



## The Establishment of the Princes' Society in Oku, Cameroon

### An Enhancement of Traditional Culture or Its Adulteration?

Hermann Gufler and Njakoi John Bah

**Abstract.** – In this article the authors give a detailed account of the introduction and historical vicissitudes of the growth and development of one key political, ritual, and performative element of Oku society. The princes' society in Oku (*ɲgele*) was introduced from the fraternal chiefdom of Nso' in the late 1940s. The interplay of ongoing interchiefdom relations and the exchange of performance of associations involved in the triangular relationship between neighbouring groups and the administration are brought to light in the context of this tale of *ɲgele*. Since the authors were dealing with relatively recent historical events they were able to use good oral testimonies as well as administrative and judicial documents. [*Cameroon, Western Grassfields, Oku Kingdom, palace institutions, princes' society (ɲgele)*]

**Hermann Gufler** is a member of St. Joseph's Missionary Society. Since 1967, he has been working in various parts of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon and is currently working in Elak-Oku where he continues to conduct research. He has published several articles on the Yamba which were republished in "Affliction and Moral Order. Conversations in Yambaland (Cameroon)" (Canterbury 2003). – See also Ref. Cited.

**Njakoi John Bah**, a native of Oku, graduated from Yaoundé University with a degree in law (1992) before becoming research assistant to Nicolas Argenti from 1992–1994. Since then, he has continued to conduct and publish independent ethnographic research and at the same time he has been engaged in a volunteer programme of the Human Rights Clinic and Education Centre, Bamenda, in Elak-Oku. He has published various articles on the Oku society in *Baessler-Archiv*, *Tribus*, and *Anthropos*.

### 1 Introduction

Much has already been written about the palaces of the Cameroon Grassfields and their institu-

tions.<sup>1</sup> However, as Argenti (pers. comm.) pointed out, most of these papers cover a great deal of complicated material with the result that one gets a tantalising glimpse of all the palace institutions but not really a full examination of any of them. A detailed study of the origin, development, and changes or adaptations of a single palace institution may also supply an answer to an intriguing question Mzeka raised in connection with the introduction of new *ɲgiri* masks and the adaptation of old ones in 1967 in Nso': "is the creation of new dances, institutions or jujus an adulteration of culture or its enhancement?" (1980: 116).

In this paper we focus on the establishment of the princes' society, *ɲgele*,<sup>2</sup> in the small kingdom of Oku, located in the centre of the Cameroon Grassfields, and describe its turbulent history since its fledgling beginning in the late 1940s up to the present. Princes in most, if not all, of the eastern Grassfields chiefdoms were debarred from entering *ɲweron*, the regulatory society recruited from commoner lineages, which existed virtually in all the palaces. The princes, however, had their own secret society called *ɲgiri*. The existence of princes' societies has been reported from

1 Mzeka (1980), Bah (2004); one entire edition of *Paideuma* (1985) was devoted to contributions by Cameroon scholars on Grassfields' palaces.

2 *ɲgele* derives from *ɲgiri* (variously spelled *nggiri*, *ngiri*, *ngirri*, *Ngirrih*, *ngürri*), the Lamnso' word for the princes' society in Nso'. In the process of adaptation it has changed from *ɲgiri* to *ɲgele* the term widely used in Oku.