

More Than a Seat: Numbers and Symbols in the Cameroon Grasslands¹

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Abstract

This paper places a carved wooden stool from Western Cameroon into cultural context. The symbolism of the motifs is presented along with the rules of etiquette associated with specialized stools.

Introduction

Art is an inseparable part of life in the Cameroon Grasslands. Art does not exist for its own sake, but plays an essential role in the life of the group. Symbols on masks, clothing and other objects are not restricted to artistic expression. Symbols often indicate the purpose of an object, the ceremony it is used for, or the person who is allowed to use it because many objects are personalized. For instance, indigo-dyed cloth, known as *ndop*, can be worn only by the royal family or nobility. The use of beaded objects is similarly restricted. A carved stool in a council chamber may only be used by a specific person or that person's representative. It is important to recognize these cultural mores, because breaking a taboo is a punishable offense.

A Carved Stool as a Status Symbol

Certain carved wooden stools are reserved for important people in Western Cameroon: the Fon (king), chiefs, *Ma Fo* (a powerful female), and certain nobles. Some stools are for everyday use and others are used during the meetings of traditional societies.

Stools are carved from one piece of wood. Plain stools are used by commoners and may be given away or sold, but stools that include certain symbols cannot be disposed of so easily [5]. The royal throne or stool, even when empty, still represents the Fon, and is therefore regarded with deep respect [4]. Gebauer states [3] that "Persons of some social importance were allowed larger stools with geometric patterns or limited symbolism to indicate the owner's position in the social scale." The elephant, buffalo, leopard, lion, and python are royal symbols, usually reserved for the Fon. The earth spider is one of the most common motifs seen today, especially on the many "tourist" stools from Foumban. Another popular motif is that of the cowry shell. According to Knöpfli "The glossy bright *cowry* shell with its elongated opening is the symbol of wealth and royalty, respect and dignity." A variety of geometric motifs can also be seen on specialized and common stools. Knöpfli writes [4] that "Stools with geometrical designs are

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for commoners, men and women.”

Nobles do not sit on ordinary stools. When an appropriate stool is not available, they prefer to stand. For this reason, stools are sometimes carried from place to place. Sometimes a stylized design and the poor condition of a stool may obscure the ownership and restrictions. One of my African colleagues was fined because he sat on a stool reserved for a council member. In more serious cases, a special ceremony is required to rectify the action. Sometimes a penalty results with privileges, though. In the past, if a wealthy person from a lower rank acquired an object that could only be used by the nobility, like a beaded stool, then the person was asked to present a gift to the Fon (the king). After the presentation and an appropriate ceremony, the guilty party was then granted the necessary title that allowed him to possess the object.



Photo 1: *Stool from Binka, one face.*



Photo 2: *Stool from Binka, opposite face*

Numbers in Political Context

Two numbers stand out in the Western Grasslands area of Cameroon (West and North-West Provinces): nine and seven. These numbers are associated with the councils of a traditional chiefdom. The Council of Nine, *mkamvu'u*, literally means “nine nobles.” *Mkam* means nobles and *vu'u* means nine.² Lecoq [5] uses the term *kamve* for the council of nine. The Council of Nine represents royal power and the power to rule. “Conseil des neuf,” that is “the council of nine” is found throughout the Bamileke region. Its members are the Fon and eight nobles. The eight nobles are the descendants of the “founding fathers” of the chiefdom, descendants of the eight companions of the ancestor of the Fon. Notué describes a *katsho* mask [7] from Bafandji (south of Ndop in the North-West Province of Cameroon) that represents the *mkamvu'u*. He states that the two fat cheeks, symbols of fertility, represent two nobles, the six protrusions above the

² [7], p. 49: Littéralement, *mkamvu'u* signifie “les neuf notables” (de *mkam* - notables [singulier: *kam*] - et *vu'u* – neuf).

face represent the remaining six nobles, and the head represents the Fon, the ninth noble.³

The council of seven, *mkem sombuech*, also represents a power, but magical rather than royal power [2]. Sylvain Djache Nzefa calls its members “les grands prêtres de la chefferie,” that is “the great priests of the chiefdom.” Claudia Zaslavsky states that “Seven is a particularly ominous number among many African peoples. To the Kolokuma Ijo, seven is a number to avoid because of its association with the great divinities.”

In some areas of the North-West Province, two councils are identified with the numbers eight and seven. In Binka, a village near Ndu on the Ring Road, the *mfuh* (*mfu'* or *mfu*) council consists of eight nobles plus the Fon. *Mfuh* is one of the two houses of *manjong* and it is identified with the number eight. The other house is the Council of Seven. The two houses of *manjong* meet in two buildings facing each other that are situated in the central part of the village. This type of placement is not typical anywhere; usually they are located in different parts of the village. Descriptions of *manjong*, an age group society, differ from author to author. Notué⁴ uses the term *majong* for this society and states that its role is to perform public works and to initiate young men to a warrior status. Raymond Lecoq gives a somewhat simpler explanation (and different spelling) for *manjong*, stating that the *mandjon* society is a man's self-help and public works organization⁵. Yet to enter a traditional *mfuh* house one needs to wear a cap and carry a weapon, usually a knife or a short sword.

Numbers Eight and Seven on a Carved Stool from Binka

While visiting Binka in the spring of 2003 I was shown a carved stool with a rectangular base and a curved, almost rectangular seat that was around seventeen inches high. Two sides of the stool had intricate carved patterns, while the rest of the stool was plain. The owner of the stool was a member of *manjong*, but it was culturally inappropriate for him to tell me his title. The cowry patterns carved into the stool, however, indicate an elevated position in the society. On one side of the stool [photo 1] cowries are carved in three sets of seven. The other side of the stool [photo 2] features two vertical strings with seven carved cowries and a horizontal string with eight carved cowries. As was previously discussed, the two numbers, seven and eight, may refer to the two houses of *manjong*. There are other numbers represented on the stool. Three half circles are carved on the bottom left and right corners of the stool, and six rectangles separated by a sinuous curve are carved along the bottom of the base. On one side, the right bottom rectangle is composed of fifteen small rectangles, possibly another reference to the two houses of *manjong*. On the other side of the stool, five of the rectangles are divided into nine smaller rectangles and the sixth one is divided into twelve smaller rectangles. The triple half circles might refer to a man or energy since the number three usually represents those concepts in the Cameroon Grasslands. The symbols taken together indicate that the owner of the stool is a powerful member of both houses of *manjong*.

Conclusion

It is only by recognizing the importance of numbers and understanding their symbolism that one can fully appreciate some of the art work of the Cameroon Grasslands. Yet the knowledge of numbers and symbols on art objects is being forgotten. Hans Knöpfler commented: “. . . the understanding of these symbols is

³ [7], p. 50: l'ensemble du masque représente le *mkamvu'u*; - les deux joues, symboles de la fécondité du groupe, constituent deux des neuf notables; - les six “bosses” supérieures sont les signes de six autres notables; - enfin, le reste, dont la tête, figure le *fo*, neuvième notable. For a photograph of the mask see [7], page 49.

⁴ [7], p. 56: Le *majong* est une société de classes d'âge dont le but est d'initier les jeunes gens au métier des armes et d'effectuer des travaux d'intérêt commun: construction de cases, de ponts et des chemins.

⁵ [5], p. 45: mandjon – hommes, assistance mutuelle, constructions.

fading fast . . . carved objects whose meanings are either no longer known or obscure outnumber those whose symbolic meaning has survived the inevitable changes brought about by time and mankind” [4]. This situation gives urgency to future research into the relationship between mathematics and art in Cameroon.

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