# Traditional Diplomacy between Kom and Nso' Ethnic Groups: The Case of Regulatory Societies, circa1800 to 2009

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**Abstract**

In the Cameroon Grassfields the fear of spilling blood was a major determinant of attitudes during hostility. Other alternatives to warfare were diplomatic practices that included gift exchanges, intermarriage and reception of refugees, mutual management of trade routes, mortuary embassies and celebrations across ethnic boundary limits. The regulatory societies in Kom (*Kwifoyn*) and in Nso' (*Nwerong*) were particularly charged with mortuary embassies and celebrations at the demise of their respective *Foyns* or Fons (Kings), based on established pacts and traditions. These roles have been threatened over the decades. Historians do not agree on how much damage has been done to these institutions in this domain. With the use of primary and secondary sources, this paper argues that traditional diplomatic roles assigned to these institutions were threatened by colonialism, post-independence boundary arrangements, new roles assigned to them by constituted administrative authorities, pressure from elites, intertribal conflicts and modernism. It reveals that in spite of these threats, *Kwifoyn-kom* and *Nwerong-nso'* have stood the test of time from circa 1800-2009, in the domain of mortuary embassies and exchange visits. The paper concludes that these institutions remain vitally relevant to handle customary disputes and serious crimes.
**Key words**: Traditional diplomacy, Kom, Nso', regulatory societies, Mortuary celebrations.

Résumé
Dans les Grassfields du Cameroun, la peur de verser du sang était un déterminant majeur des attitudes en cas d'hostilité. D'autres alternatives à la guerre étaient les pratiques diplomatiques qui incluaient les échanges de cadeaux, les mariages mixtes et l'accueil des réfugiés, la gestion mutuelle des routes commerciales, les ambassades mortuaires et les célébrations au-delà des limites ethniques. Les sociétés régulatrices de Kom (*Kwifoyn*) et de Nso' (*Nwerong*) étaient particulièrement chargées des ambassades mortuaires et des célébrations à la mort de leurs *Foyns* ou Fons (rois) respectifs, sur la base de pactes et de traditions établis. Ces rôles ont été menacés au fil des décennies. Les historiens ne s'accordent pas sur l'ampleur des dégâts causés à ces institutions dans ce domaine. En s'appuyant sur des sources primaires et secondaires, cet article soutient que les rôles diplomatiques traditionnels assignés à ces institutions ont été menacés par le colonialisme, les arrangements frontaliers post-indépendance, les nouveaux rôles qui leur ont été assignés par les autorités administratives constituées, la pression des élites, les conflits intertribaux et le modernisme. Il révèle qu'en dépit de ces menaces, *Kwifoyn-*

*kom* et *Nwerong-nso'* ont résisté à l'épreuve du temps, de 1800 à 2009 environ, dans le domaine des ambassades mortuaires et des visites d'échange. L'article conclut que ces institutions restent d'une importance vitale pour gérer les litiges coutumiers et les crimes graves.
Mots clés : Diplomatie traditionnelle, Kom, Nso', sociétés de régulation, célébrations mortuaires.

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## Introduction

Organized polities generally have relations with their immediate and distant neighbors. The standard method used in order to influence actions, attitudes and decisions of foreign governments is referred to as diplomacy. The common objective sought for is that tension should be minimized and the use of force or a resort to war avoided at all costs. In this same line of reasoning, there is also the comprehensive use of "national power" to amicably arrive at a peaceful resolution of differences between nations. This practice in some cases may be coercive, with the threat to apply and show strength although overtly nonviolent. Sometimes diplomacy is used in the context of actions, meetings and summits which may be regular or spontaneous. It has also widened over the years to include pressure and actions of supra-national bodies, organizations and non –state actors. A person involved in the aforementioned actions is called a diplomat. They often enjoy certain prerogatives and the most outstanding is that in the host country and in the international arena, they are protected from harassment and arrests (Freeman et al, 2021:2).

Diplomatic practices have evolved in recent times to actions in blocs or groups of countries who, with a common interest, stick together and act as such. This is a complement to the traditional diplomatic practice known for many years. Every human group of the past and today is known to have exercised some form of diplomatic behaviour (Terisso, 2016:327). In the Cameroon Grassfields, considered sometimes as a

single cultural entity, local groups developed alliances amongst themselves, carried out regular cultural exchange visits and long distance trade beyond their polities, and far beyond this geographical area towards the Sahara. According to Nkwi, this is termed "inter-chiefdom relations", which in this context represents traditional diplomacy (Nkwi, 1987:41-43).

Various forms of such traditional links developed in the Cameroon Grassfields. Some were on equal basis, while others were on a more unequal basis, more like a master-servant relationship. In this region, it was common to find relations that had developed out of ancestral links or friendship sealed by blood covenants. Such covenants and pacts were important.

Diplomacy in the Grassfields was very often accompanied by rites and rituals. Sites where these acts took place were marked by monoliths and fire-resistant tree species, such as the *ficus* tree. In some instances, the use of ritual instruments such as the iron double headed gong was widespread. The fear of spilling blood was very important in the history of the Grassfields. Non-blood shedding tactics were adopted as an alternative, and were known by various names in the region. In Nso', this was called *kinang* and in Kom *su lenghachum*. Princes and warriors very often served as shuttle diplomats. They were known as *Ntumfon* and *Ntufoyn* in Nso, and Kom respectively, and carrying the tail of a buffalo as an insignia (Funteh, 2016:766-769).

Palace retainers in each group were identified by a loincloth tied in between the legs, a cap with alternating black and white strips, and a wine cup stained black on the top and bottom. They were known as *Chi-nto*, in Kom and *Nchelav* in Nso'. They carried a traditional diplomatic bag on behalf of the sovereign. This gave them immunity while they exercised this function. In the case of the Nso' ethnic group, the

bag had a soft shoot of the palm leaf (*Vwemsin*), tied to its opening as a seal, and a peace plant affixed on it, as a symbol of this assignment. Diplomatic bags were known as *kibam ke Fon* in Nso' and *Bo Nto'* in Kom (Interview, Lukong Joseph, 2022).

These were different from the market bags (*Kibam ke Waiy*) adorned with cowries used by proxies of Fons who carried out trade on his behalf. The diplomatic bags were used to carry rare articles and valuable items intended as gifts for friendly Fondoms (Kingdoms) such as ivory bangles, cloth, camwood, beads, caps, leopard skin and pelts. Bulky items were carried in the same convoy, most often by retainers. These included: kola nuts, goats, palm oil, salt, brass pipes, wood objects, gourds, cane objects, pottery and smoking pipes. In charge of the Fons diplomatic bags group were designated lineage heads, with the title of Faay or Shuufaay in Nso', and Bo in Kom. In the Nso' ethnic group, the following played this role: Faay Kuiynse, Shuufaay Lun and Shuufaay Yuuwar. In the Kom ethnic group persons in charge were also title holders called *Ntufoyn* or *Bo*. They included: Ntufoyn Findoh, Ntufoyn Waini Nkang, Bo kitcha and Bo Nteh Laikom (Yuinwe, 2011:184).

Besides being a means to sustain traditional diplomacy, reciprocal mortuary embassies and celebrations for late Fons and other state dignitaries were common practice. In the case of the Kom and Nso' these tasks were the prerogative of the regulatory society, in partnership with the war club/brigades called *Manjong* and *Njong* in Nso' and Kom respectively. Leading members of the society of princes called *Ngirri* in Nso', participated principally to arrange rites in the royal cemetery. Kom did not have *Ngirri* and this role was handled by title holders called *Bo Kwifoyn*. Other participants were state councillors, some village heads, and diviners who constituted the core of these exchange visits. Each of these groups, had a special role and assigned tasks.

Accompanied by masquerades, they performed varied dance styles, each with their respective orchestra animating from the background. Entry into the precincts of these regulatory societies was limited only to retainers, and other title holders integrated into these institutions. The successful celebration of a mortuary visit following the death of a Fon in a friendly Fondom, marked a high point of inter-Fondom relations, and allowed for the nature of such a relationship to be evaluated and maintained (Nkwi, 1987:43-61).

These elements of traditional diplomacy in the Grassfields produced key spots, annual rites, symbolic cultural tenets, unwritten codes of behaviour, and legendary oaths as characteristics of diplomatic relationship. Much of this persisted into the period of colonial rule, and gradually was interfered with or changed to varying degrees (Talla & Womai Song:158).

African institutions have been caught at the crossroads of various forms of pressures, especially with the introduction and enforcement of modern forms of governance. Traditional regulations, customs and values are constantly being threatened, modified or completely discarded. Historians and many other interested parties disagree on the degree of change suffered by these traditional institutions and on how much of these institutions' competences and values can be integrated into modern forms of government and tendencies. While this debate persists, it is evident that *kwifoyn-kom, Nwerong-nso',* and other institutions have faced and resisted certain changes and restrictions of their prerogatives.

This paper seeks to determine, how much of infringements these institutions have suffered in the past decades, and precisely in the domain of long-established mortuary embassies / celebrations between 1800 which marked the earliest records of these rites, and 2009, when the last mortuary embassy took place between the two

Fondoms. These infringements have arisen from the following: modern influences which undermine the legacy of traditional diplomacy, colonial and new independent African states boundaries, and the political class. The Fon, the regulatory society and the war brigades, assumed or were given new and added roles by Colonial authorities, and so-called 'Traditional Councils' were inaugurated. Additional roles included the collection of taxes, recruitment of labor, and a foreign legal system that worked alongside the customary courts. This paper aims to see how these relatively modern challenges have affected the legacy of inter-ethnic diplomacy in the Grassfields. As we shall see, in spite of the mutations and threats, the underlying role of these regulatory societies in the domain of diplomatic mortuary embassies and celebrations, has not been totally undermined.

This paper examines the Nso' and Kom ethnic groups, summarizes their histories, and the role of the regulatory societies. Through the use of active participants in these exchange visits, it considers the successive Fons involved in these rites since its inception, and how established diplomatic norms on mortuary embassies and celebrations have been carried out. Finally, it describes the last two mortuary embassy trajectories (routes), and hallmarks of the celebrations. This methodology will permit the researcher to evaluate what has actually changed from the practice that was standard in the past in this domain.

## 1: Historical Background

The Nso' ethnic group is one of the major Fondoms in the western Grassfields of Cameroon. Its founder according to oral traditions was a Tikar or Ndobo princess called Ngonso' who migrated to Mbo' plain at Mbokam, then to Ndzenso', where they settled for some time, and finally moved uphill to establish a Fondom at Kovifem. The princess

entered into a pact with the aboriginal clans (*Mntar*), and when she died her son called Leh became the first Fon of Nso' (Mzeka 1980:7). The Nso' language is said to have emerged at Kovifem at this point in time. The Nso' also built a dynasty with the regulatory society (*Nwerong*), and that of princes (*Ngirri*), which are found in most Grassfield groups, together with defence brigades (Fanso, 2017:43).

The Chamba raids reached the upper Grassfields about 1780, and ransacked Kovifem twice forcing Fon Sanggu and his people to take refuge in Taavisa. This was later followed by Fulani raiders from the Banyo Lamidat who caused suffering and instability in the region (Fowler & Zeitlyn, 2000:1-3). While at Taavisa, Fon Sanggu and members of the royal family were killed. Fowler describes these attacks on the northern Ndop plain as devastating where in a number of Fondoms were scattered "*never to reform as individual polities again.*"(Fowler, 1990:78). Faay Ndzeedzev (first Counselor) with the eponym Shaang, redeemed the royal line when in one of his regular trade trips from Mbembe to Babungo, exchanging oil for hoes, redeemed a prince called Yiir, who had been sold to slavery, and crowned him Fon Se'mbum I. He returned with his people to Kovifem. In the early 19th Century circa 1820, Se'mbum I took the decision to transfer his capital further south to Kumbo (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982:132-135).

The regulatory society *Nwerong-Nso* is believed to have been brought to Kovifem, the then capital, by immigrants who joined the Nso' and *Visale* (aboriginal *Mntar*). These were the lineage heads of Taakum and Tsenla Mbam. This was particularly so because Ngonso' a female could not be in possession of such sacra. The *Nwerong-Nso* regulatory society then grew in strength to become an arm of Fondom institutions. Its primary role was to execute decisions of the Fon and *Nwerong*

hierarchy. It was represented in public in an impersonal manner, by a hooded personality who could not be held responsible for any pronouncement, or actions undertaken on behalf of this institution (Mzeka, 1980:16).

In the recent decades, *Nwerong* gradually evolved to be conceived as a co-ruler of the Fondom alongside the Fon, and thus was seen to have attributes like "the eyes and ears" and the voice of the Nso' people. It remained a secretive and a closed institution principally of male retainers. Through a very recent complex process, wealthy personalities belonging to the social class of princes and indigenous *Mntar,* have been inducted into its general assembly (*Nwerong wo Nsansa*). It evolved to have powers to demobilize the Fon for acts of neglect, autocracy and treason. There is also the upper echelon and the inner core (*nwerong wo wiy),* whose role is to mystically track and eliminate dangerous forces such as witchcraft, serious crime, evil cults and treasonable acts. Depending on the severity of the case, it sometimes imposed the death penalty on persons found guilty in the customary court at Mbuluv (*kisee*), or enforced sentences of exile (Chem-Langhee, 1989:27-28).

*Nwerong* had an advisory role to the Fon, implemented his orders, and became involved in the selection process of a new Fon as intrigues entered that domain. Other functions of this institution included: the repair of palace buildings, tapping the Fon's palms, kolanut trees, farms and forests. *Nwerong* policed the polity, prevented crimes, forestalled fires, and protected the Fon, property, resources and ritual sites. The Fondom was animated culturally by this institution with sacred music and masquerades. Its masked dancers included *Shikwala, Kibaranko, Vingaayasi, Jwi Nwerong, Yee Nwerong,* and *Shinkang* (the jester speaking in the Kom language – pointing to connections between the groups). *Nwerong* would perform ceremonies to mourn its

elderly members and those who had gone through a complex initiation at each lodge; mourn princes, princesses of age and Fon's wives. The mourning period for the Fon and his council members, chief priests and queen mother was complex in terms of procedures and restrictions. This followed a higher dimension in terms of duration, procedure and celebrations (Interview Woo kidzev, 2018). Together with the military association, *Manjong,* it was the sole group that could act on behalf of the Fon and Nso' people, and as such represent the Fondom in a mortuary embassy and celebration beyond the boundaries of the Nso' polity.

The Kom are believed to have also migrated from Tikari or Ndobo to Babessi around 1700. Legend holds that, through trickery, the host Babessi Fon virtually eliminated the male population of the Kom while leaving his own men unharmed. They were redeemed according to legend by Nahdong, the daughter of the late Fon who had hung himself in despair. She led the surviving males on a winding migration trail following a python trail. From Babessi they went to Nkar and took on a clan from there called the *Ndo-titichia* who accompanied them to Oku, through Ajung (Ejun) and then to the present headquarters at Laikom. On arrival they met indigenes called *Ando-nalo,* and made peace with the surrounding Akeh and Achain (aborigines) whom they incorporated. Nahdong's first son Njina (Jinabo) became the first Fon of the Kom people at Laikom, and it is from this arrangement that matrilineal succession is believed to have started in this polity (Nkwi, 1987:172).

Princes from Kom later migrated to create new settlements at Abu, Njinikom, Yang and Alim. Beyond the hills at Mbesinoku (Mbessa or Mbissey), is found a legendary shrine at Ajung which marks this trajectory. Every newly enthroned Fon in Laikom must be taken to this spot upon ascending to the position of sovereign ruler.

Here, they meet with diviners, priests, indigenous rulers for sacrifices done at the shrine of a legendary peace pact between the Kom royal clan and other clans called *Ngo-mukain*, which is marked by monoliths which sealed the alliance between the Kom royal clan on their arrival (Nkwi, 1987:173).

The Kom expanded through conquest from 1850 to occupy areas formerly under Kijem and Nkwen polity. They also occupied Baiso, Menjun and Mbinkar to the south. The hilly nature of Laikom spared the Kom from Chamba and Fulani raids and rather provided refuge to fleeing Fons of Mbeba, Nkwen and Bamessing. Foyn Yu who reigned from 1865-1912 expanded Kom control to protect lineages harassed by the Bafut to its south- east and to the north-west where he and the Nso' jointly subdued the Din ethnic group. Foyn Yu attempted to subdue the Bum who resisted until the German arrivals ended this spiral of conflict (Nkwi, 1987:175).

The Foyns of Kom beginning with Jinabo administered the territory with the *Menang,* society since *kwifoyn* was introduced later at the close of the 18th Century. *Kwifoyn* was reserved for retainers and is believed to have been introduced into the Kom traditional set up by Foyn Kumambong. It was led by a page with the title *Bobe,* who was quasi-independent from the Foyn. *Kwifoyn-kom* undertook tasks such as punishing persons who breached traditional laws and customs, tried cases of witchcraft, murder, adultery related to dignitaries, collected the Foyn's wine and tribute, ran the royal household, acted as emissaries and assisted in fertility rights. As custodians of the tribute huts, they ran the royal household by making provisions to the Foyns wives and royal family as directed by the sovereign. In like manner, they were intermediaries in the collection of, and giving out the bride price of princesses. The inner core of the *kwifoyn-kom* lodge handled cases of treason, traitors and witchcraft. At the village levels

*kwifoyn* functions were handled by the village regulatory society called (*Mukum*), with an orchestra of friction drums. Its task was to handle cases of suicide and village community works. The same as in Nso', it had five internal lodges: *Kwifon-Ntu'u, Ndo-Nggvu, Nko'o, Mobu, Aguo'o* and *Likang.* The masked dancer called *Likang,* performed in public using the Nso' language (Nkwi, 1987:180-181).

*Kwifoyn-kom* just as in Nso' worked with the military association *Njong,* to carry out mortuary embassies and celebrations on behalf of the Kom people to friendly neighboring groups. Minor differences can be found between *Nwerong-nso'* and *kwifoyn-kom* for example, that the former did not have its origins in *Menang*, nor the village regulatory society *Mukum,* nor use friction drums. The heir apparent and symbolic father of the Fon even though of royal descent was integrated into *Kwifoyn-kom*, while such a practice was not accepted in Nso'. In *Nwerong-nso',* its leaders (*Sheys* equivalent of *Bobes in Kom*), were not members of all lodges. Besides these, all other operations of these respective institutions in these Fondoms were fundamentally the same (Interview Mfomikom, 2021).

Mortuary embassies, celebrations and exchange visits were planned; emissaries sent to discuss and agree, before plans for large scale movements were made. Sacrifices were prepared and done on the eve, followed by arrival and display of masked dancers and departure. Each visit was evaluated, and the next visit, if any, was discussed. The warrior club leaders *Ndokifeng* in Kom and *Mfoomi Ba* in Nso' were associated in the planning and visit (Funteh, 2015:773).

**2: The Origins of the Kom –Nso' Pact of Friendship**

The Kom people, while migrating from Babessi through Nso', took on the Ndo-titichia and Ndo-Ijinasung clans from Nkar, and later the Itinalah break away clan from Tsenla

in Nso' took refuge in Kom. Their route through Mbim, Djottin, Nkor to Ajung and finally to Laikom, went through areas that later became Nso' territory (Ngam, 2012:88, 95). On arrival at Laikom, Foyn Jinabo preserved a good relationship with the Nso'. Moves towards stronger diplomatic ties came when the Nso' were under pressure from Chamba raids and their Fons began to take refuge in Taavisa at the close of the 18th Century. Fon Sanggu who died as a refugee in Taavisa, is believed to have begun diplomatic relations with aFoyns of Kom in the mid-18th Century. This was sealed by a blood pact between Fon Sanggu II of Nso' and Foyn Nkwo of Kom circa 1800 (see shaded section of the table below) in the early 19th Century (Yuinwe, 2011: 183-184).

The Kom and Nso' Fondoms circa 1880 sealed a second blood pact focused on military cooperation against the Din people, and to prepare for a greater threat from the Bamum. This pact took place at the boundary spot on the hills above Mbesinoku (Chem-Langhee & Lemven, 2004:175-176; Mzeka, 1980:70). Din people (see figure 1 below) had successfully resisted Nso' incursions on its polity, and was the only group that was an obstruction for the Nso' to tidy up its frontier to be shared only with Kom, after Djottin, Dom, Mbinnon and Nkor groups were subdued in its western boarders. The Kom thus through this military alliance, accepted to invade Din from the rear, while the Nso' attacked through Oku. Din was brought to submission. This marked an extension of the original pact to include military cooperation. In this paper, the focus is more on diplomatic exchange visits, between *kwifoyn-kom and Kwifon-Nso'* following the demise of their rulers; as a demonstration of cordial and friendly historical relations between these two Grassfields Fondoms according to the pact of circa 1800.

Table 1: Chronology of the Fons of Nso' and Foyns of Kom

| N | Fons of Nso' | Reign | N | Foyns of Kom | Reign |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Leh | ? | | | |
| 2 | Jing | ? | | | |
| 3 | 3-12 Unknown | ? | | | |
| 13 | Yiyaang | ? | | | |
| 14 | Kootum | ? | | | |
| 15 | Dzeni | ? | | | |
| 16 | Ndzefon | ? | 1 | Jinabu | 1730-1788 |
| 17 | Sanggu | ? | 2 | Kumambong | 1788-1800 |
| 18 | Sanggu II (Yiir) | ? | 3 | Nkwo | 1800-1815 |
| 19 | Se'mbum I (Fomukong) | ? | 4 | Nkwain | 1815-1830 |
| 20 | Tamanjong | 1840-1875 | 5 | Tufoin | 1830-1855 |
| 21 | Se'mbum II | 1875-1907 | 6 | kimeng | 1855-1865 |
| 22 | Mapri | 1907-1910 | 7 | Yuh I | 1865-1912 |
| 23 | Ngah Bifon I | 1910-1947 | 8 | Ngam | 1912-1926 |
| 24 | Mbinkar Mbinglo | 1947-1972 | 9 | Ndzi I | 1926-1954 |
| 25 | Ngah Bifon II | 1972-1983 | 10 | Loah | 1954-1965 |
| 26 | Ngah Bifon III | 1983-1993 | 11 | Nsom Ngwe | 1965-1974 |
| 27 | Sehm Mbinglo I | 1993- Present | 12 | Njina II | 1974-1989 |
| | | | 13 | Yibuin | 1989-1994 |
| | | | 14 | Yuh II | 1994-2016 |
| | | | 15 | Ndzi II | 1916- Present |

Source: Yuinwe, 2011:183-187; Ngonso' Festival, 2010: Heritage Committee Publication. The shaded section marks the period after the pact at Ajung (discussed below)

Mortuary embassies and celebrations, and other diplomatic ventures, became regular between Kom and Nso'. The most prominent of these events occurred in 1965 following the death of Foyn Loah of Kom. Fon Sehm Mbinglo of Nso', stayed in the Laikom palace and ensured that the succession process went smoothly. Only Fon Mbinglo was allowed to sound the Nso' royal trumpet in the Laikom palace (Yuinwe, 2011:183-184). Other specifics of this visit are described by D. N. Lantum as follows:

> Fon Mbinglo temporarily transferred his palace to Laikom for five days when Fon Kom died in 1965 and the king-makers went into conclave to screen and confirm the rightful successor. These king-makers of Kom still remember with joy and admiration Fon Mbinglo's powerful temporary rule and generosity during the interregnum. Every day he would offer a bullock for slaughter. Immediately after assuring the peaceful installation of Fon O'loo [Nsom Ngwe], Fon Nso' left Kom on

> horse-back and returned to Kumbo through the hilly Anyajua to Oku road (Lantum 2000:70).

Participation in the funerary rites of late Fons became a routine following these pacts (see shaded section of the table 1 above). This was only interrupted after the reign of Foyn Nsom Ngwe (1966 -1974), when after his demise in 1974, *Kwifoyn-Nso'* did not perform this exercise. This failure is termed *Mentassen.* This was significant because thousands of participants were expected to turn out for the celebration creating the need for food and drinks. When the harvest of the previous rainy season was poor; because of pest attack or poor weather, the host Fon feared stressing his people, as this could lead to hunger and strife thereafter. Lukong thus suggests that Foyn Njina II, the successor of Foyn Nsom Ngwe postponed the visit of *Kwifoyn-Nso'* because the necessary logistics were not ready as to the anticipated number of guests (Interview Lukong, 2022).

Since then, the accumulated funerary celebrations of Foyns Nsom Ngwe, Njina II and Yibuin were pending. Thus when, Fon Ngah Bifon II and Fon Ngah Bifon III of Nso', died in 1983 and 1993 respectively, *Kwifoyn-kom* did not perform their funerary celebrations. This situation persisted until Fon Sehm Mbinglo I of Nso' (1993 to present) re-established these relations with a mortuary embassy and celebrations in 2007 to mourn three pending Foyns of Kom. A return visit was undertaken by Foyn Yu II in 2009 to mourn the two Fons of Nso'. These celebrations followed the established historical route (Interview Munang, 2021; Interview Maamo, 2022).

**3: Case Study: Exchange Mortuary Celebrations of 2007 and 2009**

The premise for mortuary celebrations stemmed from the oaths and covenants made with each other. Otherwise, it was believed that misfortune would be experienced by the defaulting party. It was also held that the deceased Fon would be angry in case of

absence or delay in performing this rite. Moreover, the incantation of the chief priest at sacrifices suggests that mediums, spirits and ancestors being invoked are the same. All were thus urged to make haste for mortuary embassies and celebrations to be carried out.

The Traditional Council, the *kwifon* head, and the war club leaders considered if and when a visit could be arranged. The dry season was preferable (the period generally reserved for death celebrations and hunting in the Grassfields). Once a date was agreed upon, envoys were sent to the partner Fon, who considered the suggestion. When these envoys arrived, it was customary for them to wait for a response, even if it took days before engaging on the return journey. Mystical forces and mediums were consulted to find out if the date was appropriate, and whether there were issues to iron out before a visit. Such issues included the temperament of the late Fon vis-a-vis his colleague at the point of death, normal relationships during times of peace, an event that happened during the previous visit, or some other matter which diviners would reveal. If there were no qualms, then a date was fixed (Interview Fomikong, 2021).

As this date approached (about four weeks prior to the fixed date), announcements were made in the *kwifon* general assemblies and war clubs for people to prepare. Traders and visitors who frequented the other Fondom, and a resident envoy known as *Woo Kibeiy* and *Iwonghi*, in Nso' and Kom respectively, gave reminders to both parties. Guinea corn and later maize was contributed by women's groups and game was hunted in preparation for the reception of guests. Items for the sacrifices brought by the visitor included: a male goat, palm oil, camwood, palm wine and salt. Dane guns, widely used for ceremonies in the Grassfields, were prepared by war brigades, while the Fon (paying the visit), prepared gun powder for the event. A week and less before the

D-day, women of Kom origin who were married to Nso' or vice versa, who were still strong enough for the two-day journey, began to arrive as a signal that all was on track. On the last 8th day before this date, *Nwerong-nso'* in a symbolic procedure led by Faay Maamo (the most senior palace retainer noble and by right) announced in the internal plaza of the Palace that these rites will proceed. He would give a few details following the revelations of diviners. The most senior retainer of *Nwerong-nso* with title of Shey, gave details on the departure time but was usually vague as to the route which was confided to only a few persons (Interview Woo Bamfem, 2020).

On the eve of a mortuary celebration either way to the Laikom palace in Kom or the Nso' palace in Kumbo, a male goat was sacrificed at the entrance of the main court yard of the palace by the visiting Fon as physical emblems (the iron double headed gong, and the state gourd adorned with cowries) representing each ethnic group were displayed. Appropriate material (camwood paste, oil, salt and paraphernalia) known only to diviners, and the consumption of palm wine accompanied this rite. Sacrificial blood was sprinkled over the monoliths in the open plaza, planted in the form of a fireside in the centre, inside a circle of stones, adorned by the peace plant (*Dracaena diesteliana*). For fear of the negative consequences if breached, these pacts were often highly respected though successors of Fons gradually neglected them, or sought for new alliances, sometimes with former enemies as time passed (Interview Nkessa, 2021).

Usually when leaving Nso' for Kom, *Nwerong* left during the day at about 3pm, signaled by a blast its sacred trumpet, followed by its mobile orchestra which engaged on the journey through Ba'rong, To'nnee to Yungkuuy, and continued through Taankiy to Oku, moving along, with its masked dancers, and equipment for the displays (see figure 1 below). The Fon of Nso' left by the same route a day earlier for the initial

sacrifices. Emissaries sent by the Fon of Kom acted as his escorts. He proceeded to spend the night in the Laikom palace. *Nwerong* moved through Oku usually at night and by the morning hours of the next day reached Mbesinoku. Here, the Fon of Mbesinoku who was a close ally of both Nso' and Kom people, offered refreshments as custom demands. He gave the mortuary convoy from Kumbo, retainers who mastered the rugged terrain and the route in both directions to accompany the Nso'. The Nso' spent the day to rest and mounted the rugged escarpment at Mbesinoku during the day. *Nwerong-Nso'* did not stop at the sacrificial spot above Mbesinoku hills, but moved all day and night, with short intervals of refreshment and rest, at the top of the Ajung, Akeh and Oku hills. They entered the Laikom or Nso' palaces in the early morning (customarily this should be during the day) (Interview Lukong, 2022).

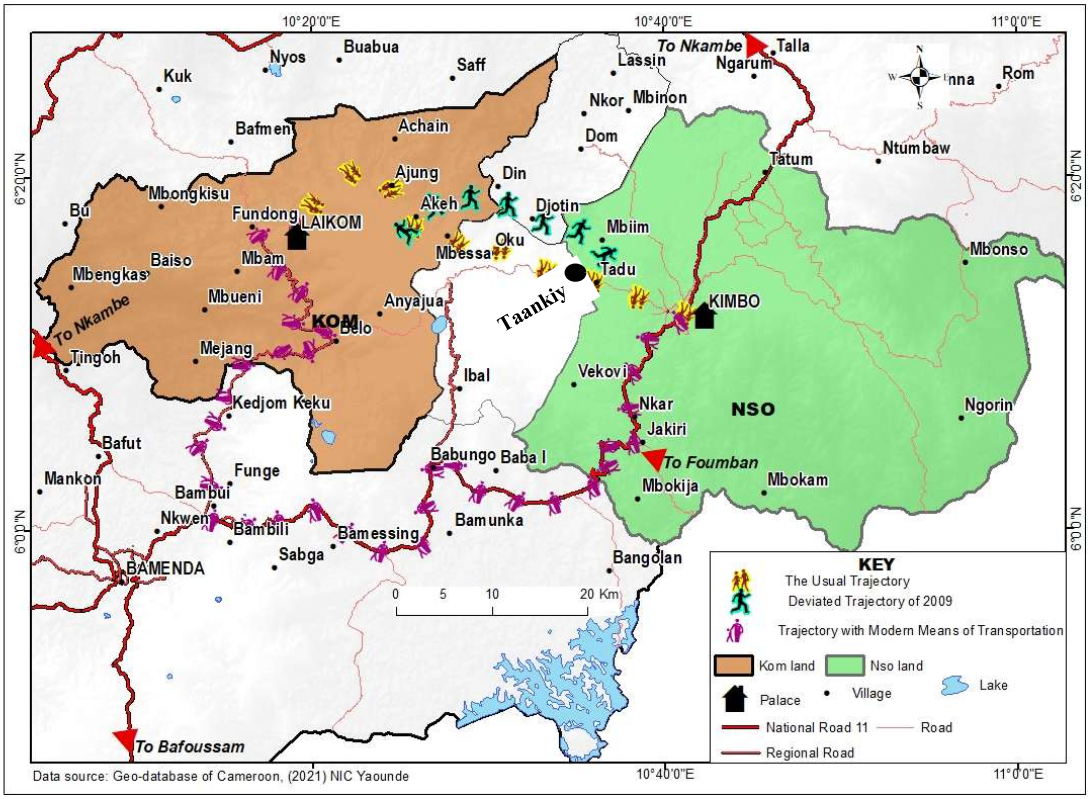


Figure 1: Route of Mortuary Embassies between the Kom and Nso'

The war clubs followed in the steps of *Nwerong and Kwifoyn.* The two Fons received the visiting *Kwifoyn or Nwerong,* and as a greeting between these regulatory societies the "sacred iron instruments*"* (symbols of their role and powers) were sounded. This act was done by their respective leaders who were Shey/Bobey respectively for Nso' and Kom, as a sign that their pacts remain in force. They proceeded together to the receiving lodge of *kwifon* and drumming followed immediately, punctuated by the mobile orchestra. This was followed by a speech from the host Fon, who usually had been told whether the journey was unproblematic. In case of any problems, he addressed them diplomatically. Early morning refreshments followed, and masked dancers began display immediately as each sub-lodge was expected to perform twice in the palace plaza and beyond. Royal dance groups *(Kigha'a and Njangwon)* which made the journey, performed; although priority was given to the war club (Interview Woo Bamfem, 2020).

The host Fon officially provided food composed of livestock, guinea corn and maize flour loaves during the day. Meanwhile as this went on, the two chief priests and the Fons, arranged for visits to *Afoa-kom* (founder symbol and deity of Kom) and possibly Ngonso' in Kumbo (see photographs below).

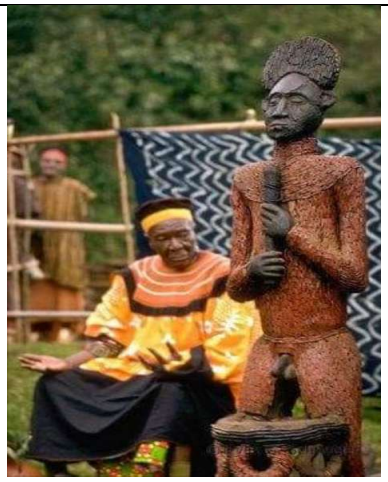

Figure 2: Foyn Nsom Ngwe and Afoa-kom in 1973. Source: Afoakom Cameroom Patrimony, 1973



Figure 3: Fon Sehm Mbinglo I and Ngonso' in 2022. Source: Ngonso', Courtesy of Bulami Edward, 2022.

In the case of Nso', the statue of Ngonso' was taken to Germany after the Nso' palace was ransacked in a punitive expedition in 1903 by Lieutenant Houben. Since then, oral tradition in Kumbo does not have any trace of the deity that was respected in the past by visiting mortuary embassies and celebrants. The incantations done by the Fon of Nso' Sehm Mbinglo I, on his visit to retrieve Ngonso' in Germany on the 12th of November 2022, militates for the view that this statue was a Nso' female deity of a similar category of ritual art works, like the male Afoa-kom of Kom.

The grave of the founder Fon, and that of the Fon to be mourned, and if there were other pending celebrations then, the grave of those Fons were also visited. By use of camwood, salt, palm oil and palm wine, libations were done at the entrances of each tomb, and wine mixed with specific medicine used to cast aspersions on the tombs of Fons. By 7 p.m. the same day *Nwerong* visited the royal cemetery, but by custom it is obliged to stop at the entrance with its mobile orchestra. *Nwerong* left by the same road, travelled overnight and reached Kumbo by 4 p.m. the next day (Interview Fomikong, 2021).

Messages were immediately sent back through emissaries to give details of the return journey. Customarily these emissaries had to deliver these messages by word of mouth. The reason for this was to pre-empt another occurrence of the abandoned mortuary celebration such as that which occurred between the Fondoms of Oku and Kom in 1974, when Foyn Nsom Ngwe died, and this etiquette was breached. If any issues had marred a smooth return they were addressed immediately. If a reciprocal visit was arranged during the first meeting, then the emissary began further informal discussion on the subject. If not, they had to wait for the next death of a Fon, and with the obligation to attend, even if it was in the same Fondom.

This is one of the types of event that animated inter-ethnic relations in the past, besides the other aspects of diplomacy discussed earlier. These occurred alongside normal periods of farming, and professional activities of artisans, weavers, smelters, cloth making, pottery, carving, tappers and others that were restricted or regulated during mortuary celebrations. Each of these ethnic groups had links with other Fondoms. The Nso' made similar visits with the allied Fondoms of Baba, Bamunka, Bamessing and Bali Kumbat. These followed the same format as detailed above. Reciprocal visits from Kom followed the same format (Interview Woo Bamfem, 2020).

**4: Land-mark Events and Mutations seen in the Nso' visit to Kom in 2007**

The peculiarity about the visit of 2007 was the Nso' and Oku dispute that had occurred on the Sub-Divisional administrative boundary at Taankiy. This skirmish was further inflamed by elites who had grazing interests in the area. There were threats that *Nwerong-nso'* should not traverse Oku sub-division or Oku territory. The Fon of Nso' Sehm Mbinglo I, was required to move ahead a day before to perform the rights at the boundary spot with the Kom ethnic group. Oral sources indicate that he made a courtesy

call to Fon Sietieh II of Oku, and that they had a cordial discussion to that effect (Interview Woo Kidzev, 2018). *Nwerong-nso'* and *Manjong-nso',* went as programmed along the route described above, to and fro without any problems. In the same manner, and as their lineage heads had done at the royal cemeteries, Shuufaay Bashwin and Shuufaay Shuubuiy, acted on behalf of Nso', while Bobe Kwifoyn-Kom and Nchindo-Kom did so, on behalf of Kom (Yuinwe, 2011: 186).

In the morning hours masked dancers began to perform; first the feathered hooded masker, with three spears and a club called *Shikwala*. It displayed in the open court yard imitating a bird. Its movements were directed by hooded persons who helped to make its` path free for the display. Next was the masked dancer with a large head mask, a skirt and blouse in the form of a net, called *Kibaranko*. The body of the dancer was smeared with charcoal. It held two clubs that very often were thrown at any perceived obstacles. Its movements were directed by a score of initiates. This was followed by two masked dancers on stilts and hooded called *Vighaayasi*. They wore masks of zoomorphic nature as the giraffe, and performed gestures the same as the animal it represented. Next, was another mask dancer with a hood and a large loin tied in between the legs called *Jwi Nwerong*. Its masks represented a praying mantis, and it made leaps and circles as its initiates directed its movements. This was followed by the masked dancer called *Yeenwerong* with an elaborate hood made of the royal loin (*ndzeiynjav*), and a mask representing a crocodile. Its initiates moved majestically in a procession to the courtyard at Laikom and into the inner plaza where the throne is displayed. Lastly, there was a masked dancer with a thick loin, and was bare body with a feathered mask and face smeared white called Shinkang. It displayed throughout the day with the objective to create fun. It spoke in the Kom language.

At the close of the day *Nwerong-nso'* went to the royal cemetery accompanied by music from its mobile orchestra before leaving for Kumbo by 7 pm. The return journey took a full day. The route remained the same, but used modern means of movement (motor vehicles). On the return journey by road after these festivities the wives of the Fon of Nso' who accompanied him to Laikom were involved in a fatal accident. As required and described above, this was the subject of investigation by diviners during post-visit exchanges, who looked into the matter, and concluded that the incident was unconnected to the mortuary celebration, thus paving the way for a return visit (Interview Woo Bamfem, 2020).

**5: Landmark Events and Variations in the Return visit by Kom to Nso' in 2009**

In 2009, the *Kwifoyn-kom* went to Nso' for a return visit, to mourn two pending mortuary visits of Fon Ngah Bifon II and Ngah Bifon III. This visit was under the reign of Sehm Mbinglo I, and the peculiarity of this event was that, it fell at the height of the inter-ethnic conflict between the people of Mbesinoku and Oku at Njikijem, marked by killings and arson on both sides. Mbesinoku was formerly an ally of Nso' and Kom people, and would provide trackers for the Fons of Nso', Kom, *Kwifoyn* and *Nwerong* on each journey to the boundary spot between the two Fondoms. At this point in time, it was administratively under neighboring Boyo Division. The Fon of Kom, Yuh II, in spite of his advanced age, reached Ajung through the road to Akeh by contrast to the use of the normal footpath from Laikom. *Kwifoyn-kom* was forced to avoid Mbesinoku territory and the traditional route through Oku. They went for the first time through Djottin, Buh and Mbiim, to rejoin the track at Tadu and continued to Kumbo', for the celebrations (see figure 1 above).

*Kwifoyn-kom* arrived Kumbo in the late afternoon because of the diverted route. The "instruments", symbols of each organization, were played together as is customary. Mortuary rites were performed by the people mentioned above in the Kumbo royal cemetery. The mask dancer *Kwifoyn Ntu'u* started the celebrations in the main palace plaza, with its whistling display accompanied by a page playing the double headed gong. It was followed by *Ndo-Nggvu* with an elaborately decorated hood and antelope mask who danced like a bird. Next was *Nko'o* with a mask representing the elephant, and holding a weapon, an old stone hammer from a smithy. This was followed by the *Aguo'o* mask, same as *Yeenwerong* in Nso' already described. Finally, *Likang* performed public gestures to create fun, using the Nso' language. These celebrations went hitch free and with no post event casualties. *Kwifoyn-kom* for the first time returned along the ring road, doing parts of the journey by car. The aged Fon of Kom Yu II reached Kumbo' by car and participated fully in all the events. Fon Yuh II died in 2017 and the Nso', therefore owe them another mortuary celebration visit (Interview Woo Bamfem, 2020).

**6: Other Past and Recent Threats to Mortuary Embassies**

The origins of other transformations in the roles of the regulatory society, stem from the debate on how best the British were to administer their colonies in West Africa; drawing from the experiences of indirect rule in India and East Africa. In a report on the Cameroons Province the fate of Native Authorities was discussed in these words:

> The evolution of indigenous institutions does not mean that those institutions are to be allowed to grow unchecked and uncontrolled… European standards and methods must be introduced in the form and measure in which they can profitably be grafted on the pre-existing stock (West Africa: Report on the British Sphere of Cameroons, Institute of Common Wealth, 1925, cited in Nzume, 2004:93).

Native Authorities were created in 1922, based on the Nigerian Native Court Ordinance of 1914, which was followed by the Nigerian Native Authorities Ordinance of 1916. By these ordinances the Fons of Nso' and Kom with their traditional institutions continued to exercise control over their subjects especially on local issues. They ran native courts, and supported the maintenance of order by *Nwerong* and *Kwifoyn*. However, when issues related to the mandated territories came up; they received instructions from the British Administration in the territory (Fanso, 2017:238-240).

One of the institutions assigned a new role, was the regulatory society. Attempts were made to modify its mode of operation. From 1958 as new African states came into existence and consequently new administrative units were fashioned. This further accentuated the deep wounds already created by the colonial administrations (Tata & Nforba, 2018:173-185).

Native authorities gradually mutated to districts, and in the independent Cameroon, the establishment of a Unitary State in 1972 drastically changed the situation on the ground. Territorial limits changed with the creation of Provinces and Divisions; by Decrees No 78/485 of 9th November, 1978 and Decree No 2008/376 of 12th November 2008. By this disposition, the full authority of Fons over their subjects remained only in principle, precisely in the cultural domain. Fons became auxiliaries of the Administration. Interestingly, in the case of the newly created Bui Division, Mbesinoku formerly within the Nso' Native Authority fell under the newly created Boyo Division. In the same manner, parts of the former Kom Native authority were found in the Donga-Mantung and Menchum Divisions. The Fons of Nso' and Oku who hitherto were in the same Sub-Division, were split by the creation of Oku Sub-Division.

The regulatory society is now required to have an authorization to carry out a reciprocal mortuary diplomatic venture, and another one to cross Sub-Division boundaries.

Since 1960 new elites have added their own influence to erode the strength these institutions had in the past. Elites have used wealth to infiltrate and attain the ranks of statutory and hereditary leaders of *Nwerong* and *Kwifoyn*. They regularly influence their decisions, and when met with resistance, solicit the Traditional Council, the Fon, or work with modern administrative authorities to drive through their personal and political agenda. This new class has also undertaken many large agricultural and animal husbandry ventures across ethnic boundaries. For example, this is the case in the buffer zone from Tadu to Ngongbaa and Kilum mountain forests, where intensive cattle rearing and a dairy industry operates. Some elites have gone as far as to acquire land and forests which were cultural reserves at Taankiy, Ijim, Ajung, Akeh and Kilum, where a huge tea plantation and factory now operates. They do not adhere to custom to manage these holdings, but make use of the law and judicial authorities in place to handle litigation concerning land use. The role of the regulatory society in such situations to make use of its traditional injunctions on land matters has therefore been greatly compromised.

Other areas of infringement of customary functions can be seen where families and lineage heads organize death celebrations while *Kwifon* is out of the Fondom on a mortuary celebration, unlike in the past. The argument being that they are at a distance far from the main event or as put traditionally that "they have crossed the river". *Kwifon* is no longer able to implement sanctions that had as verdict, exile, summary execution in the face of treason against the Fondom, adultery involving the Fon's wife, or defiling the throne by an unauthorized sitting on it by a prince. Large-scale industrial complex

owners openly defy injunction signals of *Kwifon*, refuse exploitation of their lands and forests when orders are made by *Kwifon* to bring wood, thatching grass and food to the palace. This therefore accounts for political and cultural transformations the institutions described above have undergone over the decades.

**Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that the mortuary exchange visits of 2007 and 2009 by *Nwerong-nso',* and *Kwifoyn-kom* experienced modifications and tensions, linked to an emerging elite and inter-ethnic conflicts. Its impact on traditional diplomatic mortuary celebrations is seen in the modification of the customary routes taken by the Fons and *Kwifoyn* of Kom. Both regulatory societies also modified the route of their return journeys. They have all made use of modern means of transportation through the major highways, which is a break from the centuries old tradition. Cars and the Ring Road No 11 are being used; marking a switch from traditional routes. Drawing from the example of 1974 following the death of Foyn Nsom Ngwe, when the Oku Fondom refused to participate in the funerary celebrations because their Fon had been informed by a letter instead of the customary messenger (Nkwi, 1987:60); the use of modern gadgets to plan, execute and handle post visit issues has also become routine.

Elites with investment ventures at Taankiy, enflamed existing tension between the Nso' and Oku groups between 2005-2007, creating fear and suspicion. Unlike the usual reception granted in the past whenever the Nso' people were making a visit to Kom, Oku did not fulfil its traditional obligations. Safe passage however was granted, but the result of elite meddling and influence on traditional matters in this area remains a threat to long-lived cultural practices.

In the face of this, and other similar occurrences, the regulatory societies found all over the Grassfields have modernized and liberalized themselves to become more dynamic. They have adopted mechanisms to admit members from previously excluded categories of the population, and have gradually integrated new methods of transportation and communication in their procedures. These are virtues which any institution, to stand the test of time, should adopt.

Even though considered secretive and fetishistic by the colonial administrators, the regulatory societies were never discarded, and resisted attempts to change their modes of functioning. Such resistance and resilience has expanded to cover threats from overzealous elites, elected and appointed officials. As the debate on how much of traditional values can be integrated into modern government continues, it is valid to say that Africans should lean on these traditional institutions, with their mystical powers and symbols, to handle succession issues, fights over land, usage of insignia, regalia and titles. These institutions remain very relevant when cases of suicide, witchcraft, desecration of the land, and the throne are concerned. In this domain, the regulatory societies have demonstrated their mastery, as administrative authorities have often turned to them, as a last resort in order to get an appropriate and long lasting solution to such issues.

**Glossary**

*Afoa-kom*: founder, symbol and deity of the Kom ethnic group
*Kigha'a and Njang won*: royal dances led by princes and princesses of Nso'; the latter is also performed in Kom called *Njang woyn*.
*Nwerong-kom* and *kwifoyn-kom:* The regulatory societies in Nso' and Kom respectively
*Kwifon-Ntu'u, Ndo-Nggvu, Nko'o, Mobu, Aguo'o and Likang*: five internal lodges and Mask dancers of *Kwifoyn-Kom*
*kinang* and *komsulenghachum:* non-blood shedding tactics in Nso' and Kom respectively
*kibamke Fon* and *BoNto'*: The diplomatic bags in Nso' and Kom respectively

*Manjong*: War Brigades in the Grassfields go by this name
*Menang*: Founder of Kom, Jinabo administered the ethnic group with this body before the coming of *kwifoyn*
*Mntar and Ando-Nalo*: Indigenous settlers of Nso' and Kom respectively
*Mukum*:The village regulatory society in Kom
*Ngirri*: A society with sacra and mask dancers constituted mainly of males of royal descent
*Nwerong wo Nsan*sa: general assembly of *Nwerong*
*Nwerong wo wiy*: upper echelon and the inner core of *Nwerong*
*Shikwala, Kibaranko, Vingaayasi, Jwi Nwerong, Yee Nwerong, Shinkang*: the Five Internal lodges of *Nwerong-Nso'* and its mask dancers.

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