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Kingdoms of the Cameroon Grassfields

IAN FOWLER


The three volumes considered here offer significant contributions to studies of African kingship and contribute to an emergent political anthropology of the Grassfields. Each adopts an approach on a sliding scale of emphasis on evidence and interpretation. Fardon takes a strongly evidence-based approach, reflecting recent methodological concerns in anthropology, which invites challenge and dialogue. Warnier presents an innovative methodological paradigm which emphasizes interpretation through observation of human action in engagement with material culture. Argenti takes the view that slave raiding underpins state formation and masquerades, and presents his own interpretations in that light. His approach resonates strongly with contemporary moral concerns about the Atlantic slave trade but lacks historical evidence.

KEYWORDS interpretation and evidence, kingship, material culture, slavery

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THE GRASSFIELDS

The Grassfields of Cameroon corresponds broadly with the present North-West and Western Regions. It is widely believed to be “the cradle of Bantu languages” and has been occupied since the Late Stone Age (Lavachery 2001). It is a highland area, ranging from 900 m to just over 3000 m, located some 200–300 kilometers from the Atlantic coast. It is largely grasslands with the few areas of montane forest located at higher altitudes. Around 1840 the region received brief mention by Baptist missionaries on the coast as a source of slaves highly favored for their good character and industriousness by the Duala (Clarke 1848). Half a century on the Grassfields became of interest as a potential source of labor for newly established coastal plantations. In 1889, the German explorer Eugen Zintgraff reached the area and established relations with the King (Fon) of Bali-Nyonga that eventually led to a flow of labor to the coast (Zintgraff 1895; Chilver and Röschenthaler 2001).

At time of contact, the Grassfields was culturally and socially diverse, with different communities practicing matrilineal and patrilineal succession, some acephalous (Dillon 1973, 1990; Masquelier 1978; Kopytoff 1981; Warnier 2007) and others with sacred Kings (or Fons) and yet others, such as the central Noni kingdoms, with a system of dual-Kingship (Chilver and Kaberry 1968). Settlement was in places highly compacted and elsewhere dispersed. Edwin Ardener (1967) linked common engagement in the colonial plantation economy at the coast to the adoption of similar cultural traits and forms of social and political organization and the emergence of a distinctive Grassfields character.

It is important, however, to stress that the Grassfields is not a homogeneous cultural and political region although it is increasingly and uncritically represented as such (Fowler 1997:66). The political forms and rich material culture of the Grassfields have gained increasing prestige within Cameroon. This trend has continued with the spread of Fonship, or Kingship, and its associated etiquette and paraphernalia to formerly acephalous groups beyond the Grassfields.

The three volumes considered here each focus, in quite different ways, on one of three Grassfields Kingdoms, Mankon, Bali-Nyonga, and Oku, and its relations of power. Warnier and Argenti both tackle the complicity or acquiescence of marginalized “youth” in their own oppression, but while Warnier takes his viewpoint very much from the Mankon king and palace, Argenti’s viewpoint is that of the Oku youth themselves. Fardon, on the other hand, uses the historical lens of an annual palace ceremony called Lela to analyze relations of incorporation and alliance that transformed an intrusive northern raiding band into the Grassfields kingdom of Bali-Nyonga.

1 A presidential decree of November 12, 2008 officially instigated the change from provinces to regions.
Taken together these three volumes represent a fecund and lively contribution to anthropological studies of African kingship and to the study of political and material culture in this region of West-Central Africa. Argenti, Warnier, and Fardon each adopt an approach on a sliding scale of emphasis on evidence and interpretation. Fardon takes a strongly evidence-based approach that resonates with recent methodological concerns in anthropology (Engelke 2009) and invites challenge and dialogue with both area scholars and those concerned with broader anthropological issues. Warnier presents an innovative methodological paradigm that emphasizes interpretation through observation of human action in engagement with material culture. Argenti takes the view that violence and slavery underpins state formation, masquerades, and much else in the Grassfields and offers his own interpretations of Oku political culture in that light. His strong interpretative approach resonates greatly with contemporary moral concerns about the Mafaa\(^2\) but lacks historical evidence.

JEAN-PIERRE WARNIER

Jean-Pierre Warnier is Professor Emeritus at the René Descartes University in Paris. His wide-ranging work on the history, ethnography, archaeology, and material culture of the Grassfields of Cameroon now spans five decades. His initial research, undertaken for his Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania (Warnier 1975), centered on the Grassfields kingdom of Mankon in its pre-colonial regional setting. He went there at the request of its king who had asked the doyenne of Grassfields studies, Sally Chilver, to send him an ethnographer.

His major published work on the regional history, economy, and political hierarchies of the Grassfields (Warnier 1985), together with studies of slavery (Warnier 1995) and cadet rebellion (Warnier 1996), stand as invaluable contributions to Grassfields and sub-Saharan African studies. Warnier's recent work (Bayart and Warnier 2004) represents a paradigmatic shift in studies of material culture, power, and embodiment. In this volume, he links ideas to do with governmentality (Foucault 1975, 2008; Bayart 1989) with a revitalized methodological approach to material culture (Warnier 2001) that draws widely on French theorists, from Leroi-Ghouron (1943) and Mauss (1936) to Parlebas (1999) and Foucault (1994, 2001), to focus on embodiment, motivity, material culture, and power. The *Pot-King* represents the seminal outcome of his return to Mankon with this innovative set of theoretical and methodological tools.

KINGSHIP AND CONTAINMENT

Warnier adopts a "praxeological" approach to kingship, that is, an approach that centers on the study of human action and conduct. He takes as his focus

\(^2\)the holocaust of the Atlantic slave trade.
the body of the Mankon king and its associated technologies of power. He argues that the means to unlock the code behind particular forms of motor conduct in Mankon rests in the praxeology of containers (hence the pun in the French title—Roi-pot/Roi-peau).\(^3\) For Warnier, Mankon kingship is inscribed in three incorporated and incorporating bodies: the body of the King, the palace, and the city. Each is an envelope or a skin with openings and each absorbs external elements, digests them, and excretes the waste. Warnier illustrates these ideas elegantly with thick ethnographic descriptive passages on the bodies and substances of the monarch and the relationships between them.

For Warnier, containment has become a fundamental technology of power and he accounts for this investment in closure in terms of the heterogeneity of the human and material elements so contained. Warnier relates this diversity to regional exchange networks, long-distance trade, and "disjunctive" migrations. Hence, internal diversity is the problem which is solved by technologies of containment. These produce locality through closure and unity derived from the shared ancestral substances of the King, obtained through sacrifice to dynastic ancestors, stored in him and shared with his subjects. The Mankon king is like a pump at the center of a hydraulic system, circulating life forces. The most common substance involved in this is raffia wine and Warnier focuses on the praxeology of raffia wine which he notes, unlike many other things, has seemingly resisted change. His advice to novice ethnographers to "follow the wine" is well put.

The Pot-King offers an explicit critique of overly logocentric structuralist anthropological approaches that focus on verbalized narratives. For Warnier governmentality is not merely verbalized conscious political organization; hence analysis should be extended to the infra-conscious in order to produce an adequate model of African sacred kingship. In other words, we should pay attention to what people do rather than what they say. Warnier views the relationship between the king and marginalized youth (or cadets) as repressive and exploitative but as he takes pain to point out this is not a view shared by the youth themselves. The cadets view the exchange of ancestral substances offered by the king for their own labor as reciprocal. For Warnier compliance makes those who comply accomplices in their own oppression.

Warnier links the sacredness of the Mankon king to two key anthropological paradigms. First, the distinction between the alienable/profane and the inalienable/sacred (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1996). The former is represented by the wine, saliva, camwood, and other things given out by the king, while the latter is the inalienable and untouchable sacred body of the king himself. The second paradigm is that of sacred kingship in Africa and its treatment from Frazer onwards. Warnier points to a lack of consideration of motor and material cultures, and underlying procedural knowledge.

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\(^3\)Pot-King/Skin-King.
He suggests a more concise explanation of regicide in terms of the aged or ailing king who is seen as a broken container (of ancestral substance) which needs to be discarded and replaced with a new one.

Warnier’s case is convincing and he employs linguistic and archaeological data to support his arguments. For instance, he analyses the Mankon terms for skin and relates this to Grassfields’ autopsy practices. And while he rejects discursive verbalizations of political relations between subject and king he does include formal speech in his analysis. Moreover, Warnier notes the contribution of linguists to our understanding of Grassfields societies and their interrelationships, especially in respect of his arguments to do with closure and multi-lingual households in Mankon. He also makes use of field archaeology in his depiction and discussion of the “war” trenches built to enclose some Grassfields kingdoms, including Mankon, in advancing his case for enclosure in the face of an ever-increasing flow of external elements.

In the *Pot-King* Warnier argues strongly and consistently that greater attention be paid to human conduct and action rather than verbal representations. However, when it comes to ethnographic fieldwork the counter-argument can be made that we cannot easily dismiss what people say. To have any idea of what is going on we need, initially at least, to be told, in order to be given context verbally. Indeed, much of Warnier’s material, and some key points in his analysis, depend upon his informant’s own narratives. For instance, he offers an observation of a newborn child being passed around the hands of well-wishers (Warnier 2007:96–97).

More pertinent to his overall argument, Warnier acknowledges in his chapter titled “Royal Excrement” that he has too few data to talk directly about the king’s bodily excreta. He suggests that a picture can be formed by examining what is expelled from the other two bodies of the monarch, the palace and city. The picture Warnier presents is ethnographically rich and fulsome. However, his account of these things—including that of the annual expulsion of witches, the last of which took place in Mankon in 1919—is based on oral testimonies he himself collected over a half century after the event, and not on observations of actual practice. In a similar vein in chapter six, Warnier offers a rich description of an event he partially witnessed termed the “Medicine of the King”. Like all ethnographic description this is partial, as the ethnographer cannot be everywhere to see all that is going on. Warnier is told about those things he had not seen and so verbal representations are requisite to building his overall description.

It is not only what is said that cannot be discounted but what is unsaid too. For instance, chapter four focuses on the routine deportment of an adult in a Grassfields house in light of Rosselin’s (1998) notion that the subject
becomes one with the space inhabited and Parlebas’s (1999) idea of motor algorithms\(^4\) which facilitate routine and embodied practices. Warnier analyses the behavior of masquerades, warriors, and healers bearing medicines who pass through portals backwards. He argues that the only way to unlock the code behind this form of motor conduct is to relate it to the praxeology of containers. Hence, the masquerade is neither inside nor outside but at the interface just like the King. This is undoubtedly insightful and Warnier rightly rejects the usual explanation offered by informants that this is how these things always behave.

However, there are always things informants cannot or are unwilling to say. In Grassfields communities knowledge of the use of medicines is reserved to specialists. We know, as Warnier acknowledges, that medicines are buried beneath thresholds to deflect the medicinal powers of hostile elements. Robert Pool (1994) has demonstrated very clearly that the category “medicine” in the Grassfields is very broad indeed and comprises all kinds of things, including masquerades. If the latter are directed to enter the house backwards over blocking medicines placed under thresholds and informants are unable to offer exegesis, this may simply reflect restricted knowledge of the local logic of the use of these things—that is that they are unsaid.

Finally, things not commonly or easily observed, such as sex and death, raise serious issues for a praxeological approach. For instance, in the chapter titled “De-sexualized Bachelors” Warnier argues that at the beginning of the 20th century one in two males did not marry and most of these were “excluded from sex” (Warnier 2007:233). Insistence on cadet celibacy is, in a sense, redundant since exclusion from marriage of some males is all that is required for other males to engage in polygamy. Indeed, there is evidence of the contrary—that unmarried males did engage in illicit heterosexual relations, as Zintgraff (1895:324) suggests in his description of his visit to the Grassfields kingdom of Babungo in 1889. Warnier’s take on cadet celibacy may be overdrawn and perhaps he accepts too easily what he is told about how people should or should not have behaved in the past. Warnier’s reference to corroborating “witness accounts” by other researchers in the Grassfields is a little bizarre, since witnessing celibacy seems a rather difficult task to accomplish unless one is observing a closed community of celibates. Being told that young people did not have sex in the past is surely more indicative of the moral stance of the informant vis-à-vis contemporary youth practice than evidence of what actually did or did not formerly go on. If we are informed of the punishment of those caught in illicit acts (Warnier 2007:239) then this demonstrates that it occurred. One suspects that illicit sexual activity was one means adopted by cadets to subvert the hierarchical order. In fact,

\(^4\)There are some difficulties with the English translation from the original Roi-Pot. “Motor algorithms” might better be rendered as “Motor control algorithms,” referring here to the unconscious procedural knowledge entailed in routine human actions.
Warnier himself introduces the figure of the Mankon *takwe*, the sexually active “hedonistic and flamboyant” philanderer, and speculates these may have emerged in the 1920s as an outcome of polygamist notables giving up wives following conversion to Christianity.

**RICHARD FARDON**

Richard Fardon is Professor of West African Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). Entering the field in the mid-1970s Fardon undertook his original fieldwork among Chamba Daka speakers in Nigeria, a region from which elements later to form the Grassfields Bali had emerged in the course of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Fardon 1980). Whereas Warnier had gone to the Grassfields in response to a King’s request for an ethnographer, Fardon may have been nudged toward the Chamba by staff interests within his department at University College London. There at this time was Phyllis Kaberry whose work in the 1940s, 1950s, and later, done in cooperation with Sally Chilver in the 1960s, had laid the foundation for ethnographic research in the Grassfields. At the center of the region they encountered five intrusive “Bali” chiefdoms that claimed an Adamawan origin. Who were they? Where had they come from? What had they brought with them? In his extensive ethnographic works on the middle belt Benue peoples (1983, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1996) Fardon has certainly answered the first of these questions. In this volume he answers the third in the form of a meticulously researched evidence-based historical reconstruction of *Lela*, an annual Durbar-like ceremony, practiced by the Grassfields Bali and related groups located elsewhere.

**FROM RAIDERS TO RIVALS**

In a brief introductory section, Fardon announces his intention to trace and analyze the material culture and power relations of the *Lela* ceremony over 200 years as a perduing element of Bali performative culture that entailed and represented shifting alliances, predation, and the incorporation of new groups. Fardon employs a broad range of evidence: primarily Basel Mission photographic archives, texts, and sound recordings supplemented by regional art history, museum collections, and his own fieldwork. The material is set out evidentially as a “set of recursive transections of the historic past” in an objective approach to conjectural history that is concomitant with the

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5 Usually a mounted military ceremony.
6 The Basel Mission photographic archive, from which key photographs of *Lela* were taken, is now available on-line at http://bmpix.org/bmpix/controller/index.htm thanks to a project initiated by its former director Paul Jenkins.
available evidence. Fardon reconstructs the emergence of *Lela* in its classic early 20th century form in Bali-Nyonga in terms of distinguishing its constituent elements; those brought from the Chamba homeland, those developed in the course of a decade of raiding through the Grassfields, and, once settled, those picked up from Grassfields neighbors and also those borrowed from Europeans.

The most intensely documented *Lela* performance took place in 1908. This was, as Fardon suggests, the apogee of Bali-Nyonga’s power in its relations with the German colonial state of Kamerun and its influence over neighboring communities. Fissures between the King and the Basel Mission were beginning to appear. Interestingly, this is more evident from the textual sources than the performance as portrayed in photographs. *Lela* was performed in the presence of the ethnographer, Ackermann, and members of the Basel Mission in Bali. Fardon’s lucid and close account of his quest for, and dialogue with, the evidence highlights the hit and miss nature of its preservation. What remains represents the poorly preserved collaborative efforts of both observer and participants. The presence of European observers in 1908 underscores the significant role played by this lavish and public ceremony in the incorporative strategies of the Bali-Nyonga kingdom.

Fardon makes the rather telling point that just who was observer and who was participant is not at all clear-cut. From the point of view of the Bali King all present, including the Europeans, were participants—not a view necessarily shared by the Missionaries who attended. Fardon subjects written accounts of *Lela*, composed by Basel missionaries, to a close textual analysis showing up the subtle editorial changes introduced by the Mission centre in Basel and the developing line of missionary exegesis of *Lela*. Initial interest focuses on the parallels between *Lela* and Biblical practice and, while military features are acknowledged, *Lela* comes to be seen in terms of “sin, sacrifice and purification.” Fardon raises the pertinent question: what influence did all this have on their Bali associates and on the Bali King and, hence, on local conceptions of power, sacrifice, and ritual? The earlier, late 19th century writings of Hutter, the soldier, and of Zintgraff, the explorer, depict *Lela* as a martial ceremony with ritual elements included to ensure success in battle and so they participated in it. The Basel missionaries also “participated” but in their case in light, perhaps, of the linkages they drew between *Lela* and Christianity. Hence, the perduring “additive and cellular character” of *Lela* enabled Bali to constantly adapt to changing contexts of power relations.

Fardon goes on to draw on the unpublished accounts by Chilver (1963, 1964) and Kaberry\(^7\) who researched all five Grassfields Bali kingdoms in the 1960s. Their enquiries provide vital information on the rights and duties of the various components of the Bali population in the performance of *Lela*

\(^7\)Dr. Phyllis Kaberry’s fieldnotes are archived at the British Library of Political and Economic Science.
without which it would have been nigh on impossible for Fardon to tie up the various strands of his reconstruction. He draws from their research that participation in *Lela* represented incorporation into one or other of Bali’s constituent elements and that the ceremony itself expressed “an aesthetic of visible adherence to a predatory organization.” He goes on to trace the Adamawan components of what was later to become the Bali and the likely transformations of *Lela* as raiding groups moved southwards, incorporating different elements as they went along. Early German accounts indicate displacement at the commencement of the Fulbe (Fulani) *jihad*. Fardon suggests these were numerous, ethnically composite, groups pushed south, at war or in alliance with each other according to changing circumstances, building fortified camps to raid or incorporate others. In the Grassfields, mounted raiding groups with fluctuating memberships are likely to have raided between c.1820–1830. At the end of this period there followed a definitive defeat at the hands of the Bamileke. What were once mounted cavalry with bow and arrow and spears had now become a more typically Grassfields style of warrior group armed with spears and muskets and, Fardon argues, *Lela* is highly likely to have undergone a similar transformation.

In chapter five, attention turns to the Grassfields context of Bali performative culture, and Fardon distinguishes between elements picked up before and after the Bali penetration of the Grassfields. He acknowledges four sources of Bali-Nyonga material and performative culture: the Grassfields, Europeans, Adamawa, and Fulbe kingship. Fardon stresses the Grassfields input and the adoption by Bali-Nyonga of the lavish Grassfields material culture and architecture, and the competitive display of palace treasures. He also notes that by the time Bali-Nyonga had settled in its present location the majority of the population was of Grassfields origin speaking Mungakka, a Bamileke dialect. What set the Bali apart were the ceremonial and ritual elements clearly of northern origin, notably *Lela*. In his penultimate chapter Fardon examines *Lela* in those Chamba communities that did not enter the Grassfields. Squaring this with elements common to the five Grassfields Bali kingdoms, and with those derived from non-Bali Grassfields kingdoms, permits Fardon to assess that, while most key *Lela* material culture “has specifiable Adamawan origin,” *Lela* in contemporary Bali-Nyonga represents a composite of different origins.

The fissive and recombinant raiding bands of the Bali precursors have left no as yet discovered trace in the archaeological record. Fardon mentions that these raiders brought blacksmiths with them, presumably to provide arrow and spear heads. Iron-working leaves traces and there is a project waiting here for an enterprising archaeologist to seek both evidence of iron-working as well as longer-established, fortified raiding camps.

In his conclusion, Fardon runs the chronology of *Lela* fast forward from its early Adamawan origins, beyond the 1908 performance, and through to

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8This is a general term for Kingdoms occupying the Western Region of Cameroon.
the late 20th century. His final flourish is to show how, as public ceremony, *Lela* has in the recent past been revitalized—first in terms of the perduring role of *Lela* in demonstrating military prowess to potential or real enemies following conflict between Bali-Nyonga and neighboring groups in the 1950s; and second, in terms of the incorporative role of *Lela* with respect to attempts to solidify broader Chamba identity in the long run-up to the reunification of Cameroon in 1961.

NICOLAS ARGENTI

Nicolas Argenti is a lecturer in Anthropology at Brunel University. He undertook his preliminary research in the early 1990s on the material culture of power in the central Grassfields kingdom of Oku (Argenti 1996). This initial fieldwork centered on marginalized youth and their use of embodied practices to challenge both their subordination and occasional experience of the violence of the Cameroon postcolonial state. Argenti has subsequently undertaken research in Sri Lanka on youth, performance, and healing in relation to political violence. In this volume, Argenti looks back to the Grassfields and to its marginalized youth in the context of slavery, violence, memory, and masquerades. His work raises significant challenges to conventional assumptions of historical change in this region which, in Argenti’s view, has, over four centuries, consecutively and forcibly been inserted into the wider global economy. This was effected initially through the violent trauma of the Atlantic slave trade, followed by the forced labor and porterage of the colonial period, through to the present day iniquities of the Cameroon postcolony characterized by Bayart as *La politique du ventre.* Argenti denies what he terms the “ponderous antiquity and stability” of centralized Grassfields polities and posits the slave trade as the recent cornerstone of state formation here. This is a challenging, sophisticated, and highly imaginative work which invites a critical response from those concerned with the archaeology, history, and ethnography of the Grassfields.

THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE ANTHROPOPHAGY OF THE STATE

Argenti asserts that state formation in the Grassfields is an outcome of the slave trade. He considers that slavery still “informs” the social relations of African societies today and that memory of that violence is unspoken but embodied ambiguously in the performance of palace and lineage masquerades, expressed indirectly in the discourse of witchcraft, and revealed in origin myths. It is clear that this approach is strongly influenced by Rosalind Shaw’s 2002 volume *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Politics of the belly.*
Imagination in Sierra Leone. Argenti further argues that slavery was transformed, relatively unchanged, into forced labor under colonial rule and that the post-colonial state and local elite have colluded to continue the exclusion and marginalization of youth.

Argenti argues that Grassfields states originated with flight from slave raids followed by the massacres of indigenous populations and the further enslavement of marginalized groups that led to further flight, massacres, and enslavement in a cataclysm of violence and a cascade of emerging states. This scenario fails to hold in one crucial case, the Chamba successor state Bali-Nyonga, whose settlement on the Western Bamenda Plateau severely disturbed settlement but did not lead to the emergence of states among the neighboring and acephalous Meta, Njie, and Moghamo populations (Dillon 1990). Regarding the Moghamo:

Moghamo society in the late 19th century was not under centralized control. State formation had not reached the stage experienced by some Grassfields groups....Although subject to similar external influences, namely extensive slave-raiding by Chamba [O’Neil 1987:9]

Significantly O’Neil (1987:80–81) suggests plausibly that engagement in the slave trade, not slave raiding, played a significant role in the consolidation of power at this time in Moghamo.

Argenti attributes early raids to the Fulani (Fulbe). Hence, we are told of “Fulani slave raiding in the early 18th century” (Argenti 2007:43) and he refers to the last large-scale Fulani raids occurring in the 1820s. This is a misconception. The Fulani arrived in the Adamawa in the 19th century and the raids of the 1820s were not Fulani but Chamba following an earlier late 18th century raid into and through the Grassfields (Fardon 1988, 2006). If these raids occurred in the 18th century there is simply insufficient time for the centralized Grassfields states Zintgraff (1895) encountered in 1889 to emerge, as Argenti argues, as an outcome of them.

While the huge significance of slavery in the political economy of the Grassfields is absolutely undeniable there is simply no evidence that these were “human hunting grounds from the 17th to the early 20th centuries” (Argenti 2007:23). Interestingly, Argenti states that “not a word” was spoken to him about slavery while he was in Oku. He acknowledges that Warnier was able to find informants in the 1970s who could talk about slavery in Mankon (and neighboring Bafut) but argues that these were slave-trading kingdoms which “experienced slavery as a form of wealth accumulation,” and were heavily fortified and never invaded. Oku, Argenti contends, “was primarily a source of slaves” and so experienced slavery by Chamba and Fulani in the 18th and 19th centuries as catastrophic violence.

On the contrary, Chilver and Kaberry (1968:19) did record accounts of early slave raids in the Western Grassfields area and noted that “these two
small states [Bafut and Mankon] had been redoubts against earlier raids” (Chilver 1967:480–481). Furthermore, far from “experiencing catastrophic violence” the irregular topography and elevation of Oku and its location adjacent to the last largest remaining stands of forest made it a refuge area from raids affecting neighboring populations: “[Oku] also provided its neighbors with a refuge area from the Chamba-led Ba’ni raids at the start of the nineteenth century, later Fulani raids from Banyo and possibly Gashaka, and finally from punitive patrols of the German military station.” (Sally Chilver in Bah 1996)

The kingdoms of the northern Ndop Plain, located immediately to the south of Oku, record only two raids, one at the end of the 18th century by mounted bowmen and the second in the second half of the 19th century by Fulani elements coming from Bamum (Fowler 1990). These communities, too, took refuge from early German patrols in the forests of the Oku massif. Moreover, by the late 19th century, Oku also “experienced slavery as a form of wealth accumulation” in so far as it engaged in acquiring slaves in exchange for locally produced hoes (Fowler 1990:400).

Argenti suggests further that “as the Oku origin myth makes clear, the foundational rulers of Grassfields polities were credited with saving their peoples from the attacks of slave raiders in their places of origin” (Argent 2007:38). Grassfields kingdoms typically have many versions of their origin myths some contradictory, some complementary, and the various strands are very much a moveable feast in relation to changing alliances and enmities with neighbors. Argenti is referring here to a version of the Oku origin myth he collected in 1992 (1996:15) supplemented with details from a composite version compiled by John Bah (1996) from the accounts of four informants. In Bah’s version, the three fraternal and neighboring dynasties of Oku, Nso’, and Mba’ derive from one original group, the Oku royal clan, which divided at Kov-vifem due to struggles over succession. There is no mention of raids in relation to this break-up. Argenti’s version includes dynastic succession dispute but attributes geographical dispersal to “battles going on in the area, and fear of being taken as slaves.” Bah and Argenti both place the Oku as the founding ancestor of Nso’ while Nso’ makes the claim in reverse. The Nso’ version collected by Chilver and Kaberry (1968) records that it was long established at Kov-vifem where it was severely raided and broken up before eventually regrouping in Kumbo, its present centre. There are 13 Nso’ dynastic tombs at Kov-vifem (which means forest of tombs in Lamnso’, the Nso’ language) to which annual sacrifices continue to be made by the Nso’ up to the present day (Prof. Verkijika Fanno, e-mail to author, April 7, 2011). Bah’s story does mention a single raid on Oku from the north by mounted bowmen in the reign of its second King. This single raid was also recorded by Kaberry in her visits to the kingdom in 1960 and 1963 when the raid was placed in the time of the grandfather of the oldest man present.

There are strong echoes in Argenti’s thesis of Eldridge Mohammadou’s (1990) hypothesis that northern raiders created successive “waves of
migration” which led to the formation of states in the Cameroon Grassfields where previously there had only been “segmentary and acephalous” polities. Argenti does not mention this work. Mohammadou’s argument has been elegantly dismissed by Sally Chilver (1996) who questioned why “it is assumed as axiomatic that the peoples of the Grassfields were incapable of inventing and developing chiefdoms for themselves and were relatively primitive?” Indeed, only some two decades after the last Chamba raids Barth (1857) records in relation to “Mbafu” (the term applied to the Grassfields from the north) that “my intelligent informant says that there are large and wealthy towns in this country, with well-frequented market-places and that the people have a great deal of property and European furniture.” Furniture here does not refer to tables and chairs but to prestige objects of European provenance. In this light, the Chamba were, in penetrating and raiding the Grassfields, simply following the money.

There is one further key source of material evidence not discussed by Argenti. This takes the form of slag and other smelting debris from iron-working in Oku (Zintgraff 1895; Jeffreys 1961; Fowler 1995). Iron-working was in full swing in November 1889 when Zintgraff, returning southwards, noted the smoke columns from the numerous charcoal producers working on the north slope of the Oku Massif. Iron-working here, and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, was highly labor-intensive and, in the Grassfields, that labor was almost exclusively provided by young males born in the kingdom or purchased as slaves and incorporated into local households (Fowler 1990). There is evidence of iron-smelting debris at over 60 separate Grassfields sites, which indicates a formerly widespread iron industry (Jeffreys 1942; Fowler 1990). The sole dates we have are for the “Glazed Sherds” industry (Warnier and Rowlands 1988) suggesting that iron production may be 10–15 centuries old. It seems hard to reconcile this material evidence with Argenti’s insistence on the Grassfields as a “slave hunting grounds” or, indeed, that Oku was selling its youth/labor into the regional slave trade. We simply cannot ignore the potential economic and symbolic significance of iron-working in the emergence of African states and kingship (Vansina 2006).

Nonetheless, the single raid on Oku and the likely assimilation of groups seeking refuge from raids elsewhere provides for memory of great violence. Argenti argues that “the violence of the past is not generally open to discursive contemplation but embodied in bodily practices” such as masquerades. Masking is significant “because the dance is incorporated, it is indeterminate and aporetic” and this guarantees its ongoing futurity so that past oppression is transformed into recurring possible futures.” Argenti draws on the writings of the late French poststructuralist and (skeptical) postmodernist Jacques Derrida (1986) and the latter’s reading of Celan’s idea of the “shibboleth.” In this, the value of the shibboleth lies in its indeterminacy and lack of direct

\[^{10}\text{Uncertain or undecidable.}\]
reference, and its ability to refer to many different things at once. For Argenti, the Grassfields masquerade is a shibboleth since meaning is not fixed. As the past is unspeakable “it will have been known only in the performative incorporation of its remembering” and can never be subject to ultimate forgetting. But as a shibboleth the poetic indeterminacy of dance is reversible so that palace elites and marginalized youth both use dance for their own ends and dance is thus a site of contestation for remembering. Accordingly, Argenti explores how the performance of palace masks “played into the palatine discourse of power in the period of the slave trade” and, conversely, how they have been appropriated by marginalized groups.

Argenti acknowledges that masking is hugely popular and that most masks are owned by lineages. He argues that the lineages masks are modeled on the Oku palace masquerade called fulọŋgaŋ and that their structure is a microcosm of the palace hierarchy (with titles, fines, etc.). He describes this as a Faustian bargain for marginalized youth since they must negotiate with the palace and reproduce the palace hierarchy in microcosm and so a dominant palace model of masking is “devolved to the village” (Argenti 2007:191). In this case, Argenti does appear to accept uncritically what he is told by his informants regarding fulọŋgaŋ— that it was the first and original masquerade in Oku. This claim is, in my view, a key element of Oku palatine discourse that conceptualizes the palace as the fons et origo of power. It might, perhaps, just as plausibly be argued that power becomes centralized in a process of centralization, rather than existing prior to the diffusion of its models into the community. Furthermore, Argenti’s conflation of marginalized youth or cadets with lineage headship is baffling. If a cadet becomes a lineage head he is certainly no longer a cadet.

Argenti also takes Fulọŋgaŋ to illustrate what he sees as an embodied non-discursive association between the slave trade and colonial porterage. Along with other Grassfields masquerades, Fulọŋgaŋ has “captains” and for Argenti this is reminiscent of descriptions of German colonial caravans. Argenti questions “how could the nightmarish role of the masked captains wielding their cutlasses have become such a feature of the performative culture of the Grassfields were it not for the experience of the slave trade…” (Argenti 2007:141). The term “captain” is not very helpful but it is the pidgin term used to refer to the lead dancers who set the steps for the other maskers.

The Oku ethnographer, John Bah, himself an accomplished performer in masquerades, points out that in some cases masquerades may have a number of dance styles and that the middle “captain” may set the style and pace while the dancers at the front and rear accentuate the rhythm with a counter step. While there is no reason why contemporary masquerade should not incorporate references to past events none of these figures is considered locally to be nightmarish (John Bah, personal communication to author, November 24, 2010). In further support of his argument, Argenti tells us that masquerades traveling between villages walk “with their head loads in single
file along the narrow paths, in the same manner as the caravans of porters did in the past.” This, like much else of Argenti’s take on masquerades, is over-interpretation and simply not convincing. After all, narrow paths encourage single files.

Argenti also argues that the imposition of German colonial rule transformed a domesticated slavery into forced labor and porterage without substantial change to the social order. This seems unlikely. We can only speculate on the nature of Kingship prior to the arrival of Zintgraff in 1889 and the inception of his project to recruit plantation labor. We do know that alliances, such as that between the Germans and the Bali-Nyonga, and the “leakage” of modern weaponry seriously destabilized the political order in the immediate region. It is also the case that colonial agents and administrators dealt with “chiefs.” The political and social order that lay behind the façade of the chief and palace was largely hidden from them. Indeed, some three decades after Zintgraff’s first passage British colonial administrators in the Grassfields experienced difficulties as they struggled to discover the names and locations of the male regulatory associations (Drummond-Hay, para. 60, 1925). These “secret” associations were political institutions providing checks and balances to kingship. In so far as colonial regimes dealt with, and through, kings, then the political and social order seems unlikely to have remained unchanged.

**PATHS TO THE PALACE**

Fardon comments that in the aesthetics of the material culture of Grassfields kingdoms more is more. I would add that, in respect of Grassfields anthropology and historiography, less is more. By dint of the nature of the available evidence much of African history is conjectural. Fardon’s tight focus on *Lela in Bali* is a masterpiece in conjectural history. Not least because his meticulous and transparent attention to sources and evidence and thick descriptions of the material and performative culture of *Lela*, set in a trans-Chamba comparative frame, positively invites and enables reinterpretation by other regional specialists.

Moreover, Fardon’s work deals with the symbolism of the material culture of the Grassfields palace as “specific and lisible,” presents an evidence-based reconstruction that engages with oral traditions, and so offers direct dialogue with contemporary Bali and Chamba historiography. In addition, Fardon’s innovative approach to the presentation of his data, through a “set of recursive transactions,” challenges the more usual and ponderous methodology of periodic contextualization. In Fardon’s view, *Lela’s* essential continuity and its contradictory characteristics as both a “time-capsule” of past practice (traditionalizing) and as a constantly changing engine of “Chamba, Ba’ni and Bali adaptation” to changing circumstances.
(modernizing) would be obscured if presented in the usual chronological sequence. *Lela in Bali* is an exemplar of historical and ethnographic reconstruction and a major contribution to studies of African politics, history, material culture, and anthropology.

Argenti’s broader frame offers more but delivers less. His thesis rests on an unsubstantiated imagining of the “unspeakable anthropophagy of state formation” (Argenti, 2007:246) that, in the case of Oku, is contradicted by the available evidence. His approach resonates strongly with contemporary moral discourses concerned with, *inter alia*, the Mafaa (Holocaust of the slave trade) in Africa and the Holocaust in Europe. Accounting for the rich and baroque masquerades of the Grassfields kingdoms (as well as origin myths and witchcraft) in terms of the specter of the slave trade, Argenti engages in an overly reductive exercise that downplays the diversity of Grassfields political and cultural formations while accounting for variation in terms of a constant. As an exercise in subaltern studies it is paradoxical that Argenti imposes his own views, in such a magisterial manner, on the marginalized youth of the Grassfields whose voices here are largely muted. Indeed, Argenti goes so far as to offer his book to them as a “new way to bear witness through texts” to the violence and contradictions of their own history. Their response is eagerly awaited.

Influenced by post-Marxist notions of hegemony (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), both Warnier and Argenti note that what people say is not congruent with the realities of their oppression. Argenti fills this lacuna with the less than transparent idea of the Derridean “shibboleth” in the context of the undecidability of unremembered but repeated violence. Warnier argues that this gap be filled by observation of what people do with respect to dominant motifs and material techniques of “subjectification.” In so doing Warnier offers a new way of looking at familiar things and new ways of thinking about them. He challenges scholars to reassess investment in enclosure and containment in their analyses of African kingship both in the Grassfields and elsewhere. The *Pot-King* most certainly invites a wider audience interested in materiality and embodiment in African governmentality as well as offering an insight into the complexity and sophistication of contemporary French anthropology.

All three volumes considered here represent significant and challenging methodological, theoretical, and ethnographic contributions to the study of material culture, power, and sacred kingship in Africa and each deserves close attention and a wide readership. With respect to an emergent political anthropology of the Grassfields it is important to acknowledge that this no longer remains the monopoly of outsiders. Since Jean-Pierre Warnier first went to the field in the early 1970s there has been an explosion of literacy and the institution of a number of new universities in Cameroon. Out of this has emerged a tranche of local scholar writing on the history and culture of the region—much of which takes the king and palace as its focus (see Nyamndi 1988; Mzeka 1990; Bah 1996, 2004; Chem-Langhée and Fanso 2011) since these things remain very much part of the lived political culture of the region. These
works by Warnier, Fardon, and Argenti will most certainly encourage, challenge, and inform this local scholarship.

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