

Review Article

Transformational Trends of the Bamenda Grassfields Regalia and Ramifications on Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the Bamenda Grassfields regalia, a potent symbol of cultural identity in Cameroon's North-West Region. This regalia has played a significant socio-cultural, political and economic role from inception. The paper therefore unveils its origin, distinctive characteristics, reasons for the observable transformational trends, implications of these mutations on the cultural identity of Bamenda Grassfielders and proposes sustainable strategies for safeguarding its authenticity and cultural integrity amid the growing influence of modern technology, contemporary fashion trends and globalization. The paper argues that although the Bamenda traditional regalia is undergoing numerous transformational trends, it has retained its historical authenticity which converges with the projection of Grassfields cultural identity while continuing to retain its strength as a symbol of national integration in Cameroon. To ensure a logical presentation of data, the chronological-cum thematic approaches were used in analyzing information gathered through qualitative and quantitative approaches. The results of our investigations revealed four main issues: That the regalia was well preserved until recently; that it witnessed changes in its designs and usage; that the transformational trends significantly affected the integrity of the attire; and that the regalia inspires and depicts cultural identity and national unity in Cameroon.

Keywords: Bamenda Grassfields, Traditional Regalia, Cultural Heritage, Identity and Authenticity.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional regalia constitute one of the most enduring and symbolically charged expressions of cultural identity among the people of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Far beyond its aesthetic appeal, it embodies the historical consciousness, political legitimacy, religious cosmology, social stratification, artistic ingenuity and collective memory that has shaped the evolution of Grassfields societies over successive generations (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). Every component of the regalia, from intricately woven textiles and elaborately embroidered gowns to coral beads, animal skins, feathers, ceremonial caps, bracelets and other ritual accessories constitutes a visual lexicon through which authority, status, spirituality and communal identity are articulated and reproduced. [1] These material expressions of culture have evolved through a sustained process of interaction between

indigenous traditions and successive waves of external influence.

Despite its profound cultural significance, the Bamenda Grassfields regalia has undergone and continuous to undergo substantial transformation as a result of colonial intervention, Christian evangelization, globalization, urbanization, commercialization, technological innovation, changing socio-economic realities and growing fashion trends across the globe. While these processes have facilitated cultural adaptation and enhanced the visibility of Bamenda Grassfields heritage within contemporary societies, they have simultaneously generated critical challenges relating to authenticity, symbolic integrity, cultural identity and heritage preservation. This paper shall be organized based on the following procedural order: contextual setting, advent and particularities, transformational trends and its ramifications, and strategies for its preservation.

¹ Interview with Toh Henry Ngwa, Notable, 80 Years, Kuk, 25/08/2025.

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Historical Context

Across Africa, clothing forms a significant art which plays an immeasurable role in shaping identity in diverse cultural settings. To this end, cloth and dress are seen as a mirror of a peoples' culture as they symbolize the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values (Akinbileje, 2014). In West Africa for instance, cloth was so symbolic among the Dogon people of Mali that it was expressed in a proverb according to which; "to sell the family's cloth is to sell the family's value" (Akinbileje, 2014: 630). This expresses the extent to which regalia was attached to identity and therefore communicated peoples' lifestyle and status over generations and defined by their political, social, religious and artistic institutions.

The historical development of the Bamenda grassfields traditional regalia, treated in this paper exclusively as ceremonial attire and excluding other forms of paraphernalia, is closely connected to the evolution of the Cameroon Grassfields societies and their political, social, religious and artistic institutions.[2] Traditional attire among Bamenda Grassfielders was never simply a form of clothing; it represented a complex cultural system through which identity, authority, spirituality, social status and collective memory were expressed (Akingale, 2015). The history of the regalia therefore reflected the broader historical experiences of the people, including migration, settlement, state formation, trade relations, colonial encounters and cultural adaptation.

The Bamenda Grassfields, located in the present-day North-West Region of Cameroon, consists of numerous centralized *fondoms*, including Nso, Mankon, Bafut, Bali Nyonga, Nkwen, Ndop, Nkambe, Kom, Aghem, Kuk, Weh, Esu and Mmen (Eweh, 2025: 21). Although each *fondom* developed its own distinctive tradition, these societies shared common cultural features such as the *fonship* institution, palace organisations, secret societies, age-grade associations, artistic specialisation and ceremonial practices (Fanso and Chem-Langhee, 1989: 49-66). These institutions played a major role in shaping the development and meaning of traditional regalia.

The earliest forms of Bamenda traditional attire were produced from locally available materials such as raffia fibres, cotton, leather, animal skins, feathers, beads and natural dyes. (Eweh, 2025: 53). These materials were carefully selected not only for practical purposes but also for their cultural and symbolic significance. Through weaving, embroidery, beadwork and other forms of craftsmanship, artisans created garments that reflected indigenous knowledge,

artistic creativity, and the relationship between the people and their natural environment.

With the emergence of centralized political institutions, the traditional regalia acquired greater importance as a symbol of power and authority. The *Fon*, considered both the political ruler and spiritual guardian of the community, wore a distinctive ceremonial attire that conveyed the dignity and sacredness of kingship (Fanso and Chem-Langhee, 2008: 15-20). Elaborate gowns, beads, caps, animal skins and other royal ornaments communicated legitimacy, prestige and continuity between the leader, ancestors and the people (Eweh, 2025: 57). Similarly, the attire of palace officials, titled elders, secret societies and other social groups reflected their respective positions and responsibilities within the traditional system (Ngwoh, 2020).

Within indigenous spiritual systems, certain garments, colours, ornaments and materials were associated with ancestral power, ritual authority and sacred ceremonies. [3] Traditional attire therefore functioned not only as a social marker but also as a medium through which communities expressed their connection with the spiritual world and ancestral traditions. Through interactions with neighbouring communities and long-distance traders, new materials such as glass beads, brass ornaments and imported textiles entered the Grassfields (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). These foreign materials were not simply adopted but were creatively integrated into existing cultural practices, demonstrating the ability of Bamenda Grassfields communities to adapt while preserving their cultural identity.

The colonial period introduced a transformation phase in the regalia. This was evident as German and later British colonial administrations introduced European fabrics, sewing techniques and new forms of dress (*Ibid*). Christian missionary activities also influenced clothing practices by encouraging Western styles and challenging certain indigenous religious practices associated with the traditional attire (Ngwoh, 2020).

In the contemporary era, the Bamenda traditional regalia has continued to experience significant transformational trends due to globalization, urbanization, technological advancement and commercialization. Modern fabrics, machine embroidery and contemporary fashion designs altered the method of production and consequently the appearance of these regalia. At the same time, the traditional attire remains central to important occasions such as royal ceremonies, festivals, marriages, funerals and cultural celebrations (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). Although the regalia has changed over time, it remains

² Interview with Che Joseph Mtembi, Teacher/Notable, 78 Years, Kuk, 25/08/2025.

³ *Idem*.

a powerful symbol of cultural identity, historical memory, political authority and artistic achievement.

The Historical Origin

The traditional regalia did not emerge merely as clothing designed for bodily protection or decoration, rather, it evolved into an essential cultural institution through which authority, identity, spirituality, prestige and communal values were expressed and preserved. [4] This partly accounts for the close history of the Bamenda traditional attire with that of the people themselves. Although each *fondom* in the Bamenda grassfields possesses distinctive cultural traditions, they share remarkable similarities in political organisation, ceremonial practices, artistic expression and systems of traditional dress (Eweh, 2025: 50). These similarities developed through centuries of migration, interaction, trade, intermarriage, warfare, diplomacy, and shared religious beliefs, giving rise to what is now recognized as the distinctive civilization of the Cameroon Grassfields. [5]

Like every human being, a true Grassfielder is genuinely proud of their traditional regalia. This pride is no pretense but real love for something great and dear for the people. Oral sources educate us that what is commonly known as the Bamenda Grassfields regalia was introduced in the area around the middle of the 19th century by the Bali people who brought their civilization from their original home, chamber, nowadays, the Sarduna regions of the Federal state of Nigeria [6]. The traditional regalia of the Bamenda Grassfields, *Toghu*, an outfit that singles out the region in the country is a multi-coloured and beautifully embroidered dress in which cotton beads of various colours are skilfully knitted into a black velvet fabric with the hand following varied symbols and patterns (Ngwoh, 2020).

Essomba (1981) asserts that by the 5th century AD, techniques of iron metallurgy, pottery, copper and bronze castings had been mastered in North Cameroon. These techniques progressively diffused southward before the 10th century to the Grassfields and the rest of Cameroon through relations with Nok culture (Nigeria) (Eweh, 2025:51). This culture was directly linked to the former West Cameroon through the Niger-Benue-Katsina route, and with the Tikar migration (Essomba, 1981). Its long overflowing design is similar to the *Agbwada* or *Gandura* gown worn by Moslems in Northern Cameroon. But while *Agbada* and *Gandura* worn in the Arid and Sahelian Regions of Northern Cameroon and Nigeria are made from light fabrics,

Toghu is made from thick heavy fabrics, suitable for the cold temperatures of the Bamenda highlands [7].

The origin of Bamenda traditional regalia was also influenced by indigenous religious beliefs. We learnt from the field that the traditional attire was believed to possess spiritual efficacy that extended beyond its physical appearance. Certain garments were reserved exclusively for ritual ceremonies because they were thought to embody ancestral blessings or protective spiritual forces (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). Animal skins, feathers, beads, cowries and specific colours were incorporated into ceremonial dress respecting religious prescriptions transmitted across generations. Consequently, the production and wearing of traditional regalia often involved ritual observances intended to maintain harmony between the living community, the ancestors and the spiritual realm.

Particularities of the Original Bamenda Grassfields Regalia

The Bamenda Grassfields traditional regalia is distinguished by its remarkable artistic sophistication, symbolic richness and profound integration into the political, religious, economic and socio-cultural life of the Bamenda Grassfielders.[8] The regalia consist mainly of a gown, worn over an inner skirt, with that of men consisting of two pieces of loose cloth (*seghe-keng* in Kuk language) fastened round the waist with strings; the long one behind and the slightly shorter one in front to ease movement. A glaring example of *Toghu* (*Sangh* in Kuk language) is seen on the plate below.

⁴ Interview with Toh Simon Che, 59 Years, Notable, Wum, 16/07/20206.

⁵ Interview with Meh Augustine Meh, 71 Years, Notable, Yaounde, 16/07/25.

⁶ J. K. Kisbo, An Appreciation of Bamenda Traditional Costume, The Ministry of Arts and Culture, ref : 1752/LMINAC/SG.DLL/ 09/08/2019

⁷ Interview with HRH *Fon* Kum Achou.

⁸ Interview with Che Joseph Mtembi.

Plate 1: Bamenda Grassfields Regalia for Men (left and Right Images), and Women (Centre Image)



Source: Centre Photo taken by Author, Yaounde, 31/12/ 2023; Photos Left and Right: Personal Album of Fang Fuuh Mac-Edwin, Yaounde and Aghem, (2021 and 2025).

Plate one illustrates the original style of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia. The image on the left shows a notable in the Aghem community, Fang Fuuh Mac-Edwin on his way to a cultural event in Yaounde. The image in the centre shows an elite in the Kuk community, Mrs. Nji Evelyne attending the end-of-year occasion of the Fenghe-Kuk Development association

(FEDA) Yaounde Branch. The image on the right features again Fang Fu-uh on his way to an initiation ceremony of the Koh society in Aghem. *Fons* wore distinctive royal regalia; elaborate ones, incorporating luxurious materials, intricate embroidery, symbolic ornaments and exclusive insignia that were forbidden to others as seen in plate two.

Plate 2: HRM *Fon* Chou Ngong Emmanuel of the Kumdze Palace of Kuk (Left and Centre Images), and HRM *Fon* Sehm Mbingolo II of Nso (Right Image)



Source: Photos of *Fon* Chou Ngong taken by Author, Yaounde, 17/12/2023 and 22/02/2026; Sehm Mbingolo: Personal Archive of Shufai Joseph Leinyuy.

Plate two depicts *fons* with distinctive Bamenda regalia. The image (left) of *Fon* Chou Ngong on the plate was captured during the Kuk Cultural and Development Association (KCUDA) fundraising event hosted by Yaounde Branch. His cap on the picture is carefully designed with cowries. This type can't be worn by an ordinary person. The regalia of his second (centre) image is crafted from the combination of velvet and indigo-dyed woollen fabric known as *Ndop*, or *Ukara* cloth, and is characterized by its colourful patterns and designs. The *Ndop* is popularly referred to as the "King's clot" because it was worn only by the royal family and nobility. It is also used to design the background, sit or table of the *fon*. It is worth noting that among the ornaments reserved exclusively for *fons* was the crescent moon motif, which was an obligatory

feature inscribed on the back of *fons*' official attire, symbolizing royal authority and sacred kinship. [9]

The earliest forms of the Bamenda traditional attire were the product of both inherited cultural traditions and adaptation to the ecological environment of the Grassfields. Women spun locally cultivated cotton into thread, while skilled weavers transformed these threads into durable cloth using indigenous looms (Ngome, 2016). As political institutions became more complex, clothing evolved into a visual language through which political hierarchy, social differentiation and ritual authority were communicated (Adamo, 2011). The *fon*'s attire therefore embodied the dignity, legitimacy and sacred responsibilities of the throne

⁹ Interview with Nji Mathias Nyoh, 91 Years, Notable, Kuk, 13/07/2026.

(Fanso and Chem-Langhee, 2008: 54). Leopard skins were closely associated with kingship because leopard symbolized courage, intelligence, vigilance and supreme authority. The rarity of the animal further

enhanced its symbolic value, restricting its use primarily to the palace and selected titleholders (*Ibid*, 55) as illustrated on plate three.

Plate 3: Fon Fue Nkanghaper II of Baba I Fon Ndofoa Zofoa III of Babungo sits on his Throne



Source: Eweh, “The Bamenda Grassfields Regalia”, p. 57.

Plate three shows how animal skins like leopards or tigers are reserved only for the beautification of *fons*' thrones or surroundings. Some designs of the regalia come in the form blouse, or the sleeveless Barewa or *Danchiki* (in Kuk language). Other designs were made entirely of the black velvet material on which intricate designs and markings were embroidered, while others used a combination of the *Ukara* cloth and the black velvet material. Similarly, elaborate bead necklaces, bracelets, anklets and ceremonial caps gradually emerged as visible expressions of political prestige and social distinction. Every component of the royal attire acquired symbolic significance, reinforcing the sacred character of kingship (Ngome, 2016).

These distinctive designs on each community regalia reinforced communal identity during inter-chieftdom festivals, royal ceremonies, funerals and national cultural celebrations (Abianji-Menang, 2026). Members of each community proudly wore attire that reflected their historical heritage and political allegiance. Thus, the regalia served as an important symbol of belonging, strengthening social cohesion and preserving historical memory across generations. The regalia embedded political authority. The *fonship* institution occupied the highest position within the traditional political system, and the regalia worn by *fons* reflected this elevated status as narrated by an informant:

Royal attire is vehemently elaborate because it symbolizes the sacred authority of the throne and the continuity of the kingdom. *Fons* traditionally wear complex embroidered gowns adorned with intricate geometric and floral designs that exhibit exceptional craftsmanship. Coral beads decorate the neck, wrists, ankles and chest, symbolizing wealth, prestige and

legitimate authority. Leopard skins, traditionally used, represent bravery, vigilance, wisdom and supreme leadership. Ceremonial caps embellished with feathers or beads further distinguish *Fons* from other members of the community. [10]

The royal regalia was complemented by ceremonial objects: walking staff, flywhisk, ceremonial spear, sword and carved stool. These objects were not merely decorative; they symbolized judicial authority, spiritual protection and political legitimacy. Collectively, they transform the *fon* into a visible embodiment of the unity, continuity and sovereignty of the *chieftdom* (Chem, 2010: 28).

The traditional attire also communicated the highly structured social organization characteristic of the Bamenda Grassfields. Every social category possessed attire appropriate to its position within the traditional hierarchy (Fakunle, 2013). *Fons*, queens, princes, princesses, palace officials, titled persons among others all wore distinctive regalia that reflected their respective ranks (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). Notables often wore embroidered gowns, distinctive caps, walking staffs, bead necklaces and bracelets that signified their rank within the palace hierarchy. [11] Members of secret societies possessed exclusive ceremonial costumes that were prohibited to non-members. [12] Ordinary citizens generally wore simpler forms of traditional attire, although sometimes a little elaborate during festivals and family celebrations

¹⁰ Interview with Fai Donatus, 52 Years, Lecturer, Yaounde, 26/06/25.

¹¹ Interview with HRM *Fon* Ntuh Mbeng Evaristus, 51 Years, *Fon* of Kuk, Wum, 27/07/2026.

¹² *Idem*.

(Ngome, 2016). These distinctions enabled members of the community to identify an individual's social status, without necessarily asking questions.

Colours were carefully selected because they communicated specific cultural meanings rather than merely enhanced aesthetic appeals. Red symbolized courage, sacrifice, vitality, royal authority and ancestral power (Eweh, 2025: 81). White represented peace, purity, reconciliation, blessing and spiritual harmony (Ngwoh, 2020). Black denoted dignity, maturity, mourning, mystery and spiritual authority. [13] Blue conveyed stability, wisdom, calmness and continuity, while green often represented fertility, agricultural prosperity, life and harmony between humanity and nature (Ngwoh, 2020).

Hitherto the introduction of modern jewelries, beads served as indicators of prestige, wealth, political authority and social distinction. Coral beads, glass beads, brass ornaments, cowries, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, waist beads and rings were essential components of ceremonial attire (Ndifor, Efeze *et al.*, 2013). The quantity, colour, size and arrangement of beads often reflected the social status of the wearer. [14] Members of royal families generally possessed more elaborate bead collections because these ornaments represented inherited prestige and historical continuity. [15] Certain bead necklaces were passed from one generation of a *fon* to the next, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of succession and the continuity of royal authority. [16]

Transformational Trends in Bamenda Traditional Regalia over Time

The evolution of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia reflects the dynamic and ever-changing nature of culture. While certain transformations have enhanced the aesthetic appeal and accessibility of the regalia, many others have regrettably eroded its authenticity, diminished its sacred significance, and weakened the cultural values it was originally intended to preserve. What was once revered as a sacred expression of ancestral wisdom now risks being reduced to a mere object of fashion, entertainment and commercial display. One of the striking changes concerns the materials employed in the production of the regalia. In the past, artisans relied almost exclusively on locally available resources such as hand-woven cotton, raffia fibres, leather, animal skins, feathers, natural dyes, cowries and handcrafted beads (Kisob, 1963).

Nowadays, many of these indigenous materials have been replaced by imported and industrially manufactured products: velvet, satin, brocade, lace, silk,

polyester, synthetic fabrics, factory-produced beads, metallic ornaments and machine-made accessories. Likewise, machine embroidery has increasingly replaced the painstaking craftsmanship of hand embroidery, while synthetic dyes have substituted the natural colouring materials once carefully prepared by indigenous artisans.

Although these imported materials have undoubtedly improved durability, expanded colour variety and enhanced aesthetic appeal, their widespread adoption has come at a considerable cultural cost. The gradual abandonment of indigenous materials has contributed to the decline of traditional textile technology and has weakened the intimate relationship that once existed between the people, their environment and their cultural heritage as lamented by an informant:

It is deeply regrettable that many young artisans now possess little knowledge of the traditional materials that sustained the Bamenda grassfields craftsmanship for generations. Hitherto now, embroidery patterns, colour combinations, ornaments and ceremonial accessories were carefully regulated and departures from accepted customs were generally discouraged because they were perceived as a threat to cultural continuity. Today, designers increasingly modify traditional attire by incorporating Western tailoring techniques, fashionable cuts, decorative embellishments, zippers, buttons and modern collars. Traditional wrappers are now transformed into fitted dresses, jackets, skirts, business suits and handbags [17]

These innovations have blurred the distinction between authentic ceremonial regalia and fashion-inspired cultural clothing as learned in the field "In the relentless pursuit of modernity, there is an unfortunate tendency to sacrifice authenticity for convenience and commercial success. Such developments call for sober reflection, lest future generations inherit only modified imitations of a cultural heritage whose original meaning has gradually faded". [18]

In the past, specific colours represented authority, peace, fertility, mourning, or spiritual power. Particular beads denoted rank and prestige, while certain caps, feathers and animal skins could be worn only by designated traditional authorities in accordance with customary law (Ngwoh, 2020). Today, many of these symbolic meanings are no longer widely understood, particularly among younger generations. The attire is increasingly being adapted to suit the taste of affluent individuals. While these designs remain elegant and respectable, they depart from the original traditional style as seen on plate four.

¹³ Interview Che Joseph Mtembi.

¹⁴ Interview with Fai Donatus.

¹⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁶ Interview with HRM *Fon* Ntuh Mbeng Evaristus.

¹⁷ Interview with Fai Donatus.

¹⁸ *Idem.*

Plate 4: Bamenda Grassfields Regalia Reflecting Evolving Stylistic Variations



Source: Photo (Left): Personal Album of Mrs Ngong Brigitte, Bamenda, 09/12/23; Personal Album of Mouome Mariette, 27/07/2026.

Plate four depicts personalities who have adopted contemporary designs that, although modest and culturally appropriate, differ from the original Bamenda Grassfields regalia. The first image shows Mrs Ngong Brigitte Nchuo attending KCUDA fundraising event in Bamenda. The middle image features Madam Mouome Mariette going to attend a marriage ceremony in Limbe, whereas the image on the right shows her going to Church in Yaounde. We can see that personal taste and modern social contexts have influenced the adaptation

of the Bamenda grassfields regalia while maintaining decency.

The traditional attire has been increasingly admired for its visual beauty rather than for the cultural messages it communicated. Personalities now select colours, embroidery and ornaments according to their personal preference or prevailing fashion trends rather than customary prescriptions handed down by their ancestors. See Plate five.

Plate 5: Bamenda Traditional Regalia Illustrating Significant Stylistic Departures from the Traditional Form



Source: Photos taken by Author, Yaounde, 19/07/24 (Left); 25/06/25 (Middle); 05/10/2025 (Right).

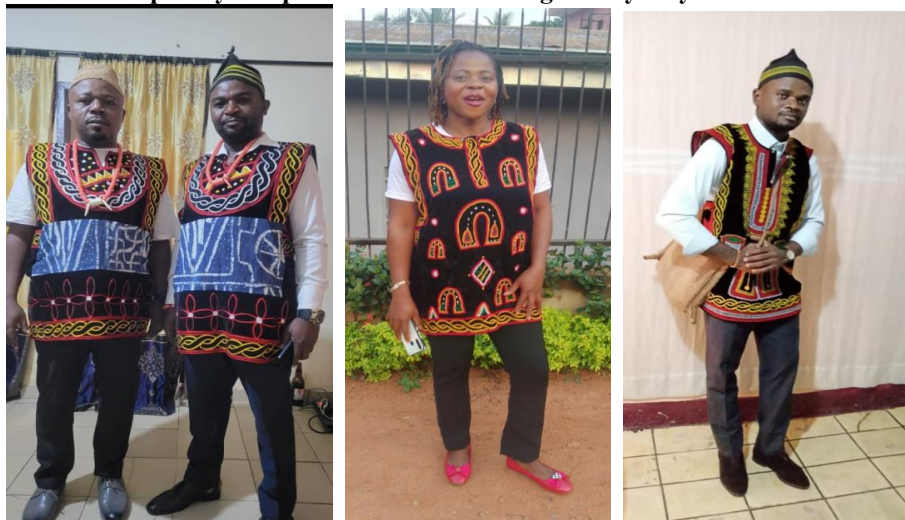
Plate five illustrates contemporarily adaptations of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia. The image on the left shows Mrs. Ngemasong Rimma Ewih immediately after the successful defense of her Higher National Diploma (HND). The slit in her gown was designed to ease movement. The image in the middle depicts Madam Lizette Lezeh on her way to a cultural event in Yaounde, while the image on the right shows Mr. Ndi Hiram equally going for a cultural event. The gown worn by Lezeh is also tailored to enhance comfort and ease of movement. We can however see that the

regalia has gradually ceased to function as a sophisticated language of cultural communication and has become an object of aesthetic appreciation and public entertainment. This decline is deeply concerning, given that when cultural symbols lose their meanings, communities risk losing not merely their traditions but also the historical consciousness and collective identity that those traditions embody.

A positive evolution of the regalia is its adoption as a uniform for some *Njangi* meetings. It is

now common to see both men and women wear the same style of the regalia as seen in plate six.

Plate 6: Contemporary Adoption of a Common Regalia Style by both Men and Women



Source: Left Image: Personal Album of Ful Lazarus Toh, 14/09/2025; Centre Image: Taken by Author, 28/01/2023; Right Image: Personal Album of Nkwain Denis Che, 05/01/2023, Yaounde.

Plate six shows that both men and women share a common style, and that the regalia fosters a sense of unity and collective identity among members of a society. It equally demonstrates how the regalia has adapted to contemporary socio-economic institutions while retaining its cultural significance. The left image shows Achia Ngong Moses and Ful Lazarus Toh attending a njangi meeting. The centre image features

Fon Melvin Amboh on her way to a cultural event, and the right image presents Nkwain Denis Che departing for work in school. Another plus to the Bamenda grassfields regalia is its growing international recognition. This was demonstrated by the incorporation of its motifs into the liturgical vestment worn by Pope Leo XIV during his visit to Cameroon. See plate seven.

Plate 7: Pope Leo XIV in a Bamenda Grassfields-Inspired Liturgical Vestment



Source: Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), Screenshot taken by Author, Live Broadcast of the Church Service in Bamenda, 16/04/2026.

Plate seven depicts a globally respected leader, the pope who adopted this culturally inspired attire. This symbolic gesture underscored the richness of the Bamenda grassfields cultural heritage and, further brought it to the attention of international audience. This reinforced the importance of preserving and promoting this traditional attire as a valuable cultural asset.

In earlier times, many ceremonial garments and ornaments were reserved exclusively for *Fons*, palace officials, titled men, or members of secret societies. Strict customary laws indicated the person to wear particular colours, beads, hats, staffs, or animal skins. [19] This preserved the dignity and sanctity of traditional authority. Nowadays, commercialization and cultural liberalization have significantly weakened these

¹⁹ Interview with Toh Simon Che

long-standing restrictions. It has even become a routine to see garments once associated with royal authority being worn by individuals who possess neither traditional titles nor formal affiliation with the palace. If not checked, it would diminish the sacred character and exclusivity that once distinguished traditional authority as reported by an informant. “A society that fails to preserve the symbols of its institutions ultimately weakens the institutions themselves”. [20]

Bases of the Transformation

Prior to the arrival of colonial administrators in the late nineteenth century, the Bamenda Grassfields regalia was produced almost entirely from indigenous materials such as raffia fibres, hand-woven cotton, leather, animal skins, feathers, locally manufactured beads and natural dyes. The production process itself reflected indigenous technological knowledge, artistic excellence, and cultural philosophies that had been perfected and faithfully transmitted across generations (Eweh, 2025: 113). Colonial rule disrupted this indigenous system by introducing imported textiles, sewing technologies and European concepts of dress. Velvet, satin, silk, wool, damask and machine-manufactured cotton gradually entered local markets through European trading companies. This lured royal courts to embrace these materials into ceremonial gowns, wrappers and palace decorations.

Missionaries regarded many indigenous religious practices as incompatible with Christian doctrine (Ngome, 2016). Since numerous ceremonial garments were intimately associated with ancestor veneration, ritual sacrifice, divination and the activities of secret societies, converts were frequently encouraged to abandon or modify important aspects of their traditional attire. This religious transformation affected not only the occasions on which the regalia was worn but also the cultural meanings attached to many ceremonial objects. As generations were raised within predominantly Christian environments, many young people inevitably lost knowledge of the profound symbolic meanings once associated with particular colours, beads, feathers and animal skins.

Progress in transportation, communication technologies, international trade and digital media exposed the Bamenda Grassfields communities to an unprecedented diversity of global cultures and fashion trends. Television, films, fashion magazines, social media platforms and online marketing continually shaped the tastes and aspirations of younger generations (*Ibid.*). Unlike earlier periods, when cultural change occurred gradually over many generations, globalization facilitated foreign fashions to spread almost instantaneously the Bamenda Grassfields. The relentless pursuit of novelty in many instances

overshadowed the deeper cultural values that traditional regalia intended to preserve.

Rapid urbanization equally altered the cultural environment within which traditional regalia is produced, transmitted, and worn. Village served as the main place of cultural education, where young people acquired practical skills in weaving, embroidery, beadwork and the interpretation of symbolic designs through constant interaction with elders and master artisans (Fokwang, 2015). The migration of large numbers of young people to urban centres disrupted this traditional system of knowledge transmission. In towns and cities, Western clothing dominates daily life because of its convenience, affordability and association with modernity. [21] As a result, many young people now wear traditional attire without fully appreciating the cultural philosophy it embodies.

Economic transformation has equally contributed to the changing character of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia. Ceremonial attire was produced primarily to fulfill cultural, political and spiritual functions. Today, it has largely become a commercial commodity within the fashion and tourism industries. [22] Commercialization has undoubtedly created valuable employment opportunities for weavers, embroiderers, bead makers, fashion designers and textile merchants. Yet commercial success has often come at the expense of cultural authenticity as market demands prioritize visual attractiveness over historical accuracy, encouraging designers to introduce decorative elements with little or no cultural significance simply because they appeal to consumers.

Moreover, genuine hand-woven fabrics, coral beads, carved ornaments and animal skins have become increasingly scarce and expensive (Wihbongale and Kom, 2025). Consequently, synthetic fabrics, plastic beads, machine embroidery and imitation ornaments have substituted materials once regarded as indispensable components of authentic ceremonial attire. While these substitutions make regalia more affordable, they simultaneously diminish its historical integrity and symbolic richness. Again, as technology replaces traditional artisanship, one cannot help but lament the gradual disappearance of skills that once represented the very soul of the Bamenda Grassfields artistic civilization. See plate eight.

²⁰ *Idem.*

²¹ Interview with Toh Simon Che.

²² Interview with Fai Donatus.

Plate 8: Machine-Made Bamenda Grassfields Regalia, a Decline in Indigenous Craftsmanship



Source: Photos taken by Author, Left Image, Yaounde, 20/07/2025; Centre Image, Douala, 31/07/2026; Right Image, 09/05/2026, (Right Image).

The plate features images of three distinguished personalities of Kuk: a notable, Pa Charles Ngong on the left, an elite; Professor Ami Nyoh in the centre, and a community leader, Che Frankline Anyang on the right. While Pa Ngong was attending KCUDA Yaounde Branch meeting, Professor Ami Nyoh was at work (school), and Anyang was participating in FEDA fundraising event in Douala. The plate reminds us of what we are gradually losing, as the rich tradition of indigenous craftsmanship is increasingly disappearing. We mourn the abandonment of the skills painstakingly handed down from one generation to the next, now being replaced by machine-made fabrics.

Moreover, royal colours, ceremonial beads and traditional motifs once protected by customary law now frequently appear in commercial fashion with little regard for their historical significance. Such developments raise a troubling question about whether cultural freedom is gradually giving way to cultural forgetfulness. Again, official, especially religious visits in Cameroon have introduced another dimension of the transformation of the Bamenda grassfields regalia. Such visits create a growing demand for visually captivating traditional attire. In response, designers increasingly combine indigenous aesthetics with contemporary fashion principles to satisfy commercial expectations. This has endangered cultural heritage and it risks becoming a performance designed to entertain visitors rather than a living tradition faithfully preserved for future generations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ceaseless transformation of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia reflects the dynamic and adaptive nature of culture. However, while cultural change remains an inevitable feature of every society, preserving the authenticity and symbolic significance of

a traditional regalia is essential, especially for safeguarding the cultural heritage of a people. Preservation, a conscious effort to ensure that innovation takes place without destroying the historical values, indigenous knowledge systems, artistic traditions and symbolic meanings that give the regalia its unique identity should be the order of the day. Protecting the physical garments alone is insufficient without simultaneously safeguarding the indigenous knowledge, craftsmanship, oral traditions, symbolic interpretations, customary regulations and historical narratives that give them meaning.

The preservation of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia demands a balanced approach, one that valorises the necessity of adaptation while protecting the fundamental principles upon which this cultural institution was established. Achieving these objective calls for the shared responsibility of traditional authorities, government institutions, researchers among others. Traditional authorities including traditional councils, queen mothers, palace societies and other custodians of indigenous institutions should not relent efforts serving as stewards of the Bamenda grassfields cultural heritage. Their role in safeguarding the regalia is primordial. This is because they possess the customary legitimacy required to regulate the production, use, interpretation and transmission of ceremonial attire.

Palace authorities should establish clear cultural principles governing the use of royal symbols, ceremonial colours, bead arrangements, animal motifs, crowns, staffs and other insignia associated with traditional authority. In this order, the inappropriate commercialization, distortion, or misuse of sacred symbols will be checked. Furthermore, *fons* and community leaders should employ efforts to promote the establishment of palace-based training centres

where experienced artisans can mentor younger generations in indigenous weaving, embroidery, beadwork, leatherwork, carving and textile production. This will help preserve endangered skills, create employment opportunities and strengthen cultural pride among young people.

A threat facing the Bamenda grassfields regalia is the erosion of indigenous knowledge. This results from the passing away of elderly custodians without adequately transmitting their expertise to younger generations. Many traditional production techniques, ceremonial practices, oral histories and symbolic interpretations remain undocumented, making them increasingly vulnerable to permanent loss. It is important for the knowledge to be archived and documented. Researchers should therefore conduct comprehensive documentation projects involving interviews with *Fons*, artisans, traditional priests among others. In this connection, records of the historical evolution of regalia, methods of production, symbolic meanings, ceremonial applications and variations among different *fondoms* will be taken and jealously preserved. This can even serve as online archives, digital museums, audiovisual documentaries and electronic databases for students and emerging researchers.

Museums and community cultural centres play a vital role in safeguarding material heritage. Each major *fondom* should consider establishing cultural museums containing historical garments, ceremonial objects, production tools, photographs and documentary materials explaining their significance. Such institutions would serve as centres of learning for local communities, researchers, tourists and future generations. Again, Cultural associations should collaborate with universities, filmmakers, photographers and journalists to produce educational materials that highlight authentic production techniques, oral traditions and historical narratives associated with ceremonial attire. This will help increase public awareness.

Integrating indigenous knowledge into educational curricula is another panacea. Education remains one of the most effective instruments for preserving cultural heritage. The limited understanding of the Bamenda Grassfields regalia among many young people is partly the result of educational systems that has emphasized foreign historical narratives while providing insufficient attention to indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions. Educational authorities should incorporate Grassfields indigenous textile production and cultural symbolism into school and university curricula. Training programs can help promote the cultural heritage of the Bamenda grassfielders. Secondary schools and Universities should implement training programs such as workshops, apprenticeships and cultural education. This

will promote understanding of the outfit's history and cultural importance.

The Bamenda Grassfields regalia should be protected. This should be done by registering it as an intellectual and cultural property, and Geographical Indication (GI) under Cameroon. Of recent, the fabric has been increasingly produced massively, particularly in foreign markets like China without acknowledgment or benefit to indigenous communities that created it. This is done without respecting the cultural symbols and significance of the fabric. Work with the ministry of trade and ministry of external relations to register *toghu* with World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), Intellectual property office of major markets like China, EUIPO, USPTO among others. This will limit its production by different countries, and by so doing, it traditional cultural expression will be respected.

More so, globalization and digital technology should be strategically exploited as instruments for cultural preservation. Television documentaries, radio programs, podcasts, websites and social media platforms can disseminate accurate information about the history, symbolism and production of the Bamenda traditional regalia. Again, economic empowerment initiatives are crucial for the Bamenda traditional regalia sector as they reduce poverty and promote economic development. The Bamenda traditional regalia sector should therefore promote sustainable practices, entrepreneurship among others. Promote fair trade practices within the industry, ensuring that artisans receive fair compensation for their work.

The tourism sector should be loaded with the Bamenda traditional regalia. This will further attract many tourists in the country thereby creating avenues for the generation of revenue for the community. Tourists from all over the world will come to the Bamenda Grassfields to experience the unique cultural heritage of the region, which includes the traditional regalia. These influx tourists will be accompanied with a positive impact on the local economy, as they will spend money on accommodations, food and souvenirs. Again, the tourism boost provided by the regalia industry will also have a positive impact on the local infrastructure. The influx of tourists will lead to the development of new roads, hotels among others. This infrastructural development will create employment opportunities for the indigenes, which will help reduce unemployment and poverty in the region.

Furthermore, the tourism boost provided by the regalia industry will also help to promote economic diversification in the region. The regalia industry is a unique and distinctive aspect of the local economy, which helps to reduce dependence on a single industry. This is especially significant in a region where the economy is vulnerable to fluctuations in a single

industry. By promoting economic diversification, the regalia industry will create a more sustainable and resilient economy.

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