

AN APPRECIATION OF BAMENDA TRADITIONAL COSTUME

by J. A. Kisob

A true Scot in his kilt is justly proud in the highlands of Scotland, so also is a true grasslander in his costume at home in the highlands of Bamenda. This pride in their traditional costume is no pretence but real love for something rich and dear to the folk of the highlands.

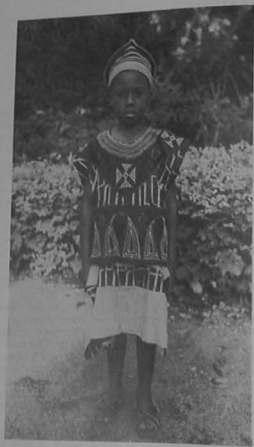
Its intricate designs are works of art by simple craftsmen with no modern education but with a fund of native talent. With lots of Job's patience, and the quiet of the countryside, the artist weaves his thoughts into patterns for the pleasure of the notables of the day.

We are told from unwritten sources that what is now commonly described as the Bamenda costume was introduced into that area around the middle of the last century by the Balis who brought their civilization from their original home, Chamba, in the now Sardouana Province of the Northern Region of the Federation of Nigeria¹.

The Balis did not only bring their bright colourful robes, they also brought the horse, commonly called in the Bali language "Nyam Bani", namely the Bali beast, and other civilizing influences to the inhabitants of the Bamenda plateau, namely, the Tikars and Widekums. This costume is now widely used in the whole of Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe, the Bamileke Region in East Cameroon and parts of Mamfe Division (Widekum and Bangwa) in West Cameroon. Hitherto the "Ntum", which is a piece of cloth worn in the form of a pair of pants and held in position by a leather belt, was the dress of the common man.

The modern Bamenda costume consists mainly of a gown, worn over an inner skirt consisting of two loose pieces of cloth fastened round the waist with strings. Sometimes a leather belt is used to

1) It is for this reason that all names used to describe the costume are in Bali.



A Bamenda youth in their traditional costume

keep the skirt in position. The cloth "Ndap" from which the suit is made is woven from local yarn by the people themselves but in recent years, owing to the high cost of the home-woven material, imitation imported designs are being used.

There are three types of the native woven cloth, "Ndap", "Njee Nwoo", and "Njee Nsaw". The last type is very scarce and expensive.

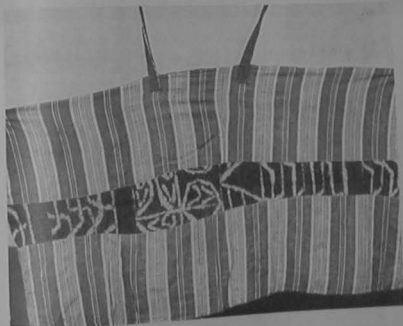
A woven wollen cap, completes the suit, but for the fons, chiefs and other notables, an ivory bangle and a necklace of glass beads add the finishing touches. A privileged few pin a red feather, "Fe Ngu", into the cap either because the wearer is a Chief, or has killed an enemy at war, a leopard or a tiger in the hunt or has succeeded his father who was a title holder. The feather is worn in recognition of any of the above circumstances and is one of the envied insignia with privileges attached to them. It is therefore forbidden for an unqualified person to wear it.

For everyday wear, a typical well-dressed gentleman looks like the picture appearing at the beginning of this article. The skirt design has remained constant; but the gowns are designed in three styles.

THE SKIRT : "Shu Nji"

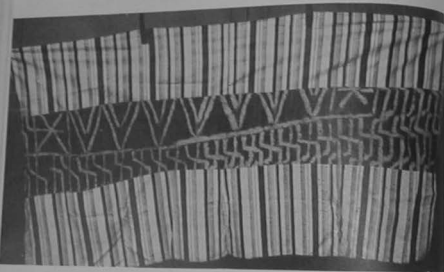
This consists of a front and back piece.

a) The front piece :



For an average man the front piece measures 110 cm \times 60 cm. It is smaller than the back piece in length and breadth. The strings shoot off near the centre.

b) The back piece :



This measures 1 metre \times 1/2 metre. It is similar in design to the front piece but longer and wider. The standard design consists of imported brightly coloured striped material sewn over the borders longitudinally and allowing a small piece of the original material to appear. The strings come off at equal distances from the edge of the piece. The difference in distances is important for better fitting since a lot of allowance should be given for the hips. The draping ends are also very important because during traditional dances, which require a lot of body movement, the four tapering ends swing from side to side.

There is a rare design for the skirt called "Golabe" which is used only by the Fons. This is different from the rest because the background is all "Ndep" with spots of red wool. It is important to note also that some recent designers now delight in embroidering designs of the "gong" (hand bell) or lizard all over the

two pieces to match the design on the gowns. This new type suit is a bit on the expensive side.

THE GOWNS

Let us now examine the three types of gowns and their uses :
a) "Paliwa" — For everyday wear. Also used by musketeers in war in our past history and at present used during ceremonial gun firing.



b) "Yadala" — Occasional wear. Same length as "Paliwa" but with long sleeves.



A practical feature of these gowns is the fact that they are roomy and free on the body. Under tropical conditions they permit free circulation of air. They are two openings at the sides of the "Paliwa" from the shoulders to permit access to a raffia or leather bag hung inside. Pockets are never made into the gowns. When the "Yadala" or "Togoh" is worn, a page, usually the son of the most favoured wife bears the bag in which are invariably a drinking cup, cola nuts, pipe and tobacco.



c) "Togoh" — Ceremonial dress. Extraordinarily large with wide long sleeves which hide the hands. Used on state occasions and for dancing.

Most modern designers have indulged in an unscrupulous display of skill but there are three features to which attention should be drawn. The neck design seems to be constant except for variation in the combination of colours. The "gong", a secret sign of authority formerly embroidered only on Chiefs' gowns, now figures very commonly on commoners' gowns. In some parts of the country most older people who know the meaning fight shy of wearing a suit with this design. The shape of a lizard is perhaps more common because no taboo is attached to it. A red moon at the centre of the back of the gown indicates chieftaincy, "Njee Nu" (moon cloth). It is very rare for a commoner to have this pattern worked on his garment; only where a Chief has donated one of his gowns can an ordinary man be seen wearing a suit with this design.

THE CAP

There are four types commonly worn nowadays. These are :

- "Capsih", plain cap woven with black raffia looking more like a Bishop's skull cap.
- The type worn by the boy in the photograph is very common and it is woven from very colourful cottons. The red feather can be worn on any of the two types mentioned above and not on the other types to be mentioned later.
- The "Fucha", looks more like a top hat without fringes but with little horns jutting out from all over the cap.
- The "Fileng" tapers like a pyramid with two flaps over the ears. It is worn only by Chiefs (see photo next page).

Broadly, therefore, this is the outline of the costume but mention must be made of the ingredients that give the finishing touches to a well dressed gentleman. I had mentioned earlier that the ivory bangle, "Long", and glass beads, "Mfa & tu", are worn round the neck. The Cameroonian made and wore ivory bangles before the arrival of foreign traders. Later, the traders improved on them and imported bangles became a valuable article of trade. Beads were in the main imported. They were very important especially the type called "Misasi" which is understood to be found, at present, only with the Fon of Nsaw. A slave was valued at thirty of these "Misasi" beads. Ornamental locally smelted ceremonial cutlasses in scarbards are worn on national occasions and used during dances. Ordinarily, villagers wear a smaller knife, "Minyi



A chief enjoying a smoke

Kob", on their belts everyday. On occasions requiring the firing of guns, a smaller calabash, "To fu Ndiakang", covered with leather and worn about the waist carries a quantity of gun-powder. Tassles made of horse tail for the Chiefs and white sheep skin for the ordinary man add beauty on dance occasions. For the militant, the dane gun is indispensable.

It was recently reported from West Cameroon that at a craft centre in Bafut, Bamenda women embroidering caps and gowns of the Bamenda Costume had during the Prime Minister's visit there presented him with some of their products. This is what Federal Information Service Bulletin N° 2105 of 23rd November, 1962 had to say about the visit :

"At the craft centre run by Bafut women, he saw women at work weaving native caps, baskets, bags and native gowns.

In their address of welcome, the women, asked the Prime Minister to look for a market for their craft. To commemorate the visit the women gave him a woven leather chain and crowned him "Father of the Centre". They also presented him with samples of their work."

There is no reason whatsoever why this craft has been entirely a man's monopoly. Like the Swiss women who weave attractive designs on their skirts and aprons, the Bamenda women have now

INFOCAM - BUEA



*Some attractive designs displayed at the Bamenda Agricultural Show.
Not a bad idea for academic gowns!*

decided to adorn the costumes of their menfolk. It is understood that the Association of all Women's Clubs in West Cameroon is holding an exhibition of suggested designs for Cameroon Women's costumes. I should welcome a report of this exhibition from the members of this club. The anomaly is that hitherto the Bamenda costume has been woven by men and not women. Modern domestic science teachers who are now teaching the art of design to women should lend a helping hand. The Bafut Women Society has set the pace and it is hoped that the education authorities will help pass on this art to the growing generation of girls by including it in the domestic Science Syllabuses. If this is done, the relatively high cost of these garments will be considerably reduced making it possible for the average man to purchase a suit.



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