

Original Research Article

The Semantic Transformation of the Cultural Significance of the Cowry in the Cameroon Grassfields

Exodus Tikere Moffor^{1*}

¹(Ph.D), The Department of Anthropology, The University of Yaounde 1, Yaounde, Centre, Cameroon

Article History

Received: 17.03.2022

Accepted: 23.04.2022

Published: 05.05.2022

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: The cowries have a very long history in the Grassfields of Cameroon. This emblematic object that was once used as legal tender in this area is a very invaluable element of cultural identity and social stratification. When this object ceased to be used as money, it was and is reserved for the royalty where it was and is being used to demonstrate their authority. It was also used in ritual and divination. The cultural meaning of this object continuous to change, thereby making it to lose its original functions. Today, it is used to play more social functions and by just anyone who can have money to purchase. As the days go by, original cowries are fast disappearing, giving way to artificial ones. This change noticed in cowries is an indicator of socio-cultural changes currently on going with many cultural elements in the Grassfields and in Africa in general. The more time passes, the more their functions change. The question which arises therefore is ‘what are the changes that have taken place in the significance and use of cowries in the Grassfields?’ This paper explores how the Grassfields people perceive cowries, their functions and change in their use. Both the qualitative and quantitative methods of data collections were used to gather information for the paper. The data collected was analysed and interpreted using the theories of cultural evolution and functionalism.

Keywords: Semantic, transformation, cowry, cultural significance, Grassfields.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Cowries is the common name for a group of small to large sea snails, marine gastropod mollusks in the family cypreaeidae, the cowries. Cowry or cowry shell is the shell of an aquatic animal. It is abundant in the Indian Ocean, and was collected in the Maldiv Islands, in Sri Lanka, along the Malabar coast India, in Borneo and on other East Indian Islands, and in various parts of the African coast from Ras Hafun to Mozambique. Huge amounts of cowries were introduced into Africa by western nations during the period of slave trade. It was used to buy all sorts of things. The shells of cowries were used for centuries as a currency in Africa. The Ghanaian unit of currency known as the Ghanaian cedis was named after cowry shells. Starting over three thousand years ago, cowry shells, or copies of the shells, were used as Chinese currency. They were also used as means of exchange in India (Wikipedia. org/wiki/cowries).

In Cameroon in general and in the Grassfields in particular, the cowry had and still has a great cultural significance in the Grassfields. It was and is still being

used as identification mark of the royalty. The cowry is useful in the hands of the diviner who uses it to detect the problems of patients who come to him. Today, it is very rare to find original cowries and when seen, they are very expensive. The markets of the Grassfields in particular and Cameroon in general are flooded with these artificial cowry shells. The latter are very affordable, this explains why this object of immense cultural value can be bought and used by everyone today, be they the young, the old, the male or the female to decorate parts of the body as well as their garments.

These cowries which were used for centuries as a means of exchange were replaced by copper bangles or rods. When this occurred, Grassfields *fondoms* adopted it as a mark of cultural identification. The Grassfields is that part of Cameroon which comprise the three culture areas of the Western Grassfields, the Bamilekes and the Bamouns. That is, the North West and West regions of Cameroon. They are a country of grassy hills and mountains with open gallery forests at an average altitude of 4000 feet above

*Corresponding Author: Exodus Tikere Moffor

(Ph.D), The Department of Anthropology, The University of Yaounde 1, Yaounde, Centre, Cameroon

sea level. All the peoples of the Grassfields are organised in *fondoms* of varied sizes.

The people of the Grassfields of Cameroon have Tikar, Widikum and Chamba origins. The Bamilekes, the Bamouns and the majority of western Grassfields are of the Tikar stock meanwhile most Ngemba speaking *fondoms* such as the Mankons, *fondoms* of the Momo Division and some *fondoms* of the Santa Subdivision claim origin from Widikum and the Balis who are the Chambas (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982)

Many of them are independent and the political structure of most, if not all, Grassfields *fondoms* are, basically similar. The *fon* has very great executive authority followed by chiefs and notables. The quarter heads also form part of the political structure. The political system is based on hereditary traditional authority and access to power is highly determined by direct descent (Warnier, 1975: 42). On the political strata of these chiefdoms therefore, the *kwifon* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables and quarter-heads. Almost everywhere, *chiefdomship* is hereditary and the *fon* is a sacred figure. And only him (the *fon*) and a few notables had the privilege to use cowries and cowries decorated objects.

The *fons'* wives and the queen mothers are distinguished from other women in the society by their cowry armbands and necklaces. It is important to note that the *fon's* wives together with the queen mother form part of the ruling class in the Grassfields *fondoms*. This is because they take care of matters which concern women folk and give account to the *fon*. They settle little disputes among the females as well as organise women for work on the *fon's* farm. They ensure the cleanliness of the *fondom* by cleaning the markets and other parts of the *fondom*.

Grassfielders are polytheistic, they believe in several religions such as animism, Christianity and Islam. Most Grassfielders are animists who believe that in animistic communities, spiritual beings could be benevolent (nice) or mischievous (naughty) or downright evil. People deal with the spirits according to these qualities. Sometimes specific rituals such as dances or sacrifices are performed using objects decorated with these cowries. Christianity is the religion of most people of the Grassfields unlike Islam which is found mostly in Sabga in the Tubah Sub Division in the North West Region and the Bamoun 'country' in the West Region.

A creation characteristic common in the Grassfields in the domain of arts is that many of their sculpted objects are beaded with a variety of beads and cowry shells. These beads are mostly imported. Some sculptors decorate their objects with real cowry shells. But today, some of them use artificial cowry shells

because they are easy to obtain. That is, in the Grassfields of Cameroon, cowries are not only used to decorate parts of the body and garments, they are used by artists to decorate drums, masks, calabashes, bowls, walking sticks and many other objects which are used absolutely by ritual and sacred dances. These objects adorned with cowries are done at the request of their owners because the articles are meant to fulfil specific functions. The decoration of objects with cowries is an art which is performed by artists who have skills in beading.

Traditional medicine occupies a very important place in the cultural universe of the Grassfields. Diviners make use of cowries for divination. Traditional medical practitioners use objects like calabashes, bags and pots adorned with this object to store ground and pounded medicine, obtained from dried leaves and barks of trees. Those who seek protection are given armbands and small bags adorned with cowries by traditional healers which they tie around their waist.

METHODOLOGY

This piece of work examines the semantic transformation of cultural significance of the cowry shells in the Grassfields of Cameroon. To collect data for this paper, the qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Underlying these methods, the following research techniques were used: direct observation, in-depth-interview, life history and questionnaire. The author visited many places in the Grassfields where he saw how objects were decorated with cowries and how such objects were used. He also attended many cultural ceremonies where he saw how objects adorned with cowry shells were handled and used. He interviewed some *fons* and notables on several occasions to understand the uses and change in the meaning of cowries. He also interviewed young people both male and female, traditional medical doctors and diviners to understand why they use cowries. Questionnaires were equally used and among some of the information that were provided by the questionnaire was the history of cowries in the Cameroon Grassfields, functions and the change in cultural significance of this object.

Data Management Analysis

Data analysis of the study began soon after our field work. Information recorded during observation and interview sessions were transcribed and arranged according to the different categories of people interviewed.

Findings

The objective of this paper is to examine the semantic transformation of the cultural significance of the cowry in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Findings were classified under the following sub headings: history of cowries, usefulness of cowry shells, their

symbolism and change in cultural significance in the Grassfields of Cameroon.

A) History of the Cowries in Africa

Cowrie shells were introduced into West Africa, possibly as early as the 8th century by Caravans of Arab traders. By the 15th century the shells circulated as money, especially in the Empire of Mali. But it is only with the Portuguese, French, British and Dutch that Africa found itself under an avalanche of these shells. The Europeans had seen the fondness that certain African tribes had for the little shells and helped to make them the main currency in the trade of slaves, gold and many other goods.

“Dutch traders reported that African merchants in Dahomey (in present-day Benin) who were unfamiliar with paper and writing were highly suspicious of the European promissory notes, checking them frequently to make sure that the writing had not disappeared, leaving them a worthless scrap of paper. Similarly, European traders were at first wary of trading their manufactured goods for shells until they saw that cowries were widely accepted as money throughout the region.” (Willie F. Page & R. Hunt Davis, Jr, 2001)

For a long time, the cowrie coexisted with many other forms of currency across West Africa: silver coins and gold dust, but also salt bars, brass and copper rods and horse-shoe shaped *manillas*, cloth currencies, beads, etc. By the 18th century, the cowrie had become the currency of choice along the trade routes of West Africa. It conserved its status as a means of payment, and a symbol of wealth and power, until the 20th century (<https://www.culturesofwestafrica.com>).

Most people thought that the cowrie would eventually die a quiet death because the shell was inconvenient: the cowries were cumbersome to store compared to bank notes and counting large numbers of them was imprecise. These challenges were not insurmountable, of course, but the French in particular wanted to divert trade from the British Gold Coast to their colony in the Ivory Coast, which was one added reason for them to force their currency, the French franc, onto their colony.

Colonizers had a particularly hard time getting the African people to accept new, more centralised forms of currency. For one thing, the West Africans, accustomed to multiple currencies coexisting on the markets, had no problem with the idea of just adding one more. But when the French prohibited the use of the shells as money around 1907, the elders resisted, refusing to include the new money in their hoards or to use it in ceremonies instead of the cowrie. Some people kept both currencies. Others simply regarded the francs as a nuisance and refused to use the coins and notes.

The French had imposed a tax system on their new colony. Between 1899 and 1902, half of the taxes came in the form of cowries and other currencies. By 1907, one third was still being paid in other forms than the official franc. The prohibition on the cowrie did not do much to change the people's habits, though. Sentimentality for the cowrie, combined with the enormous stocks of shells in the area and the depreciation of the French franc - whereas the cowrie retained its value - contributed to the resistance of West Africans to adopt the new currency until the 1940s.

“The attachment to the cowry and the refusal to adopt the money of the ‘Whiteman’ was a way of defending the independence and sovereignty that they possessed before the (colonial) conquest. They felt that the demonetisation of the cowries was a way to cut them off from a significant symbol of their past and of their culture, in favour of the franc, an anonymous money” (Félix A. Iroko, 1988).

The cowry shell has many uses and meanings. It has been used as money in many cultures. They are popular for jewellery, and religious accessories all over the world. Found in the Indian Ocean and the Sahara Desert. Cowrie shells are especially important in much of ancient Africa.

Cowries equally have spiritual meaning in Africa. In African legend, a love of cowrie shells shows that you could be family to an ocean spirit of wealth and earth. It also represents the Goddess of protection in the ocean. In Africa, and in the Americas, the cowrie symbolised destiny and prosperity. Also thought of as the mouth of Orisha. Believed to have taught stories of humility and respect (<https://africaimports.com/the-meaning-and-history-of-the-cwrie-shell-2>).

B) The Utility of Cowry Shells

Cowry shells as has been discussed earlier was and is still a very valuable cultural objects in many parts of Africa. In the Grassfields of Cameroon specifically they were used as a means of exchange but today they serve as ornamental beads used on objects which play varied functions such as politics, divination and religion.

a) Cowry Shells as Currency

The cowrie or cowry shell was one of the most successful and universal forms of currency in the world. This attractive white shell has all the characteristics required of money: easy to handle and carry around due to its light weight, non-perishable, good for small and large purchases. Its shape makes it instantly recognizable and difficult to forge. The cowries also have very little variation in size and form, which makes them easy to count. They were often threaded into bracelets or long strings of forty, or packed into pouches to form greater quantities. For large payments, the shells could be tossed into baskets and weighed to

determine their value
(<https://www.culturesofwestafrica.com/cowrie-shell-monetary-symbolic-value>).

In some small villages in Africa, trade was the elders' responsibility and privilege. The goods that the villagers produced - excess grain, honey from beekeeping, cloth, forged metals, etc - were sold and the proceeds stored in common funds as obligatory contributions. Elders used the stored cowries to buy necessities like tools, medicine, or cattle for the community. Much of the trade the villagers, themselves, did was in the form of barter, and involved no money: a sack of peanuts in exchange for a cooking pot, a hoe for a nice basket.

People in the Grassfields used this means of exchange until cowry shells were replaced by copper rods. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982:92) and

Knopfli (1999: 65) cowry shells are valuable because in pre-colonial times they were used as money. Knopfli (1999: 65) continues by saying that anything could be bought with cowries, even women, for they were one of the goods to be bought with money.

Cowries no longer serve as currency in West Africa, but traces remain of their history as a form of money. In Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, people still occasionally give alms to the poor in the form of cowries, either alone, or mixed with coins. Some traders are specialized in selling items such as cowries as ritual offerings. People across West Africa may still pay for ritual services using the little white shells. In Ghana, the national currency is the *cedi*, which is the Akan (Twi) word for "cowrie". The coin for 20 cedi featured the image of the beloved shell in 1991 (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana_cedi).



Picture 1: Ghanaian 20 cedis coin featuring a cowry shell

Source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana_cedi

b) Cowry Shells Used for Decoration

Cowry shells are a very significant tool to artists who have skills in beading. Articles like bowls, walking sticks, embroidered costumes, stools, houseposts, doorframes as well as title drinking vessels are beaded with cowries to add their aesthetics quality. This is due to the glittering nature of these shells. These artists use cowry shells together with other multi-coloured beads. The varied colours do not have any other function apart from aesthetics.

In the days of old, all objects decorated with cowry shells were reserved for the royalty and notables whose use was seen only during important ceremonies like the *fon's* dance, enthronement of a new *fon* and the death celebration of a *kwifon* member.

Many artists engaged in beading especially with cowry shells, note that some of their clients particularly foreigners come for their objects especially stools adorned with the cowry shells. This is what an artist involved in beading had to say during an interview:

I am not a sculptor. I am specialised in beading and I bead carved objects such as masks, thrones, calabashes, stools with a variety of beads and coins. The main object I use in beading is the cowrie. I buy these cowries from the market. Real cowries are very rare to find today and if seen, they are very expensive. Most objects that I bead today are done with artificial cowries which are available at low cost. Twenty years ago, I beaded objects with cowries only for the royalty, using real cowries because artificial cowries were not available. Today, my clients are not only the royalty. I bead objects just for anyone who can afford my services (Njoya Ibrahim).

To Njoya like many of those engaged in the beading activity, majority of their customers are attracted by the extra beauty that cowries give to an article. Clients are overwhelmed not only by the beauty but also by the beading technology. Although cowry shells are used to decorate art object, the role goes beyond mere aesthetics.



**Picture 2 and 3: Stools adorned with cowries. H: 60 cm and D: 42 cm
Photo Tikere (01/11/2019)**

The elephant heads and tiger stools above are decorated with real cowry shells but for the head of the tiger which has some multi-coloured beads. These stools like many of those found in most Grassfields palaces are adorned with objects which symbolise authority and prestige. Cowries are often used as ornamental beads as seen above on stools, thrones, statues, bowls, calabashes, baskets and many other objects.

c) The Function of Cowries in Politics

Grassfields fondoms are highly stratified with the *fon* or sultan having very great executive authority. Chiefs, notables and the queen mother also form part of the political structure of this cultural zone. On the political structure of these *fondoms* therefore, the above

mentioned personalities have the privilege to own and use special items adorned with cowries. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 59), the *fon* is far above the others in his society. In most Grassfields chiefdoms, he is called *mfon* or *fon* or *efo* or any similar word. He embodies the society, and to Nkwi and Warnier, he is father of all and unifies the village around himself. The *fon* is exceedingly prestigious and regarded as being quite apart from other human beings. He is sacred; one of his numerous duties is to bring villagers together, he performs rituals and ensures that they are appropriate conducted to guard against outside threats. These responsibilities ascribed the sultan or *fon* gives him the privilege to use prestigious objects which bear the symbolic cowries as demonstrated in pictures 4 and 5 below.



**Pictures 4 and 5: Some royal figures in cowries adorned regalia
Photo Tikere (11/03/2018)**

When the *fon* is presiding a meeting or when he is in a ceremony with his chiefs, sub chiefs and other notables or when he receives visitors in the palace, he sits on his traditional carved seat some of which are decorated with cowry shells to perform his political duties. In December 17th 2012, I attended the annual dance or the *abene for* of the Bafut *fondom*, organised

by His Royal Highness *fon* Abumbi II of Bafut. During this ceremony, he conducted certain rituals and one of such was the rite of passage for some men and women in the land. To do this, he sat on the royal throne decorated with cowries. He equally made use of a stool also adorned with these culturally valued shells. Because of his supreme nature in his *fondom*, he is

guarded by *chindas* armed with spears. These guards are not actually to protect him from any trouble but a

means to really demonstrate his position as the highest authority in his land.



Pictures 6, 7 and 8: A fon sitting on his royal throne decorated with cowries
Photo Tikere (17/12/2012)

The *fon* is assisted by a few senior titleholders and the titular mother of the *fon* who supervises the royal wives. The latter, exercises significant leadership over the women of the 'country.' The *chief*, sub chief and *fon makers* come immediately after the *fon* on the political strata of Grassfields *fondoms*. They are usually referred to as hereditary rulers, council of elders or clan heads. They are very instrumental in their *fondoms*. They work hand in hand with the *fon* in the management of the village. They are the *fon's* advisers. They represent the *fon* in their different areas and they appoint and crown a successor when a *fon* is 'missing.' They are equally the core of the *kwifon* society. They have the prerogative to own and use certain status paraphernalia. These include calabashes (see picture 22), bowls etc. adorned with cowries. These objects are associated with them due to their significant responsibilities in the *fondom*.

d) Cowries in Divination and Healing

Many communities across western Africa and beyond use these shells as divination tools. The fortune-teller throws or simply drops the cowries onto a surface, and interprets their positions to tell the future. The number of shells used depends on each diviner and the tradition they come from. The Yoruba, for example, use sixteen cowries in their *Merindinlogun* divination to ask the Orisha spirits for advice. Some use the cowries in conjunction with - or instead of - other tools like bone fragments or kola nuts (<https://africaimports.com/the-meaning-and-history-of-the-cowrie-shell-2>).

Cowry shells are equally used by diviners for divination in the Grassfields *fondoms*. A diviner will use cowry shells together with other objects, throws them on the ground. By shaking and throwing them on the ground, he looks at the symbol which comes on top. From this symbol, he could discern what hopes and fears are in the minds of the patient or person he is carrying out his divination.



Pictures 9, 10 and 11: A diviner conducting divination
Photo Tikere (14/10/2017)

These cowries can be used for individual consultation but their main function is to inform the diviner what is in the mind of an individual by encouraging that individual to reveal himself or herself to the diviner. This object gives the diviner channels of communication with the society's gods. This is possible because the diviner is believed to have divine powers, which he uses to understand what is going on in people's lives.

Other diviners use the buffalo horn decorated with cowry shells for divination (as we can see in picture 12 below). Such diviners will shake the horn and then listen for a few minutes to understand the message the gods have as the root cause of their patients' problem. In an interview with a diviner and he told me that:

I receive all sorts of patients, those who have spiritual problems, those who have committed crimes (such as taking what does not belong to them) etc. other people consult me because they fear the unforeseen. For instance, among the Grassfielders, the cry of the cat or owl is usually a sign that something bad will happen. When a man hears any of these animals cry, he/she consults me to find out what awaits the family. I consult using different objects but the main one that I use is the buffalo horn beaded with cowries. I handle the horn in my right hand, shake it, and present the problem of my client to the gods in the local language. I could have spoken even in Pidgin English since the gods understand all languages but I choose to use the local language for my client to comprehend that his/her problems are actually being communicated to the gods. I will repeat the exercise many times and listen to what the gods will say (Doctor Ngong Emmanuel, 8th September 2021).



Picture 12: A horn adorned with cowries used for divination
Photo Tikere (10/11/2020)

I met a patient (who did not want his identity to be reveal) in the home of a diviner and he told me that:

I have gone to several hospitals to look for solution to my ailment to no avail. I have had persistent frontal headache for more than a year and I have done several scans on the head and no illness is diagnosed. I came to the diviner to find out what the problem is. After consultation I was told that it was a spiritual problem and it had to be treated spiritually.

If the problem of the patient is identified, the diviner proceeds to solve it. But if it is not within his competence, he will refer the said client to a specialist who could be a traditional doctor. The traditional healer who stores his medicine in small bags (see pictures below) may give some to his patient to apply on his or her body to ward away the spirits disturbing him/her if his problem is spiritual.



Pictures 13, 14 and 15: Indigenous bags used for healing
Photo Tikere (14/10/2017)

These bags do not only contain medicine to send away evil spirits, they are used to store ground medicine used to treat severe illnesses such as stomach ache, snake bite, sprains, poisoning etc. Other traditional healers produce small bags which they sew some cowries on them. These bags which some are charms aimed at providing good luck, or protective objects to fight against evil eyes are tied on the waist by their users.

Traditional healers use the calabash to prepare liquid medicine. Some of the medicine is a combination of herbs or only a single herb which is usually chopped into small pieces and put in a calabash containing some palm wine. If kept for some hours, the palm wine is believed to extract the medicinal value from the herbs. The patient takes the medicine twice a day, a cup in the morning after meal and another in the evening before going to bed. The patient can refill the calabash containing the herbs once or twice or even thrice with palm wine and drinks until he/she is completely healed. This is done following the instructions of the traditional practitioner. Some of these herbs can last for up to one month before they can be replaced by the traditional medical doctor. An example is the treatment of filaria. This illness is treated with snake plant (*dracaena trifasciata*). The plant is up rooted, cleaned and washed with water properly. The stems and the leaves are chopped into small pieces and put in a calabash containing palm wine. This medicine has to be taken for at least one month for proper treatment.

Some of them (traditional medical practitioners) decorate this container (the calabash) with all sorts of designs to fulfil diverse functions. Many of these traditional healers embellish the mouths of their healing calabashes with cowry shells as illustrated in the picture below. Palm wine is poured in such calabashes and it is believed that this liquor put in the

calabash will extract the nutrients from the leaves and/or bark or roots of trees that will help treat his patients, the cowry shells on the mouth of the calabash will stop any strange force from inhabiting the container of medicine. All the calabashes of medicines are well covered to stop flies and other insects from entering the medicine.



Picture 16: Calabash designed with cowry shells
Photo Tikere (14/01/2018)

e) Cowries in Religion

Religion plays a very important role in Grassfields societies. Although there are several religions in this region, each has a means of reaching the supernatural spirits. Majority of the people are animists and believe that spiritual beings could be benevolent or malicious. The people deal with them sometimes, with specific rituals such as dances or sacrifices performed to them. One of such occasion where dancing is done is during death celebrations. During this ceremony which is aimed at saying good bye to the deceased, jujus use costumes (masks and gowns) and staffs which are splendidly adorned with cowries.



Picture 17: A /mukum/ jujus in cowries designed attire
Photo Tikere (05/11/2016)

In their original contexts, ceremonial masks are used for celebrations, initiations, crop harvesting, and war preparation. The masks are worn by a chosen or initiated dancer. During the mask ceremony the

dancer goes into deep trance, and during this state of mind he "communicates" with his ancestors. The masks among the Grassfields can be worn in three different ways: vertically covering the face: as helmets, encasing

the entire head, and as crest, resting upon the head. African masks in general and those of the Grassfields in particular often represent a spirit and it is strongly believed that the spirit of the ancestors possesses the wearer.

This manifestation by the juju wearing masks and costumes beaded with cowries is an attempt to attract the spirit of the dead person and a way to say good bye to him to the world beyond. The masquerades equally want the dead person to take their problems to those living beyond. This is because they believe that their existence is controlled by the ancestors and the living dead and if they do not present their problems through this means, they will not be known. When a man is buried and the death celebration is not done with these dances, the ancestors will think that they have been forgotten and due to this, they might punish the living and this can be done in many ways: inflict the people with illness, famine and even death.

The people also believe that when a man wears a mask and the costume of a masquerade, he becomes a spirit, that is he loses his individuality and takes the spirit of the masquerade. To emphasize their sacred nature, particular masks are out of bounds to non-members especially to women who must not enter their lodges, see them under production nor understand their producers. They may not be seen, except, on the proper ceremonial occasion and never touch by a woman or non-members of the fraternity or regulatory society. The more the mask is considered powerful and dangerous, the more severe are the taboo restrictions to women and non-members. In the Grassfields masks are owned by fraternities and regulatory societies.

The masks dance or juju above is a royal dance which demonstrates only in very important ceremonies. This explains why the masks, the gown and the staff are all decorated with cowries. These items like any other status object is handled only by initiates. To become a member of this juju like all others, certain payments are done. To belong to the samba society of Oku for instance, the man seeking membership is required to pay these items: 370 cowry shells or 370 francs for the staffs and horns of samba, three chickens, three calabashes of palm wine, three loaves of *fufu*, some rope, two small hide bags for medicine and a large bag made of woven raffia fibre for medicine plants. The samba has two spear-like staffs; a male and a female. These staffs are decorated with cowry shells and treated with strong medicines which are the spirit of the dance. In the days of old, these staffs were used in warfare but today they are used only by the samba society in important ceremonies (Koloss, 2000: 210-212). The male staff is covered with a white sheepskin and cowry shells at the top and it is used by the first leader or the 'head' or the first *akam* who ushers the dance group or juju into the yard. The female staff is covered with black sheepskin and cowry shells at the top and it is

handled by the 'last leader' or last *akam* who comes in after the dancers. It is important to state that samba is a masquerade dance group open only to the male folk. This dance is a common characteristic of most if not all Western Grassfields fondoms, but membership into it requires different payments.

Not every member in this group can dance with both staffs. In a dance only members who have completed payments of 370 cowry shells, five chickens, five calabashes of palm wine, five loaves of *fufu*, one rope, seven red feathers and nine bundles of tobacco can handle both staffs. Meaning that those who have completed payments at the different levels, have the privilege more than those who have not.

The samba society can be compared to the family where the father is the leader or the head of the family. He assigns responsibility to the different members of the family just as the 'head' or leader or first *akam* of the samba controls the different areas where the dancers have to dance. The member with the female staff or the last *akam* can be compared to the mother whose role in the family is to ensure that things go well. She is the last person to sleep when everyone else has slept. The dancer with the female staff comes at the tail therefore baring the way to unwanted persons or spirits that could disturb the activities of the samba society.

When these masquerades dance, some of them use mysterious works of arts like masks, costumes, bowls and spears. Most Grassfields masks are believed to have certain powers reputed to be powerful and are termed 'bad juju.' When this *bad juju* is on display someone has to be around it with a carved bowl beaded with cowry shells or calabash of medicine to 'cool it down' by sprinkling the contain of the bowl on it, this is to stop it from running wild.



Picture 18: A carved bowl used by *mukum*
Photo Tikere (10/09/2016)

To reinforce the sacred and royal nature of some of the jujus, their musical instruments are beaded with shells of cowries. These instruments which may

include drums, rattles, guitars, horns or flutes are manipulated only by those who have a mastery of the secret and rhythm of such societies.



**Pictures 19 and 20: Musical instruments decorated with cowry shells
Photo Tikere (11/12/2019)**

The drum in the picture above is used during *abene for* or the annual dance in Bafut. This is a ceremonial drum owned by the palace. It is used only for such an emblematic occasion hosted by the *fon*. *Abene for* goes beyond mere dancing, it demonstrates the socio-political and religious organisation of the fondoms which practice it. This drum as we can see has very few cowries on it and it is played by a member of the *kwifon*.

In addition, during all important occasions such as the enthronement of a new *fon*, the annual dance, the death celebration of a *kwifon* member, the

members of ruling class or notables use objects decorated with cowry shells. One of these objects is the calabash (see picture 21). This calabash is that of the *fon* of Kedjom Keku. The object and its cover are all decorated with cowry shells a symbol of authority. During this occasion, palm wine is poured from this calabash and used for libation. This is performed by the *fon* himself who has to thank the gods of the land for protection. He also calls on them to provide as well as make to celebration to be a success. As he speaks these words, he pours the palm wine on the ground three times.



**Picture 21: A picture showing the *fon*'s palm wine calabash
Photo Tikere (14/10/2017)**

Notables also use calabashes which are adorned with this emblematic motif, cowry shells. Their calabashes are decorated differently depending on their social ranks. During any very important cultural celebrations that concern the notables, a large pot of palm wine is placed at the centre where they (the notables) are gathered. The Palm wine is removed from this palm wine pot and poured in the calabash of each notable. Every notable drinks from his calabash. A notable can only pour palm wine from his calabash only to a stranger, someone who does not belong to this class. These notables use their different titled cups in their compounds in diverse ways. This cup can be employed during succession rites, twins' celebrations and even when a member of the family has to travel out of home. One of the notables had this to say in an interview:

I, like many other notables, have titled cups which are equally decorated with cowries. Apart from using this cup for drinking, I also use it each time any of my children wants to travel out of the fendom, to ask our ancestors to take the child where he/she is going safely, watch over the child and provide for him/her. And that whoever that wants to cause harm to the child should not succeed (Tah Mukeh).

In this occasion of sending off a child out of home therefore, palm wine from the notable's calabash (like the one in the picture below) is poured into his titled cup. He pours some of it (the palm wine) from his cup on the ground while talking to the ancestors. The same ancestors who have once handled this cup. When this is done, he pours some of the wine in the child's hands to drink so as to seal the covenant.



Picture 22: A notable's palm wine calabash
Photo Tikere (09/11/2016)

C) Symbolism of Cowry Shells

Cowry shells have a lot of symbolic meaning among the Grassfielders of Cameroon like in many parts of Africa. A symbol is a sign, shape, or object which is used to represent something else. It can be used to represent a quality or idea. In this paper, I have used cowry shells to stand for fertility, wealth, authority and power and an object of social stratification.

i) Cowry Shells, a Symbol of Fertility

The cowrie's elegant shape represents the female form, its rounded top (see picture 24)

reminiscent of a pregnant woman's belly. Thus it is a symbol of fertility. Fertility is a very invaluable issue among the Grassfields people of Cameroon in particular and Africans in general. A man's strength is measured in the number of children he has. A man with no child is not respected in his society. A woman who marries and cannot get pregnant for the husband means that she is not fertile and is therefore compared to a man. Her infertility does not only make her to lose favour from her in-laws, she is regarded as a liability by her friends and the society.



Picture 23: Cowry shell that resembles the belly of a pregnant women
Photo Tikere (06/08/2015)

The shells of cowries are almost always smooth and shiny and more or less egg-shaped, with a long, narrow, slit-like opening (aperture). The shape of the cowry shell as illustrated by picture 25 below looks like the female genital. The slit on the cowry, resembles the vagina. It is the symbol of fertility as some of its major roles are to receive the penis during sexual

intercourse and holds the sperm until they pass into the uterus. It also provides a passage way for childbirth. Childbirth makes the woman to be regarded as the mother of humanity. It is through this very invaluable part of her body, the vagina that she is able to bring forth a new life.



Picture 24: A cowry shell which looks like the female genital
Photo Tikere (06/08/2015)

ii) The White Colour of the Cowry Shell, a Symbol of Purity

The colour of the cowry is white. White stands for anything which is good and right. It is a colour of certainty, of illumination and of insight. The colour symbolises purity and life. White is the colour of cleanliness, and innocence. Some cultures view white as the colour of royalty or of deities.

White among the Grassfielders, represents cleanliness, purity and justice. This means that anyone be they the *fon*, chief, sub chief, queen mother, princes or princesses who uses crafted items like stools, bags and calabashes decorated with cowries and those who use cowry armlets and necklaces, must treat all village folks equally. They must always be just in their judgements. They ought to live exemplary lives for the commoners to follow. They have to put themselves at

the service of the people and work tirelessly for the society to function well. If this is not done, the leader might be punished by death from the gods or by the ancestors.

iii) Cowry Shells, Symbol of Authority and Social Stratification

The *fons* and members of his government (chiefs, sub chiefs and notables), as seen above use objects adorned with cowries. Such objects which include stools, thrones, walking sticks, bowls, drums, cups, calabashes etc., are reserved for their use due to their social position and role. They therefore serve as elements of social stratification, used to identify them as well as distinguish them from the commoners. It is important to note that the Grassfields of Cameroon is highly stratified, where the *fons* occupy the highest rank followed by the chiefs, sub chiefs, quarter heads, heads of families and at the tail of the social ladder are commoners.

When the original function of cowries changed, Grassfields *fondoms*, adopted them as an ornament and as status symbol used by the *fons*. *Fons'* wives wore and still wear strings of them as necklaces, armlets or anklets. *Fon's* wives are marked out by wearing cowry shells as they are traditionally respected in these *fondoms* for being of greater social position than other women. *Fons'* wives have these cowry armlets where ever they go.

To demonstrate that princes and princess are different from the others in the *fondoms*, during special occasions as mentioned above, they either decorate themselves with cowries or carry objects decorated with this status icon. For instance, during *abene for* in Bafut, 'palace children and women' are identity from what they carry and the dresses they put on (see pictures below). From the picture we notice that the last princes from right to left has a chain made of cowries around her head meanwhile her sister to the right, carries a bag which have some cowry shells on it.



Pictures 25, 26 and 27: Princesses in a cultural celebration
Photo Tikere (17/12/2012)

Palace women are not excluded from the special status that princes and princess enjoy. Like the other members of the royalty, they dress in special clothes in occasions. In the picture 29, we see a palace woman whose dress bares cowry shells. Her dressing is a strong indication of her social status.



Picture 28: A palace woman in a celebration
Photo Tikere (17/12/2012)

D) Changes in Cultural Significance of Cowry Shells

There is no culture that does not change, culture or cultural elements are susceptible to change with time either due to internal or external forces and this was the case with cowries. This object has had a lot of transformation both in connotation and usage.

a) Cowry Shells as Currency

When cowries were first introduced in Africa and in the Cameroon Grassfields, they were used as currency. This was highlighted by Willie Page and Hunt Davis (2001), as they note that; by the 15th century the cowry shells circulated as money, especially in the Empire of Mali. Europeans had seen the fondness that certain African tribes had for the little shells and helped to make them the main currency in the trade of slaves, gold and many other goods. European traders were at first wary of trading their manufactured goods for shells until they saw that cowries were widely accepted as money throughout the region.

On the Bamenda Plateau, as Nkwi and Warnier (1982:92) note, cowries were known as *aghié*, whereas elsewhere, they were called *mbefu*, which means "white money" or "white grains". But the introduction of copper rods as a new means of exchange made cowry shells to lose its fundamental function of money. This object took a fresh meaning which was that of an item of cultural identity, having great influence in politics, religion and in healing.

b) Aesthetics

Today, many young people both male and female have found interest in the use of this status symbol, the cowry, which was reserved for the royalty and members of the ruling class. These youngsters use bracelets and cowries ear rings, meanwhile others wear slippers decorated with cowries and some (specifically females) simply attach them on their hair (see pictures 30 – 32), despite the fact that they are not qualified to do so. Many of these young people recognise that they are not supposed to use objects beaded with cowry shells but they do so to add beauty to their attire and equally look beautiful.



Picture 29, 30 and 31: Cowries used in diverse ways
Photo Tikere (07/09/2019)

Beauty is a very important concept in the world in general and in the Grassfields of Cameroon in particular. Everyone wants to look beautiful or handsome in the manner he/she dresses. That is why every day when a man or woman dresses to go out, he/she first of all does a proper examination of him/herself in front of the mirror to evaluate his/her appearance. Some people even ask the people with whom they live to appreciate them. If a man or woman finds out that he/she is not looking good, he/she will do all to render him/herself beautify.

These objects be they bracelets, slippers, or ear rings, they are produced by craftsmen and women and displayed at roadsides and major junctions where passers by can easy see. These craftsmen who are mostly youths testify that they exhibit their objects at the road sides because they cannot afford the fees to hire shops. To render some of these articles more beautiful, some are decorated with the traditional fabric of the Grassfields.



Pictures 32 and 33: A display of some articles decorated with cowries
Photo Tikere (18/03/2020)

Some tailors today use cowry shells as part of their design. Some of them note that they like many other clients want to identify themselves as Africans

that is why they chose to use cowries on clothes. Yet, other tailors make use of the fibre on which they sow

these cowries. In some clothes, the buttons are cowry

shells (see pictures below).



Pictures 34 and 35: Clothes adorned with cowries
Photo Tikere (02/10/2020)

The major reason why these young people find interest in the use of cowry shells is that they want to identify themselves with the cowries, a symbol they believe is African. It may not have its roots from Africa but the fact that it has an invaluable function in African societies and in the Grassfields *fondoms* in particular makes it an African identity. The cowry shell is a status symbol associated with the ruling class but they (youngsters) use objects adorned with cowry shells not to challenge the authority of the local leaders but they want to participate or share in their cultural heritage.

All these young men and women who use objects decorated with cowries acknowledge that such items can only be worn in towns and cities. They cannot use them in their different *fondoms* because this will be considered a crime punishable by the tradition. In some *fondoms* like Kedjom, the user will be summoned to the palace where the object will be seized and he/she be made to pay a fine, if the object he wears does not match his/her social rank.

CONCLUSION

Cowries or 'white money' had been used in most parts of the world as a means of exchange. In Africa in general and in the Cameroon Grassfields in particular, it could be used to buy everything, even the woman. This form of money was later replaced by copper rods and by coins and notes. When this happened, the cowries lose its original utility and it was then adopted as a status symbol, used to adorn all sorts of art objects by artists who were either gifted in beading or had had some training in this domain. As a mark of honour, objects decorated with them were reserved for the royalty, the ruling class and useful objects in the hands of diviners and traditional healers to fulfil political, religious, healing, divination and aesthetics functions. But today, cowry shells and items beaded with them are handled and owned by just

anyone who can afford. Despite this misuse of cowries by youths, this object still remains a status symbol, a cultural heritage that identifies high cultural personalities.

REFERENCES

- Félix, A. I. (1987). *Les cauris en Afrique occidentale du dixième au vingtième siècle*. ANRT.
- Knopfli, H. (1997). *Crafts and Technologies: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western of the British Museum*.
- Knopfli, H. (1999). *Sculpture and Symbolism. Crafts and Techniques: Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grassfield Woodcarvers and blacksmiths* (part 2). Basel: Basel Mission.
- Hans-Joachim, K. (2000). *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer Berlin.
- Moffor, E. T. (2005). *Culture Portrayed Through Handicrafts: A Case Study of Bambui Society in the Grassfields of Cameroon*. Master's Dissertation, The Department of Anthropology: The University of Yaoundé 1.
- Moffor, E. T. (2008). *Symbolism on Handicrafts in the Bambui Fondom (Western Grassfields – Cameroon)*. Higher Diploma Dissertation, The Department of Anthropology: The University of Yaoundé 1.
- Moffor, E. T. (2016). *Arts and Socio-Cultural Changes: The Sculpture(s) of Kedjom Chiefdoms (Western Grassfields Cameroon)*. Ph.D Thesis, The Department of Anthropology: The University of Yaoundé 1.
- Moffor, E. T. (2020). *The Symbolism of Stones and Megaliths in the Bamenda-Tikar Fondoms of Cameroon*. *International Journal of Education and Social Science Research*, 3(6).

- Moffor, E. T. (2020). Traditional Arts and Socio-Cultural Changes: The Case of Bags in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. *IJIRMP*, 8(6).
- Moffor, E. T. (2021). The Dynamics of the Xylophones in Cameroon Grassfields Arts, *EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 3(2), 86-96.
- Şaul, M. (2004). Money in Colonial Transition: Cowries and Francs in West Africa. *American Anthropologist*, 106(1), 71-84. Retrieved May 4, 2018 from *University of Illinois*.
- Nkwi, P. (1976). *Traditional Government and Social Change: A Study of the Political Institution Among the Kom of the Cameroon Grassfield*. Fribourg University Press.
- Nkwi, P. (1987). *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon*. Yaoundé.
- Nkwi, P., & Jean-Pierre W. (1982). *Elements for the History of the Western Grassfields*. Yaoundé: Department of Sociology University of Yaoundé.

- Willie, F. P., & R. Hunt Davis, Jr. (2001). *Encyclopedia of African History and Culture: from Conquest to Colonisation (1500-1850)*, 3. ISSN 1555-8428

Electronic Sources

- <https://africaimports.com/the-meaning-and-history-of-the-cwrie-shell-2>
- <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/cowries>
- https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana_cedi
- <https://www.culturesofwestafrica.com/cwrie-shell-monetary-symbolic-value>
- <https://www.culturesofwestafrica.com>

Oral Sources

During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with some key informants and also took the life history of some Grassfields people. Below is a list of some of them.

List of Informants

Name of Informant	Age	Sex	Marital statue	Social Status	Date of Interview	Time of Interview
Andrew Toh Tinseh	75	M	Married	Notable / Quarter head	10/6/2020	5 pm
Bernardette Anguh	43	F	Married	Commoner	10/06/21	3pm
Christine Tangeh	52	F	Married	Commoner	14/05/2021	3:10pm
Ngong Emmanuel	73	M	Married	Diviner	08/09/2021	10:30am
Njoya Ibrahim	56	M	Married	Artist - Beaded	21/08/2021	4 pm
Tah Mukeh	45	M	Married	Notable	20/12/2021	5:15pm

Cite This Article: Exodus Tikere Moffor (2022). The Semantic Transformation of the Cultural Significance of the Cowry in the Cameroon Grassfields. *East African Scholars Multidiscip Bull*, 5(5), 63-78.