
DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS
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MORE THAN A SEAT:
NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS IN THE
CAMEROON GRASSLANDS

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More Than a Seat: Numbers and Symbols in the Cameroon Grasslands¹

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for commoners, men and women.”

Nobles do not sit on ordinary stools. When an appropriate stool is not available, they prefer to stand. For this reason, stools are sometimes carried from place to place. Sometimes a stylized design and the poor condition of a stool may obscure the ownership and restrictions. One of my African colleagues was fined because he sat on a stool reserved for a council member. In more serious cases, a special ceremony is required to rectify the action. Sometimes a penalty results with privileges, though. In the past, if a wealthy person from a lower rank acquired an object that could only be used by the nobility, like a beaded stool, then the person was asked to present a gift to the Fon (the king). After the presentation and an appropriate ceremony, the guilty party was then granted the necessary title that allowed him to possess the object.

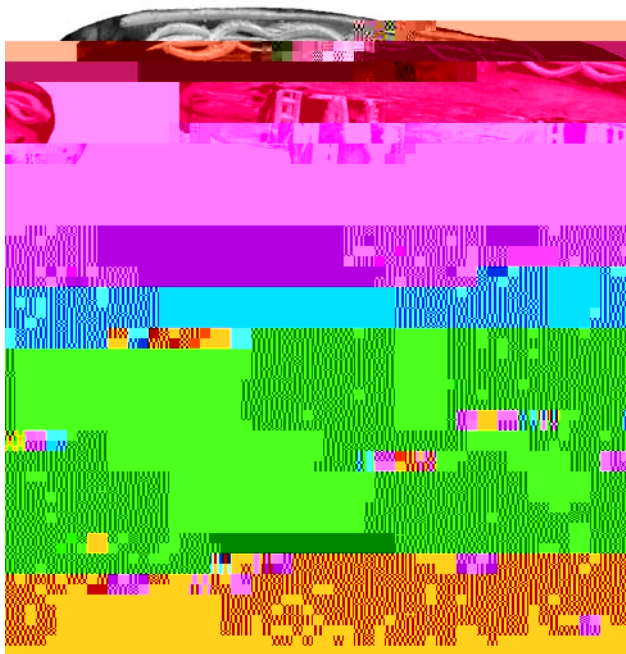


Photo 1:



Photo 2:

Numbers in Political Context

Two numbers stand out in the Western Grasslands area of Cameroon (West and North-West Provinces): nine and seven. These numbers are associated with the councils of a traditional chiefdom. The Council of Nine, literally means “nine nobles.” means nobles and means nine.² Lecoq [5] uses the term for the council of nine. The Council of Nine represents royal power and the power to rule. “Conseuil des neuf,” that is “the council of nine” is found throughout the Bamileke region. Its members are the Fon and eight nobles. The eight nobles are the descendants of the “founding fathers” of the chiefdom, descendants of the eight companions of the ancestor of the Fon. Notué describes a mask [7] from Bafandji (south of Ndop in the North-West Province of Cameroon) that represents the . He states that the two fat cheeks, symbols of fertility, represent two nobles, the six protrusions above the

² [7], p. 49: Littéralement, signifie “les neuf notables” (de - notables [singulier:] - et neuf).

face represent the remaining six nobles, and the head represents the Fon, the ninth noble.³

The council of seven, also represents a power, but magical rather than royal power [2]. Sylvain Djache Nzefa calls its members “les grands prêtres de la chefferie,” that is “the great priests of the chiefdom.” Claudia Zaslavsky states that “Seven is a particularly ominous number among many African peoples. To the Kolokuma Ijo, seven is a number to avoid because of its association with the great divinities.”

In some areas of the North-West Province, two councils are identified with the numbers eight and seven. In Binka, a village near Ndu on the Ring Road, the (or) council consists of eight nobles plus the Fon. is one of the two houses of and it is identified with the number eight. The other house is the Council of Seven. The two houses of meet in two buildings facing each other that are situated in the central part of the village. This type of placement is not typical anywhere; usually they are located in different parts of the village. Descriptions of an age group society, differ from author to author. Notué⁴ uses the term for this society and states that its role is to perform public works and to initiate young men to a warrior status. Raymond Lecoq gives a somewhat simpler explanation (and different spelling) for stating that the society is a man's self-help and public works organization⁵. Yet to enter a traditional house one needs to wear a cap and carry a weapon, usually a knife or a short sword.

Numbers Eight and Seven on a Carved Stool from Binka

While visiting Binka in the spring of 2003 I was shown a carved stool with a rectangular base and a curved, almost rectangular seat that was around seventeen inches high. Two sides of the stool had intricate carved patterns, while the rest of the stool was plain. The owner of the stool was a member of but it was culturally inappropriate for him to tell me his title. The cowry patterns carved into the stool, however, indicate an elevated position in the society. On one side of the stool [photo 1] cowries are carved in three sets of seven. The other side of the stool [photo 2] features two vertical strings with seven carved cowries and a horizontal string with eight carved cowries. As was previously discussed, the two numbers, seven and eight, may refer to the two houses of There are other numbers represented on the stool. Three half circles are carved on the bottom left and right corners of the stool, and six rectangles separated by a sinuous curve are carved along the bottom of the base. On one side, the right bottom rectangle is composed of fifteen small rectangles, possibly another reference to the two houses of . On the other side of the stool, five of the rectangles are divided into nine smaller rectangles and the sixth one is divided into twelve smaller rectangles. The triple half circles might refer tofer fuè8 rectanglct

fading fast . . . carved objects whose meanings are either no longer known or obscure outnumber those whose symbolic meaning has survived the inevitable changes brought about by time and mankind” [4]. This situation gives urgency to future research into the relationship between mathematics and art in Cameroon.

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