllis Kaberry (London: International African Institute, 1967), 142–43.
15. Phyllis M. Kaberry, "Retainers and Royal Households in the Cameroon Grassfields," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 3, no. 10 (1962), 282–98.
16. Hans-Joachim Koloss, "Kwifon and Fon in Oku on Kingship in the Cameroon Grasslands," in *Kings of Africa* (Utrecht: Foundation Kings of Africa, 1992), 40.
17. Photograph by Gilbert Schneider of Ngumba House, published in Fred Ferretti, *Afo-a-Kom: Sacred Art of Cameroon* (New York: The Third Press, 1975), 63.
18. Nkwi, "A Conservation Dilemma," 108.
19. Paul Gebauer, *Art of Cameroon* (Portland: The Portland Art Museum; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 78.
20. Charles Weber III, "The Educational Policy and Mission Schools of the Baptists in British Mandated Cameroon 1922–1945: The Policy and Education Work of Carl Bender, Paul Gebauer, and George Dunger," dissertation on microfiche (1982), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Shanklin, "Missionaries and Witchcraft Beliefs," 58.
23. M. D. W. Jeffreys, "Some Notes on the Fon of Bikom," *African Affairs* 50, no. 200 (1950), 241–49.
24. Rebecca Reyher, *The Fon and His Hundred Wives* (New York: Doubleday, 1952).
25. Gilbert Schneider, letter to Katherine White, November 5, 1973, Katherine White Archives.
26. Eugenia Shanklin, "The Track of the Python: A West African Origin Story," in *Signifying Animals, Human Meaning in the Natural World*, ed. Roy Willis (London: Allen and Unwin, 1990).
27. Catalogue card, Katherine White Archives, Seattle Art Museum.
28. Alastair Lamb and Venice Lamb, *Au Cameroon: Weaving/Tissage* (Hertingsfordury, England: Roxford Books, 1981).
29. Shanklin, "The Odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom," 62–69.
30. Ferretti, *Afo-a-kom*.
31. George Spicely, quoted in *ibid.*, 122.
32. Fon Nsom's words were recited by Bobe Chia Fuinkuin, a high-ranking member of the Kom entourage; quoted in Shanklin, "The Odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom," 66.
33. Paul Nchoji Nkwi, "Becoming Foyn: Among the Kom of the Cameroon Western Grassfield," *Paideuma* 36 (1990), 235–43.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Quoted in Cyprian Frisiy, "Chieftaincy in the Modern State: An Institution at the Crossroads of Democratic Change," *Paideuma* 41 (1995), 56–57.
36. Jean-Marie Teno, *Chef!* California Newsreel, 1999.
37. *Ibid.*