

*Ntok ebkuo*

A Western Grassfields' Palace (Cameroon)

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Abstract. – The author describes the organisation and functions of the royal palace of Oku, a small kingdom in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The palace and its institutions are at the centre of the kingdom. In Oku, the palace is referred to as the “intestines of the country.” After looking at the various sections of the palace, the author shows how each section is organised. He deals with the four sections of the Oku palace, viz. the *kwifon*, the *ngele*, the section of the Fon's wives, and the Fon's section. The position of the King or Fon is epitomised as the leading ritualist of the kingdom. In the second part of the article, the author describes in detail two palace rituals: the grass cutting ceremony and the planting of guinea corn. [Cameroon, Western Grassfields, Oku Kingdom, royal palace, organisation and functions of palace institutions, palace rituals].

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In the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, a palace refers to any house or set of houses owned and occupied by the Fon, King, or Chief with his wives and children. In Oku, it is both where the King lives and where he lived before his enthronement. It also includes any recent home built by the King, as in Nso', for resort or as a farmhouse. A palace is the first home of the clan that takes the lead in a migration process. Wherever the clan settles,

the first home is built for the leader of the clan who is the King or Fon. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the clan leader in Oku was known as *Baba*. When the term Fon was finally introduced, the Fons became known as *Baba əbfon*. The first home in any settlement constructed by the group for their leader immediately becomes the palace and the centre of the settlement, known in Oku as *əbtoo ketum* (intestines of the country). Those who were accompanying the leader start setting up their own homes in the immediate surroundings of the palace permitting the palace to be literally central.

Although palaces are supposed to be the first settlements in any Western Grassfields community, most, if not all, aborigines were robbed of the right to govern by those who came later and controlled a good number of people. In Oku the first settlers were the Ntul under the leadership of Baba Kentum; in Nso' it is believed that the Ndzəndzəv were in Kumbo (Kimbo') before the present ruling dynasty came; in Kom, it is said that before the ruling class was installed, the people of the present Kedjem were already in Belo. When the Kom started expanding from Laikom, their first place of settlement, the Kedjem were overpowered in a fight and sent off. That is exactly how most new dynasties established themselves.

The palace type that will be discussed in this article is the Fon's, King's, or Chief's current home. I will be looking at the various sections of the palace, how each section is organised, and at the palace decorum. Also of importance in