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Cameroon Tobacco Pipes

PAUL GEBAUER



1. HIGHLAND CHIEFTAIN IN FULL REGALIA.

In an article concerning art forms in the architecture of Cameroon (*African Arts*, Volume V, Number 1) reference was made to a standard prayer among the men of Kom. This prayer implores the gods to fulfill the three basic needs of every married man: progeny, prosperity, and prestige. No misinterpretation is possible about the desire for offspring, for a break in the geneological chain would be fatal. But what can “prosperity” mean within a grassland economy wherein meager hillside farms provide only a subsistence yield? The plea has nothing to do with the white man’s hunger for material possessions. It is a cry for protection against drought, floods, locusts, and warfare, and it implies a few amenities beyond bare necessities. The supplicant has in mind the daily calabash of palmwine, sufficient tobacco for the puffs and snuffs of the day, a pinch of salt for the main meal, and a kola nut or two to be shared with visitors.

Tobacco rates second among the prayed-for luxuries. The gods must have responded favorably in past centuries, because the use of the weed is widespread. Women have more “tobacco breaks” than their North American counterparts have coffee breaks. On the way to the farms the ladies of Cameroon smoke. Unforgettable are the single files of grassland women toiling uphill, followed by a thin blue trail of smoke. Small pipes held tightly in cold hands account for the air pollution of the lovely highland air. Little charcoal burners add to it. Hung just below the bare spines, swinging to and fro like incense bowls, they warm the bodies and help dispel the morning blues. Hourly tobacco breaks lighten the farming chores. The descending veils of smoke in the evening tell that work is done.

Men are just as much devoted to the habit. In the 1930’s no highlander travelled without pipe, flint, iron, moss, and tobacco in his bag. Carriers often stopped after each two-hour toil “to let their souls catch up with them”. Awaiting their souls they lit a

(OPPOSITE PAGE) 2. TOBACCO PIPE. BAMILEKE/BAGAM. 22". BOWL 6½". TERRA COTTA, WOOD. 3. PIPE BOWL, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. 5". TERRA COTTA. 4. TOBACCO PIPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. 24". TERRA COTTA, WOOD, IRON. 5. PIPE STEMS. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/TIKAR. AVERAGE HANDLE HEIGHT: 6". BRASS/BRONZE STEMS. IVORY HANDLES. 6. TOBACCO PIPE. BAMILEKE/BAGAM. BOWL: 4½". BRASS, IRON. 7. TOBACCO PIPE. BAMILEKE/BANGANGTE. BOWL: 6". TERRA COTTA, WOOD STEM. 8. PIPE BOWL, PROTOTYPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. 6". TERRA COTTA. 9. PIPE BOWL, PROTOTYPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. 4½". TERRA COTTA. 10. PIPE BOWL, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. 5½". TERRA COTTA.





11. CHIEF OF BABUNGO AND HIS WIVES.

pipe to be passed along the line. Each man inhaled deeply and rapidly to achieve mild intoxication. A small vent at the base of the bowl, controlled by the finger, accelerated inhalation. A more leisurely use of the pipe occurred in social gatherings and court sessions. Rulers kept awake during tedious state affairs by operating their ceremonial pipes slowly.

The extensive use of tobacco and its related cultural observances points to long acquaintance and usage. The tall variety of tobacco with narrow leaves is seen most frequently; the long-leafed type is less common. Among the Mambila we found a preference for a third type, a small, neglected-looking plant. Dr. M. D. W. Jeffreys claims to have seen the same kind in his old Bamenda division. He writes about a "smaller plant with small, greyish hirsute leaves". In his article "Some Bamenda Vernacular Names for Tobacco" (*Nigerian Field*, vol. XXXV, no. 4, 1970), Dr. Jeffreys presents an interesting tabulation of local names. He comments as follows: "What strikes one is the wide range of names", and says that some names support the theory "that *Cannabis sativa* was smoked in Africa long before tobacco and that its Persian name *bhang* is now in use for tobacco."

Lack of uniformity in the African cultivation and treatment of the harvest are cited to argue against pre-Columbian knowledge of the tobacco plant, which is indigenous to the American continent. In

Cameroon the seed beds are always in close proximity to the huts, often on the rubbish heap just behind the dwelling. Abandoned homesites are preferred for the cultivation of the seedlings. It is claimed that fallow soil and the ashes from the burned huts favor growth. The bones of ancestors buried below old sites may add flavor to the leaves! Weeding and fencing of the plots may or may not be done. Women, as the ones entrusted with all tasks related to fertility, cultivate, harvest, cure, and market the crop. The sun-dried leaves are fermented in some groups; other groups merely beat the harvest into small particles. Cylindrical rolls of leaves appeared as currency in Kaka markets into the 1930's.

The pounding of tobacco into a fine powder produces the snuff of which the women are especially fond. The powder is mixed with ashes of plantains or red pepper, or both. This is an old custom. C. J. Bender observed it among the coastal tribes in the last century. He wrote "... the women prefer snuff. The snuff is kept in tiny calabashes or in the hollowed-out cones of the palm. Some of the women carry their snuff boxes in their earlobes..." (C. J. Bender, *Twenty Years Among African Negroes*, Little Blue Book No. 797, Girard, Kansas). Explorer Zintgraff noticed the same among the rainforest tribes in 1886. He reported that the women used the potent snuff "almost all day long". Like Bender on the coast, he saw the

containers neatly tucked into feminine earlobes (E. Zintgraff, *Nord Kamerun*, Berlin, 1895). We found snuff lovers, containers, and accomodating earlobes in the north in the 1940's. In the fifties, at the court of Bangwa in East Cameroon we photographed the long fingernails of the ruler, who used one thumbnail to transport snuff safely from container to nose. In 1886 Zintgraff was startled by this selfsame indulgence in snuff among the Bakundu. Ralph Linton mentions the practice among the Bali (*Tobacco and its Use in Africa*, Chicago, 1930, p. 25).

Snuff containers are plain, while the pipes are ornate. Cameroon pipes are the embodiment of all the art and traditions of the people—their history, religion, culture. Here, in miniature, one has a magnificent study of the whole range of traditional and current art forms and styles. Mythology, folklore, and historic trends and influences are all incorporated and expressed in these pipes. Motifs in the carving on other articles are repeated; or the pipe maker may create small versions of larger articles; some pipe bowls are miniature masks or headgear and pipe stems are carved like house posts or stools. Most of the material used in the larger art forms are used also for pipes: clay, terra cotta, wood, ivory, and metal.

The pipe makers are inspired craftsmen, making objects of art of the humble, utilitarian pipe bowl, carving stylized portrayals of the whole panoply of the animal world, creating zoomorphic fantasies. The rich symbolism of grassland culture and the power and splendor of feudal rule added significance during the earlier, great period of pipe-making.

Wooden stems were enhanced with a lacework of copper wire, with plating of brass or tin, studded with brass tacks. Artists made the most of the natural beauty of well-grained wood or an unusual nubby texture. The stem cover, which was slipped over the metal tube, became art in the round. The traditional renderings of python and earth spider, leopard and bat, lizard and crocodile, frog and cowrie shell—all were incorporated into the designs. Ivory stems were carved with human and animal figures symbolizing fertility and long life. Even the geometric patterns of the tiedyed hangings and the applique designs on grassland gowns were adapted to pipe surfaces. The courts of Bamileke and Bamum applied their unique



12. TOBACCO PIPE. BAMILEKE/BAGAM. LENGTH: 20½". BOWL HEIGHT: 6½". BRASS, WOOD, IRON.

13. PIPE BOWL, PROTOTYPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. HEIGHT: 4½". TERRA COTTA. DESIGN: BABOON HEAD CAPPED BY MYTHOLOGICAL ANIMALS.



14 . THE FON OF MANKON IN STATE ATTIRE.



15. CREATING PIPE BOWL IN WAX FOR CASTING.



16. POST CARVER OF NSAW SMOKING.

colorful beaded designs to stem covers. One of the pipes in the Portland Art Museum illustrates clay sculpture and miniature wood carving at its best. A buffalo mask fills the frontal space of the bowl. Between the horns of the buffalo rests an animal mask. The base of the bowl is a face mask. The remaining surface is covered with lines that continue around the wooden stem, on which are carved mythical figures. The pipe is an example of unity of clay and wood, realism and stylization (Fig. 17).

Not only the traditional motifs were used. Fashion and historic events had an impact on pipe art. Pipes are records of tastes and change. The ceremonial pipe of one chieftain, for instance, depicts a soldier of the German Colonial Army, rifle and all. This style was popular after the military conquests of Morgan, Stetten and Dominik in the 1890's. With the coming of British rule and law, the German soldier was replaced by the figure of a judge sitting in session, stroking his beard or smoking his own pipe. The birth of the Republic in 1960 brought back the patterns of the beneficial ruler of former decades, securely seated on his stool. Before colonialism, hunters and hunted animals were in vogue, and before that, mythology and totemism; now it seems that the "good old days" of feudal peace and prosperity are again the theme.

Special mention should be made of some old terra cotta pipe bowls because of their superb design (Figs. 8, 9, 13, 18, 19). With the fluctuating trends in styles, wise craftsmen stored away the best of the old originals to be used as models when styles returned to popularity. When compared with later copies, these original prototypes reveal a skill unmatched today. Rarely seen in public, they sometimes appear for sale in the marketplaces only when the death of a master-patriarch breaks up the working fellowship grouped around him. Feuds within an extended family may also result in the dispersal of tools and models of a working guild. Economic calamities such as unexpected court fines or high taxes have prompted the sale of a yard's properties.

Pipes made of clay only are disappearing in the areas south of the Sanaga River. These pipes are small and unadorned. Congo influence is a probability. The short pipes seen along the eastern border show Nigerian influence. Among the Mambila we noticed clay pipes brought from Yola by the kola carriers. Along the route to Chad the Hausa trader spread imported varieties. In the grassland we traced the use of small pipes to men who had worked in the coastal plantations.

The true grassland pipe is a combination of terra cotta bowl and wooden stem. Regular bowls vary in height from two to six inches. Stems can be plain, straight wooden tubes or highly ornamented objects of wood or ivory into which a metal tube is inserted (Figs. 2, 4, 7, 12, 17).

Pipes made only of wood, in one or two sections, are also becoming rare, although small versions are still in use in the southwest. Large, ornamented bowls of hard or soft wood, inlaid with copper, brass, or tin, were still popular in Bamileke areas in the 30's.

Metal pipes made of bronze or brass in two or three parts are treasured to this day by rulers of central Cameroon (Fig. 6). Production of metal pipes origin-

ated with the Tikar who—it is claimed—brought the lost-wax method (*cire perdue*) to central Cameroon. Thorbecke complained in 1911 that among the Tikar of central Cameroon the art of casting pipes had dwindled to "small, hardly artistic products from a rough and gritty metal which reproduced the wax forms imperfectly..." (Franz Thorbecke, *Im Hochland von Mittel-Kamerun*, vol III, Hamburg, 1919). The six metal pipes of Table 22 in Thorbecke's dissertation are objects cast in the last century. They illustrate Tikar skill at its best. The Bamum and some of the Bamileke groups acquired this skill of casting from the Tikar and perfected the art to the point of creating a monopoly. (The metal pipes in European museums credited to the Bali were not cast by Bali craftsmen). Only two centers of casting function today, both controlled by Bamum men. One is at Fumban in the east and the other at Nkwen in the west. Both prosper.

The manufacture of clay pipes enjoyed widest diffusion. Evidences in African and European museums support the claim that many manufacturing centers existed in olden days. A mapping of their locations reveals the heavy inroads made by imported tobacco and imported pipes in the wake of colonial conquests; the imports caused the falling off of production of locally made pipes, just as imports have replaced the locally made tools, weapons, baskets, and pottery. Efforts to halt the trend have been made, however. In 1952 we happened to see a kiln on the road to Ebolowa



17. TOBACCO PIPE. BAMILEKE/BAGAM. LENGTH: 22". BOWL HEIGHT: 6". TERRA COTTA, WOOD, IRON. BOWL DESIGN: THREE MASKS.

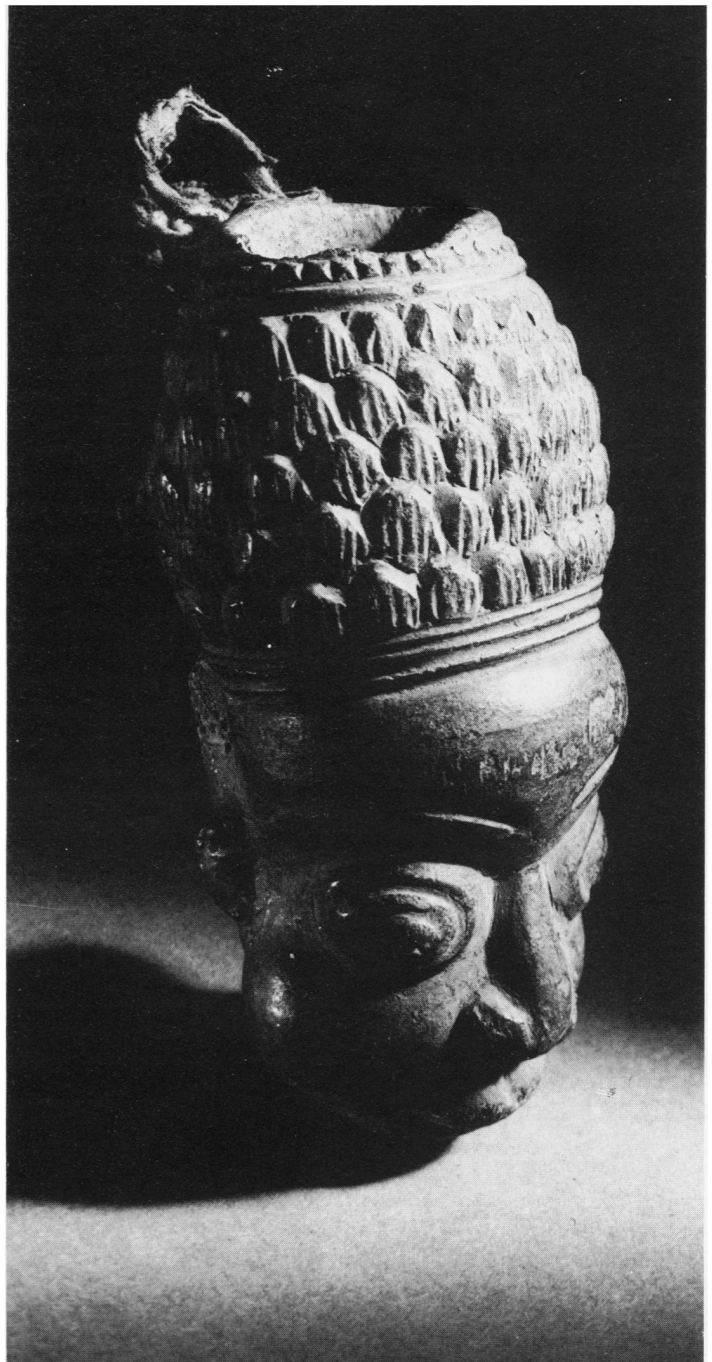
in the south. Next to it a wayside stand displayed well-made Bulu pipes and bowls of old Bamileke patterns. The Bamileke versions were improved by high firing and a black glaze. We had seen them before in the Bangangte markets, where they competed with locally made products. Hausa traders in the west also had them among their wares. We discovered that they came from the workshop of a French plantation owner here on the road to Ebolowa.

One indigenous center for the production of clay pipes persists to this day, the village of Bamesing. Now called Nsei, it is located below Sabga Pass in the west. Its pipe makers established a reputation long before the Germans came to Cameroon in 1884, which may be accounted for by the control of superior clay deposits, an abundance of trained workers, specialization, nearness to an old trade route, and an ancient rumor about the metaphysical qualities of the pipes. To these contributing factors one must add the benefits of an unusual political stability in the village structure.

In 1932 we made our first inspection of the many workyards of this village. Often afterwards we visited to watch the specialists at work. In 1970 we called once again on Master Fondong Yungwe, the oldest leader in the craft. The number of workyards has diminished. In Yungwe's own yard we met with only two assistants. Gone were the many youngsters of six to twelve years who had once crowded the yard to learn the craft. The demands of the modern school system are blamed for this loss. Formerly these boys saw to the basic chores of digging and wedging the clay, supervising the drying process, and helping with the firing. The more talented ones were permitted to make the small pipes for the women and to



19. PIPE BOWL, PROTOTYPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING. HEIGHT: 3½". TERRA COTTA. HEADCOVER DESIGN: DOUBLE BELLS OF A REGULATORY BRANCH OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT.



18. PIPE BOWL, PROTOTYPE. WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSING HEIGHT: 5¾". TERRA COTTA. CUP DESIGN: SACRED DOUBLE IRON BELLS OF LOCAL REGULATORY SOCIETY.

(OPPOSITE PAGE) 20. LABORER AND HIS PIPE.

sell them personally on market day. In this way the best of them were drawn into their elder's part-time occupation, became apprentices, and eventually masters of their own yards.

Although the small apprentices are gone, methods in making the clay pipes have changed little with the years. The partially dried bowls are put at the feet of Yungwe and his helpers. The same set of locally made raffia and iron tools which we had examined many years earlier are used in the carving of the figures. The tools are dipped in palm oil often during the sculptural process.

Firing methods remain the same. The sun-baked bowls are placed between layers of elephant grass. The sudden heat of the grass-fire hardens the bowls. As soon as they are extracted from the ashes, the hot

objects are sprinkled with a liquid from the flowers and fibers of the raffia palm. The type of clay and the amount of sprinkling account for the color variations of the finished product.

During the 1970 visit to Cameroon, I witnessed an unexpected revitalization of the traditional art of pipe making. The endeavors of the U.S. Peace Corps added to this hopeful awakening, and the Cameroon Government supports the trend wholeheartedly.

Tobacco pipes became and still are status symbols. The pipe indicates the owner's rank in society. Retainers at courts shared with the common man the use of plain or moderately decorated pipes. Members of associations, public or secret, were permitted to show their totems on the bowls. Members of courts and royal families owned expensive pipes of metal and ivory. Enormous ceremonial pipes were reserved for the highest rulers in the public functions.

Ceremonial pipes had their own retainers, male or female. Fõn Ndi of the Kom had one of his wives appointed guardian of the state pipe. Another one was assigned the care of the tobacco supply. Yet another operated the vent of the pipe on state occasions. In earlier times, Sultan Njõya, Fõn Ndi, and many others could afford such luxuries of service, as they had hundreds of wives to spare. Less fortunate rulers made do with one male retainer for the triple duty of guarding the pipe, the tobacco, and of operating the vent—plus the carrying of the state pipe in ceremonial processions.

Humbler lords of the realm carried and cared for their pipes themselves, as does the highland chieftain seen in Fig. 1. His attire for the personal call on his powerful neighbor would have been incomplete without his personal pipe. It was not an extraordinary piece of art, yet it served the purpose of declaring rank and the peaceful mission of the caller. His cap, the chain of leopard teeth, the strings of valuable beads from the slave trade, and his personal drinking cup completed his paraphernalia. Yet it was the pipe which underlined his mission of goodwill.

Women, as in the past, still cling to the traditional small pipe, although they are the heaviest smokers. The unornamented little pipe of clay and wood is for the average toiler. A decorated bowl indicates a woman of rank or a member of the royal household. Queens and queen-mothers may use a man-sized, highly ornamented pipe—in fact, any type desired.

In 1970, we observed, along with the revitalization of the art of pipe making, that the use of tobacco has different social implications now than it had in the past. At Sabga Pass, a member of the most conservative and exclusive groups in all Cameroon, a youthful Bororo girl, greeted me with a cigarette between her painted lips—the cigarette a product of Cameroon. Thus the feeble tobacco cultivation experiments of the last century under Governor von Puttkamer have grown into tobacco plantations and one of Cameroon's most prosperous national enterprises. The war between pipe and tobacco wages. Who will win? □

