# KINSHIP VALUES AND THE PRODUCTION OF 'LOCALITY' IN PRE-COLONIAL CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS (WEST CAMEROON)

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ABSTRACT

Igor Kopytoff introduced the concept of the 'African frontier' in the mid 80s, providing scholars of Africa with a powerful tool which helped to overcome scientific and political objections posed by concepts such as 'tribe' or 'ethnic group', though in subsequent decades the paradigm has been subjected to critical scrutiny by major scholars of sub-Saharan Africa. The article begins with a brief outline of Kopytoff's paradigm, summarizing critical assessment of the model and arguing for a shift in conceptual terminology while preserving Kopytoff's most useful insights. This is followed by discussion of the sense in which Appadurai's concepts of 'locality', 'ethnoscape' and 'neighbourhood' fit into the study of the Cameroon Grassfields. Finally, theoretical discussion is augmented by data collected in the region, illustrating how kinship values worked through official discourse (foundational narratives) in order to produce 'locality' in pre-colonial Grassfields. As a result, it is suggested that Appadurai's concepts, initially forged for ethnographies of and in contemporary settings to describe modern societies, also apply to pre-colonial Africa.

Keywords: pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, African frontier, locality, kinship values, foundational narratives, first settlers/late comers

## *Introduction*[1]

In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the official version of history, or foundational narrative, re-presents African communities as homogeneous and ahistorical—a condition commonly attributed to autochthonous people—with static borders, thus projecting a kind of 'reversed image of reality'.[2] This article deals with a specific region of sub-Saharan Africa known as the Cameroon Grassfields, a term that derives from the German colonial period and refers to the well-watered highland savannah region of western Cameroon. As Fowler and Zeitlyn (1996: xx) argue in reference to the area, however: 'identity is constantly reworked' but 'is nonetheless "fixed" in narratives of the past'. Thus the issue that one immediately confronts when studying myths of origin—or, more generally, narratives aspiring to represent the complex pre-colonial state of affairs—is one of terminology

and, of course, use of specific concepts. Terms such as 'community', 'groups', 'chiefdoms', 'polity' and so on are inadequate for they presuppose a congruence between territoriality, language, population and culture. One solution to this vocabulary issue was provided to scholars of Africa by Kopytoff's *The African Frontier* (1987). This is an extremely helpful tool in many respects but needs to be fleshed out for it is too abstract and highly hypothetical. Here, I suggest that an alternative solution to the African-frontier paradigm can be found in Appadurai's work (see in particular Appadurai 1991, 1995).

In the introductory part of this article I sketch a brief definition of Kopytoff's notion of the African frontier before offering a critical assessment of the paradigm which summarizes some of the major critiques made by Africanist scholars; then I look at the paradigm in the light of Appadurai's work, arguing for a shift in concepts and terminology while retaining Kopytoff's insights. This is followed, in the second section, by a discussion of how these modern concepts fit the considered region and era. In the final section I explore how kinship values worked through official discourse (foundational narratives) in order to produce what Appadurai calls 'locality', 'neighbourhoods' and 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1991, 1995) in pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, thus linking this final section with part one and two of the paper. Overall, I suggest that these modern concepts—which were forged for ethnographies of and in contemporary settings to describe modern societies—can also be used to describe pre-colonial African worlds. This should offer an alternative paradigm for the conceptualization and representation of pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields and pre-colonial Africa in general.

## *The paradigm of the 'African frontier'*

### i. Defining the African frontier

Kopytoff initially sketched his 'African frontier' model in a brief paper in 1977 (Miers and Kopytoff [eds] 1977). Four years later, he applied the model to the study of ethnogenesis in a Grassfields chiefdom (Kopytoff 1981; see also Geary 1981). But the full theoretical development of the paradigm is to be found in his famous introduction to a book he edited in 1987 and entitled *The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture* (Kopytoff 1987: 3–84).

The 'African frontier' is constituted of geographical and political areas nestling between organized societies but 'internal' to the larger region in which they are found (Kopytoff 1987: 9). It is the result of a process whereby incipient small societies are generated by other similar societies (ibid.: 3). The new polity thus produced could either stabilize into an integrated society or vanish: 'broken up by internal stresses or absorbed by similar but more successful frontier polities or regional metropoles' (ibid.: 17). This is why Kopytoff assumes that African polities have been 'constructed' out of—human and cultural—'bits and pieces of pre-existing societies' (ibid.: 3). According to this perspective, cultures in Africa spread through time from place to place carrying with them similar cultural baggage and deeply rooted worldviews which enable one to look at the African continent as a coherent cultural system.[3] The agents of this basically similar kit of cultural and ideological resources were what Kopytoff calls frontiersmen: people who, for various

reasons (social, demographic, economic and political) moved out of their kin groups, communities, and polities (Kopytoff 1987: 10).

Kopytoff's African frontier helped scholars of Africa to overcome both the political and scientific objections inherent to the concept of 'tribe', a term which was not only seen by some Africans as pejorative but—more relevant to my argument—was 'analytically inadequate and historically misleading' (ibid.: 3). Although scientific and political-critical assessment of the term had begun in the late 60s, triggered and empowered by the process of decolonization of the African continent (Fried 1966; Helm [ed.] 1968; Southall 1970), no alternative and satisfactory concept was provided by the critics.[4] By switching from a static concept (like 'tribe') which assumes a congruence between space, culture and language, and presupposes isolation and immobility, to a model which underlines processes (interaction, emergence, dissolution), the African frontier offered a powerful alternative analytical category, stood in opposition to 'evolutionary' theories and changed our way of seeing pre-colonial African history.

ii. Critical assessment

Regarding Kopytoff's paradigm, scholars of Africa usually complain about the absence of location of events in time and space and the lack of cultural and environmental contextualization (Guyer and Belinga 1995: 94; MacGaffey 2005: 192; Vansina 1990: 262; Zeitlyn and Connell 2003).[5] In his effort to create a general model accounting for a pan-African political culture Kopytoff separates 'the development of political institutions from all other contexts and from all contingent effects' (Vansina 2004: 185 n. 73). Guyer and Belinga likewise argue: 'By holding the history of material life constant he [Kopytoff] fails to incorporate the extremely rapid growth in knowledge, of cultigens and monies in particular' (Guyer and Belinga 1995: 94). This separation allows Kopytoff to speak of a similar sequence that repeats itself again and again over several millennia, which is unrealistic and thus highly hypothetical and abstract. This separation also results in overemphasizing the political and, subsequently, in underestimating the weight of other institutions and the ideology on which they rest (kinship, ritual, age grades).[6] As MacGaffey puts it, the traits Kopytoff dwells on are all political, making little reference to cosmology, religion, technology or environments (MacGaffey 2005: 192).[7]

For example, Kopytoff notes the relative indifference of Africans 'to rootedness in physical space, together with an indifference to a permanent attachment to a particular place' (Kopytoff 1987: 22); that 'African space is, above all social space', and that 'African "roots" were not conceived to be in a place (…) but in a kin group, in ancestors, in a genealogical position' (ibid.). These are crucial arguments, for mobility is a fundamental feature of Kopytoff's paradigm: 'This social transcendence of purely physical roots certainly contributes to the ease of movement into frontier areas—and it may itself be a frontier-conditioned trait' (ibid.: 23). Although the scholar of Africa feels familiar with such statements he/she may also feel uncomfortable with their generality and high degree of abstraction. Thus, one is compelled to ask, with Vansina: 'How can this relative indifference to rootedness in physical space be explained?' (Vansina 1990: 262). Subsequent studies have put some flesh on the bones of Kopytoff's model. But the evidence he provides in the text itself is ambiguous because the relation of the overall argument

to (specific, particular) traditions often remains unclear. The problem with Kopytoff's thesis is that while most of these facets of tradition (like kinship, rituals, age grades, foundational narratives) constitute part of the model, they are not given the appropriate attention; by considering them as derivatives of the political, he fails to integrate in the analysis their specific interactions with it.[8]

iii. An example: mobility in pre-colonial equatorial Africa

The relative indifference of Africans to rootedness in physical space has to be explained. Vansina touches on this issue in many of his publications where he provides a very helpful analysis of the political organization of pre-colonial equatorial African societies. I will draw on an example taken from Chapter Three of his *Paths in the Rainforests* (Vansina 1990: 71–100). Here, Vansina uses the term 'political organization' in a broad sense (the relation of humans to land, space) not restricting it to institutions of governance. 'Political organization' refers to the composition of three fundamental residential units and their relations, characteristic of pre-colonial equatorial Africa: the house—which constituted the basic level of social organization; the village—which was an aggregate of houses and a unit of settlement; and the district—which was an alliance of houses, rather than of villages; the district was essential for the reproduction of its constituent houses. Although the village was the very foundation of society, it moved; shifting cultivation required migration over small distances every few years (between three and ten years in most cases) within the same territorial domain where the village was located (Vansina 2004: 74). Hence, semi-nomadic settlement was built into the system of agriculture. The constituent houses left to join another settlement, creating a new constellation of houses. Being conscious of the impermanence of villages, equatorial Africans focused on the founding house in a village, attributing to it the same permanence as the house through a metaphoric extension. In other words, impermanence, insecurity and unpredictability in physical life had a counterpart in the cognitive realm. Given these characteristics of the village, collective institutions, activities and ideas which created an *esprit de corps* were crucial: for example, among the Lele of Kasai, age grades more than houses determined the actual structure of a village whereas western Bantu achieved communal cohesion through circumcision ritual. Through these institutions—which are also ideology—the village was perceived as a house on a higher level (Vansina 1990: 79).[9]

One can draw some major conclusions from such an analysis: 1) to be able to understand how people related to space in pre-colonial equatorial Africa, Vansina focuses on specific traditional institutions (house, village, district); 2) it is recognized that they are integrated in a specific system of agriculture; 3) non-political institutions (age grades, circumcision ritual) are taken into account and given the appropriate attention, which allows Vansina to discover that mobility (or absence of rootedness) in physical life was compensated by what we might call an 'ideology of permanence'; therefore the production of space relied heavily on non-spatial, non-scalar mechanisms. In other words, it relies on cognitive processes (ideology): metaphoric extensions and the institutions and the ideology on which they rest, such as circumcision ritual and age grades, for example.

*Appadurai's concepts and their relation to Kopytoff's paradigm*

It seems to me that one of the main weaknesses of Kopytoff's thesis is that by restricting the definition of locality to its spatial, scalar aspects, and by overemphasizing political processes, it fails to take into consideration those non-spatial, non-scalar, non-political mechanisms that produce space. These shortcomings can lead, as shown by the example developed above, to partial representations or mis-representations of pre-colonial Africa. But one cannot transform the paradigm leaving its terminology unchanged. This brings me to the main topic of this essay: the need to switch to another vocabulary, to find more adequate terms and concepts which in turn may support more insightful representations of pre-colonial African worlds, while preserving Kopytoff's main insights.

In contrast to Kopytoff, Appadurai views space ('locality') as primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial. The power of the concept lies precisely in the fact that locality is not reduced to spatiality. Rather, spatiality is one dimension of locality. Thus, locality allows us to speak of spatiality, group formation (localised or not) and temporality, without necessarily implying an isomorphism between 'spatial localization, quotidian interaction and social scale' (Appadurai 1995: 204; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7). In contrast, 'neighbourhood' refers to 'actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized. Neighbourhoods, in this usage, are situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for reproduction.' (ibid.) The use of neighbourhoods suggests 'sociality, immediacy and reproductability without necessary implications for scale, specific modes of connectivity, internal homogeneity and sharp boundaries' (ibid.: 222–223: n. 1). Neighbourhoods all together constitute 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1991), a useful term in that it allows us to overcome the association of 'culture' with spatial boundedness and ethnically homogeneous forms (Appadurai 1995: 208). Actualized locality (neighbourhood) is produced by material and non material means. The building of houses, the making and unmaking of fields and gardens (one could say the system of agriculture in general) belong to the first category whereas rituals and narratives belong to the second.[10] All together these constitute a body of local knowledge which contributes to the production and reproduction of locality (ibid.: 206).[11]

The production of neighbourhoods is an inherently relational process because neighbourhoods are, firstly, opposed to something else. This can be a forest, wasteland or an ocean; if one looks at Kopytoff's African frontier in the light of Appadurai's concepts one can add an 'internal frontier' in Kopytoff's sense to that list—and Kopytoff's 'polity', 'society' or 'community' could be subsumed under the term 'neighbourhood'. Secondly, neighbourhoods derive from other, already produced neighbourhoods. Particular neighbourhoods are always to some extent ethnoscapes because they often recognize that their own logic is a general logic by which others construct similar life-worlds (Appadurai 1995: 208). Kopytoff likewise speaks of the 'African frontier' as 'a process in which incipient small societies are produced by other *similar* and usually more complex societies' (Kopytoff 1987: 3; emphasis added). I shall temporarily end the presentation of Appadurai's concepts and their relation with Kopytoff's paradigm here but shall return to their discussion later. Let me now present some features of pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields and examine in what sense Appadurai's concepts fit in the considered region.

*'Global' aspects of pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields*

i. Pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields: politics, economics and the slave-trade

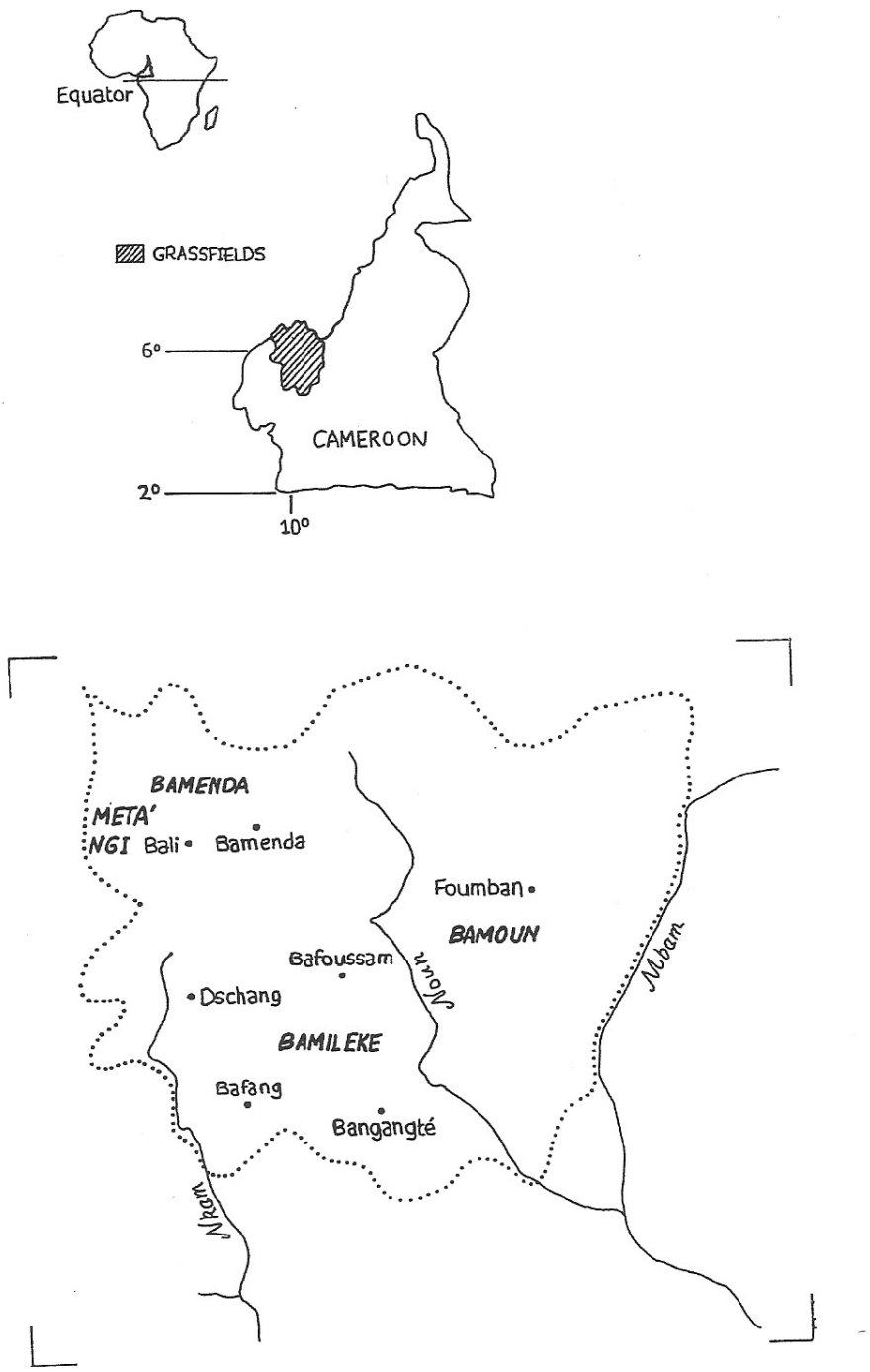
In a preface to a book with contributions from scholars working on Cameroon, Ian Fowler and David Zeitlyn (1996: xviii) write: 'The enormous diversity of Cameroonian culture, language and history is well known. Its geographical position makes it a true African crossroads, a microcosm of the continent.' They add that 'the Grassfields of Cameroon, is itself a microcosm of this microcosm'. There could not be a better way to describe the complex state of affairs that prevailed (and still prevails) in pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields.

The Cameroon Grassfields area roughly corresponds to the present North West and South West provinces of Cameroon (Map 1). Albeit perceptibly different from both its southern forest neighbours and from northern groups on the Adamawa Plateau, the Grassfields was (and still is) far from being homogeneous.

The language density and diversity of the region is the highest in Africa. Linguists attribute this phenomenon to a diversification *in situ* extending over several millennia. Moreover, archaeological findings suggest that the region has been peopled for at least nine thousand years, albeit not necessarily continuously. As Warnier (1984) notes, linguistic and archaeological data reinforce each other in suggesting a continuous and *in situ* peopling extending over a very long period of time, together with a brewing of population. The Grassfields has been linguistically divided into four sub-groups: Momo, Ring, Metchum and Mbam-Nkam. These languages share fifty-five per cent of their basic vocabulary with each other (Hombert 1979), but have distinct noun-classes and tonal systems and are not on the whole mutually intelligible. To give but an example of the linguistic fragmentation: the Mbam-Nkam subgroup comprises no less than twenty eight dialects (Voorhoeve 1971). This linguistic obstacle was overcome by multilingualism and the use of West African pidgin as a vernacular language.[12]

Although patrilineal succession, virilocal marriage and large compound units with sons, brothers and their wives were predominant, a large section of the Bamenda Grassfields practiced matrilineal succession. Yenshu (2005), for example, accounts for a particularly complex situation that prevailed and still prevails among the Kedjom elements incorporated in various Grassfields polities where one observes juxtaposition of patriliny and matriliny.

The region is characterized by a common political institution referred to as 'chieftaincy' or 'chiefdom' in the anthropological, historical and sociological literature. However, these polities varied considerably in the degree of political centralization, ranging from acephalous among the Ide (Masquelier 1978) and the Ngi to highly centralized communities with complex palace hierarchies and elaborate *vie de court* like the Bamoun kingdom (Tardits 1980), the Bamenda Plateau and the Bamileke country chiefdoms. Between these two diametrically opposed types lay communities like the Meta' (Dillon 1973, 1990). The degree of political centralization varied both in space and time according to the local economic specialization of production (craft and agricultural products) and the participation of Cameroon in the global economy, which began with the Atlantic




Map 1. Cameroon and the Cameroon Grassfields

slave trade in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the more centralized the system of governance, the less densely populated a region was.[13]

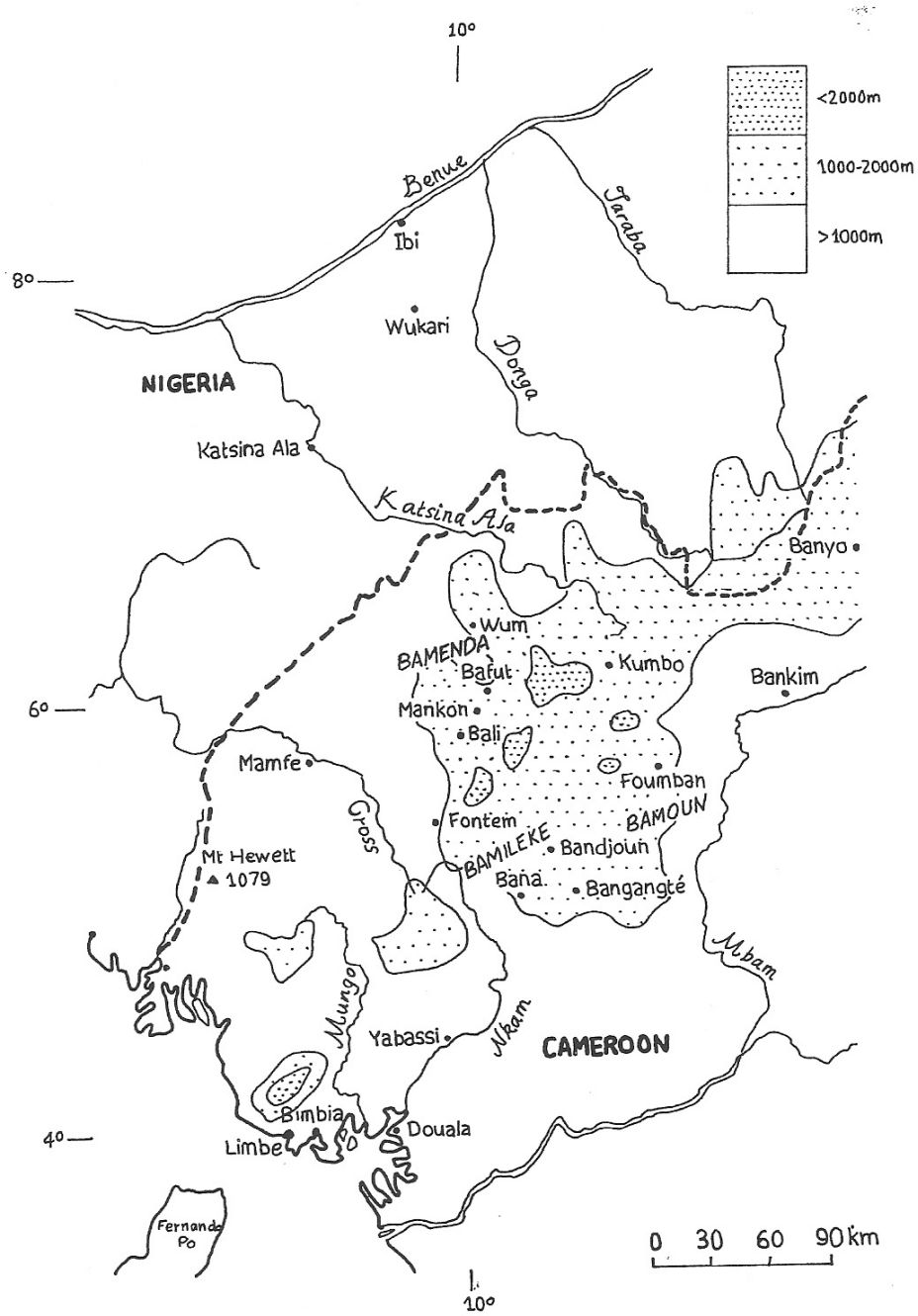
ii. Trade networks in pre-colonial Grassfields

In his 1985 study of economic activity in the Bamenda Grassfields, Warnier demonstrates that the degree of political centralization depended on regional specialization and correlated positively with the degree of insertion of local economies into long-distance trade networks. Making use of the centre/periphery model he shows that regional export-orientated production was structured around two poles: in the centre of the Bamenda Grassfields, the main product and export was iron (all the polities producing iron were in the Ndop Plain: Babungo, Bamessing and Bamenyam), whereas palm oil producers were localized in the western and north western parts of the Grassfields (Oshie, Ngi, Mogamo and Widekum, Metchum valley). In between lay communities specialized in craftwork, crops and cattle (Mankon and its neighbours, and most of the southern Grassfields). Regional production and exchange followed an east-west axis. Specialization was unequal and polities producing iron accumulated wealth at the expense of peripheral communities which produced and exported palm oil. Polities specialized in craftwork, crops and cattle were in an intermediary position. The benefits accumulated through regional trade by the better positioned polities could be converted into commercial capital and used to acquire long-distance trade items (rifles, gun powder, camwood, glass beads, ivory, cowries and of course slaves). In contrast to regional trade, long distance trade conformed to the principles of gift economy. Notables and *fons* ('chiefs') exchanged gift items and in this way created and maintained reciprocal relations as well as relations of dependence. They also controlled access to this network thus preventing citizens of lower condition and peripheral communities from accessing the sphere of prestige goods. This resulted in increasing the initial regional inequalities.

The Grassfields were at the heart of a long distance trade network extending in four directions: Middle Benue to the north, the Adamawa to the north-east, Douala and Calabar to the south-west (Map 2). Goods circulating along these trade routes comprised the same items as listed above.

To Middle Benue in the north, the Kom bought palm oil (produced in the western and north-western Grassfields), rifles (brought from Europe via Douala and Calabar) and slaves on the Bamenda Plateau in exchange for stuffs and other slaves. They kept the rifles whereas slaves were sold on further to the north. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Grassfields traders, mainly from Kom, Wum and Isu, went as far as the Katsina Ala to sell cola nuts (produced in polities of the northern, central and southern Grassfields) in exchange for stuffs, salt, rifles, camwood and glass beads, thus making contact with Tiv traders approximately two hundred kilometres away from their country. Stuffs were sold as far as the Bamenda Plateau and the southern Grassfields in exchange for slaves and rifles.

The Adamawa trade routes linked the communities of the left bank of the Noun River to the entire Grassfields area via Banyo. These routes originated in two main central points: Nso and Foumban. Cola nuts, slaves and ivory were highly valued by the Hausa traders whose caravans reached as far as Foumban, Nte and maybe even Nso and Bafut, and who largely held the Adamawa network by the end of the nineteenth century. In




Map 2. The Cameroon Grassfields in pre-colonial trade networks

exchange they gave glass beads (imported via Banyo), cowries (which, obtained in Kano, were brought to the Grassfields via Nso and Foumban) and stuffs.

Douala and Calabar constituted the main routes of the slave trade, each one in different periods. The Grassfields were first brought into the long distance trade which centred on Douala via the Bamileke country—and probably the Bamoun—as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. The dynamic of this network declined during the nineteenth century and finally gave way to Calabar which by this period had grown to unprecedented proportions (until it was annexed by the Germans in 1884). In the early nineteenth century the Grassfields long-distance trade shifted from Douala to Calabar. During the second half of the nineteenth century Calabar held a central position in a network covering half of the Grassfields region, the Tiv country up to the Katsimbila, the entire Cross basin, the areas under the influence of the Aro Chuku oracle, and the eastern part of the Ibibio country. The Bamenda Plateau exchanged cattle, crops and slaves (via Calabar from 1820–1830 to the early twentieth century) for salt (produced in Mamfe, Basho and Liverpool), rifles (imported via Bangwa-Fontem), and brass rods imported from Calabar.[14] Southern Grassfields traders went as far as the Plateaux's edges where intermediaries exchanged goods and established contact with the inhabitants downstream; occasionally, they even went as far as Calabar (Baikie 1865: 35, cited by Warnier 1985: 169) covering a distance of nearly two hundred kilometres.

### *Population movements, heterogeneous compositions and deterritorialization: endogenous and exogenous factors*

As mentioned earlier, the Grassfields have been characterized by continuous population movements spanning a very long period of time. However, I will focus here on demographic expansion and contraction and population movements that occurred from the seventeenth century onward until the dawn of the colonial era.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century (Warnier 1985: 151, 1989: 9) the southern Grassfields (and probably the south part of the Bamoun country) fed the Atlantic slave-trade first via Duala (from 1614 to 1670) then via Calabar (1820–1830 up to the early twentieth century). The Bamenda were drawn into the long-distance trade networks during the nineteenth century (Warnier 1985) via Calabar. The insertion of the region into the global economy resulted in a process of depopulation whereby social cadets were abducted for sale by elders from their own kin (Warnier 1989).[15] This resulted in increased insecurity, triggering 'an ever-increasing displacement of a population of disenfranchised people seeking security in escape and independent resettlement' (Argenti 2007: 44). What followed was a perpetual movement of people and the creation of polities with composite, heterogeneous populations. Thus, in the southern Grassfields chiefdom where I conducted fieldwork, more than twenty per cent of the lineage heads present in the chiefdom by the late nineteenth century came from another polity. Moreover, twenty-seven per cent of married women at the end of the nineteenth century came from chiefdoms other than their husbands. This is very close to the average number of thirty per cent of non-local wives calculated upon the basis of 60–70 genealogies collected by Warnier and Rowlands from a number of Grassfields chiefdoms (Rowlands 2008 [1987]: 61; Warnier 1985: 198).

Conversely, the population was much more homogeneous among the acephalous Ide and Ngi and the less centralized Meta' studied by Dillon (Dillon 1973, cited by Warnier 1985: 198). This suggests that population composition was largely determined by the degree of insertion of each community into the world economy.

Thus, heterogeneity and fluidity was a result of exogenous factors as well as features of the social organization itself. To give but a few examples: according to patrilineal succession that prevails in the region with the (matrilineal) exceptions already mentioned, only one son inherited all the assets, both material and immaterial: the whole compound, the rights and prerogatives, the mediate position between the living and the ancestors, the title(s), the right to participate in the secret society of which his father was a member, and finally his social status. Consequently, all the other males of the lineage had to make their own way in life. This resulted in creating a contingent of male social cadets (Warnier 1996, 1989) comprising men who were exploited by senior elders and could never marry, thereby being condemned never to achieve adulthood.[16] Secondly: post-marital residence being virilocal (in the majority of cases), many women not only married outside their community of origin but also took a young male agnate with them; consequently each external marriage entailed the movement of two people (Warnier 1975: 378; Pradelles de Latour 1996: 139). Finally: in the southern Grassfields scholars acknowledge several processes of lineage segmentation. According to the first, an agnatic descendent of the fourth generation (if not the successor of his father) is considered the starting point of a new segment (Barbier 1977; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 52–53; Hurault 1962: 31; Tardits 1960: 29–30; Tsékénis 2000: 59). According to the second process, which Pradelles de Latour (1986: 122–125) terms 'segmentation by derivation', when a male agnate enrolled as a servant of the *fon* (and provided that his own father was not a servant of the palace) and was awarded a notability title for his services, he gave his descendents the 'praise name' given to all the offspring of palace servants, and not his own (Pradelles de Latour 1986: 123; Tsékénis 2000: 59).[17] In a third process of segmentation, a fourth-generation male agnate descending from the lineage of the *fon* lost the right to give the palace's praise name to his offspring (unless he was rewarded with a notability title), thus this process, which Pradelles de Latour (1986: 122–125) has labelled 'segmentation by elimination', delineated the royal lineage which could not therefore proliferate as in other African kingships.

All these resulted in the heterogeneous composition of the Grassfields polities, their moving frontiers/borders, the perpetual disengagement and resettlement of groups and, thus, a continuous process of deterritorialization (which explains, at least in part, the ongoing preoccupation with autochthony). This also accounts for the understanding of how the 'local' was conceptualized and how the 'local' was linked to the 'regional'. Considering this situation, which were the mechanisms that produced 'communities'?

### *Producing 'communities': kinship as metaphor and the production of locality*

Grassfields polities are actualizations and reworking of a common core of ideas, forms and practices. The first settlers/late comers oppositional trope is part of this common core. Hence, although my first hand data refers to a single 'village' (in fact a polity) located in the southern Grassfields, this opposition was and still is extremely widespread in the whole

region although it is not always founded on the same kinship values (see next section). Because my conclusions derive from the analysis of oral tradition (foundational narratives), ritual practices and the values of kinship and marriage, I shall give a brief description of Grassfields kinship before turning to analysis of the foundational narratives.

Scholars dealing with kinship in the Grassfields do not feel at ease when it comes to defining its nature. To limit the argument to the southern part of the region (Bamileke), scholars disagree whether Bamileke kinship is a patrilineal or dual descent system and most emphasize agnatic relations. For example, Tardits (1960) calls the Bamileke bilinear but discusses only agnatic descent. Hurault (1962) describes the Bamileke kinship system as if it were double descent but warns that Bamileke lineages, particularly the patrilineage, are not 'true' lineages; his discussion of descent nonetheless emphasizes the 'more evident patrilineal ties'. Den Ouden (1987: 6) describes kinship among the Tsa and Ngong chiefdoms in Bamboutos district as 'a limited patrilineal descent system', while Pradelles de Latour writes:

> In Bangwa the *lineage* (in the strict sense of the term: corporate group or unilineal descent group) is *patrilineal* given that its continuity is secured (…) by the transmission of goods, titles and duties from father to son, but the *lineage group*, the *actual social unit*, is *cognatic* as it includes the descendants—either through men or women—linked, by three consecutive generations, to a common male ancestor. (1996: 43; emphasis added).

More than reflecting an undetermined ambiguity these interpretations reflect the complex fact that the Bamileke kinship system cannot be grasped in binary terms but, rather, as constituted by three kinds of 'groups' which overlap, namely: a group defined by agnation, a second defined by matriliny, and a third defined by uterinity (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Pradelles de Latour 1996; Tsékénis 2000).[18] These ways of belonging are expressed, amongst others, in the nature of the relations between kinsmen, in the nature of what is transmitted (either material or immaterial) through each of these lines, and in kinship terminology. Thus, for example, from the strict viewpoint of kinship terminology, all agnatic descendents (men and women) of a common male ancestor theoretically hold the praise name (which is similar to a Western surname) of this ancestor and, by extension, of their father. The praise names thus delineate a group of agnates. But each person also receives the praise name of his mother's father and is therefore incorporated, through these terms of address, into the lineage of his maternal grandfather. Belonging to two groups is also manifest in the attribution of surnames (*ze la'* or 'village name' in Batié; *ze püe* in Bangwa) and in terms of designation (Tsékénis 2000: 61–64).

More important for my argument are other widespread features of Grassfields kinship. It is acknowledged that Grassfielders concentrate on agnatic links when discussing inheritance while they emphasize matrilineal bonds when referring to supernatural sanctions. These relations are not equally valued, for practices akin to ancestorship reveal that matrilateral ancestors are feared more than patrilateral ones. Offerings and sacrifices to the former occur more frequently because they are considered more efficient (Brain 1972: 167; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 51, 54, 80; Rowlands 2008 [1987]: 58–59; Pradelles de Latour 1994: 31, 1996: 40–41; Warnier 2009: 54–55; Tsékénis 2000: 112). This must be put in relation to the superiority of wife-givers over wife-takers, an asymmetrical relation that encompasses both the living and the dead. Indeed the crucial role of the mother's

father (a wife-giver for Ego) is acknowledged by the majority of scholars working in the Grassfields.[19] In addition to the sacrifices and/or offerings made to one's matrilineal ancestors, the mother's father appears to be a central figure in every male adult's life. Good or ill health depends on whether certain ritual obligations have been fulfilled towards one's mother's father and/or his lineage group. But the most important thing that one has to keep in mind is that wife-givers also subordinate wife-takers as ancestors (Brain 1972: 167; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 94; Pradelles de Latour 1996: 22–23, 27; Rowlands 2008 [1987]: 58; Tsékénis 2000: 94). These are crucial features of Grassfields kinship because, as we shall further see, the position of the *fon* vis-à-vis the 'autochthons' in the political-ritual sphere was comparable to the position of a son-in-law (wife-taker) vis-à-vis his father(s)-in-law in the kinship system.

*Comparative extensions: kinship, politics and ritual in southern and northern Grassfields*

The quantity and quality of monographs accumulated since the 60s allows us to proceed to a comparative study of the first settlers/late comers opposition through the myths of origin and the associated rituals (enthronization, biannual ritual cycle and fertility rites), as much as their correspondence with kinship values.

i. Southern Grassfields: predominance of the autochthons as fathers-in-law over chiefs as sons-in-law[20]

*The foundational narratives*: The myth of origin goes like this: an immigrant hunter establishes himself through gifts of wild game and marries an autochthonous woman (Brain 1972: 14; Malaquais 2002: 84; Pradelles de Latour 1996: 147; Tsékénis 2010a).[21] Feldman-Savelsberg mentions that in the myth of Bangangté the hunter is given only land (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 205 n. 2).[22] Women offered by the autochthons, however, are not to be seen as counter-gifts for wild game, as the majority of the studies implicitly suggest. Firstly this would be equating women with game and, secondly, it would run counter to the superordinate position of wife-givers over wife-takers expressed in Grassfields kinship. This initial 'exchange' is asymmetrical (Tsékénis 2000, 2010b). This is important to notice because the subordinate position of the hunter-chief, often obfuscated, rests precisely on this kinship relation. The western Bangwa myth differs slightly from the four other myths since it mentions 'a group of forest hunters searching for game and slaves'; the group of hunters 'consisted of a *chief* and his family, and a retinue of nine loyal servants (…) the *"Nine" of the Night society*' (Brain 1972: 13–14; emphasis added). The hunter settles and starts attracting people to him through his generosity, and finally, by ruse and/or violence drives out the indigenous chiefs or converts them into sub-chief status (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 205 n. 2; Malaquais 2002: 85; Pradelles de Latour 1996: 149–150; Tsékénis 2010a: 148–151). The myth of Batié contains a supplementary sequence which further illuminates the nature of the relation between the hunter-chief (son-in-law) and the autochthons (fathers-in-law). Indeed, it is said that a curse sent by the original heads of autochthonous lineages, which caused his wife to give birth to dead new-borns, compelled the twelfth *fon* of the dynasty to make offerings to the successors

of the autochthons and restore all their original prerogatives. The offerings consist of spouses and matrimonial gifts (palm oil and a goat), thus explicitly identifying the *fon* to a son-in-law and, reciprocally, the autochthons to his fathers-in-law. These offerings were reiterated by every newly installed *fon* until the late 70s.[23]

*The associated rituals*: The rituals which are highly relevant to the relations between the autochthons and the *fon* are the rites of enthronization, the biannual ritual cycle and the rites of fertility. In Bangwa and Batié the ritual of enthronization points out to the superordinate position of the 'Nine' and the heads of the autochthonous lineages, who are literally said to be the 'king makers' (Adler 1982), and conversely had the power to depose or even kill (un-make) him (Pradelles de Latour 1996: 176–183; Tsékénis 2010b; also Tardits 1965: 181 for the Bamoun kingdom).[24]

The majority of the Grassfields polities performed (and some of them still perform) collective initiation rites that lasted two years. The first year (*nggu kang* 'year of the *kang*') was dedicated to the initiation of young boys into adulthood whereas the following year (*nggu njang* 'year of the *njang*') was dedicated to the initiation of young girls who have had their first menstruations (Batié, Bangwa, Bandjoun). These were extremely important rites not only because of the number of people involved and their extended duration but also because they were a prerequisite to marriage. In other words, girls and boys could not marry unless they had gone through the biannual ritual cycle. Crucial for my argument is that in all the known and recorded cases these rites were initiated by the heads of the autochthonous lineages. Moreover, along with the boy's initiation (during the year of the *kang*) the initiation of young princes (descendents of the *fons* lineages) to the *Nye* society took place. Thus, the symbolic and biological reproduction of generations was initiated by the autochthons; and the incorporation of young princes into their exclusive initiation society was preceded by the opening of the *nggu kang*.

In Bandjoun, a ceremony takes place every year at the end of the dry season which is performed in order to 'call the rain'. The protagonists of these fertility rites belong both to the royal and the autochthonous lineages (Malaquais 2002: 91). In western Bangoua some of the autochthonous lineages 'provide the chiefs with cult officers, particularly in the *kungang* fertility rites' (Brain 1972: 14).

ii. Northern Grassfields: predominance of autochthons as fathers over chiefs as sons

In this section I will draw heavily on the studies published by Yenshu (2003, 2005) on the Kedjom of Kom and complement this input with relevant material from Warnier (1975) on the Mankon.

The Kedjom are people who have been scattered over the past five hundred years within an area delineated as the Iron belt (Warnier 1982; Warnier and Fowler [eds] 1979).[25] This geographical dispersion is the result of constant shifts in settlement and dynastic disputes. The Kedjom are integrated into the Grassfields economy as smiths, herdsmen, highland farmers and skilled craftsmen, principally wood sculptors. Oral tradition explains that the Kedjom dispersed 'either as founders of new polities (…), as important components of some polities (…) or simply as segments within other groups." (Yenshu and Ngwa 2001: 599). Kedjom elements in Kom claim that the royal (Kom) lineage (which, it must be noted, is matrilineal) stands in the relation of 'child' to their clan (*wain ndo*). The Kedjom

head clan holds the title of *Bofon*, lit. 'father figure to the *fon*' (Yenshu and Ngwa 2001: 606).[26] Furthermore, we are told that within the polity of Kom 'Kedjom identity (…) is mediated through a variety of claims, practices and positions' most important of them being the 'claims to *first settlers* and historical memory' (ibid.: 607; emphasis added).[27] One informant illustrates the importance of the Kedjom clan in Kom by referring to the crucial role played by the Abei compound, seat of the titular 'fathers' of Kom *fons* in the following terms:

> The compound is one of the most important Kedjom compounds. The Fon is obliged to visit it. Fon Yibain refused to visit it but he was pleading to be taken there when he was on his deathbed. The compound head gave him wine to drink from his cup and he got well. He had asked to be taken to see his father before he died. He lived for some time again before he died. (ibid.: 607–608)

In a footnote we are told: 'In ritual symbolism of Kedjom and Kom, vitality or life force is transmitted from father to offspring through the sharing of a drink from the same cup, with the father drinking first and the handing the cup to his son.' (ibid.: 608 n. 7).

Among the Mankon of the Bamenda Grassfields, one version of their origin myth goes like this:

> One day came *Mbangno*. When he arrived he was not *fon*. He was only an ordinary man. He was generous and what he possessed he shared. When men go hunting he did not follow them. He stayed home and cultivated his plantain. When the hunters came back to the village after the hunt he called them: 'Why don't you come say hello to me when you pass by my house, after the hunt? Fathers, can't you seat inside your child's house?' He bought food and gave it to them. This happened every time they returned from hunting. In those days there was no *fon* in Mankon. But the elders decided that there ought to be only one man to speak to them, and that they would listen to him. They looked for candidates and found three. They hesitated, but the ones in favour of the Hero grew more and more.
>
> The elders thus became acquainted to gather inside *Mbangno Zen*'s house. Each of them would bring his bag containing the iron gong (associated with the ritual power of *Takingo*), and they would all play their music. The Hero would not join them. He was terrified. The elders decided that if this was to continue each of them had better take his bag and his gong and go his way. Being afraid of the gong *Mbangno Zen* sent his eldest brother, *Ndifomukongo*, to represent him [at the gatherings]. Neither the hero nor even his successor *Angwa'fo* I (who died around 1825) ever saw the gong. It was only under the reign of *Fomukongo* (approx. 1825–1875) that the *fon* made the payments (*tsam*) for his elder (*ndi*), and acquired a gong. The elder's name was *Ndifomukongo.* (Warnier 1975: 406–407)

One striking difference between the origin myths found in the southern Grassfields is that the founder of the Mankon dynasty is a farmer whereas the autochthons are described as hunters—which represents a complete inversion of the southern Grassfields pattern. Nonetheless, here too, as in Kom, the *fon* is perceived as subordinated to the autochthons by virtue of his position as a 'cadet' vis-à-vis his 'seniors', which in turn rests on the son/father relation. Therefore whereas the superior position of the autochthons vis-à-vis the *fon* is founded in the southern Grassfields on a relation of affinity, it is formulated in genealogical terms in the northern area.

*Foundational narratives and kinship values*

There are at least two ways of reading a polity's foundational narratives (FN): the first I would call 'cultural' in that it draws the attention to culturally relevant ideas/images; it is the official version of local history, here of the rulers who are also the late comers. A second way I would term 'critical' in that it includes subaltern voices, here the first settlers or autochthons, and the chiefdom's subjects in general (the critical reading includes sources such as archaeological findings, colonial records, genealogies confirming or invalidating official narratives). Analysis of the literal meaning of the FN tells us that the polity is founded upon the relations linking an (originally wandering) hunter with local chiefs (autochthons). These relations are of two sorts: a political relation (mediated through the value of agnation) where the hunter-chief subordinates the local chiefs who become his vassals;[28] and a relation of affinity according to which the hunter-chief, perceived as a son-in-law, is subordinated to the local chiefs who are reciprocally perceived as his fathers-in-law. These two relations are not equally valued: indeed, the value of affinity and hence the corresponding relation is hierarchically superior to the political relation founded on agnatic filiation. In other words, the ruler (hunter-chief) is superior to the local chiefs only on a subordinate level whereas the local chiefs are superior on a superordinate level and inferior (to the chief-hunter) on an inferior level only (Fig. 1). This kind of relation is what Dumont (1966, 1983) calls 'encompassment of the contrary'. Note that according to this logic, identities are the result of relations and they change according to the context-level, e.g. the type of relation considered.[29]

| **Values of the opposition** | **Oppositions** | **Hierarchical levels** |
|---|---|---|
| Affinity and ritual | Autochthons (fathers-in-law)>hunter (son-in-law) | HL I |
| Agnation and political relations | Chief >Sub-chiefs | HL II |

Figure 1. 'Hierarchic relation' between the hunter/chief and the autochthons/vassals.

Let me turn now briefly to a critical reading of the FNs. Suffice is to say that as one can also read in many other ethnographies of the region and of West Africa in general, the FNs are constructed in such a way that the local chiefs (autochthons) are de-historicized or, in Kopytoff's words, 'the history of chieftaincy in terms of the politics of precedence

becomes independent of the local histories of precedence' (1987: 122). Identity is fixed in official *narratives* of the past although in *practice* it is constantly reworked (Ardener [1967: 298] spoke of a 'ceaseless self-classification' in the Grassfields), and in this sense, the discontinuities between the pre-colonial situation and the present are less salient than in other cases: the FNs (for associated rituals see Tsékénis 2010b) produced their own historicity. Moreover, by being mute on the small-scale conquest wars against neighbouring chiefdoms, they projected the image of a homogeneous population and of static frontiers. However, as always happens, official discourse was (and still is) contested—albeit not overtly—by informal narratives expressed by subjugated local chiefs (autochthons) and other notables (Warnier 1984: 399–400; 1975 for the Bamenda Plateau).[30]

### *Conclusion: the production of locality in pre-colonial Grassfields*

When the hunter-chief who—according to the official narrative—founded the polity arrived in the region, the local communities were organized in a way we could label 'proto-chiefdoms'. Batié's autochthons were themselves hunters that had found 'indigenous' people in place (see also Tsékénis 2010a). We can date these first encounters back to the beginning of the fifteenth century approximately.[31] Hence, today's autochthons had been themselves conquerors in a distant past, and this occurred in other Grassfields polities as well (see Brain 1972: 4 for the western Bangwa and Malaquais 2002: 88 n. 76 for Bandjoun). What seems to happen then is that the oppositional trope first settlers/late comers is both diachronic and translocal (transregional). In Appadurai's words this narrative (and the rituals associated with it—see Tsékénis 2010b) is 'local' and 'regional' knowledge of how to produce locality (Appadurai 1995: 206). Each of the Grassfields polities is an actualization of this knowledge, what Appadurai calls: a 'neighbourhood'. Foundational narratives can be seen as a dimension of locality.

Drawing on critiques addressed to Kopytoff by major scholars of Africa, I argued for both changes of the 'African frontier' which would improve its powerful insights, and a shift in terminology which might support more accurate representations of pre-colonial African life-worlds.

A second aim of the paper was to understand both how locality (or at least one of its means of production) was conceptualized through foundational narratives in a 'polity' (a 'neighbourhood'); that is, how it is actualized in a particular place (the specific values and relations by which it is produced). Furthermore—through careful comparison—to account for its extension in space and time; that is, its 'global', or rather, regional dimension. In this effort to understand both the local and the regional, and how they relate, I made use of two apparently contradictory paradigms. Indeed, the local was interpreted in structuralist terms and, more precisely, in Dumontian terms, through the idea of 'hierarchical opposition' (Dumont 1966, 1983) whereas I tried to conceive of the regional through postmodern concepts. But the paradox is only apparent, for in the present article the idea of 'hierarchy' does not refer to the 'essence' of a particular place but 'reflects the temporary *localization* of ideas from *many* places' (Appadurai 1988: 46; original emphasis).

Finally: 1) I suggested that discourses concerning 'globalization' and 'indigenous' peoples usually thought to be characteristic of the post-colonial period, have analogies with discourses that precede the advent of European colonialism and industrial capitalism. 2) I adopted Appadurai's ideas in order to show that pre-colonial African worlds can be described using concepts usually found in ethnographies of and in contemporary settings to describe the contemporary world. These suggestions should help guard against the problematic use of various 'oppositional tropes like then/now, before/after, small/large, bounded/unbounded, stable/fluid, etc that implicitly oppose ethnographies of and in the present to ethnographies of and in the past' (Appadurai 1995: 207).

## NOTES

[1] This article is an extended version of a paper delivered at the Finnish Anthropology Conference (*Ideas of Value: Inquiries in Anthropology*) held in Helsinki in May 11–12 2010. I would like to thank the conference organizers and particularly Laura Huttunen for offering me the opportunity to present my work.

[2] See for example the contributions of Nancy Fairly, Chet Lancaster, William Murphy & Caroline Bledsoe, Randall Packard, Lee Cassanelli and Sandra Barnes in Kopytoff (ed.) 1987.

[3] This persistence of the idea of Africa's cultural unity has been linked at times to political arguments concerning the place of Africa in a post-colonial world (Grinker and Steiner [eds] 1997: xxvii).

[4] Terms such as 'ethnic group' or 'ethnicity' were in fact used in African studies until the 90s, often with a similar content as 'tribe' (Ekeh 1990: 661, 663; Fardon 1987: 171, 173; Lentz 1995: 305). One major reaction to colonial social anthropology (Ekeh 1990: 671–672) which occurred in the 50s and lasted throughout the 60s was the intellectual movement of the Ibadan School of social history led by African social historians such as Kenneth Dike and J. F. Ade Ajayi (Ajayi 1961; Dike 1956; Dike and Ajayi 1968).

[5] Zeitlyn and Connell (2003: 120) also touch on the issue of specific localization in space and time in Kopytoff's paradigm arguing that political and linguistic histories often have different trajectories in space and time.

[6] One can of course reverse the 'causal relation' and argue that the biased overemphasis on the political sphere results in 'extracting' it from its contexts. Kinship for example is seen as determined by the types of political organization in such a way that Kopytoff interprets their relation in evolutionary terms although his model in general is 'anti-evolutionary' (Kopytoff 1987: 17).

[7] This focus on power fits the idea of 'wealth-in-people', a concept which was first used by Miers and Kopytoff (1977) on the basis of equatorial Africa ethnography and history and which 'migrated' in ways that lost it its connection to this specific region. The idea of 'wealth in people' describes the well-documented fact that in pre-colonial equatorial Africa 'interpersonal dependents of all kinds—wives, children, clients and slaves—were valued, sought and paid for at considerable expense in *material* terms' (Guyer and Belinga 1995: 92; emphasis added). According to this concept, people were valued because pre-colonial Africa was relatively underpopulated thus making labour (and not land, as in the case of Eurasia) the scarce factor in production. This concept was highly compatible with the 'lineage mode of production' which identified lineage and gender/generational inequality as the fundamental structural principles of society (ibid.: 91). For a critical account of the 'wealth in people' concept and its relation to the 'lineage mode of production' see Guyer and Belinga 1995. See also note 12.

[8] Hence, in a preceding article the detailed study of a specific kinship system and its relation to the foundational narratives in a chiefdom of the southern Grassfields revealed that authority as much as power was crucial for the understanding of the way the first settlers/late comers (one of the main characteristics of the 'African frontier') opposition worked (Tsékénis 2010a).

[9] Linguistic evidence for this is the shift in the meanings of terms designating 'house', 'village' and 'kin group'; each term may shift from one of these meanings to the others (Vansina 1990: 79).
[10] For an insightful study of the production of locality by material means in the Cameroon Grassfields see Warnier 2009.
[11] I think that reflecting on pre-colonial Africa in terms of local knowledge has a lot to offer. The idea of 'wealth in knowledge' developed by Guyer (1993) and Guyer and Belinga (1995) for pre-colonial equatorial Africa could be easily and fruitfully imported into the Cameroon Grassfields. A focus on knowledge allows one to restore a balance between accumulative/quantitative and compositional/qualitative aspects. For example, Guyer and Belinga argue that several pre-colonial practices and institutions cannot be explained exclusively through the idea of 'wealth in people' *en vogue* in the 70s and 80s. According to these authors, the concept of 'wealth in people' has to be complemented with the idea of 'wealth in knowledge'. Their combination allows for a better understanding of precolonial African worlds.
[12] According to Warnier (1985: 5; 1980) half the population of the Bamenda Plateau was bilingual at the beginning of the colonial era.
[13] Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century population density was low in the extremely centralized and elaborated Bamoun kingdom (eastern Grassfields; 8–10 people per square kilometre), medium in the Bamileke region (southern Grassfields; 30–40 people per square kilometre), high in Ngi (80 people per square kilometre) whereas Metchum and Wum were underpopulated and even depopulated (Warnier 1984: 403).
[14] According to Warnier's informants brass rods first appeared in the Bamenda Plateau around 1870 (Warnier 1985: 167).
[15] Warnier (1989: 10) estimates that 0.5 per cent of the Grassfields total population—three hundred thousand—left its homeland in caravans which represents no less than fifteen thousand individuals per year.
[16] Part of this contingent fed the Atlantic slave-trade. Thus what I call 'endogenous factors' cannot be clearly separated from 'exogenous factors' for there is an obvious synergy between social structures, the slave-trade and long-distance trade.
[17] *Ndap* in Bangangté, *ndé* in Bangwa, *mku'* in Batié. The praise names are predetermined, and correspond to the social categories constituting the polity: notables, servants, smiths and commoners (see also Tardits 1965: 178). Praise names belong to what anthropological literature of kinship has labelled 'terms of address'.
[18] One could add a fourth group, defined by rules of exogamy in cognatic terms, which differs from patrilineal and matrilineal groups (Pradelles de Latour 1996: 43, 139; Tsékénis 2000: 67). The uterine group differs from the matrilineage because it does not involve the inheritance of property, custodianship of skulls, or succession to office (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 54).
[19] The MF is *taaryiy* in Nso, where the term means 'donor of one's mother' (Chilver 1991, 5); *tama* among the Mankon (Warnier 1975; 2009); *ti li* among the Kedjom Keku (Yenshu 2005: 169); *tankap* in western and southern Grassfields (Brain 1972 and Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Pradelles de Latour 1996; Tsékénis 2000).
[20] Chiefdoms of Batié, Bangwa, western Bangwa, Bangangté and Bandjoun.
[21] The generic word for 'hunter' is *ndjumvem* in Batié and *njôvüp* in Bangwa.
Although the foundational narratives focus on the deeds of the hunter and his descendants they also mention that he is accompanied by other people: wives, kinsmen, servants, followers. These people are 'forgotten' in the course of the narrative.
[22] Notice that this was a prerogative of *fons*.
[23] This was a crucial sequence in the ritual of enthronement. A similar offering is mentioned by Warnier (2009: 177).
[24] Rowlands (2008 [1987]: 56) writes: 'There have been cases in the past where *fons* have behaved anti-socially (i.e. in their own interest) and have been deposed and even killed.' In the Bamoun kingdom the *Tangu* 'father of the country' was the head of a judicial and repressive institution (Tardits 1973: 45).

[25] According to Yenshu (2003: 614) the Kedjom have no myth or legend of origin. Nevertheless, they are mentioned in foundational narratives of the polities of which they often constitute a fundamental component as in Kom and Nso.
[26] In terms of kinship structure some Kedjom families and classes have been integrated into the Kom matrilineal system while others have maintained the nucleated patrilineal kinship system characteristic of the Kedjom (Yenshu and Ngwa 2001: 606–607).
[27] Most informants interviewed by Yenshu 'were of the opinion that the Kedjom were the original inhabitants of the area', but interestingly enough 'this claim does not (…) lead to other claims of the autochthony type' (ibid.: 607).
[28] For a similar configuration of values see Rowlands 2008 [1987]. From the available monographs to date it looks like this hierarchic relation is common to most of the Grassfields chiefdoms. This is suggested—although not in exactly the same terms—only by one scholar, Rowlands (2008 [1987]).
[29] From a political perspective (which is mediated by the value of agnation) the chief is logically superior to his vassals; but by virtue of the relation of affinity which links them, the chief as a son-in-law is inferior to his vassals as they are at the same time his fathers-in-law. Identity is plural and changes according to context and level (the value accorded to the specific context).
[30] The following narratives of migration which I recorded in Batié during fieldwork conducted from 1995 to 1997 are extremely widespread throughout the Cameroon Grassfields:
Narrative I: 'I left *Nggum* [a village in the actual department of Haut-Nkam] accompanied by my spouses and several kinsmen. We arrived in Batié under the reign of *Ndjabunkèm* or *Fô Yuayi*; I first founded my compound in *Ka' Fèm Nggum* [one of the traditional quarters of the chiefdom] which was renamed *Fèm Nggum* [empty place left by *Nggum*] because of the void my peoples created by deserting the place. We finally established the compound in *Lek*'; Narrative II: 'I am a son of a Bapa chief and left my village for the chiefdom of Bansoa after a dynastic dispute. The frequent small-scale wars caused great losses among my people and so I left Bansoa and found the compound in the chiefdom of Bangam [north of *Djengu*, a quarter of Batié] and then in *Hiala* (*Ndzan*), near the compound of *Ngwâmbé Te* [great notable of Batié], then in *Ka' Fèm Nggum* and finally in the actual place.'; Narrative III: 'I am the son of a Bangam chief (…) I left Bandja and sojourned in Bamendjou with my kinsmen where twenty four of my children were sold [e.g. as slaves] that is why we left Bamendjou for Batié where we definitively chose to live.'
Following Warnier (1984: 399–400) such narratives should not be taken at face value as they often express the distribution of local and regional of power rather than refer to actual migrations.
[31] If indigenization is to be defined as 'a process of rooting and (…) a general process of identification (…) that is not dependent upon whether or not one is indigenous in terms of standard definition' (Friedman 2000: 605) then, clearly, the FNs refer to a rhetoric of indigenization.

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