

# Contemporary Drinking Horns in the Western Grassfields, Cameroon

By

**Mathias Alubafi Fubah**

Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> African Unity for Renaissance Conference: 2015 and Beyond: Engaging Agenda 2063. Organised by the University of Johannesburg and Africa Institute of South Africa, HSRC. University of Johannesburg, Soweto Campus, 22-24 May 2015

## Abstract

Using ethnographic research and my local knowledge as a native of the western Grassfields, this paper discusses the recent growth and popularity of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee across the western Grassfields within the context of continuous obsession with objects of status typical of the region's titled men and elders. In particular, the paper illustrates how cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee embody the desire of Bambui youths to assert their status and identity, and more importantly to make Bambui voice heard in the wider Grassfields community. The paper also discusses the use of cow horn drinking cups by Bambui youths who are for the most part voiceless in issues of tradition as a means to challenge the dominant institution of traditional elites that generally excludes youths from certain categories of objects and motifs. The paper will show how by choosing to acquire drinking horns with foreign iconographic aesthetics such as the facial image of Bruce Lee, as traditional elites do with those of the royal animals, youths have imposed over time new and foreign aesthetic practices in Grassfields artistic practices.

## **KEY WORDS**

Horn, Cameroon, Grassfields, Change, Continuity

## **Introduction**

Drinking horns, particularly those decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee first made their appearance in the Grassfields in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Perhaps even earlier, but I first discovered them in 2009. At the time, I had just arrived Douala from England *en route* to Bambui to participate in a family meeting that brought together my paternal first cousins as well as their spouses and parents. Prior to our departure from Douala to Bambui, Athanasius, my cousin, pulled out a drinking horn decorated with the facial image of Bruce from one of the cupboards in his living room and placed it on the table. The horn

caught my attention and I asked him what he wanted to do with it: “that is my drinking horn—I do not want to be ridiculed in the village because I don’t have a drinking horn,” he stressed. Then I went further, what is this image depicted on your drinking horn? “Bruce Lee, of course, the youth favourite actor,” he concluded.

Having grown up in the western Grassfields and participated in most family, contemporary and youth association meetings, I realized how easy it is for a young man to be belittled in public on grounds that he does not have a drinking horn. The Western Grassfields of Cameroon is a highland region of over two million people, with over fifty ethnic groups and languages covering most of the Northwest Region. It has many shared practices and beliefs, which makes it suitable and often necessary to be studied as a region, and not just as a distinct ethnic group.<sup>1</sup> Hierarchy is a crucial part of Grassfields ideology and is based upon such things as age, gender and titles.<sup>2</sup> Objects of material culture such as the buffalo and cow horn drinking cups are essential elements in the traditional diplomacy of the Grassfields region. Across the Grassfields, the drinking horn is seen as a means of socializing youths into the traditional fabric of the society. Family meetings, being one of the ritual contexts in which socialization takes place, tend to be strict on young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five or forty who attend such gatherings without their drinking horns. They are seen as “uncultured” and a threat to the integrity of the family. Conscious of this, young men, like Athanasius have made the drinking horn one of the most important items that must not be forgotten whenever they are going to a family, contemporary or youth association meeting. It is in such gatherings that they learn and practice how to become elders, successors, and titleholders—and one notable means of portraying this is by using their cow horn drinking cups for drinking palm wine as the elders and titled men do with their elegant and distinctive buffalo horns. As Abang, one of my cousins maintained, “you will be addressed as a child if you do not have a drinking horn—and you know what that means.”<sup>3</sup>

Since our family meeting in 2009, I have made successive visits to carving workshops, family, contemporary and youth association meetings across the western Grassfields observing how the drinking horn is acquired, carved, distributed, used, and by who.<sup>4</sup> The outcomes of my observations have been overwhelming. In the three carving workshops that I have been visiting in Kedjom Keku or Big Babanki, Nkwen and Baba I, the story has been the same—the horns are categorized in accordance with the social status of the patron.

Essentially, the buffalo horn drinking cups are produced for titled men and elders of the community such as the *fon*, sub-chiefs and associated elites, while the cow horn drinking cup without any decoration is meant for the rest of the community including commoners, as well as untitled lineage heads and women. This, however, is in spite of the fact that women are known to use drinking vessels made from calabash rather than the cow horn. It only goes a long way in explaining the status of the patrons for undecorated cow horn drinking cups in comparison to the other categories. According to the Kedjom Keku buffalo horn carver, Pa Mbighobong, the cow horn drinking cup is likened to a bird's toenail because it is not from a royal animal.<sup>5</sup> The third category of drinking cups, which is quiet recent and has attracted and is attracting attention from youths, especially members of contemporary and youth associations is the cow horn drinking cup decorated with the facial image Bruce Lee. This category of cow horn drinking cups is my interest in this paper, precisely because it is a new and foreign aesthetic that has evolved in the carving profession across the region—and needs to be interrogated in order to understand why carvers and youths have suddenly developed interest in a drinking horn with foreign iconographic motif, and more importantly to understand the significance of this new development in comparison to the other categories of cow horn drinking cups.

Drawing from ethnographic research and the literature on Grassfields art, this paper suggests that recent growth and popularity of cow horn drinking cups, especially those decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee across the Cameroon Grassfields is an affirmation of the politics of obsession with objects of status typical of titled men as well as elders and youths. The paper argues that cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee unlike undecorated cow horn drinking cups are significant because they embody the desire of these youths to assert their status and identity and more importantly to make Bambui voice heard in the Grassfields community. The paper demonstrates that the deployment of such imagery is a reflection of the contemporary struggle with tradition in which youths in the region are engaged: it becomes a symbol of defence against their suppression by a gerontocratic elite, and thus youth asserts itself against a practice which retains the buffalo horn drinking cup for traditional elites.<sup>6</sup>

In order to unload the above claims, I divide the paper into four sections: first, I identify and examine the significance of the drinking horn in the Grassfields, particularly drawing from

my research experience and the relevant literature on Grassfields art, second, I examine the cow horn drinking cup as an instrument in the youths search for Bambui roots, third, I present the cow horn drinking cup as a means of affirming the politics of obsession with prestige items common across the region, fourth , I discuss the cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee as a means to challenge the dominant institution of traditional elites that generally excludes youths from certain categories of objects and motifs. The last part, the conclusion, highlights the new artistic scene emerging from this new trend of cultural production.

### **The Significance of the Drinking Horn in the Grassfields**

Titled men as well as elders and urban based elites in the Grassfields are noted for their obsession with prestige items, and especially for their interest in foreign aesthetics or the “foreign other.”<sup>7</sup> Their interest in prestige items and foreign aesthetics have led them to be described as people with a duty to appropriate and bring inside the kingdom all resources that circulate not only across the region or nation but also those from abroad.<sup>8</sup> For example, most of the palace collections across the Grassfields are made of objects both from the Cameroon Grassfields, and beyond. The extinction of the buffalo and by extension, scarcity of its horn, and above all, the social organization of Grassfields kingdoms which renders untitled men, women and youths voiceless has made it indispensable for many to look for alternative categories of objects and aesthetics in the hope of fulfilling their dreams of becoming recognizable elites and titled men in their communities.

More recently, the growth and popularity of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial images of Bruce Lee among Grassfields youths have increased significantly to such an extent that contemporary cow horn drinking cups have outnumbered all other categories of drinking vessels.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that in the Grassfields context dominated by the politics of obsession with foreign aesthetics and interest in gaining prestige that contemporary drinking horns, especially those decorated with facial image of renown celebrities, such as Bruce Lee have become so popular among youths, that it is now seen as a threat to the very existence of, and status of titled men and elders, and by extension, their buffalo horn drinking cups.

However, interest in contemporary and foreign aesthetics is not restricted to cow horn drinking cups or youths across Bambui. It cuts across the traditional and contemporary fabric

of the Grassfields and Cameroon. As Argenti (1998) has noted in the case of Oku, masquerades in this kingdom, are now founded by contemporary and youth associations such as Air Youth rather than solely by elders and titled men as was the case in the past.<sup>10</sup> One notable explanation for this is the continuous marginalization of untitled men and women, as well as youths of Oku and the Grassfields by the elders and titled men who feel they have control over prestige items and certain categories of objects and aesthetics, such as masquerades, and the buffalo horn drinking cup. The outcome of the growth and popularity of contemporary resources and aesthetics is the proliferation of a variety of aesthetics across the Grassfields in comparison to the previously predominantly traditional, and by extension, royal objects of titled men and elders.

Much has been written about the rationale behind the production and exchange of contemporary traditional art forms across the Grassfields, but little about the growth and popularity of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee, as an aspect that embody the desire of Bambui youths to assert their status and identity, and more importantly, to make Bambui voice heard in the Grassfields community. Worth noting here, is the fact that, most Bambui, and by extension, Grassfields youths, associate the acquisition of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee with the “youths choice,” and tend to exalt them as a means to avoid being ridiculed in society and a show of commitment to their ancestral values. In fact, if Bambui youths show interest in drinking horns with particular foreign iconographic motifs, it is because they are descendants of a culture that is obsessed with prestige items and foreign aesthetic, and that tends to value these qualities as prerequisites for titles, authority and power in their communities.

Grassfields or Bambui culture also encourages ownership of the drinking horn decorated with facial image of Bruce because it is one notable object that bridges the gap between youthfulness and adulthood. As a matter of fact, youths and commoners are associated with plain or undecorated cow horn drinking cups. Besides using undecorated cow horn drinking cups, commoners have a gourd to drink from.<sup>11</sup> Ownership of a cow horn drinking cup decorated with the facial image of Bruce Lee empowers a youth, making him to be seen as someone mature enough to face the challenges of manliness—such as competing for a title or titles within his community. With these challenges under control, the cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee can rightly be represented as a means through

which youth can achieve what Gilles Seraphin calls the “statutory quest.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, attaining the status of a man or titleholder in the society as opposed to his previous youthfulness. This is also one of the reasons why Bambui, and by extension, Grassfields youths consider ownership of such a drinking cup important, because it enhances their social status both in the village and in the association level—be it in Cameroon or abroad.<sup>13</sup>

However, while majority of Bambui youths see cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce in the same light as the buffalo horn used by titled men and elders, most of which have been handed down from generation to generation, some, are, somewhat skeptical, on grounds that the foreign iconographic motifs do not reflect a real Bambui identity, especially in the eyes of the ancestors who are propitiated through the use of these horns in pouring libation. In a region where the buffalo horn drinking cup is continually seen as means of bestowing blessings on the family and population, many Bambui youths feel acquisition of cow horn drinking cups with foreign motifs will “disconnect” rather than reconnect its owners to the local community. In fact, most of my informants argued that the use of cow horn drinking cup with foreign iconographic motifs in spraying palm wine over the population as Grassfields *fons* do during the *mendele* or annual dances in villages across the region or in making libation, for example, might lead to a curse rather than the much expected blessings.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, some, especially members of contemporary and youth associations residing in Bamenda (the provincial capital of the North West Region) shared this conviction, arguing that the use of cow horn drinking cups with foreign aesthetics in pouring libation to the ancestors might be resisted because the horns do not reflect the buffalo horn drinking cups the ancestors left behind. This type of resistance, Paul maintains, “might be meted on the family in the form illnesses, accidents and even death. Yet, in spite of these reservations, most of these contemporary “drinking horn sceptics” are still concerned about the implications of not having a cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee during family or association gatherings.

### **Cow Horn Drinking Cup and the Search for Bambui Roots**

Before investigating further, it is necessary to briefly address the theoretical question of the notion of tradition as implying stability and absence of change, especially considering that such views have been challenged by several scholars in the last decades.<sup>15</sup> The above scholars all emphasize the highly conceptual and illusionary character of tradition. Moreover,

anthropologists have realized that, whatever a society does is part of the people's attempt to understand their situation and grapple with changing conditions. Thus, the growth and popularity of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee among Bambui youths, is not only because they are obsessed with prestige items, or that they want to negotiate their relations to the local community, and make Bambui voice heard in the Grassfields community. Rather, it is one way through which youths produce meaning enabling them to examine and shape their life condition. For Bambui youths, their engagement with the changing conditions of today's society is manifested in their ability to make use of drinking horns with foreign iconographic motifs as a means in both their effort to construct an imagined Bambui community, and especially to reconnect themselves to the local community in order to be seen as men following in the foot-steps of elders and titled men in the community—and therefore, capable of competing for recognition in the form of traditional titles.

Apparently, there is no social gathering in the western Grassfields where the use of the cow horn drinking cup, especially those decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee is considered a means of negotiating relations to the local community as is the case in most Bambui contemporary and youth associations; no place where youths have made ownership of such drinking cups a symbol of prestige, power and authority, or even, what Scott cogently calls a “hidden transcript of resistance” against suppression by a gerontocratic elite; no place where such a drinking cup is associated with the politics of obsession with prestige items or is used as a means of asserting one's social status as it has taken hold in Bambui contemporary and youth associations.<sup>16</sup> No Grassfields scholar has undertaken an exhaustive study of the rationale behind the recent interest in cow horn drinking cups, particularly those with foreign iconographic motifs in the western Grassfields than Jean Pierre Warnier and Hans Knöpfli.<sup>17</sup> Although the work of these scholars is limited to the buffalo and cow horn in general, it provides a lens through which we can understand the value of the contemporary cow horn drinking cup. For instance, in his study on the “King as a Container in the Cameroon Grassfields,” Warnier explains that:

The fon of Mankon takes palm wine from his drinking buffalo-horn or cup and sprays saliva/wine onto the people during the annual dry season festival. His drinking horn is an important vessel in this ritual gesture. And that for the neighbouring Meta, the hereditary buffalo-horn drinking cup of the lineage head is seen as a means of establishing continuity with the dead fathers of the patrilineage and drawing upon their mystical power in

ritual contexts. The cup is made potent by uttering over it what the Meta call *njawm*, glossed by Dillon as ‘strong statement’, which is a speech, made aloud, by the owner of the drinking horn. The cup gains its power from the breath of the dead elders stored in the same cup which they have breathed and spoken over for generation after generation. The strong statement made over such a cup is so powerful that it effects what it says. When speaking over such a cup, a notable can only tell the truth. What must be stressed is that the notable is seen as a container of breath-and-speech, and the drinking horn as the receptacle of the accumulated breath-and-speech of the dead generations.<sup>18</sup>

The above extract illuminates the fact that ownership of a cow horn drinking cup is one notable means of ensuring that there is continuity with both the ancestors and the descendants of the lineage head. It is a means of building from and extending the breathe and speech of the dead elders and titled men of one’s lineage, and by extension, the Bambui community. As a matter of fact, it is through the acquisition and use of a cow horn drinking cup, especially one decorated with images of power and authority that Bambui youths are considered men, since for many people from Bambui and the Grassfields, one is a man only if he owns and uses a cow horn drinking cup with distinctive motifs in the same manner as others or elders and titled men do with the buffalo horn. This means that ownership of such a drinking cup allows the man the opportunity to store the breathe and speech that will eventually be handed over to his successor upon his dead. In other words, a Bambui youth becomes a man, and by extension, an ancestor only if he lives behind a cow horn drinking cup with facial image of Bruce Lee that will be used in venerating him. In Bambui in particular and the Grassfields as a whole, people generally scorn youths who do not own such drinking cups, and tend to address them as children, commoners or even women, in some cases. For instance, a Bambui elder once refused to serve the author palm wine in a plastic cup on grounds that it was not a man’s drinking cup. I guess he was referring to a cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee as is the case with most Bambui youths. In a similar situation, one of my informants told me how he was insulted right in his own house by visitors who refused to pour palm wine into his cup because it was a glass rather than a cow horn drinking cup decorated with the facial image of the youth’s favorite actor. One of the visitors angrily questioned him: “How can you call yourself a man when you do not have a drinking cup even in your own house?” We can “pour this palm wine into everyone’s glass in this house as long as they are visitors but not you because you are in your house and cannot tell us that you forgot your drinking cup somewhere.” The informant told me how he felt guilty after the incident but mustered courage and explained his situation to the visitors, and promised to buy



such a drinking cup in future before he was allowed to drink from the glass—as the last chance.

The informant's experience suggest that, in Bambui in particular, and the Grassfields as a whole, ownership of a drinking cup is one of the main criteria for evaluating the status of a youth, since the local population prioritizes a drinking cup as evidence that the youth is now a man, and by extension part of the community, and is capable of rubbing shoulders with his colleagues and peers. Indeed, in Bambui, nothing reflects the status of a youth more than his drinking cup—that he polishes and puts in his bag whenever he is going to a family or association gathering. It is this practice that led Paul Gebauer to assert that a “Grassfields man's drinking cup is always among the few items in his carry-all bag.”<sup>19</sup> The drinking cup is also popular among youths because it is used not only for drinking palm wine, it is also used for drinking palm wine mixed with the blood of a sacrificial fowl or cock.<sup>20</sup> As Warnier notes, in the case of Mankon, the drinking cup was used by trade-friends in the past in passing formal alliances, by drinking from their cups, after saying aloud: “If I know something about you and fail to tell you or if I betray you, may this wine (or this blood) tell it to my stomach.”<sup>21</sup> The idea behind such a statement is that the “wine from the cup stays in the person's stomach, and if he betrayed his friend, even years later, justice would be done by causing his ignominious death with swollen feet or a swollen belly.”<sup>22</sup> The popular belief in Bambui in particular, and the Grassfields as a whole is that alliances passed using drinking cups other than the buffalo or cow horn (such as glasses and plastic cups) can never be effective—which might also explain why the glass bottle that was originally held by one of the figures on the Bamum throne was replaced with a traditionally stylized drinking horn decorated with perls before the throne was sent to Berlin in 1908.<sup>23</sup> In case of Grassfields and Bambui youths who are restricted from using buffalo horn drinking cups, the cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee serves as an alternative.

### **Cow Horn Drinking Cup and the Politics of Obsession with Prestige items and Foreign Aesthetics**

Over the last couple of years, most Bambui youths, especially members of contemporary and youth associations, have come to be convinced that the one notable means of attaining their goals and social status is to own a cow horn drinking cup decorated with the facial image of Bruce Lee. Accordingly, many have come to associate ownership of such drinking cups with

the affirmation of ethnic and social backgrounds. In present day Bambui, ownership of a cow drinking horn in the name of Bambui and ethnic pride in foreign aesthetics is more important than ownership for the sake of status and social recognition, because many youths feel cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee now serve less as a signifier of social status than a marker of social identification. In fact, ownership of cow horn drinking cups in contemporary and youth associations is concrete proof that these youths form an important part of the Bambui traditional and contemporary elite's class. It is also a confirmation that, despite the restrictions and suppression by a gerontocratic elite, they remain sons and daughters of Bambui. For most Bambui youths, a drinking cup with facial image of Bruce Lee can also serve as *nifieh-ngu* or red feather which marks their place in the traditional hierarchy, since it is through such awards that youths can obliterate the social stratification between traditional elites and themselves. By so doing, ownership of a cow horn drinking cup as a symbol of ethnic affiliation neutralizes the distinction between traditional elites and youths.<sup>24</sup>

The experiences of Bambui contemporary and youth association members support this marked change in the ownership and use of cow horn drinking cups. Until the early and mid-2000s when most Bambui youths began to commission cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee, drinking cups, especially, the buffalo horn drinking cup and foreign resources and aesthetics served as an instrument in the traditional elites' search for status and social recognition, and in their struggle for control of the local population and resources. Ownership of buffalo horn drinking cups and foreign resources also played a decisive role in the desire of these elites to get access to the notability necessary to re-enforce their power. This was the case for Caramel, a popular Bambui photographer, now deceased, who built an impressive empire from his various photo studios and acquired assorted drinking horns, and titles to achieve his personal ambitious. The less ambitious elites were not so interested in objects of status and foreign resources such as the buffalo horn, and rather tended to depend solely on undecorated cow horn drinking cups and other categories of drinking vessels. As one of my informants told me, "until I was told that I needed to have a cow horn drinking cup with a particular motif, commissioning a cow horn drinking cup with facial image of Bruce Lee was not in my mind, since I was comfortable with my undecorated cow horn drinking cups and glasses."<sup>25</sup>

Interest in contemporary cow horn drinking cups with facial image of Bruce Lee became an absolute necessity for most Bambui youths and elites, including those who were previously uninterested following the political upheaval resulting from the 2008 presidential elections. Following the post-election violence, many Bambui youths and elites were victimized, and as a result, were forced to identify with Bambui contemporary and youth associations for security reasons. The victimization of Bambui youths during the post-election violence was exacerbated by the fact that during the democratization process of the early 1990s, most of them decided to become allied with the opposition movement, and specifically to back the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the main opposition party in the country, which then, and until present day enjoys huge popularity with people from Bambui.

As had happened in the 1990s, when titleholders and elders in Bambui reacted to the post-election violence by going under the canopy of the palace associations that defended them as custodians of the land, it was through affiliating to contemporary and youth associations across the village that youths and elites were able to challenge their victimization by government forces as idle people and perpetrators of the violence. More importantly, associating with contemporary and youth associations provided the youths with the means to counterbalance the suspicion and dominant narrative that characterized them as idle people who are not affiliated to any recognizable village association and who are always ready to go on the streets and cause problems. Indeed, associating with contemporary and youth associations required these youths and elites to acquire the necessary requirements associated with membership such as the cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee.

### **Cow Horn Drinking Cup as an object of resistance**

Some recent studies on the Cameroon Grassfields have reiterated the fact that artistic creation across the region, today, as in the past, is essentially a political phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> This is true, especially for the cow horn drinking cup, since drinking cups have formed part of a “network of exchange of objects that have played a crucial role in defining regional cultural identity since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>27</sup> Again, titled men, and elders as well as urban based elites from the region are noted for their obsession with objects of prestige, and especially for their interest in foreign aesthetics or the “foreign order.”<sup>28</sup> Their interest in prestige items have led them to portray objects such as the buffalo horn drinking cup, a means of exaggerating their

importance and dignity in the face of their subjects, and especially a form of administration through which a certain political and social order is maintained at the expense of untitled men as well as youths women. The buffalo horn served as a royal object and ownership was restricted to members of the royal family and traditional elites such as elders and titled men. As a matter of fact, the buffalo horn served as a tool in the local elites' search for status and social recognition, and in their struggle for control of the local population. By tradition, it was, and still is one of the “most precious heirlooms handed down to the most honourable member of the family from one generation to the next.”<sup>29</sup>

In the politics of ethnicity in Cameroon, the buffalo horn drinking cup was, and still is used in forging alliances, both with rulers of equal status as well as with political elites and meritorious sons of the kingdom and region. This was the case with the incumbent president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, in 1985 when he was crowned “fon of fons” or king of kings during his maiden visit to the then North West Province. Following his new title, Paul Biya was lavishly decorated with the traditional regalia of the western Grassfields, including *togo-oh* or gown, a leopard skin bag, a buffalo horn drinking cup, a red feather and associated important royal objects. Additionally, similar rewards are presented to meritorious sons of the kingdom or region during *mendele* or annual dances performed in kingdoms across the Grassfields during December and January. In most cases, these rewards are presented to urban based elites who have succeeded in their careers and are now seen as potential intermediaries between the local community and the government or the outside world. Upon receiving these rewards, urban based elites become known as titleholders in their local communities and are integrated into the ranks of titled men and elders of the community. They are charged with the responsibility of lobbying and bringing development and foreign resources to their villages and region. As titled men, they can share palm wine from the same calabash with other titled holders. Drinking palm across the Grassfields is particularly significant because it is considered a ritual, but also a sacred activity, especially in the context of titled men and elders. Palm wine nourishes the brain of the title holder, allowing him to think positively especially in issues associated with the well-being of his people. Accordingly, we can ascertain that it is a cultural symbol, and like other makers of culture—is largely controlled by titled men and elders. In issues of tradition, palm wine was and still, is used in communicating with the ancestors and deities of the region, kingdom, family or families.

In contrast to the privileges associated with titleholders and the buffalo horn drinking cup, commoners, including untitled men, and youths as well as women were and still, are restricted from using the buffalo horn as a drinking vessel. Their drinking vessels are the cut-off end of the long horn of the zebu—which was, and until present day, is variously, but derogatorily described as a “birds toenail” or a “blank page” since it is not harvested from a royal animal.<sup>30</sup> As a rule, women in particular, are not allowed to drink from the buffalo horn drinking cup but the owner may pour palm wine from his buffalo horn drinking cup into a titled woman’s palm from which she then drinks the wine.<sup>31</sup> However, it is forbidden when the titled woman is unclean. As noted by Hans Knöpfli, a “woman is regarded as unclean for seven days when she has her monthly period, while men are considered unclean for three days after sexual intercourse as they might unknowingly have had contact with an unclean woman.”<sup>32</sup>

These restrictions were strictly enforced by putting in place disciplinary techniques or what Michel Foucault calls “*dispositif*,” which are the various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body.<sup>33</sup> Put differently, measures aimed at sanctioning defaulters were instituted. For example, untitled men and commoners who dare to commission or acquire the buffalo horn were heavily fined and their buffalo horns were also seized. Moreover, defaulters (if any) were accused of, and associated with “witchcraft-related practices, since it was widely believed that only witches or sorcerers could be bold enough to disobey the authority of traditional elites, or to subvert the dominant social and political order overseen by the Grassfields customary elite system of chieftaincy.”<sup>34</sup> In some cases, they were cursed and punished with illnesses such as leprosy. An informant in Kedjom Ketingo told me that the disappearance of leprosy across the western Grassfields is as a result of the fact that the forest no longer harbours royal animals such as the buffalo that could cause people to disobey traditional law and be punished with the illness. In Bambui, the defaulters were not only cursed, but some were actually killed by throwing them at *Mbohtikobotu*, or valley of darkness—a deep and dark valley in which defaulters of traditional religious practices were thrown in the past. This practice and punishment did not end with the victims alone, it also extended to, and affected their family members. For example, family members of anyone thrown at *Mbohtikobotu* were not allowed to mourn or perform the religious rites associated with first funerals across the Grassfields. In fact, this type of death was considered

a 'silent death' and the entire community was expected to go about their businesses as if nothing had happened. With all these restrictions and sanctions, the buffalo horn drinking cup posed a major challenge to Grassfields commoners and untitled men as well as youths.

As a result of these restrictions, untitled men, including commoners and youths see the cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee as an instrument in the counter-hegemonic project. Indeed, untitled men thought it is through using the cow horn drinking cups that they could challenge the overwhelming regime of chieftaincy and notability, which, as mentioned earlier, gives status to customary and politico-bureaucratic elites at the expense of social juniors and women. More importantly, this buffalo horn resistance enables the newly emerging class of youths, with their cow horn drinking cup with facial image of Bruce to contest, not only the pre-eminent position of the Bambui customary leaders in the buffalo horn drinking cup and other objects of status and prestige, but also their claims of exercising control over local people through what I would dare call Bruce Lee drinking cup governmentality. Because the emerging cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce embody the desire of Bambui untitled men and women to invert to their own advantage particular configurations of power, and hierarchy that have so far characterized the Bambui traditional society and because the ownership of buffalo horn drinking cups by titled men and elders insinuates a critique of the traditional customary hierarchy, while hiding behind mischief and malice, it is possible to read these developments as a "hidden" object of resistance. However, by pointing out the "hidden" nature of the cow horn drinking cup as an object of resistance, I am not suggesting that the interest in cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee does not also boost the image of youths as people who can shape their own life condition.

Across Bambui, youths interest and obsession with cow horn drinking cups as an instrument of resistance tie into the village's traditional mode of ownership of objects of status and prestige controlled largely by titled men and elders. It also shows the ambition of these youths who have unanimously identified Bruce Lee's facial image as the youth choice to outshine their titleholders and elders in what Arjun Appadurai calls the "tournament of values."<sup>35</sup> As a mark of this tendency of resistance, most contemporary and youth associations in Bambui hold their meetings once a month, usually on the first Sunday of the month and each member has a special seat allocated to him or her, based on his or her status

in the group as titled men and elders do in their own gatherings. This is the case with members of the Bambui Youth Beginners Association (BYBA).<sup>36</sup> For example in one of such meetings, in which titled men and elders were also in attendance, one of these BYBA members who happens to be one of the richest young men in the village pulled out a very large and long cow horn drinking that overshadowed the buffalo horn drinking cups used by the elders and titled men. Undoubtedly, by using such a gigantic cow horn drinking cup decorated with facial image of Bruce in the midst of titled men and elders, this BYBA member was not only extending the traditional practice of obsession with objects of status and prestige, but, he was also expressing his opposition to the Bambui mode of restricting youths from using certain objects—associated with status and authority.

This shift from buffalo horns to cow horn drinking cups, especially those decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee can also be associated with the need to transform the cultural production scene across the western Grassfields, because it implies new methods of carving and exchanging the drinking horns, for example.

### **Concluding remarks: The new artistic scene**

This paper has examined the transformation of the artistic scene by members of contemporary and youth associations in the western Grassfields through the use of cow horn drinking cups decorated with facial image of Bruce Lee and related motifs. It has shown how members of contemporary and youth associations use their cow horn drinking cups to compete not only with titled men and elders, but also among themselves. Apparently, this new form of cultural production is not restricted to the facial image of Bruce Lee, it extends to other forms of foreign aesthetic practices that define youths and the contemporary scene in which they belong. During my fieldwork and successive visits to different carving workshops as well as contemporary and youth associations gatherings across the region, I was overwhelmed by the rate of transformation that has taken place especially in terms of the type of new designs on cow horn drinking cups and the manner in which the horns are used and exchanged by members of these groups. For instance, the cow horn carver from Baba I in Ndop told me that he decorates his cow horn drinking cups not only with the facial image of Bruce, but he also adds a snake-like base that can serve as a horn stand, allowing the user to put the horn on the ground or table as he drinks.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, he also carves cow horn drinking cups with a flat base, which like those with a snake-like base, also allow the user the

opportunity of resting the drinking cup on the table as he or she uses it. The buffalo horn drinking cup, however, has continued to be carved with a sharp or pointed base that does not allow the user the option of resting the cup on any surface except by holding it in his or her hand. It is these modifications and in particular, the facial image of renowned actor, Bruce Lee, that have given contemporary cow horn drinking cups the unique status it enjoys as a drinking vessel of choice for most Grassfields, and in particular, Bambui youths.

However, despite the strategic use of foreign aesthetic by Grassfields youths to assert their status as titled men and elders do, the 21<sup>st</sup> century popularity of contemporary cow horn drinking cups in the Grassfields is not about preserving the identity of the region. Rather, the use of such aesthetics, especially the facial image of Bruce Lee by youths is intended to show the relevance of foreign aesthetics to youths in today's Grassfields cultural landscape. In their compositions, such aesthetics become important political instruments in the affirmation and in some cases, novel constructions of contemporary traditions and regional narratives from the point of view of youths and untitled men. Instead of seeing these developments as different from the ideals of elders and titled men of the western Grassfields, they should be welcomed and embraced as part of the culture and creative industry that is increasingly becoming a driving force in the national, as well as continental and global markets.

## Notes and References

---

<sup>1</sup> Jindra, M. 2005. Christianity and the Proliferation of Ancestors: changes in hierarchy and mortuary rituals in the Cameroon Grassfields. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 75 (3), pp. 356-377.

- Koloss, H. J. 2000. World-view and Society in Oku (Kameruner Grasland). *Baessler-Archiv* 35, pp. 383-453.

- Kopytoff, I. 1981. Aghem Ethnogenesis and the Grassfields Ecumene. In: C. Tardits (ed.) *The Contribution of Ethnological Research to the History of Cameroon Cultures*. Paris: CNRS.

- Nkwi, P. N. and Warnier, J. P. 1982. Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields. Yaounde, Department of Sociology. University of Yaounde

- Rowlands, M. 1993. Accumulation and the Cultural Politics of Identity in the Cameroon Grassfields. In: P. Geschiere and P. Konings (eds.) *Itinéraires d'accumulation au Cameroun*. Paris: Karthala.

- Warnier, J. P. 1993. The King as a Container in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *Paiduma* 39, pp. 303-319.



- 
- <sup>2</sup> Diduk, S. 1987. *The Paradox of Secrets*. Ph.D Dissertation. Department of Anthropology: Indiana University
- <sup>3</sup> Abang is one of the local elites and responsible for monitoring and enforcing traditional etiquettes across Bambui. Bambui, September 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Fubah, M. 2014. The Changing Life of the Buffalo and Cow Horn and New Methods of Adaptation by Carvers and Patrons in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *African Studies* 73 (1), pp. 41-57
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 48.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.
- <sup>7</sup> Argenti, N. 1998. Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal* 4, pp. 753-782.
- Rowlands, M. 1996. The Consumption of an African Modernity. In M. Arnoldi, M. Geary, and K. Hardin (eds.) *African Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 188-213.
- Rowlands, M. 2008. Africa on Display: Curating Postcolonial Pasts in the Cameroon Grassfields. In P. Schmidt (ed.) *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*. Sante Fe: School for Advance Social Research Press, pp. 149-162
- <sup>8</sup> Argenti, N. 1998. Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal* 4, pp. 753-782.
- Rowlands, M. 2008. Africa on Display: Curating Postcolonial Pasts in the Cameroon Grassfields.' In P. Schmidt (ed.) *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*. Sante Fe: School for Advance Social Research Press, pp. 149-162.
- <sup>9</sup> Fubah, M. 2012. Title Cups and People: Relationships and Change in Grassfields Art. *Anthropos* 107 (2), pp. 183-193.
- <sup>10</sup> Argenti, N. 1998. Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal* 4, pp.753-782.
- <sup>11</sup> Gebauer, P. 1979. *Art of Cameroon*. New York: Portland Art Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 215.
- <sup>12</sup> Seraphin, G. 2000. *Vivre a Douala: L'imaginaire et L'Action dans une Villes Africaine en Crise*. Paris: Karthala. p. 19.
- <sup>13</sup> Warnier, J. P. 1993. The King as a Container in the Cameroon Grassfields. *Paideuma* 39, pp. 303-319.
- <sup>14</sup> Argenti, N. 1998. Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal* 4, pp. 753-782
- <sup>15</sup> Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.
- Fabian, J. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hobsbawn, E. and Ranger, T. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

- Ranger, E. and Vaughan, O. (eds.). 1983. *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*. Oxford: Macmillan.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, J. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Warnier, J. P. 1993. The King as a Container in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *Paiduma* 39, pp. 303-319.

- Knöpfli, Hans. 1997. Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Grassfields, Cameroon. British Museum, Occasional Paper Number 107.

<sup>18</sup> Warnier, J. P. 1993. The King as a Container in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *Paiduma* 39, pp. 303-319.

<sup>19</sup> Gebauer, Paul. 1979. *Art of Cameroon*. New York: Portland Art Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>20</sup> Warnier, J. P. 1993. The King as a Container in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *Paiduma* 39, pp. 303-319.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>23</sup> Geary, C. 1981. Bamum Thrones and Stools. *African Arts* Vol. 14, No. 4: 32-43; 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> Malaquais, D. 2002. *Architecture, Pouvoir et Dissidence au Cameroun*. Paris: Karthala.

<sup>25</sup> By less privilege, I should be understood as referring to commoners or untitled men and women.

<sup>26</sup> Argenti, N. 2001. Kesum Body and Places of the Gods: The Politics of Children Masking and Second World Realities in Oku, Cameroon. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7 (1), pp. 67-94.

- Geary, C. 1981. Bamum Thrones and Stools. *African Arts* 14 (4), 32-43; 87-88.

- Malaquais, D. 2002. *Architecture, Pouvoir et Dissidence au Cameroun*. Paris: Karthala.

- Malaquais, D. 1999. Building in the name of God: Architecture, Resistance, and the Christian Faith in the Bamileke Highlands of Western Cameroon. *African Studies Review* 43 (1), pp. 49-78.

- Ndjio, B. 2009. Migration, Architecture, and the Transformation of the Landscape in the Bamileke Grassfields of West Cameroon. *African Diaspora* 2, pp. 73-100.

- Rowlands, M. 2008. Africa on Display: Curating Postcolonial Pasts in the Cameroon Grassfields. In P. Schmidt (ed.) *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*. Sante Fe: School for Advance Social Research Press, pp. 149-162

<sup>27</sup> Forni, S. 2007. Containers of Life: Pottery and Social Relations in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *African Arts* Vol. 40 (1), pp. 42-53.

<sup>28</sup> Argenti, N. 1998. Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon. *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal* 4, pp. 753-782

---

<sup>29</sup> Knöpfli, H. 1997. *Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Grassfields, Cameroon*. British Museum, Occasional Paper Number 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

- Fubah, M. 2014. The Changing Life of the Buffalo and Cow Horn and New Methods of Adaptation by Carvers and Patrons in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *African Studies* 73 (1), pp. 41-57.

<sup>31</sup> Knöpfli, Hans. 1997. *Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Grassfields, Cameroon*. British Museum, Occasional Paper Number 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Accessed: [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/dispositif](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/dispositif)

<sup>34</sup> Malaquais, D. 2002. *Architecture, Pouvoir et Dissidence au Cameroun*. Paris: Karthala, pp. 123-25.

<sup>35</sup> Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

<sup>36</sup> Fubah, M. 2014. The Changing Life of the Buffalo and Cow Horn and New Methods of Adaptation by Carvers and Patrons in the Grassfields, Cameroon. *African Studies* Vol. 73 (1), pp. 41-57

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-57.