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Traditional Bamileke Architecture in Western Cameroon: The Building as an Expression of Intention

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Abstract

By observing the traditional architecture of the Grassfields in general, and that of the Bamileke people in particular, one can make a clear observation: building spaces were not conceived haphazardly. Most of them possess a strong utilitarian, symbolic, or functional value. The typical traditional houses of this group of people are of various types, composed of prefabricated walls assembled on site. Their shape consists of a square or rectangular base surmounted by a high conical roof, and their architecture is characterized by expertise in assembly through binding, braiding, and carving. This study first presents the traditional architecture of the Bamileke people from a morphological perspective, then analyzes its symbolic value, and finally examines the function or utility of the building within the local culture. These various approaches have led to the conclusion that the traditional architecture of the Bamileke people corresponds to a system of thought, a philosophy, and a precise ideology based on social equilibrium. The conical roofs that characterize it symbolize the sociology of this people, marked by the presence of a leader at the top and the population at the bottom. Each member of the community is at the same level as the other members of the group.

Keywords: architecture, traditional, Bamileke, building, intention

1. Introduction

Etymologically, intention refers to the deliberate plan to accomplish an act. It is the expression of a willingness. Upon analytical observation of the traditional architecture of the Grassfields in general, and that of the Bamileke people in particular, it is clear that no built space was conceived by chance. The buildings there possess a strong utilitarian, symbolic, or

functional value. Like other forms of artistic expression in this cultural area, architecture is a "marker" not only of the culture of the different peoples, but also of their social, political, economic, and religious organization—in short, one of those that allow people to act upon their environment. Far from being a simple marker of identity, traditional Bamileke architecture constitutes a unique testimony, the analysis of which allows for a meaningful assimilation of historical, cultural, social, and religious facts. It is part of a meaningful ensemble, reserved for the chieftaincy or secret societies. The buildings are neither constructed haphazardly nor are they the product of mere whim, nor are they the product of individual inspiration. The work is simultaneously a complete technical achievement, the momentary culmination of a long artisanal and artistic tradition, and a true historical "document" that can be analyzed or deciphered in relation to its specific context and era.

Traditional Bamileke architecture is a kind of visual language, often composed of diverse decorative motifs, in this case, carved pillars embedded in the buildings, directly corresponding to the major symbolic themes of the communities that created it. Among the Bamileke, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, traditional architecture is closely linked to the daily lives of the people. Due to the difficulties associated with dating objects, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact date of the first architectural constructions in Bamileke territory. However, in light of the work of the historian Cheikh Anta Diop, who estimated that the first Bamileke kingdoms were formed in the 16th century, the existence of the first buildings can be placed in the same period. The forms and functions of traditional Bamileke architecture are varied. They range from the great royal house to the houses of dignitaries, including those of the dead, used to preserve skulls through the use of earthenware pots. This study will first undertake a descriptive analysis of the buildings' morphology within the relevant community. Second, it will carry out an analytical study of its symbolic value; and third, it will examine the buildings' function or purpose within the local culture. Particular emphasis will also be placed on the practical challenges associated with modernizing the built environment in this cultural area.

2. **Descriptive Study of the Morphology of the Buildings in This Area**

According to TERRISSE (A), knowledge of an environment is necessary to understand African arts: wood arts are linked to the plant environment; religious arts are linked to beliefs; functional arts are linked to social structures. Therefore, it is beneficial to explore the environment and seek the elements that may have contributed to the emergence of such forms.

2.1 The Natural Environment and the Choice of Building Materials

The traditional architecture found in the grassfields in general, and among the Bamileke in particular, is influenced by soil quality, topography, and climatic or atmospheric phenomena.

2.1.1 Soil Science of the Western Region

Here, reference is made to the soil diagram by P. SEGALEN (Fig. 1) for the distribution of soils in the western region. Moderately saturated ferralitic soils are found on basement rock (gneiss-granite), on plateau basalts, and on mountain trachytes and basalts. These soils range

in color from brick red to very dark red. Clay content increases from 40% near the surface to 60% across the entire profile, decreasing toward the parent rock. Their considerable thickness, high porosity, friability, absence of stones, and high clay content (kaolinite, gibbsite, goethite, and hematite) allow for good water retention.

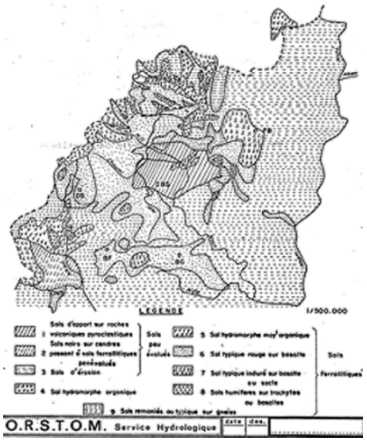

Figure 1. P. SEGALEN, Outline of the soil science of western Cameroon

2.1.2 Climate

From a climatic point of view, the orientation of the terrain, the altitude, and the distance from the sea give precedence sometimes to the effects of the Atlantic monsoon, and sometimes to a more contrasting continental climate. The climate is described as a "Cameroonian" mountain climate. Temperatures are relatively low, with maximums not exceeding 22 to 23°C. Minimums often reach 13°C; frost is not uncommon at higher altitudes. Rainfall is quite significant, exceeding 1600 mm per year. The climate has two main seasons: the dry season, which runs from mid-November to March, and the rainy season, which extends over the rest of the year.

In his numerous works on the Bamileke societies, JC Barbier presents some general characteristics of the populations of the western plateaus of Cameroon: a population heavily invested in agriculture, favored by the nature of the soil. They also practice livestock farming, arts and crafts, and metallurgy, among other things. They are a very traditional population by nature.

Thus, the plateaus of western Cameroon, rising to over 1000 meters in altitude, tower above the tropical rainforest of the coast and the Cross River and Wouri basins. These plateaus extend on either side of Cameroon's "backbone," which runs from Fernando Po Island and Mount Cameroon to the Mandara Mountains. They are separated from the Adamawa Plateau by the upper Mbam Valley. The Nigeria-Cameroon border, which delimits these plateaus to the north and west, corresponds to the Benue River basin. A single civilization developed across all these plateaus, from Foumban to Wum and from Bankim to Bafang. Initial empirical observation reveals the following common features:

2.1.3 The Landscape

In contrast to the forest, the Germans used the term "grassland," later translated into English as "grassfield," (Fig 2) to designate the savanna of these plateaus and the mountain formations found at higher altitudes. Traditional settlements are scattered, and the hedgerow landscape bears witness to human reforestation: valleys populated with raffia palms, curved and level hedges, fences to manage small livestock, fruit trees such as kola trees, eucalyptus trees introduced by the colonial administration, and so on. The hills are crisscrossed by gullies that climb ever higher, following the slope. Women work in groups there, cultivating mainly tubers (taro, cocoyams, yams, cassavas) and maize. Since the 1950s, plantations of robusta and arabica coffee have been added to these food crops. This description shows that the natural environment of the grassfield, and therefore that of the Bamileke people, constitutes a favorable asset for the realization of a type of architectural construction that defines the identity of the group in question. This identity is determined not only by the natural conditions of the environment, but also by the external appearance, or rather the morphology of the buildings.

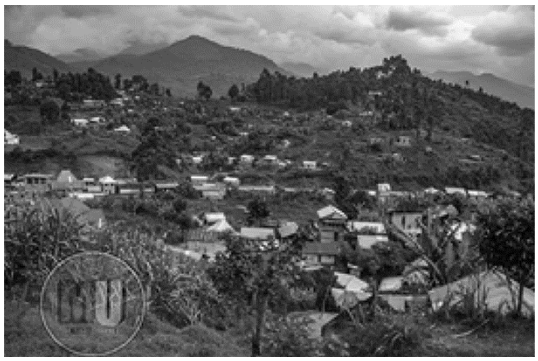

Figure 2. A landscape in the Bamileke region

2.2 The Morphology of the Buildings

From the outside, the traditional architectural structures of the Bamileke people exhibit distinctive characteristics. These will be discussed in this section. Furthermore, this architectural singularity will be illustrated by presenting a specific building: the traditional Bamileke hut.

2.2.1 Building Materials

Traditional building materials used by the Bamileke of Western Cameroon are primarily of plant and natural origin, adapted to the climate and local craftsmanship. They include bamboo (resistant and rot-proof), raffia, thatch for roofing, mud for cob, and wood for the structure.

2.2.1.1 Key Traditional Materials:

• Bamboo/Raffia: The primary material used to create a sturdy frame, forming woven or

bound bamboo panels.

• Mud/Earth: Used to fill the gaps in the bamboo lattice, forming strong walls (cob).

• Thatch/Straw: Roofing material for conical or pyramidal roofs.

• Raffia ropes: Used to bind bamboo structures without metal nails.

• Wood: For framing and decorative carvings.

2.2.1.2 Dwelling Characteristics:

• "Box" structure: Traditional houses are composed of prefabricated walls (bamboo panels) assembled on-site.

• Shape: Square or rectangular base topped with a high conical roof (sometimes up to 20-30 meters for royal houses).

• Architecture: The architecture is characterized by skilled craftsmanship in assembly through binding, weaving, and carving. Nowadays, modern materials such as stabilized earth bricks (SEB) are also used in construction in Western Cameroon.

2.2.1.3 Types of houses

- The large royal house (Fig 3)

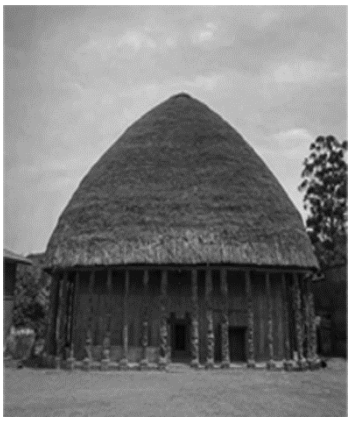

Figure 3. The large royal house

The traditional western hut is square in plan and topped with a voluminous thatched roof that gives it, from a distance, the silhouette of a mushroom; it contrasts with both the circular hut of northern Cameroon and the rectangular hut with a mat roof found in the forest areas. Chiefdoms are made up of clusters of such huts. In addition to the chief's (mfo) hut, there are numerous huts belonging to his wives, arranged on either side of an alley leading down from the market square to the chiefdom, as well as huts for servants, large meeting houses for customary associations, and so on. It can be described as a veritable architectural ensemble. Sculpture accompanies the construction of these huts and externalizes the owner's social rank: door frames, pillars supporting the roof, seats for attending association meetings, statues, and

masks representing ancestors.

Furthermore, according to JP Notue, Bamileke architects give considerable importance to geometric shapes and volumes (point, line, circle, square, triangle, rhombus, cone, cylinder, etc.) in their pursuit of balance, harmony, and aesthetics, as well as for various other reasons (symbolic, religious, esoteric, etc.).

The timber frame is an imposing structure, nearly 25 to 30 meters high, and approximately 20 meters long and wide. Its four walls form a kind of square parallelepiped, surmounting an enormous conical roof covered with thatch. The square is fundamentally the shape of traditional Bamileke buildings (and also of those of many sedentary peoples).

The construction material for the walls, timber frame, and ceiling comes from raffia palm. These elements are prefabricated on the ground before being assembled using a completely original technique characteristic of traditional grassfield architecture.

The large house has a large main chamber (where sacrifices are performed) surrounded by corridors. It has four openings (the number four has symbolic significance) with richly carved frames. Numerous carved pillars surround the house, defining the veranda. The four prefabricated walls are attached with ties made of raffia palm stem bark, to carved corner posts set into previously leveled ground.

- The Notable's House

Although inspired by the same architectural style as the large royal house, it is designed on a smaller scale. It embodies both the high social status and authority of the notable. Furthermore, it holds spiritual significance, as the notable plays a key role in religious practices and is the head of the family lineage.

- The *Nto*

This small ritual structure, often aesthetically discreet, represents the sacred building par excellence. It is the place where mystical powers and magical forces reside within the chiefdom. This building is closely linked to influential secret societies and ritual ceremonies.

- Houses of the Dead

In many family compounds, vaults shaped like traditional huts are built—initially made of earth and more recently of bricks—representing the house of the dead, where the skulls of ancestors are kept. Talking about the origins of the Bamileke, Cheikh Anta Diop asserts that “Ancestor worship among the Bamileke is a legacy from their ancestors in ancient Egypt. Following the practice of preserving mummified bodies, the Bamileke, fleeing war during their long journey from Egypt to the Tikar Valley (between approximately the 9th and the second half of the 11th century) […], [to easily transport the remains of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents during times of war, had the ingenious idea of henceforth preserving only the heads and burying the rest. Thus, each person was to keep the mummified head of their ancestors in jars to be buried in a corner of the house, awaiting a possible escape following a lost war or other major catastrophe.”]

- Construction of the Skull House

This house, symbolizing the link between the living and the ancestors, resembles a typical dwelling. Traditionally built of earth, it is now constructed of cinder blocks, but its floor remains packed earth. The successor designates the location. The site chosen for the construction of the Skull House renders the area within the compound inappropriate for the building of ordinary houses.

- Houses of notables, chiefs, and sovereigns

The great house of the Bamileke chiefdom of Bandjoun is one of the few remaining examples of monumental Bamileke architecture. It testifies to great ingenuity and artistic skill.

- Chiefs' houses

The chiefs' houses can have different architectural styles, though they generally feature conical roofs. The chief lives in one of the great houses, while the other houses are for the women, the barns, kitchens, and other shelters. The great house can serve different purposes: meeting room, Skull House, museum, and repository of the chiefdom's heritage objects.

The conical roof of the hut is unique to the Grassfields people. It is traditionally made of straw. Its height varies between 15 and 30 meters. (Fig 4)

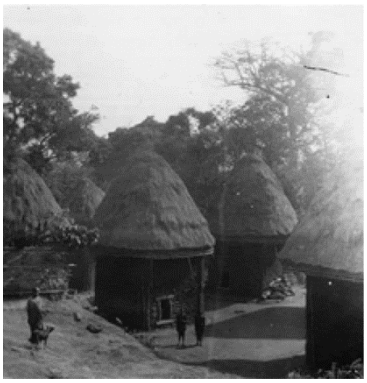

Figure 4. The capital or tsa

In short, the Bamileke house has a typical architecture that is an expression of culture and illustrates the rootedness (Fig. 5) of these constructions in a topographical landscape. The houses, generally located within the hedged farmland of the family compound, are built for specific functions: living quarters, women's quarters, a shrine for skulls, kitchens and their barns for crops, and shelters for certain livestock.

Figure 5. Three Bamileke guard huts at the entrance to Chief Bafounda's residence

3. Analytical Study of Its Symbolic Value

This section provides an overview of the symbolic value attached to traditional architectural buildings found in the Grassfields cultural area. It focuses on the relationship established between these buildings and the social organization, institutions and beliefs of the group on the one hand, and on the other hand between the architectural building and the preservation of cultural heritage.

3.1 Architectural Structure and Social Organization, Institutions and Beliefs of the Group

3.1.1 A Territorial Organization Centralized around the Chieftaincy

Figure 6. Remains of the wall of an unfinished hut, Bandjoun. The construction style is thought to date from the seventeenth century

In common parlance, the term "chiefdom" is used interchangeably to refer to both the territory controlled by a chief (fo) and the capital of that territory where the chief resides (Fig. 6). It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the chiefdom as a territorial unit (guo) and the capital (tsa). The Bamileke chiefdom, sometimes colloquially called "the village" (but a very large village), is highly centralized and comprises:

- the original territory where the founder settled
- the territories conquered throughout history
- the territories of vassal chiefs
- the capital (tsa), the fo's quarter, also called hyala.

The *guo* is divided into sub-chiefdoms, quarters, and sub-quarters.

- The capital or *tsa*

The ‘tsa’ (Fig 7) is the chief's main administrative, religious, and cultural center. It is located in the Hyala quarter, which houses all the high-ranking dignitaries and oversees the other quarters. The chief's personal residence is the most important building in the ‘tsa’. It is also where the chief's wives, the servants who constitute his staff, and his representatives live. The ‘tsa’ also contains the places of worship, the most important of which are the huts that house the skulls of the village's ancestors and its treasury (ritual objects). It is the meeting place for the main customary societies. Each of the chief's wives and each of his servants has an individual hut. Each brotherhood, however small, and even if it meets only rarely, insists on having one or two separate huts. Finally, the ‘tsa’ must be able to accommodate distinguished guests, the chief’s friends, and local notables who never fail to attend major ceremonies. Thus, the ‘tsa’ can comprise several hundred huts. Today, the intellectual and commercial elites of the various chiefdoms, cognizant of progress, are building imposing modern concrete palaces alongside traditional monuments (the great house, the secret society huts).

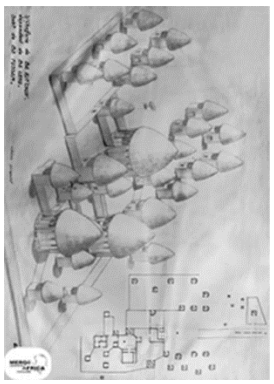

Figure 7. Prototype for the construction of a traditional Bamileke chiefdom, established by Raymond Lecoq

From an urban planning perspective, the ‘tsa’ (chiefdom) is still organized in the same way. This layout is adopted on a smaller scale by all the notables. It is situated on a gently sloping site traversed by a wide central avenue. The marketplace is at the very top. The women's quarters are located on either side of this "boulevard," while the great house and the chief's residence (and its outbuildings) are at the bottom, backing onto the sacred grove and near the river. A perpendicular side path leads to the entrance of the chiefdom, defended by a tall portico lavishly decorated with carved posts. This particular layout is linked to religious beliefs. Spatial organization here is nothing other than a reflection of the ritual order (see Figure 6). The main parts of the ‘tsa’ can be distinguished:

- The market or *sim*

The market square overlooks the chief's personal residence. It opens onto the perspective of the slope of the central walkway. The market is generally held once or twice a week,

depending on the chiefdom. Besides its economic role, the sim plays other essential roles in traditional Bamileke life. It is a true center of activity. Customary ceremonies and dances take place there. The square is very large and shaded by gigantic baobab trees to which a sacred character is attached. There are a number of huts belonging to the major customary societies, and each houses a large lip drum, approximately 1 meter in diameter and 3 meters long (with carved figures at the ends).

- The *fam*

This is the most forbidden place in the chiefdom, and the main sanctuary. The chiefdom is divided in two: the small world of the fam, which holds political and religious power, and the rest, the princes and ordinary people. A distinction must be made between the ‘famka' located toward the top of the ‘tsa’ and the fam proper, situated near the chief's residence. The ‘famka' is the royal cemetery. It is there that the remains of the *mfo* are buried, in a veritable temple-vault. The chiefs are buried lying on their side, back to the wall, facing inwards. A terracotta pot marks the location of each grave and is used to receive sacrificial offerings (cattle bowels, palm oil, raffia wine, etc.). The fam, which occupies a fairly large area, is not only a cemetery, but also a kind of school where the chief's servants and the traditional leaders of the chiefdom are trained.

- The *Fo's* Residence

A wide, gently sloping path leads from the market to the fo's residence in the low-lying area. The fo's hamlet is traditionally divided into three parts:

- The living area of the fo's first wife on the left.

On the right, each side of the avenue is administered by a council of nine women. This division is linked to religious beliefs. For example, there are two different places of worship for the children of the chief, depending on whether they were born in the right or left part of the chiefdom.

- The chief's own domain occupies the lower end of the main avenue.

This culminates in the great house, a veritable monument of gigantic proportions, which is the linchpin and nerve center of the chiefdom and its entire domain. Its dimensions are always impressive. Within this courtyard are also the chief's personal residence, the guest house for distinguished guests, and the houses of the servants and security guards. The treasury is guarded by the *kam,* a kind of secretary who is also in charge of the barns. The chief's domain abuts the sacred grove where the chief's totem is believed to be kept in the river, the only direct access point to water.

- External outbuildings.

The huts of the customary societies are located in the immediate vicinity of the chief's residence or even, for some, in the sacred grove; the standing stones represent the ancestors. (Fig. 8) Finally, a few guard posts protect the main access points to the ‘tsa’.

Figure 8. A view of the ‘tsa’of BANDJOUN, Sacred wood (BAMENA, The great house of BANDJOUN, the sculpted details below

The architecture of the Grassfields (West/Northwest Cameroon) is dominated by power structures built with local materials (bamboo, raffia, earth). It is distinguished by:

• The Great House (Palace-Temple): A monumental building (up to 30m high) with a conical roof, a symbol of royalty (discussed above).

• Houses of notables and secret societies: Rectangular or square buildings.

• Functional houses: Women's quarters, kitchens, and storage areas.

• Megalithic structures: Standing stones and Y-shaped wooden posts ("mega") associated with rituals.

These structures incorporate geometric patterns carved on the house posts, demonstrating a highly symbolic "architecture-sculpture."

4. Architectural Building and Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Family Museum)

With few exceptions, the Bamileke chiefdoms are all designed on the same model. Some are open to the public, and each generally houses a museum whose collection displays several objects representative of the chiefdom's cultural and artistic heritage (royal thrones, masks and beaded objects, fabrics with traditional patterns, etc.).

Sylvain Djache Nzefa, a Cameroonian architect, adopting an ethnological-sociological approach, raised awareness in 1994 with his analysis of the traditional chiefdoms of the Grassfields, caught in the gears of "modernism." These structures, he asserted, are "in decline with regard to socio-political, religious, and economic aspects... They have long been experiencing, like the whole of Cameroonian society... a violent identity crisis, it is a veritable cultural chaos." This alarming observation triggered a process of reflection whose primary aim was to elevate the status of chiefdoms in all aspects of their heritage (tangible and intangible).

The diagnosis made by Sylvain Djache Nzefa lies at the heart of the "Chiefdoms Route" charter, developed in 2006. It highlights an urgent need to make an inventory of heritage, raise awareness and inform local populations and diasporas about their cultural origins, demonstrate that heritage protection is in no way an obstacle to modernization; structure

chiefdoms in terms of management and organization, and develop exchanges and partnerships.

The Chiefdoms Route Project (PRDC) thus created the necessary tools for the preservation, conservation, restoration, and promotion of tangible and intangible heritage. It also focuses on heritage enhancement and cultural development of the territory, with the aim of promoting it as a tourist destination. The PRDC's objectives are multifaceted:

• To raise awareness among the Cameroonian population about its cultural values in order to achieve a reappropriation of its tangible and intangible heritage;

• To innovate by creating a unique cultural hub in sub-Saharan Africa;

• To implement a program for the security and inventory of heritage;

• To organize a network for a coordinated approach across the country;

• To meet the rural and urban economic development needs of the population in order to improve their social conditions (primarily through job creation).

Following the inventories comes the phase of heritage conservation and dissemination. To this end, the PRDC has undertaken the establishment or renovation of community museums within the chiefdoms designated as "heritage houses." These museums are established at the request of the chief, reflecting his strong commitment to promoting the cultural heritage of his community. Indeed, the building is the responsibility of the chiefdom. Once the project is defined in consultation with the PRDC, which can provide expertise in architecture and construction monitoring, funding is then sought for the construction or rehabilitation of an existing building. The chiefs thus mobilize various partners, including the elites of their community, gathered in a development committee, who all contribute to covering certain expenses related to the implementation of the heritage center.

Each heritage center develops its own theme, related to the history or unique character of the chiefdom, or simply a theme dear to the chief. Subjects such as the phenomenon of slavery (customary and transatlantic), the role of the blacksmith, the art of hunting, and traditional and contemporary arts have been addressed. New themes, such as humankind and its relationship with nature and the environment, are under consideration. As already alluded to above, each theme is defined by the chief, who must therefore establish a scientific committee specialized in the theme being developed. Furthermore, the chief identifies the staff who will work daily in his museum. In addition to its complementary scientific contribution to the work undertaken by the chieftaincy, the PRDC provides expertise in museum design and implementation, as well as in staff training. It also supports the museum's operation for a specific period. Four heritage sites are thus open to the public in the chiefdoms of Bamendjinda, Bandjoun, Bamendjou, and Bangoua.

5. The Function or Usefulness of Buildings in the Local Culture

5.1 Construction Techniques and Brand Identity

5.1.1 Meanings of the Cones and Their Numbers

According to Zenu Mecunzin, a Bamileke traditionalist: “At the top is the leader, and at the bottom is the population. Depending on their responsibilities, the appearance and number of cones at the entrance to the family compound indicate the levels of responsibility and authority of the chief or notable.

The number of cones is generally odd to ensure a majority and avoid a perfect balance, synonymous with immobility, during deliberations and votes.

• Three cones represent the house of a notable. Certain notables related to the king, the Menkam are entitled to building conical roofs in front of their houses.

• Seven cones at the entrance to a family compound represent the domain of a vassal chieftaincy.

• Nine cones represent autonomous kings.

At the top of the roofs, branches or copper are used to channel the energy of thunder.

The construction of this type of structure (Fig. 9) is reserved exclusively for those recognized by the traditional authority of the Grassfield peoples.”

Figure 9. Bamena Chiefdom Square

5.1.2 Food Construction and Preservation Techniques

The architecture and preservation of foodstuffs in the Grassfields of Cameroon (Western and Northwest regions) rely on ancestral know-how, adapted to a highland climate and aimed at ensuring household food security. Traditional housing, particularly the Bamileke hut, is a technical and functional model using local materials:

- Structure: Raffia bamboo bound together (often without nails) and earth, forming a square-based parallelepiped.

- Roof: A large, cone-shaped thatched roof, providing thermal insulation.

- Barns and Storage: Storage structures are integrated into the compound. They are often

raised to avoid humidity and rodents, and are constructed of bamboo or earth. Preservation relies primarily on drying and the use of smoke:

Kitchen Drying Rack (Interior Granary): Produce (maize, beans, peanuts) is frequently placed above the kitchen hearth. Smoke and continuous heat (smoking/drying) prevent mold and deter harmful insects.

Solar drying: Onions, peanuts, beans, and pumpkin seeds are sun-dried before storage.

Storage in granaries/cribs: Raised bamboo structures (cribs) are used for corn on the cob, allowing for natural ventilation.

Vegetables: Vegetables (*ndole*, bean leaves) are dried, sometimes after blanching, for long-term preservation.

Over time, traditional architectural methods have presented numerous challenges related to food preservation in the region. These include:

- Modern materials: Thatched roofs are often replaced with corrugated iron, and eucalyptus wood replaces Chinese bamboo in the framing.

- Post-harvest losses: Despite these methods, insects and rodents can cause significant losses (up to 40% in some cases).

- Modernization: The development of small, aluminized plastic bags or cold storage methods is being explored, but traditional techniques remain dominant in rural areas.

Preservation in the Grassfields is not only technical; it is also cultural, as a full granary is a symbol of prosperity and family dignity.

5.1.3 Traditional Construction Techniques and Practical Challenges Associated with Modern Construction Techniques

Construction materials form the physical foundation of any architectural project. Their selection influences a building's durability, cost, aesthetics, and comfort. They fall into two main categories: traditional materials and modern materials. Traditional materials include unfired earth, wood, stone, thatch, and palm leaves. Unfired earth is notable for being a good thermal insulator; it is also a local and inexpensive resource. Wood (or bamboo stalks, in our case) is a natural, abundant, and flexible material used for structural framing and walls. Stone is durable and aesthetically pleasing, serving as a material for load-bearing walls. Thatch and palm leaves provide lightweight, insulating roofing. Traditional materials offer excellent durability, provided the building is protected from excessive moisture; stone and lime, for instance, can last for centuries. Maintenance is regular and often manual, requiring tasks such as renewing lime renders or treating wood against insects.

An advantage is that they allow air and moisture to pass through (they "breathe"), which prevents mold. They can be repaired using the same raw materials. In short, traditional materials have a low carbon footprint, construction techniques are passed down culturally, they blend easily into the landscape and local climates, and they are readily available from local

sources.

Modern materials—increasingly utilized in the Grassfields cultural region—include, among others, reinforced concrete, steel, glass, and composite and insulating materials. Reinforced concrete is robust and widely used, enabling large-scale construction projects. Steel is strong yet flexible, making it suitable for complex structures. Glass allows for natural light and transparency. Composite and insulating materials (such as panels and engineering plastics) also contribute to superior construction.

Modern construction materials offer numerous advantages but also come with significant drawbacks: while they deliver high technical performance and meet contemporary standards (regarding safety, insulation, and durability), they can be very costly and less environmentally friendly. Furthermore, their widespread use increases reliance on imports in certain African countries. These materials possess exceptional initial mechanical and structural strength, offering good resistance to impacts and severe weather conditions. They require little maintenance during the early years; however, repairing cracks or rust is a complex and expensive undertaking. On the downside, they tend to trap moisture if ventilation is inadequate. Their manufacture is energy-intensive, and recycling them is a complex process.

Since no civilization can live in self-sufficiency, it is important to know how to consider and adopt what is best in others without losing oneself. That said, a combination of the two building systems would be the best thing to do. This would involve the valorization of traditional materials with modern techniques (stabilized earth, treated wood). This initiative would also involve the promotion of a hybrid architecture, which takes into account respect for local identity with increased performance. A search for ecological alternatives: low-carbon concrete, bioplastics. This would give rise to sustainable architecture adapted to the African context, based on the intelligence of the choice of materials. A choice that combines traditional resources with modern innovations and which makes it possible to build in a responsible, economical and culturally rooted way.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that among the Bamileke, architectural construction is never the product of chance or whim, nor is it simply the result of individual inspiration. The work is simultaneously a complete technical achievement, the momentary culmination of a long artisanal and artistic tradition, and a true historical "document" that can be analyzed or decoded in relation to its specific environment and era. Furthermore, in this ethnic group, as throughout sub-Saharan Africa, traditional architecture is closely linked to the daily lives of the people. The objective of this study was to examine traditional architecture among the Bamileke of western Cameroon in order to present the motivations behind its creation, which are both utilitarian and highly symbolic.

An overview of the natural environment reveals that western Cameroon, due to its soil composition, offers significant advantages for the production of earthen bricks, a building material used for construction, as well as for the production of bamboo, highly sought after for framing. Furthermore, the architecture is unique due to its distinctive appearance,

characterized by conical roofs. Metaphysically, this roof symbolizes the sociology of the Bamileke people. At the apex is a leader, and at the base, the general population. Each person at the base is on the same level as the other members of the community. Depending on their responsibilities, a building may have multiple conical roofs. Three conical roofs represent high-ranking dignitaries, seven or more represent vassal chiefs or those with a certain rank, akin to the king. Nine roofs represent autonomous kings. Oral tradition reveals that bronze or copper was used to adorn the apex of the conical roofs. This allowed the ancestors to channel the energy of thunder. The height of the roof ensured that this energy, arriving via thunder, could not reach those living in the house.

According to Dr. Ottou, a specialist and researcher in intangible cultural heritage, the greatest power that governs the universe is one. It is generally odd because, when making a decision, the majority opinion is taken into account. Furthermore, behind the construction of conical roofs lies the idea of piercing the heavens and reaching the Creators (the Egyptian concept that enabled the construction of the pyramids). In short, the traditional architecture of the Grassfield people in general, and that of the Bamileke people in particular, is intentional insofar as the creation of this type of architecture remains reserved for those recognized by the traditional authorities of the region. It is also because the buildings are designed and constructed intentionally, with the aim of better framing their institutions and beliefs, and also to meet many utilitarian needs.

Driven by scientific and technical progress and the winds of globalization, new construction materials—such as concrete and aluminum roofing—have emerged. These materials have largely replaced long-standing staples like packed earth and thatched roofs supported by raffia bamboo. This shift has resulted in hybrid structures that combine traditional resources with modern innovations—a defining characteristic of most buildings in the area. Nevertheless, in many chiefdoms, traditional structures built using ancestral techniques can still be found today; indeed, even amidst modernity, the architecture remains deeply rooted in local culture.

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Notes

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