



## **An Expression of Power, Unity and Faith Through Dance: The /Abine-mfor/ Fon's Dance of the Bafut People in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

An Annual festival is a cultural event which is celebrated by most if not all Western

Grassfields Fondoms. In Bafut, this annual festival is referred to as 'abine-mfor' (fon's dance) or 'flutes' dance'. This occasion was instituted by the very first *fon* of the Bafut Fondom to commemorate the ancestors and spirits through sacrifices and dancing. The majority of Bafut people admire and celebrate the *Abine-mfor* with passion but very few understand the *raison d'être* of the dance. The question is what is the cultural significance of the *fon's* dance in the life of the Bafut fondom? This paper examines the symbolism of *Abine-mfor* and the functions of the ceremony in the life of the fondom. Collecting data for this paper, we used the qualitative method. This method was employed through techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interview, informal discussions, literature review and photography. The data was interpreted using theories of symbolic anthropology of Geertz, and functionalism of Malinowski and Brown. Major findings reveal that in the Annual dance, the villagers perform traditional dances, sacrifices to honour their ancestors and spirits. This ceremony therefore reflects the belief system, social and political form of organisation of the Bafut Fondom. Cultural manifestations such as *Abine-mfor* and others should be documented (Historical Particularism of Boas) so that Bafut and non-Bafut people should understand its importance to the cultural heritage of Bafut in particular and that of Cameroon in general.

**Key Words:** *abine-mfor, Bafut people, Cameroon, cultural heritage, dance, Bamenda Grassfields*



## Introduction

Dance is an important part of every socio-culture. It is usually done following a rhythm produced by specialists using musical instruments. Music and dance varies from one culture to another. The dance this paper concentrates on is the *Abine-mfor* (fon's dance) or *Abine Lela* (flutes' dance). *Abine-mfor* (*abine* means dance and *mfor* means fon). *Abine-mfor* therefore means 'dance of the fon' in the Bafut language.

In Bali Nyonga<sup>1</sup> the dance is known as *Lela*, in Kedjom it is called *Kebien ke ndong*, meanwhile in Mbei it goes by the appellation *nerah*. This is a common characteristic in most if not all Western Grassfield fondoms. *Abine-mfor* is a dance festival organised by the *Fon*<sup>2</sup> of Bafut every December to bring together his people from far and near as well as to venerate the ancestors. Some fondoms organise it once every two years in the month of December. In fondoms like Kedjom (Babanki), for instance, it is performed to commemorate *fons* who have 'disappeared' or 'travelled' to the world beyond.

The duration of the ceremony varies from one Western Grassfields fondom to another. In Bafut it runs for four days, in Nso, it is performed for a week, in Nkwen, it lasts for three days. During such festivals, many *fons* usually invite their colleagues from neighbouring fondoms to witness as well as participate in the celebration. In Bafut our research site, majority of the people admire and celebrate with passion but very few understand the *raison d'être* of the dance. The objective of this paper therefore is to examine the cultural significance and the role of the *Abine-mfor* in the life of the Bafut man in particular and the Fondom in general.

Calling the festival *abine* or a dance may give the impression that it is all about dancing. It goes beyond mere dancing to include many other rites which are performed by the *Fon* and the notables in the Bafut Palace. The major objective of this paper is to demonstrate the cultural significance of *Abine-mfor* in the lives of the people in particular and the fondom in general. Secondly, this paper intends to document this practice for posterity as recommended in the historical particularism theory of Franz Boas. Bafut is one of the Tikar fondoms in the Grassfields of Cameroon. The Grassfield is one of the four cultural zones (Grassfield, Sawa, Fang-Beti and Sudano-Sahel) of Cameroon which comprises three culture areas including Fondoms in the North West Region, the Bamilekes and Bamouns in the West Region. They are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests at an average altitude of 4000 feet above sea level. All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of varied sizes.

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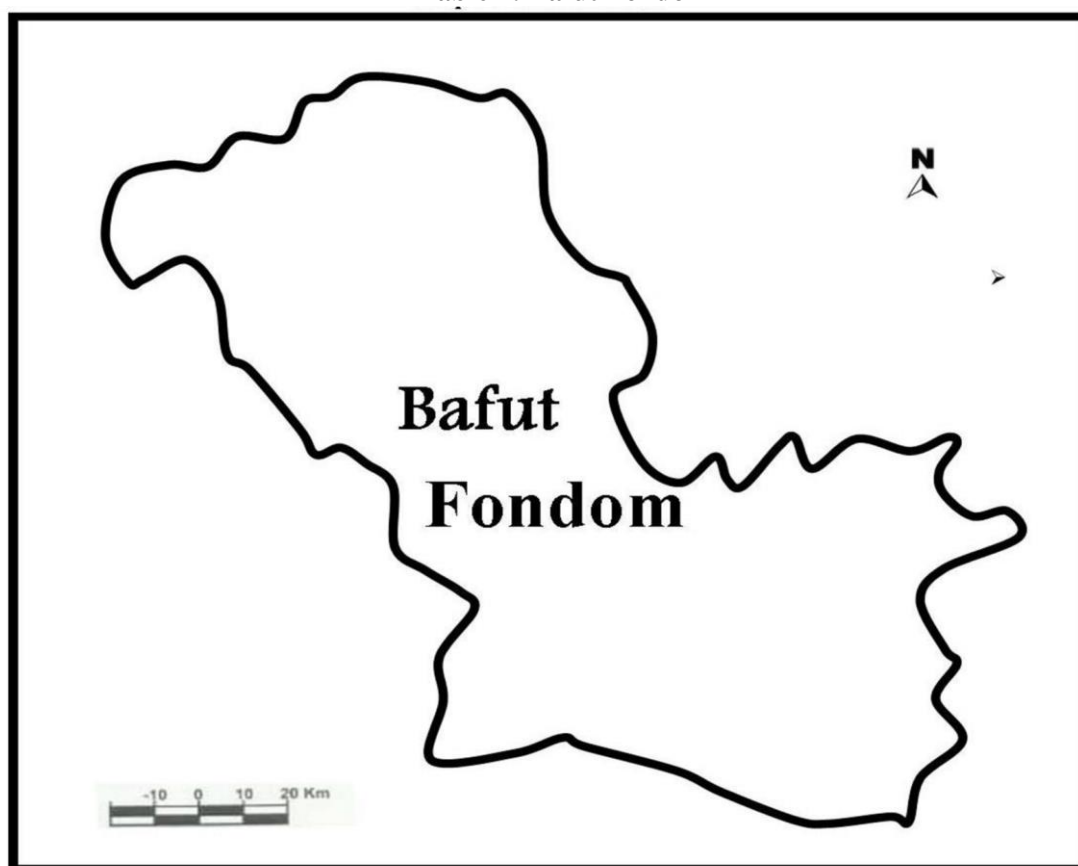
<sup>1</sup> Bali-Nyonga, Kedjom, Mbei are all Fondoms in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon.

<sup>2</sup> The term *Fon* is the same as King. The *Fon* rules a Fondom and the King rules a kingdom.



Sama (2021), notes that geographically, Bafut is situated about twenty kilometres northwest of Bamenda, in the Mezam Division, and covers an area of roughly 340 km<sup>2</sup>. Bamenda is the chief town and Regional head-quarters of the North West Region. It is located in the Bamenda or Western Grassfields geographic region - which includes Cameroon's North West Region and surrounding grasslands areas. Bafut is divided into 26 quarters. Bafut had a population of 80,305 in 2005, but is now estimated to have over 100,000 inhabitants.

**Table 4: Bafut Fondom**



Source: Drawn by Tikere (17/06/2023)

Bafut is primarily an agrarian region with a rich cultural background. She is settled in three main zones and is actually a composite of different ethnic groups. At the centre are the people of Mumala'a (heart of the country) clustered around the *Nto'oh*<sup>3</sup> (Fon's palace) who refer to themselves as the real Bafut. This name is applied to the whole kingdom. To the south is the *Ntare* (ridge) area covering villages like: Mankwi, Mankanikong, Mambu, Bawum, Mundum and Akofunguba. The north is the Mbunti (lower) area, which descends abruptly to the Menchum River valley. Here you have Tingoh, Obang, Mbakong, Butang, Kwaala, Buwe, and Bukari.

Bafut tradition traces its dynastic origins to the Ndobo or Tikari areas. From the reign of Afoo-Afum or Firlo (Aletum, 1990) the first Fon of Bafut, it has operated as a fondom or kingdom, using traditional power structures. Upon their arrival from Banyo dated 600 years ago and from Tikari at least 400 years ago, the Bafut people built the current "old palace" of Mbebili, also known as Nto'oh Firlo. It still contains the tombs of the first three Bafut kings Firloo, NebasiSuh and Ambebi. The *Fon's* palace, and thus the centre of Bafut's traditional power, was later moved

<sup>3</sup> All the terms used in this paper are in the Bafut language but written in English alphabet depending on the sound as it is in the Bafut language.



to its current location, and by the time of the German annexation of the Cameroons in the late nineteenth century (Sama, 2021: 243).

Chem-Langhee (1976), Fanson (1988), Ngoh (1987) note that many kingdoms of the Western Grassfields, like Bafut, claim an origin from the east in the Upper Mbam River area where the present-day Tikar people live. As if to give credibility to their claim, the political institutions, spatial organisation, and religious practices show very strong similarities. The Bafut people migrated into the Grassfields area under several leaders and at different times. Most of the people of Bafut fall under the Tikari tribe. The migration of the Bafut people from Ndop has been attributed to disputes of succession, which resulted in the disintegration of the group. One faction moved to other parts of the former North West Province of Cameroon. Yet another faction moved to settle on the small hill called Mbebeli in present day Bafut about 1516 (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962, Nebasina 1973, Asombang 1999). These newcomers found out that some people had earlier inhabited the small hill so they settled with them peacefully after offering them gifts. Another group, the Buwe Bukari, was already settled in the lower part of Bafut but the two early settlers seemed not to have established any contact with each other. The Buwe Bukaris are believed to have found their way into this area through the Menchum valley. Another group of migrants into the area include the Bawum who claimed to have come from the hills of Bamenda Station; that is, around Bamendakwe. The people of Mambu claim a Widikum origin and passed through Mundum to Bafut. The only recognisable early settlement where the various migrants conveyed was Mbebeli supposed to be the earlier settlers of present day Bafut under the leadership of Neba Chi (Kaberry 1952, Chilver and Kaberry 1962/1968).

In 1518, two years after settlement in Mbebeli as a result of the rocky and hilly nature of the area, a woman from the palace went out for farming and fishing and found a level and fertile land. Aletum (1990) writes that according to legend, the present site of the Bafut palace was founded by one of the *fon*'s wives whose original name was *Maa Lum Mochiengie* from mbebeli. She reported to the *fon* and after serious investigation the people decided to move to the level land which is where the present palace is located. During their departure only part of the population moved to the present site because of chieftaincy disputes. As a result of the disputes, many people supported him (Neba Chi) because he was generous. Consequently, many people moved to places like Ntohmuwi of Niko quarters, Ntohnta'a of Njibujang quarter that later moved to Nkwen (another fondom). The Bafut people assassinated *Maa Lum Mochiengie* in an organised coup staged at Nsanimunwi. Since then, her name became "*Nduh-ala-ambue*", meaning that, "she who founded a nation, but got missing" (Aletum, 1990). The reasons for the act were to put an end to the respect she gained from many people. It was feared that she could pull the entire crowd to her side and power might one day be handed to her, as it happened with Neba Chi and Agha-Njo (Chilver and Kaberry 1963/1968).

### **The Political Structure of Bafut**

All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in chiefdoms of different sizes. Most of them are independent (Warnier, 1975: 42) and their political structure is basically similar. They are generally regional polities with centralised authority. In Bafut particularly, kingship is sacred and the populations are divided into commoners, royals, and notables. There is an elaborate system of ranked titles and powerful

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closed regulatory secret societies and princes fraternities (Chilver and Kaberry 1968, Chilver and Kaberry 1971, Geschiere 1993). The palace is both the focal point of political, religious and ceremonial life and the headquarters of the principal secret societies. It is also the cosmological centre and focal point around which larger than usual populations congregate (Kaberry 1962, Asombang, 1999). Bafut is one of the Grassfields Tikari groups with strong established tradition and belief systems.



Bafut is equipped with several institutions that maintain law and order at different structural levels. The monarch or *Fon* is the titular ruler of Bafut (Aletum, 1990). In Bafut, the kingship is sacred, meaning that the political organisation is centred on the *Mfor* or *Nfor* (king), better known locally as *Fon*. He is titular leader with political as well as ritual powers associated with the fertility and welfare of the land and the people. The *Fon* is a member and head of all secret societies and chief priests of the cults and shrines. He is the dispenser of honours and installer of successors. Because he is ritually installed, it is believed that he takes on immortal attributions; he is never ill, it is the palace that is cold; he never dies, he disappears or is lost or fire goes out. Therefore, the *Fon* means more than just a leader to his people. He is seen as a living god, feared, respected and honoured given that he is closest to the gods and the ancestors. The *Fon* can be held responsible for all successes and failures in the kingdom so he does all to satisfy his people and create social harmony.

For the purpose of effective government, Bafut is divided into villages (Nekuru). The latter are further divided into quarters. An Atangcho (sub-chief) governs a village, which has the status of sub-chieftom, while a Tanikuru (singular) or Butabunekuru (plural) governs a quarter as a quarter head. The last political unit in the Bafut system of government is the lineage known in Bafut as Ayiehenda meaning “wing of a house” (Aletum, 1990). The lineage head or the Taachieh is the political head at this level of administration who represents the founding ancestor of the family (Aletum, 1990). Alongside these traditional administrative structures, a general characteristic of Bafut society is its distinction between royals, notables and commoners. This system of ranked titles is inextricably tied to the number of secret societies that constitute the core of the political and spiritual structure. The most important secret society is *Kwifor* (the Bafut national assembly) whose membership is open only to commoners and people of distant royal descent. The next most important society is the closed male princes' fraternity - Chong (Asombang 1999). The other groups like the Takumbeng are made up of outsiders. There are many other societies which one is expected to join on becoming a member of *Kwifor* or Chong. All the societies have their headquarters in the palace. This centralisation consolidates the power base of the palace and the asymmetrical position, relative to one another, of the *Fon* and *Kwifor*, who execute that power (Engard 1986/1988, Asombang 1999). Bafut is a society where wealth and success in life are expressed in terms of the number of secret societies to which one belongs and the titles purchased in them explain the attachment that people have to these institutions.

The relationship between the *Fon* and *Kwifor* is rather intricate and at times conflictual, with one avoiding sanctions from the other. In practice, however, it is a relationship of mutual respect and co-operation. Even with its wide-ranging powers, *Kwifor* sometimes appears to play only an advisory role or is seen as supporting the *Fon*. Similarly, the *Fon* is quite often referred to as the son of *Kwifor*. So the two articulate very well in practice rather than being a check on the other. It is this institutionalisation of the sacred and the judicial that constitutes the power base of the kingdom. Nevertheless, the *Fon* is the only person that interacts directly with the other two powers since he is *primus inter pares*. The local subjects can only belong to one of these. Princes have nothing to do with the *Kwifor* and do not see it. Just like the members of *Kwifor* are not supposed to see the Chong.

### **Economic Activities of the People of Bafut**

The Bafut people are engaged in a variety of activities which support or generate income for the livelihood of many families. Some of these economic activities are farming, embroidery, palm wine tapping, palm oil production, sculpture and many others. Awah (2005: 46) notes that Bafut is mainly an agricultural area, a peasant community. Most people in Bafut own farms. The few people who are involved in commercial activities, still farm as a secondary activity. It is easy for someone in Bafut to be a farmer, a trader, a wine tapper and an oil producer or a combination of



many other activities. Even those involved in tertiary activities like service provision such as civil servants, teachers, nurses, council workers have farming as part-time jobs to cultivate tubers (cocoyams, colocasia) and palm oil. Small-scale cash crop cultivation of palms, ginger and rice is practised in a diversified manner. There is some division of labour, the women tend to be more physically active than the men. Most of the agricultural activities are carried out by women while men stay at home waiting for them to return, fetch water, cook and feed them.

Palm wine tapping and palm oil production is an important economic activity in Bafut. A few of the men who own palm bushes tap palm wine from these palms in the early hours of the morning and in the evening. The wine collected is used in many rituals one of which is the *Abine-mfor*. Some is sold to retailers and some is set aside for socialising during the day. In the dry season, palm wine tappers make more income than in the rainy season because palm wine is used in many death celebrations which are conducted mostly during this period of the year. Many of these palm plant owners spend some time collecting the nuts to produce palm oil.

Embroidering of traditional gowns (Togho) of the Bamenda Grassfields is mainly an activity that takes up time for a few of the women. These women produce gowns for almost everyone in the society. But in the past, these traditionally embroidered robes were used only by the members of the ruling class as they (robes) were adorned emblematic symbols. These traditional wear is sold in the local markets and in urban centres. This is one of the main attire of the *Abine-mfor* Festival.

Some of the people of Bafut, especially the men are engaged in wood carving, producing objects such as drums, stools, thrones, statues, pots, walking sticks and many more. The *Fon*, notables and secret societies used to be the major clients of these artists. Some of these items are reserved for the royalty and used during important cultural manifestations like the flutes' dance. In this ceremony, drums (designed with symbolic motifs), the royal stool and throne and ritual statues could be seen.

In Bafut women produce different types of baskets using raffia bamboos and fibres. The baskets which are manufactured in varied sizes are used locally as kitchen utensils in the preservation as well as transportation of food items. These objects are sold in the different markets in Bafut and in the markets of neighbouring fondoms.

### **Religion in the Bafut Fondom**

Religion can be regarded as that aspect of culture which relates man with the sacred and the supernatural and it has different forms depending on the socio-culture. Majority of the people believe in the traditional religion, a religious belief which consists of worshipping gods, spirits and sacred forces. They believe that these spirits could bless them as well as harm them. There are different rituals conducted to venerate as well as ask for supplication from the gods. Some of these rituals are seen in the *Abine-mfor* Festival.

Religion in Bafut therefore has its own forms and modalities of worship. In terms of form, traditional rituals are the most important, while secret shrines are usually identified with streams, forests, trees and stones. Access to these sites is generally forbidden to the public, especially women, with only initiated members, chief priests and diviners being allowed to enter them. In addition, ritual performances take the form of incantations and sacrifices. The animals used for sacrifices include rams and fowls; while camwood, palm oil, salt and water are also used.

Today, there are many religions in Bafut apart from the traditional religion, these include Christianity and Islam. Christianity, brought to the Grassfields people in general and to the people of Mankon by white missionaries is the belief in the Almighty God. Those who practice



this religion are called Christians. At the introduction of Christianity, much of their traditional culture was abandoned, including much native dance and song. Christians believe that God is the creator of the world and everything therein. By so doing, they have to give praises to Him. Christianity is propagated by many religious bodies such as the Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists and so on. Christian churches use the double gong as one of the fundamental musical instrument to produce music to praise God, the creator of man and the universe.

### Methodology

*Abine-mfor* is an annual festival which holds in the *fon's* palace and very invaluable in the life of the fondom. Data for the article was collected from primary and secondary sources. We used both the qualitative and quantitative methods to collect information. We attended the *Abine-mfor* especially on the last day where we witnessed some of the rites conducted. We equally got first-hand information from some notables and commoners alike through in-depth interviews and life histories to understand the rituals and place of *Abine-mfor* in the life of the Bafut people. These methods were also used to comprehend the cultural significance of the different titles awarded at the annual dance celebration and the reasons why some Bafut people go for these titles. The researchers used informal discussions during the dance to get the views of the people. Questions addressed to artists were to know for how long they prepare for the yearly jamboree and how much income they can raise in a single ceremony. Questionnaires were established to be filled by notables, elderly men and women and artists. A digital camera was used to snap numerous photographs that show-cased the diverse activities of dance. The pictures snapped gave more credibility to the verbal information collected in the field. Lastly, literature review was also used to get some important historical facts about the *Abine-mfor*. Data for the paper was analysed soon after field work was over, using content analysis and the contents of the pictures were interpreted iconographically. The data was equally interpreted using functionalism and symbolic interactionism.

### Presentation of Results and Discussion

*Abine-mfor* is the royal dance of the Bafut fondom. It is organised by the fon himself that is why the celebration is named his. Although organised by the fon, it is a festival which concerns all the Bafut people from within and out of the fondom who have to contribute in one way or the other for its success. Historically, *abine-mfor* is a cultural ceremony that dates back to the founding fathers of Bafut. It runs for four days unlike the past when it used to last for an entire week. That of 2012 started on Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> to Sunday, 17<sup>th</sup> of December. This part of the article is divided into four; the rites performed before and during the period of *Abine-mfor*, award of titles, dancing and the place of the *Abine-mfor* in the lives of the Bafut People.

The researchers attended the *Abine-mfor* especially on the third day where they recorded the ceremony from the beginning to the end. There are rites which are conducted before and the first day of the *Abinemfor*. It is important to note that the Bafut Fondom has a ritual calendar and those performed at this occasion fall within this calendar as Awah (2005: 48) notes:

*A year in Bafut, like many other Grassfields Kingdoms, is marked by a ritual calendar even though different in types and purposes of rituals. The palace of Bafut is where most of the rituals are planned, executed and their impact assessed. This is where most ritual life begins and extends to the other quarters and fondoms and/or ends. In all, cases decisions on the dates of these rites are taken in the Palace. There is a movement to and from the Palace and the quarters/villages. Everyday one sees members of the three powers of Bafut in the palace trying to prepare grounds for rituals.*

Sama (2021:244) states that the events gearing to the start of the *Abine-mfor* begin on the eve of the market day 'Yika' and continues on the market day 'Yijong'. During these periods, the Bafut secret societies and the *kwifor* send priests to the different shrines where it is believed Bafut



cohabit the ancestries to worship and appease before the activities of the *Abine-mfor*. The immediate market day that follows according to the calendar, some rituals are performed at the heart of the palace by the *Fon*, chief priest or the notables.

One of the rituals conducted before or very early on the first day of the annual dance is called *M'ma'abumwi*. Describing this rite, Awah (2005: 51) says that one of the rites surrounding the *Abin-a-Nfor* called *M'ma'abumwi*, placatory rite is conducted just before the *Fon's* annual dance to appease the ancestors so that they should not cause the failure of the dance. It is during this time (the third week of December), that the annual dance is held. Very early in the morning, before the first cockcrow (about 4am), the Bukums gather in the palace and prepare the material to be used for the rite. They first start by chanting some ritual songs and bless the gifts of camwood, a calabash of palm wine and food in the palace. From then they disperse to different directions, in small groups, to consult and appease the ancestors believed to reside in waterfalls.

When the Bukums, delegated from the palace to appease the deceased *fons*, reach the waterfalls, they place the food on leaves and put it where the waterfall collects. They also put the camwood and a calabash of palm wine nearby. The Bukums move some metres away from the waterfall and wait for a while. When it starts raining very heavily, it announces the arrival of the late *fon* and the ancestors to collect the gifts. It is explained that the heavy rain is restricted to the area of the waterfall and soaks the delegates. During this time, the deceased *fon* talks to them and sends them with a message to the entire kingdom. When the rain stops, they return to the waterfall to verify if the gifts have been accepted. If the gifts are rejected, they return and inform the palace and no annual dance is held. In this case, the *fon* will send people to different directions in far off Kingdoms like Kom, Mankon, Nkwen and Babanki to consult with fortune-tellers and find out why the gifts have been rejected; and what should be done to appease the ancestors. If the gifts are rejected, it is interpreted as an indication for trouble in the following year(s). It means that many people will be sick with incurable diseases and there will be hunger and low fertility. At this period of the year, there is usually heavy dewfall around the morning hours that coincides with the outing of the Bukums and Ngang-ngangs (medicine men).

The sounds produced by the falling dew are taken for rainfall as the Bukums are alone at the site of the ritual. The messages they bring back to the palace are a host of symbols which they interpret and explain their meanings to people.

On their return from the waterfall, the remaining gifts are placed on every Neubah and waterfall where the spirit of every particular deceased king is believed to reside. The Bukums ask for the success of the *Abine* (dance), the success of the next year, the fertility of crops and women, good health and prosperity. When all the emissaries to the different waterfalls return to the palace, the talking drum is played to announce their arrival. The whole environment is quiet to hear the message from the ancestors. In case of success, a black ram is slaughtered at the two "sacred" posts at the dance plaza outside the palace. This ritual is called the *Mbaw-Abine* directly translated as "build the dance ritual". This indicates the official start of the annual dance that lasts for four days.

On the first day, the *fon* together with his notables visit the shrine in the palace to offer sacrifices, inform them of the activities, appease them for any wrong doing in the course of the year and then beg for prosperity, good health as well as high yield in food production and many others. On this day like on the last day, the people dress traditionally – in their *toghos* (embroidered gowns), carrying items such as spears, ceremonial knives, the gong, and objects of sacrifice which include *camwood*, a goat and salt. The goat is slaughtered at the shrine and its blood given to the gods. Some salt is also offered them.



The second and third days are dedicated for rehearsals in preparation for the dance on the third and last day. On this day, a fashion parade is organised where Miss *abine-mfor* is selected. The competition is opened to all princesses without any registration fees, but those who have to take home prizes are girls between 12 and 30 years group. Miss *abine-mfor* takes the cash prize of one hundred thousand (100,000)francs CFA, the second prize is fifty thousand (50,000)francs CFA while the third prize is twenty-five thousand (25000)francs CFA. The other contenders take home the sum of five thousand (5000)francs CFA each as complementary amount for participation. These princesses have their own dance whose music is produced with special musical instruments such as the rattles. This instrument is tied on their right legs such that as they dance, it rattles and produces a rhythm. On the third day, inhabitants are training in different domains of the culture. Examples are the playing of the musical instruments as well as dancing.

On the fourth before the dancing, there are a series of activities that precede it in the court yard of His Rural Highness known as *asang ntoh*. The first of such activities is the rite of passage where young men are introduced to manhood and women introduced into womanhood. That is, the men and the women are initiated and this title known in Bafut as *abune-mfor* which is an occasion that introduces the newly initiated into a new circle of cultural life. (Before this day, all the men and women who besought to be initiated to statuses had already met the chairman of the traditional council and enrolled for it. The names of these individuals are read and prepared before the arrival of the *Fon*). After this ceremony the men can greet the *Fon* where ever they meet him. Those who have not performed this, when they meet the *Fon*, they cannot talk nor greet him. They will only wait for the *Fon* to speak to them first before they can respond. If the *Fon* does not speak, they stay silent. The people who go in for this title are of two types; those who are obliged to do so because of their social position, people who are close to the *Fon* and the other category comprises people who just want to have the honour of coming close to the *Fon*. This is a privileged position to some people in the Bafut fondom because those who can greet the *Fon* look at themselves to be higher than those who cannot do so.

This takes place in a special place arranged for this purpose; a place where the *Fon's* throne and stool are kept. The throne and stool of the *Fon* bear the special motif of the elephant. The base and stand rings of these objects are beaded with real cowry shells as demonstrated in figure 1 below. Here, there are two *nkeng* or peace plants (*dracaena*) on both sides (one on the left and the other on the right) and a plum tree that provided shed to the *Fon*. The *nkeng* are very symbolic. They are used here as if to mean that these people who are anointed here should demonstrate peace and love wherever they go. It also represents the *nto'oh* as the most peaceful place in the society with the *Fon* the first promoter of peace in his chiefdom. This explains why the *Fon* can never take part in any evil deed in the fondom.

**Figure 01: The *Fon*'s throne and stool**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

When they are prepared, the *Fon* then comes out from the *achum* – the lodge of the ancestors of Bafut (see figure 2). This *achum* is over 400 years old. Major repairs on the roof are carried out annually by specialists drawn from the entire fondom. It is important to note that in Bafut, every quarter has a hill where grass for the thatching of the *achum* is cut. On this hill, no farming, hunting or any other activity is carried out. Only males can go there and harvesting is done in the dry season when grass is dry and the thatching done in April. The hills are never burnt.

**Figure 02: The *achum* – the lodge of the ancestors of Bafut**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

He is accompanied by his guards (mbeh mfor) with each guard carrying a spear, a weapon which they use to protect the *Fon* and to defend themselves in case of any problem. As the *Fon* comes

out of the *achum*, he is welcomed and his presence announced with the sound of two elephant tusks blown by two notables as can be in their attire, they wear gowns designed with the double gong and the moon motifs and the *ndop* fabric. These elephant tusks are adorned with anthropomorphic symbols, male and female heads. Nkwi & Warnier (1982: 62) notes that ivory trumpets (elephant tusks) are blown to advertise the presence of the *Fon* and Knopfli (1999: 32-33) writing about the annual festival in Bali-Nyonga states that the elephant tusks are blown to announce the presence of the *Fon*. There are also a set of flutists who welcome him with a melody produced with these objects as portrayed in figure 4 below. The flutists stop blowing their flutes when the *Fon* has settled down on his throne.

**Figures 03, 04 and 05: Announcing the arrival of the *Fon***



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

Some elderly women and three young girls dance to the melody of the flutists. One of the young girls carrying a woven bay while the other two dance with rattles made of iron with some pebbles put in the inner part on their right legs. These females are all drawn from princesses. As they dance, they are provided some food in a flat mortar covered with a fresh banana leaf (a symbol of life) and some drinks. These food and the drinks are carried to the place and used to entertain themselves.

**Figure 06: Food in a flat mortar in one of the rituals during the annual dance**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

As he settles down, he concert with some notables in the Bafut Fondom as seen in the figure below. It is important to note that in the Western Grassfields in general and in Bafut in particular, to speak to the *Fon*, a man must bow and speak through his hands, it is regarded as disrespectful to speak to the *Fon* as if he were a commoner. This concertation is to brief the *Fon* on the level of preparedness and also for the *Fon* to give instructions on how the activities have to be conducted.

**Figures 07 and 08: The *Fon* in concertation with some of his notables**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

As soon as he finishes to discuss with the notables, the items needed for the initiation rite are brought. These items include palm wine in a calabash, the *Fon's* traditional cup and *camwood*

in a calabash. A calabash of palm wine is handled by the *nchinda* meanwhile one of the *Fon*'s wives carries the calabash of camwood. Another calabash of palm wine is placed on the *Fon*'s elephant stool.

**Figure 09: Preparation of ritual objects for the rite of passage**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

When this is done, the initiates are brought in front of the *Fon*. They are split into groups, if they are many. As the first group comes in front, the chairperson of the traditional council is there to read their names to the *Fon* and then ask them to kneel in front of the *Fon* as demonstrated in the figures below. As they kneel, the *Fon* then collects *camwood* from a calabash, calls the name of the initiate, prays for him in a way culturally recognised while anointing him with the *camwood*. He anoints them first on their bodies and then on the forehead as demonstrated in figure 10 below.

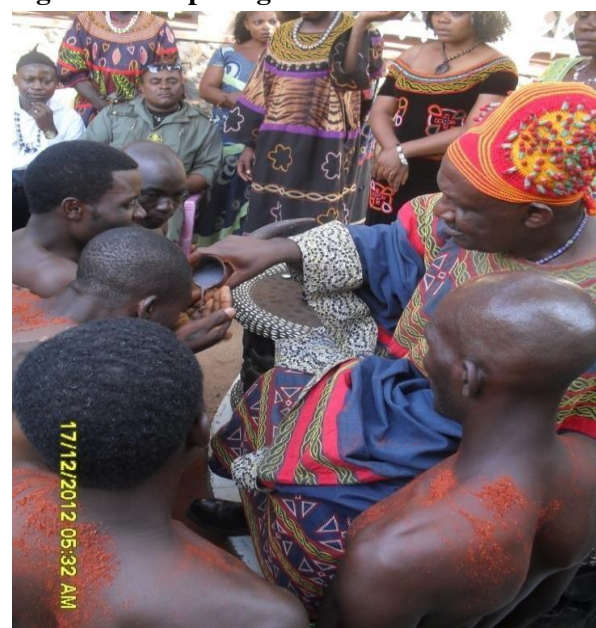
**Figure 10: The *Fon* conducting the rite of passage on the men**



Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)

When all the initiates are anointed with *camwood*, palm wine from one of the calabashes is poured in the *Fon's* cup. He drinks some and then pours some in the hands of the initiates (see figures 11 and 12 below). In most fondoms of the Western Grassfields, no one drinks from the *Fon's* cup except him. In many cases, the *Fon* does not drink in the open and even if he does, they do not say that he drinks, the people only describe the action.

**Figures 11 and 12: The *Fon* performing the rite of passage on the men**



Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)

When the initiation of the men is over, all of them come in front of the *Fon*, bow and then greet him, a manifestation of their new birth or new cycle of life. As they come forth to greet the *Fon*,

they are accompanied by their ‘godfathers’ – guardians or mentors whose responsibility is to guide or mould the newly initiate in the culture of Bafut. When this is done, these newly initiated then go into the public where they are “beaten” and pebbles thrown at them as portrayed in figure 13 below, to empower them in their new status. This gesture is to show that the entire community approves and acknowledges them.

**Figure 13: The newly initiates are being empowered**



**Source: Tikere’s archives (17/12/2012)**

As discussed earlier, the women are equally initiated and theirs come after that of the men. The women are initiated in the same way like the men. They kneel in front of the *Fon* in groups of five depending on the number of women who are to be initiated. As they kneel, the *Fon* collects some *camwood* from the same calabash anoints the women both on their bodies and on their foreheads while praying, and then pours palm wine in their palm to drink.

When the initiation rituals are over, the calabashes of palm wine and *camwood* and the *Fon*’s traditional cup are returned to the palace meanwhile the calabashes of palm wine, throne and stool are carried to the esplanade where other ceremonies and the dancing proper has to take place. When the throne and stool are installed, the two elephant tusks which were used to welcome as well as announce the presence of the *Fon* are placed for the *Fon* to rest his feet on, a symbol of authority and majesty (see figure 14 below). **Figure 14: The *Fon*’s throne and stool at the palace plaza**



Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)

It is important to note that in such an occasion, princesses and princes dress in a special traditional attire - the *ndop* or *togho*, wearing cowries on the heads, and beads on the necks. As demonstrated in the figures below, they carry different emblematic objects ranging from baskets, whisks or horsetails, bangles to bags, items destined to manifest their royalty. During the rite of passage, these princesses sit in a bench while the initiation rites are going on.

Figures 15, 16 and 17: Princesses in Bafut in traditional regalia



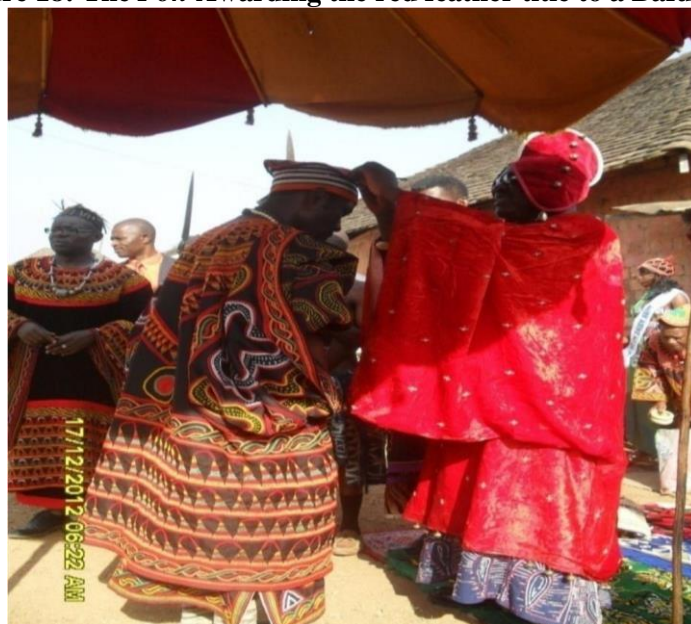
Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)

The activities performed at the esplanade are the award of titles of all sorts to both men and women and dancing. Diverse titles are awarded ranging from the red feather (third class), the spine of the porcupine among others. The red feather (feather of the touraco bird), known as *ngu'uh*, is a third class title awarded to many people, to indigenes of Bafut as well as to persons working in Bafut. On this day, the red feather was awarded to people from Bambui, Bambili and other neighbouring villages whose work had contributed to the growth or development of the Bafut Fondom. The red feather in most Western Grassfields fondoms is awarded to a person

who has hunted a royal animal or carried out a developmental project in the village or to someone who has given birth to twins.

The symbolic object (red feather) is stuck in the traditional cap of the recipient as shown in the figure below. Like any initiation rite, the *Fon* as he sticks the item, he incarnates where he calls the name of the recipient and prays to the gods to give him the strength to continue to do good things in the chiefdom for the benefit of all.

**Figure 18: The *Fon* Awarding the red feather title to a Bafut man**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

Before the red feathers are being used, they are placed on the cloth on which *nfottii* and *mamforttii* are standing. *Nfottii* and *mamforttii* are sacred, free-standing, almost life-sized statues covered from top to toe with mainly tubular glass beads belonging to the palace treasure in Bafut. Commenting on these statues, an interlocutor, a noble of Bafut told the researchers that:

*This pair of statues is called in Bafut nfottii and mamfortii meaning 'the Fon of tree or stick and the mother of tree or stick.' But these statues are the Fon and his mother, and they are the most symbolic of all representations in the Bafut fondom. They are used during two major ceremonies; the annual dance and enthronement of a new fon. These objects are usually displayed together with other emblematic artifacts from the royal treasure chamber. These statues are equally regarded as the god and goddess of Bafut. The female statue carries a calabash which she serves palm wine to the male in his traditional title cup. Every year during abine-mfor the people pay homage to these symbolic objects in the fondom. The statues date about 600 years brought from migration from Tikari (15/02/2014)*

The red feathers are placed on the cloth on which *nfottii* and *mamforttii* are standing so that they can be empowered by these potent objects. They are picked by a member of the *kwifon* and placed on the stool of the *Fon*. At this moment, no one has the power to touch them except the *Fon* who picks them one after the other and puts it on the receiver's cap.

Another title awarded during the *Abine-mfor* is the pine of porcupine known in Bafut as *ntih ngoo*. The pine is obtained from the porcupine. This animal uses it to protect itself from other animals. *Ntih ngoo* is a status higher than the red feather, a second class title in this fondom. The number of people who received this title were fewer than those who took the red feather.

Unlike the red feathers, the pines of the porcupine were handled by the *fon's nchinda* who handed them to the *Fon* one after the other. In all the cases, when the *Fon* is sticking the pine, he calls the name of the initiate while uttering some words of prayer. He gives different prayers to the varied people to whom titles were awarded.

**Figures 19 and 20: The *Fon* praying before awarding *ntih ngoo* to a Bafut man**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

The next set of titles comprises bags of varied types, bangles, symbol of the moon, horse tail and royal swords. These title symbols are placed on the *Fon's* carpet before they are awarded to the different groups of persons. The first type of bag awarded is embroidered, red in colour with some golden bells attached on it. This bag is awarded to both male and female but that given to the men is slightly bigger than that awarded to women. The bag is worn on the neck of the initiate by the *Fon* himself as portrayed in the figure below. This is the first class title which Bafut people called *bar megum*. During this rite, some men are also given the royal sword known as *ageu'eh*.

**Figure 21: The award of a title bag by the *Fon***



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

The next title is awarded only to the female folk. This is the third class title which is the equivalent of the red feather for the men. This constitutes a calabash and a bag woven with fibre. This is a small round calabash (mo'oh) with a small hole bored on it (see figure 22 below). This calabash might be used by these title women in the place of the *mo'oh ntong* – a small calabash used by the women to drink palm wine. The calabash is handed to the initiate who holds it in the left hand and the woven bag is put on the right hand see figure below. An elderly woman in Bafut made the researchers to understand that:

*This small drinking vessel is one of the items which is handed to the successor of this recipient when she dies. The bag serves as a container to carry the mo'oh and this initiate carries them to every cultural ceremony which she uses. These gifts or awards are not given for these women and the men to keep but used during cultural manifestations. This helps to project the culture (12 January, 2013).*

**Figure 22: The award of the *mo'oh* title by the *Fon* to a Bafut woman**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

The next third class title awarded to women are a bangle worn on the right hand and the symbol of the moon attached to their traditional gowns or traditional dresses all by the *Fon* as seen in the figure below. In other Western Grassfields cultures, the symbol of the moon (*sang*) is used solely by the *Fon*. But in Bafut even women can use this symbol and this is because the people believe that only a greedy *fon* will restrict people from using certain symbols in the fondom.

**Figures 23 and 24: The award of titles to some women in Bafut**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

After the award of bangles and the moon symbol the next group of award is the royal sword. This title is given only to the male folk and this object is used mostly in dancing the traditional dance in occasions like the *abine-mfor* and other cultural ceremonies.

**Figures 25 and 26: The *Fon* awarding the sword in the annual event**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

The last set of women on the honour position were those who received the whisk or horse tail - *asang ne'eh* (see figure below). This second class title for the women was received by only one woman in the whole ceremony. That notwithstanding, there are people who receive more than a single title.

Figures 27 and 28: The award of the *asang ne'eh* during the *Abine -mfor*



Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)

The last item before the dance was the award of certificates of honour signed by His Highness *Fon Abumbi II* to distinguish people in the Bafut Fandom. These are people both men and women who have influenced the culture both in and out of the fandom. All the certificates were handed by the *Fon* himself, an act which projects his authority in the land.

When the title awards are over, it is the opportunity for the different *ndas* (war groups in Bafut) to perform their dances at the Palace plaza to inform the people of their existence. There are eight of such groups in all. In the days of old, when there were rampant wars, the Bafut Fandom depended on different war societies specialised in different war weapons to defend the Fandom. There was a group specialised in guns, another in bows and arrow and others engaged only in traps setting. But today, in the absence of wars, these war societies only display in ceremonies like *Abine-mfor*. Commenting of the *ndas* in Bafut, Sama (2021: 245) states that on the day of the annual dance or the fourth day, the *manjong* groups or *ndas* displayed to demonstrate their war equipment as they used them to fight during the Bafut - German wars and tribal wars. These groups include Nda Mukong, Nda Atawa, NdaNgo'o and several others.

**Figure 29: A *nda* on display during the annual dance**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

These *ndas* dance or each *nda* dances towards the place where the *Fon* was sitting to greet the *Fon*. They were accompanied by the sounds of the two trumpets. As they approached the *Fon*, he got up picked his dane gun and then stepped forward and greeted the dance by raising his gun as demonstrated in the figure below. The gesture of the *Fon* is a sign of recognition and approval of the different war groups. **Figure 30: The *Fon* responding to the greetings of the *nda***



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

After the dance of the *ndas*, the dance proper began with the *Fon* opening it in the company of his notables, guards as well as the musical team produce music with drums and flutes. These personalities danced round in the same footsteps following the rhythm of the musicians. After opening the dance, the *Fon* (in red) was led to his throne where he sat, watched and enjoyed the colourful and entertaining dance. The music of *Abine-mfor* was produced by a team of special drummers who use drums adorned with varied royal motifs - elephant heads', lion and lizard. Some of the drums were decorated with real cowries. These musicians sat in a special position reserved for them.

The *Fon* opened the dance to demonstrate his authority as the ‘father’ of the land and a representative of the ancestors. Dancing round the Palace plaza communicates to the people that everything is in control. Dancing the same footsteps that he inherited from the ancestors is a means of transmitting or showing this same dance steps to the younger generation. This is a way of telling the young people that this is the style of dancing, learn it because it is our cultural heritage and identity.

**Figure 31: The opening of the *Abine-Mfor* by the *Fon***



**Source: Tikere’s archives (17/12/2012)**

Dancing is done in a circular manner and in groups; princesses dancing in a separate group, notables in their group, people dressed in traditional attire dance in theirs while those who are not dressed in traditional wear dance separately. This part of the ceremony lasts for several hours, that is for about three hours as the people dance and enjoy themselves. The dancing marks the end of the *Abine-mfor* for the year and also the end of the ritual calendar. As the ritual calendar ends in December, a new one begins in February as Awah (2005: 54-55) notes that according to the *Fon*, the year starts in Bafut in the month of February, with a ritual to usher in the New Year. During this ceremony, the Royals visit the shrine of the late *Fon* Achirimbi II, situated in a waterfall at Mile 21 on the Wum road. The last group of people who go there are the princesses. They return with the offshoots of bananas and plantains, move into the Palace then into the Achum and place them there. It is said that the files of people who go to the waterfall take all the bad things to the ancestors there and return with good health, food and fertility to the kingdom. Those offshoots of bananas signify that they have returned with fortune.

### **The Place of *Abine-mfor* in the Lives of the Bafut People**

The *Abine-mfor*, an annual dance is an end of year dance that the *Fon* organises to end the year’s activities. The ceremony is referred to as a dance, but it goes beyond mere dancing. It touches all the different aspects of life in Bafut which could be examined in the following perspectives; socio-cultural, economic, political as well as religious.

### **Social Function of *Abine-mfor***

*Abine-mfor* is a yearly rendezvous which brings Bafut indigenes from around the country and abroad to fellowship with one another and also commune with the land. When these people come together, they do not only interact within themselves, it gives them the opportunity to meet people, friends and relations they have not met for a long time. This explained why during such



an occasion, we saw people in pairs greeting and hugging each other and then chatting in an attempt to know about the state of one another. It enables people to create new social relationship. An interlocutor made us to understand that:

*Sometimes, I meet many people who came for the cultural festival from the city without knowing that they were from this fondom. This meeting therefore gave us the opportunity to know ourselves and start a new relationship. Some people meet during this celebration for the first time and create a relationship which could even end up in marriage (14/01/2013).*

Sama (2021: 248), notes that the identification of the people as they return home annually is often seen as love the people show for their families and comrades. Some of them have had a long period of time of separation. *Abine-mfor* can be regarded as a unifying factor, as it paints the picture of collaboration between and amongst the citizens of Bafut. Through this, the image of the fondom is sold within and out of the fondom.

The dance therefore brings about social solidarity among the villagers. Group life gives people advantages that lack as solitary persons. More people mature, reproduce and reach old age because they receive group protection, nurturance, and cooperation. Moreover, group life provides a medium in which cultural adaptations can arise and benefit other community members. Equally significant, our humanness arises out of and is sustained through social relationships.

Music and dance give people great pleasure and emotion just like all the other aspects of arts. This explains why when music and dancing at the *Abine-mfor* were going on, those who do not master the footsteps of the dance either nodded their heads where they were sitting. Some people attend the annual dance for one major reason, to watch as well as participate in the colourful and prestigious dance of the *fon*. They enjoy the music produced by the skilled drummers and the dance which is done in a circular manner led by the *Fon* himself. Music and dance some people note, can make one forget the worries that one has, just by listening to a song or participate in a dance, thus music gives joy to the soul.

*Abin-emfor* is a cultural jamboree that show-cases the culture of the people of Bafut. Each time the annual dance is organised, the culture of the people is displayed in varied forms: music and dance and material culture (clothes, stools, drums, walking sticks, and drinking vessels) and in material culture. The music and dance of people do not only show the dancing style, but tell stories about the origin and the system of belief of the people. It is true that those who attend a ceremony where folk music is sung might not understand the song but the music and dance will give them maximum pleasure.

The cultural identity and heritage of the Bafut man is demonstrated through the annual dance. This is an occasion where people dress in their traditional regalia, prepare the traditional dish - achu and the yellow soap, consume palm wine and the dance itself are all evidence to show the rich culture of the people. The traditional attire of the Bafut people is the *togho* accompanied with the traditionally embroidered cap, walking stick and sheath for the men. The women wear traditional dresses which is not the gown like that of the men but embroidered blouses and loins accompanied with horse tails for nobles and woven bags.

The sheath is used in putting the specially designed ceremonial knife used during important cultural manifestations like the annual dance and death celebrations. In this socio-culture, this cultural element is not handled by just anybody, it is handled by the male folk only and they are of types; the simple ones used by commoners and those decorated with cowry shells and other geometric figures are used by the ruling class. The *togho*, walking stick, horse tail and the woven bag like the sheath are in categories, with the notables using those which are decorated with



specific animate motifs such as the lizard, the spider and others. Those used by commoners are adorned with very simple geometric figures.

*Abine-mfor* is also an occasion where youngsters get to learn their culture. We could observe some young people actively engaged in watching how the drumming and dancing were done. These youths who are very keen in this event are the ones to take over from these drummers and dancers when they will no longer be there or strong enough to still perform such activities. The dance is performed in a very special manner and there is no specific moment set aside to teach the youngsters how to dance. Some of those who do not understand how to move their footsteps following the rhythm, stand behind and watch how it is done or they queue up in a corner where they endeavour to copy the footsteps from those who master it. This therefore portrays ensures continuity in the *Abine-mfor*. Sama (2021) commenting about the youths and the *Abine-mfor* notes that:

*it educates the young growing up on issues concerning their culture. That is, many children come out, learn to chant, sing and dance while others come to witness and learn all about the Abine-mfor or the Bafut cultural annual festival performed towards the end of the year (p. 245).*

#### **Economic Value of *Abine-mfor***

The *Abine-mfor* is an opportunity for many people both indigenes and non-indigenes of Bafut to raise some income or make economic gains. During the *Abine-mfor* in Bafut, there is a market at the entrance of the *fon*'s palace composed of both men and women who sell traditional objects ranging from embroidered robes, drums, walking sticks, embroidered caps, horse tails, traditionally decorated drinking vessels to calabashes. These objects are displayed in the open at the entrance to the Bafut Palace to those who attend the yearly rendezvous.

It is important to note that many artists in Bafut start preparing their art objects for sale in the next annual as soon as the current dance is over.

*An embroider informed the researchers that: when the Abine-mfor is wrapping up, I start preparing my objects for the next event. Sometimes I even hire the services of some young girls during the holidays to assist me in production. These girls that I pay at the end of each day help me to produce all types of embroidered costumes: gowns, skirts, blouses and even trousers. Such that before the next ceremony, I would already have enough goods for sale (15/02/2013).*

For the length of time that the annual dance lasts, many of the business men and women who own palm wine spots, beer parlours, and even restaurants around *Sani Square*, (that is, the commercial area around the palace) make huge sums of money. The beer parlours and the palm wine spots, sell drinks and close sometimes after mid-night because of the demand from the many people who have come for the celebration in the palace. At this period of the year also many Bafut people living abroad return home to spend the end of the year with their families, as such, they spend some of the money they bring with them to buy drinks and fellowship with the people at home.

#### **Political Value of *Abine-mfor***

The Bafut Fondom like all the Grassfields Fondoms are stratified with the *Fon* and the notables coming at the top of the social rank. Because of their social status, they have the privilege to certain ceremonies as well as the use of specific status symbols. One of the occasions that the *Fon* has such honour to organise and host is *Abine-mfor*. In the occasion, the *Fon*, the 'father' of the entire Bafut people and the custodian of the culture uses many status symbols as the political leader. During the *Abine-mfor*, we observed that when the *Fon* left the *Achum* to come out and meet the people, his presence was announced with the sound of two emblematic elephant tusks.



This object is not only blown to signal his presence. Where he sits, these objects are placed in front of him where he rests his feet in order to attract the power of this commanding animal. He is the only one in the whole Fondom who has the prerogative to use this object to demonstrate his authority.

In many cultural ceremonies, the *Fon*, because of the position he occupies in his society, has the supremacy to use an art item adorned with the elephant motif. Figure 14 portrays the *Fon*'s seat, the elephant throne and elephant stool (on which items he needs for rituals are placed). The *Fon* is regarded and sometimes referred to as an elephant, the biggest and most important personality in the fondom. He is not the biggest person in size but this is so because of the responsibility that has been bestowed on him by the Bafut people. To further demonstrate his sovereignty over the others, when his notables or anyone else lower in rank wants to discuss with him, they bow and then speak through their hands.

We have discussed earlier that the annual dance is opened by the *Fon*, that is, the *fon* and notables dance round the palace plaza first to the music produced by the elephant tusks and the flutists. He does this to declare the start of dancing. It is important to note that in some cultural ceremonies, the sound of the elephant tusks or trumpets represent the voice of the *Fon* and whenever it is heard, it is respected. Throughout the day, the *Fon* is protected by some palace guards dressed in the royal fabric known in most Grassfields Fondoms as *ndop*. He is not being protected from any danger or from any attack but these guards are a means to portray his position as ruler of the people.

During the *Abine-mfor*, the ruling could be identified by the embroidered robes and the symbols which appeared on them. Here, we see social stratification on display, the notables are associated with objects which carry motifs such as the lizard, the double gong and others. The above analysis is a demonstration of the prestige that the traditional leaders are accorded during certain cultural celebrations including *Abinemfor*. Kottak (1991: 221) states that prestige as the basis of social status - refers to esteem, respect, or approval of acts, deeds, or qualities or qualities considered exemplary. Prestige, or 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984); provides people with a sense of work and respect, which they may often convert into economic advantage.

#### **Religious Function of *Abine-mfor***

The *Fon*'s dance of Bafut has an immense religious role. Although the occasion is called a dance, it surpasses mere dancing to include religious rituals and the first rituals is conducted before or on the first day of the dance. The rituals and the dance signify the death and rebirth of a new year. The death is seen in the fact that these are the last rituals performed and at the end of the year. A notable in the Bafut Fondom said that:

*As the year is ending, the Bafut people believe that all the happenings especially bad acts committed should go or be washed away by the rituals and dancing ceremonies as everything had been committed in the hands of the ancestors and gods. When this is done, we expect a new beginning which comes with the start of the new ritual calendar in the month of February (20/01/2013).*

We have also discussed earlier that on the first day of the dance, the *Fon* and notables visit the shrine in the palace to offer sacrifices to them, inform them of the activities, appease them for any wrong doing in the course of the year and then beg for prosperity, good health as well as high yield in food production and many others. The sacrifices conducted therefore is a means to make them to come into union with the gods of the land.

On the fourth and last day of *Abine-mfor*, there are some religious rites carried on some selected Bafut people both men and women who decide to move to adulthood. This ritual is performed

by the *Fon* with the use of camwood and palm wine. As he conducts the rites, he prays to the ancestors and the gods of the land. During the award exercise, he (Fon) equally commits the lives and activities of those to whom gifts have been given into the hands of the gods. This means that the newly initiated and those who received award could clap to any *fon* in the Grassfields and those who received titles, could use them where ever they go, they are and will always be protected by ancestors and gods.

Different religious objects are used during the *Abine-mfor*. One of such is *atie mbobine*. These are two

‘white’ sticks which are beautifully decorated. They are planted at the palace plaza. The *atie mbobine* are here for one year and are only replaced on the eve of *Abine-mfor* after the conduction of certain sacrifices to the ancestors and gods. At the foot of the sticks are two clay pots and another black stick is planted in between the *atie mbobine*. That is, a black ram is slaughtered at the two "sacred" posts or *atie mbobine* in a ritual called the *Mbaw-Abine* directly translated as "build the dance ritual". This ritual is conducted to indicate the official start of the annual dance. These objects are equally part of the ceremony because according to an interlocutor, a notable in Bafut:

*There were two villages called Mbebeli and Bukari existing here. It is worth mentioning that before the Bafut people came to this site under the leadership of Fon Firlo in about 1470. These two villages merged to the population that came to form Bafut. When they merged, a covenant was taken that they will never separate. The v-shape of the sticks symbolises the two states which came together to form one. The mouth on the stick is a symbolic mouth which sucks the blood which is used to renew the covenant taken that never in the history of the people will the two villages ever separate (25/02/2013).*

**Figure 32: The atieh mbobine of Bafut**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

In the *Abine-mfor* Festival, there are two almost life-sized statues known in Bafut *Mfortii* and *mamforttii* on display at specific corner of the palace plaza. *Mfortii* and *mamforttii* meaning ‘fon of tree or stick and mother of tree or stick.’ They are called as such may be because they are produced out of wood. That notwithstanding, these statues are the *fon* and his mother, and they are the most symbolic of all representations in the Bafut fondom. They are used during two major ceremonies; the annual dance and enthronement of a new *fon*. These objects are usually

displayed in front of two symbolic stones, on a fabric together with other emblematic artifacts from the royal treasure chamber. These statues are equally regarded as the god and goddess of Bafut. These stones mentioned above have been here since 1635, during the reign of the fourth fon of Bafut known as Fon Nebanfor. People who committed abominable crimes such as adultery, murder, and others were executed here. But today, they act as symbolic stones that are used mostly during important cultural events like *Abine-mfor*.

**Figure 33: *Mfortii* and *mamfortii* on display during the annual dance**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

The Bafut Fondom like all Grassfields fondoms have a ritual calendar and on this calendar, one of the important rituals conducted before the *Abine-mfor* is the *Takumbeng* ritual, organised in mid-November (Asombang, 1999). *Takumbeng* is the society of princes, whose title can be traced back to the fourth generation. Its role is ritual: to ask the gods to provide the Bafut people with good health, fertility, abundant harvests, peace and protection from famine and disease. Its symbols are *Ndere* (Takumbeng hut): a small bamboo house with walls covered in torn young raffia leaves and housing a talking drum played as the Takumbeng members perform their sacrifices. One of the *Ndere* is found at the entrance to the palace (see figure below). Takumbeng keeps the spiritual powers of Bafut and she has two main rituals: Mfeenu (the pollution removal rite) and Mundeughi (the laying of protective ropes across road junctions) to protect Bafut from evil from other kingdoms.

**Figure 34: The *ndere* of Takumbeng at the Bafut palace**



**Source: Tikere's archives (17/12/2012)**

### ***Abine-mfor* and Health**

As already mentioned above, the *Abine-mfor* has a great role to play in health in Bafut. It is common to hear that health is wealth, hence, the Bafut people have to be healthy psychologically, mentally, physically and socially especially during the *Abine-mfor*. The *Abine-mfor* is a sign that the gods have cleansed the land of all unhealthy characteristics. The Takumbeng society plays an important role because they ask the gods to provide health, fertility, good harvest and peace. However, their role does not conflict with the section of the *Ndakwifor* council known as *Bandansie* or the *Ndabushooh* (Aletum, 1990) who are specialists in charge of traditional medicine and cleansing the land from every kind of infirmity. During the *Abine-mfor*, all the activities performed are a sign of health or an opportunity to restore health in the Fondom

### **Conclusion**

*Abine-mfor* or the flute dance is a yearly festival organised and hosted by the Fon of Bafut. This ceremony which is organised in the month of December, lasts for four days. It was instituted by the very first fon of the Bafut Fondom to commemorate the ancestors and spirits through sacrifices and dancing. *Abine-mfor* is therefore a huge cultural heritage to the Bafut people in particular, Cameroonian and African culture in general. The occasion is an opportunity for many people to meet family members and friends they have not seen for some time. Young people both boys and girls use it as an opportunity to learn the dance and other aspects of their culture. The Fon's political and religious powers are manifested through the *Abine-mfor*. This ceremony therefore carries invaluable information about the Bafut society; it reflects the belief system, social and political form of organisation, the health dimension and the economic value of the dance to the artists who are engaged in the production of material needs used in the annual dance.



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