

Royalty and Ancestral Venerations: Commemorating /Teh Pfu Teh Vu'ntuh/ the Death of Palace Children of Kedjom Keku Fondom in the Cameroon Grassfields

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Abstract

Royalty and ancestry venerations: commemorating the death of palace children (princes and princess), examines the different ceremonies and rites which are performed during the death celebration of princes and princess or palace children. Children in the Grassfields of Cameroon in general and in Kedjom Keku in particular are treated differently, that is, those of free birth and those of royal descent. Such differential treatment is seen during the funeral and death ceremonies of the palace children. The questions this paper seeks to answer are: what are the different ceremonies and rituals conducted at the death celebration of princes and princess? What are the cultural significance of these rituals to the Kedjom man and the fondom? The methodology of this paper is purely qualitative. We employed techniques such as direct observation, in-depth interviews and life histories to collect data. Data for the article were analysed during and soon after fieldwork was over. Data interpretation was done using the interpretive anthropology approach. Findings revealed that there are two categories of palace children; those born when the *fon* had not yet ascended the throne and those born when the *fon* was already crowned *fon*. The second category constitutes who real palace children. During the death celebration of these real palace children, special rituals are conducted. Findings also show that during the death celebration, these palace children wear special attires. This aspect of culture like many others should be documented so that generations to come should actually understand the social, political as well as religious organisation of their people.

Keywords

Royalty, Ancestral Veneration, Commemoration, Death Celebration, Palace

1. Introduction

Every society has a way of treating and celebrating children when they are born, as they grow up and when they die. In the Grassfields and particularly in the Kedjom Keku fondom, children are treated and celebrated in varied ways depending on the family in which they belong or are born. Three categories of children can be identified in this study area: children of commoners, children of notables and those born by the *fon* on the royal bed with any of his wives. Children of the *fon* commonly called in *Ga-ah Kedjom* (Kedjom language) as *Vu' ntuh* (palace children) could be grouped into two; those born before the *fon* became *fon* and those born when the *fon* has been enthroned as *fon*.

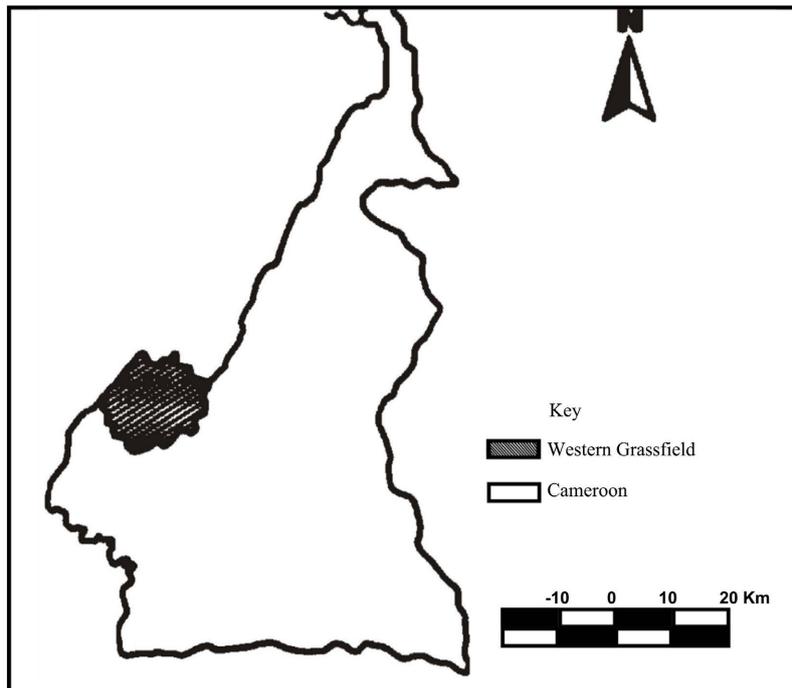
1.1. The Study Site

The Kedjom also called Babanki¹ are part of a larger cultural area known collectively as the Western Cameroon Grassfields. The Western Grassfields is a region that corresponds to the Anglophone North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon as shown in **Map 1**. The part of Grassfields that was under English Administration known as the “Bamenda Grassfields”² (Warnier, 1975: p. 43).

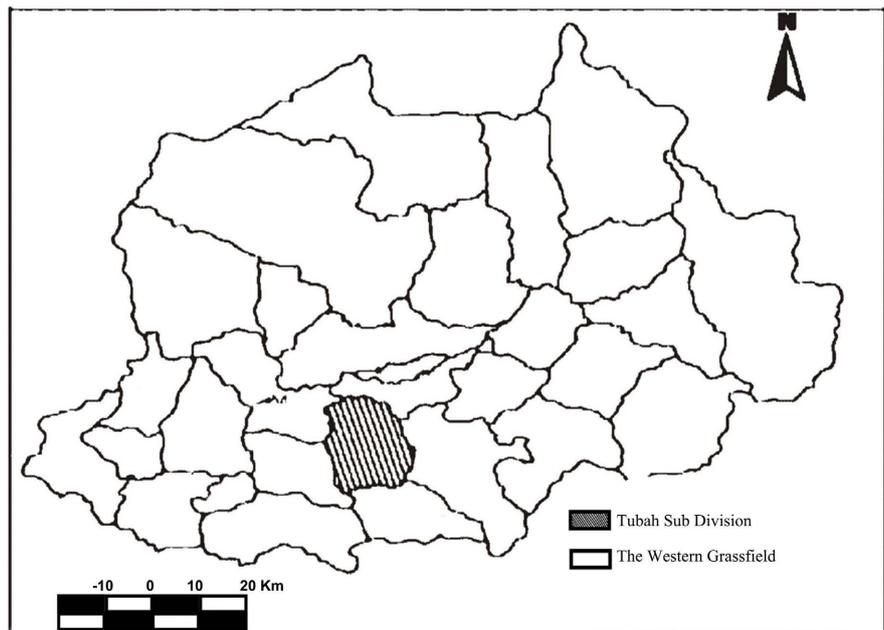
The Western Grassfields (see **Map 2**) is a territory characterised by high plateau with an altitude ranging from 1000 m to 1800 m which lay on either side of a volcanic mountain range—running south-west and north-east from the Gulf of Guinea to the Tibati, whose highest regional peaks are Mount Bamboutos (2740 m) and Mount Oku (3008 m). With a surface of roughly 16,800 square kilometres. The Western boarder is separated from the Upper Cross River basin by a sharp escarpment. A range of hills runs north-east to the Gayama gap and divides it from the basin of the Katsina Ala River. It is partially marked off from Takum area and south-western Adamawa by an arc of mountains (Eyongetah & Brain, 1974). The natural vegetation of this region consists of short and tall grasses with raffia and oil palms growing along the courses of the rivers and streams and banana trees surrounding the compounds.

¹Babanki is a degenerated form of the nickname Banki that is derived from “nki”. During their war with neighbouring villages, apart from traditional weapons of guns, bow and arrows, cutlasses, they used occult powers too. A critical code phrase could be used during the war, “vulu a vu-nki” or vu-nki lu” which means “let’s attack them like the whirlwind”. The word “Nki” means whirlwind”. Later on, neighbouring villages also nicknamed the Kedjom people as “Ba-nki”—“those people who attack like a whirlwin”. The name further degenerated to Babanki. When Germans came to Cameroon, especially in the Grassfield, they attached the prefix “Ba” to most villages to mean “the inhabitants of” in the Mungaka (Bali) language. The original name of these people is Kedjom. The misinterpretation of Babanki to mean “basket makers” as would be translated from Mungaka is false (Mundi, 2005: p. 55).

²“Bamenda Grassfields” after World War 1, Cameroon a former German colony was divided into two: one part (the greater part) was put under French administration under the League of Nations Mandate, while the Western remaining part was mandated to the British who administered it as part of Nigeria. The part of the Grassfields that was under English rule was called “Bamenda Grassfield.”



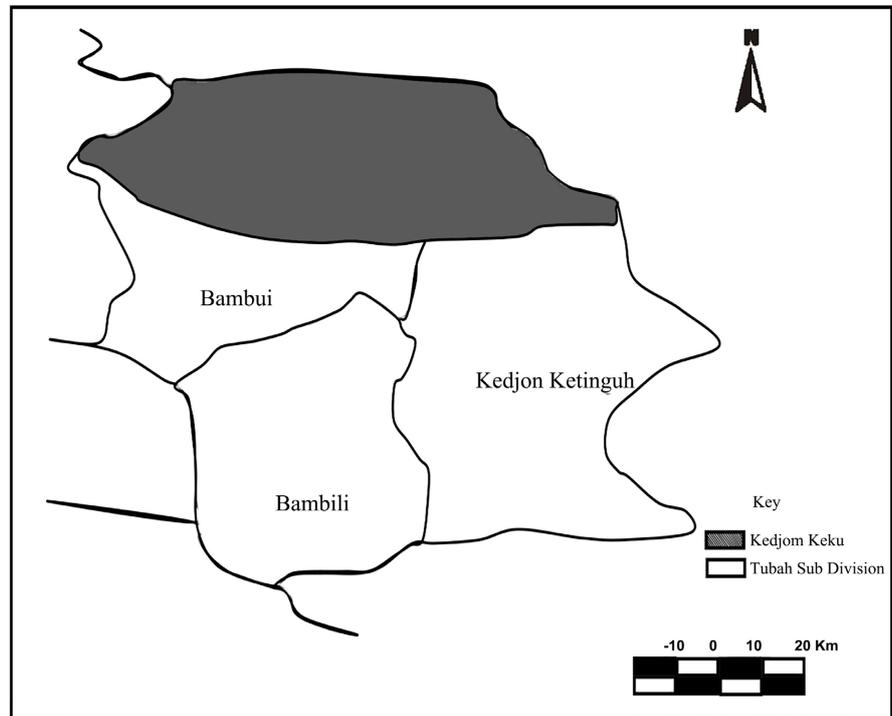
Map 1. The location of Western Grassfields in the Republic of Cameroon. Source: Adapted from administrative map of Cameroon-MINATD-1992.



Map 2. The Western Grassfields showing Tubah Sub Division. Source: Helvetas Cameroon, drawn by Paul Mbadi 02/08/2023.

1.1.1. Location of Kedjom Keku

Kedjom is in Tubah Sub Division, Mezam Division, in the North West Region of Cameroon. Tubah Sub Division as demonstrated in **Map 3** below covers four villages: Kedjom Keku, Kedjom Ketinguh, Bambui and Bambili. The area is inhabited by a population of about sixty-eight thousand (68,000) people. Most of



Map 3. Kedjom Keku in Tubah Sub Division. Source: Adapted from the Administrative figure of Cameroon-MINATD-1992.

the inhabitants settle on the hill according to their history, it is only with time that most of them have move down to the plains reason being the search for fertile land (Helvetas, 2001).

Kedjom Keku literally means “people of the forest” as the area they settled on was forested. She is situated in the northeast of Bamenda some 15 kilometres from Bamenda, the regional capital of the North West Region. With an estimated population of about 20,000 inhabitants, she is bounded to the northwest and southeast by Bafut, to the east by Bingo (Kom) and the south by Bambui (Mofor, 2022d).

1.1.2. Origin of Kedjom Fondom

Oral history indicates that Kedjom people came into the North West Region from the northeast. They had migrated from an area east of Lake Chad, then moved southwest ward to the Adamawa plateau, north of Bankim. They then migrated into the North West Region through Nso, Ndop plain, Oku, Kom and are now settled where they are: Kedjom people are of the Tikar or Tikari stock. The Tikari fall under the Semi-Bantu peoples in the Grassfields region of Cameroon. They are essentially blacksmiths, weaver and woodcarvers. It is believed that the blacksmithing was learned through their contacts with the Sudanese and Egyptian traders east of Lake Chad.

Kedjom people were warriors. Oral tradition indicates that they never lost any war. They fought their way through the various villages and clans they came across. Yet, they had no real geopolitical ambition; otherwise, the subjected people

would necessarily have swollen up the population of this fondom. Their culture and tradition encouraged their continuous migration. *Kwifon*, the supreme government organ of Kedjom people had ruled that whenever a *fon* of Kedjom died, the village had to move from that location. By such movements, they were necessarily going to encroach upon territories and clans, hence confrontation and war. This cultural tendency gradually died down at the turn of the twentieth century, upon the advent of foreign colonialists who preferred to see the Kedjom people settled down to real development like other villages.

1.1.3. The Split of Kedjom Fondom

The split of Kedjom occurred in the mid-1800s after the death of Fon Yufanyi. In Kedjom, the *keben ke ndong* (flute dance) or the annual dance is a very special ceremony that is hosted by the *fon* to venerate the gods, commemorate the loving memory of warriors who had died as well as special celebration of the death of *Fon Mbuwayn*, who passed on without leaving a successor. It is also a period of prayer for protection for the coming season. It is thus a period of village ritualistic cleansing. The dance is called *ndoo nyingsse* since it was usually held after the whole village had harvested red oat grass for the roofing of the palace. It is thus a period of renovating the palace. It is equally a time to pay homage to the royal house. During the dance, everyone is decked in expensive traditional regalia.

During this special ritual dance, many initiations are carried out in the village. The *kwifon*, the supreme ruling authority of the village usually announces the date of the dance and it will not take place when there is a death at the palace. In this special case, *kwifon* announced the date of the dance and the dance began. The dance had to last for two or three days and held twice over a period of two weeks. These two periods were designated as “the first dance” and “the last dance”. It so happened that during the period of the dance, a prince named *Ninying* died the dance continued, despite the fact that the palace was bereaved and this was not in keeping with the customs of the ancestors. Quite dissatisfied, seventeen princes and their families decided to migrate away from Kedjom to form present day Kedjom Ketinguh because they considered such an act as disrespectful to their ancestors and the land. During their migration, they faced hostilities from nearby villages such as Balikumbat. They made appeals to their brothers they had left behind to assist them fight their enemies. This was done to the victory of Kedjom Ketinguh. The split of Kedjom into two was caused by nothing other than a family quarrel which eventually involved the entire Kedjom people and occurred around the period of the annual dance (Aghogah, 2022, Makiyighome, 2021).

Kedjom Keku like most Cameroon Grassfields fondoms is highly stratified with the *kwifon*, the *fon* and notables occupying positions of decision making. The *kwifon* is the highest institution in this society. According to *Nkwi and Warnier (1982)*, a distinctive feature of the political system of all Western Grassfields states is the police society known as *kwifon* which usually has its quarters

in the palace precincts and has, among its duties, the recruitment of boyhood of the palace retainers from freeborn commoners. This secret society has secret gongs and special ritual functions. There are important masks associated with it. At important national events or the death of a member, the society puts on its masked dances. In the execution of its state duties, its retainers appear clothed in specially designed gowns which give them power. Its authority is of an impersonal kind and its agents cannot be held to account by the populace. In some parts of the Western Grassfield, especially in Kedjom Keku, it takes decision and gives instructions on very important matters about the fondom. For example, the celebration of the death of palace children, work on the palace, shrines, roads, repairs of the *fon's* palace and others. It has prerogative powers to enthroned or depose a *fon* and to exile evil-doers from the village. The removal of pollution is the prerogative power of the *kwifon*.

After the *kwifon* is the *fon*. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 59) among the notables, the chief was first and far above the others. In most Grassfields fondoms, he is called *mfon* or *fon* or *efo* or any similar word, that for the sake of convenience, is usually written *fon*. He is the highest personality in the village to whom inhabitants pay allegiance. He is a custodian of culture and an auxiliary to the administration. He is highly respected and endowed with power and authority over the territory. He has the final say in all major issues. He is chief military commander and the highest judge in the judiciary system. The *fon* is defied and seen as demi-god. He is the chief priest and serves as a link between the people and the ancestral gods. The *fon* also performs rites to appease the ancestors, seek their help in times of difficulties and purifies the village from curses and witchcraft practices. Unsettled problems in quarter councils are brought to the village traditional council where the *fon* presides. The importance of the *fon* and the power he wields is reflected in the humble and respectful way the people greet him. To greet the *fon*, a man first bows, claps thrice and utters the word *mbeh*. Women stoop as low as possible before clapping and saying *mbeh*. The *fon's* power is demonstrated through the use of the leopard or tiger skin, the red feather, special dances, dresses and special behavioural action. By Kedjom culture, the *fon* is regarded and spoken to in the third person plural “*ve* or *they*”. The *fon* is called *ntuh*, same as the palace. The *fon* is called *wayn* meaning a child. A child in the people's understanding is an immature person and therefore not yet responsible, and cannot be held accountable for what he says and does. His errors are blamed on his parents and guidance.

After the *fon* are a few important royal sons such as the *Ndifon*, palace title holders such as the *vutihvuloh* (sub chiefs). A prince who has transcended three *fons* or has gone beyond contesting the throne is an original *tih looh*. Other sub chiefs might be people who come from a different fondom with a number of followers. The title of a *tiloh* (sub chief) and *chehfon* (king maker) are acquired either by inheritance or by initiation. After the sub chiefs are the *chehfons* (king makers). Heads of the traditional societies such as the “*kwifon*” and the village

traditional councils equally enjoy some high privileges. Quarter heads, village councillors and the senior members of regulatory societies follows in the ranking. They are followed by the heads of minor descent groups and compounds.

The *fon* occupies an invaluable position in the Kedjom Keku fendom as he is “father” of the fendom. Due to this, his children (princes and princess) have certain privileges. They are called *Vu ntuh* or palace children in *Ga’ah Kedjom*. As children of the palace, they are entitled to specific objects and a special ceremony in which specific rituals are performed in their honour one of which is their death celebration.

1.1.4. Belief System of Kedjom Keku People

Nigosian (1994: p. 4) defined religion in general as “an invention or creation of the human mind for regulating all human activity, and this creative activity is a human necessity that satisfies the spiritual desires and needs inherent in human nature”. Traditional African religion had existed for many centuries before the arrival of Western Christian missionaries and Western political expeditions on the African continent. With the challenge for and the Westernisation of the African continent in the 19th century, many Africans became Christians not by choice but via intimidation. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that others became Christians by choice (Nigosian, 1994).

Kedjoms are a deeply spiritual people. They believed in the existence of the Supreme Being called *Mbom* or *Nyingong*. He was believed to be invisible, omnipotent, omniscience and omnipresent. A large proportion of Kedjom Keku indigenes have converted to Christianity, and this religion has been assimilated into Kedjom Keku culture, and many Kedjom Keku Christians maintain traditional spiritual beliefs. The cultural practices contain elements of indigenous religion. Most of them strongly uphold their African traditional practices while claiming to be Christians. The new convert is poised between two worlds: the old traditions and customs of his culture which he is striving to uphold or leave behind, and the new beliefs, and practices to which he is still a stranger. They run to the traditional medical doctor in times of trouble, to the miracle worker for signs and wonders, and to the main stream church for serious funeral rites. They visit the traditional healers, the prophets from faith healing churches and western style hospitals and clinics for health and healing. In the traditional Kedjom Keku practices, religion and spirituality constitute key elements of the health and healing practices.

According to Mbiti (1969: pp. 1-2), a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through words and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind. He further explains that to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involve participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. In regards to these ideas, ancestral reverence was a common feature in Kedjom Keku fendom which is in line with their traditional belief system. For instance, the people believe that the soul of the *fon*, priests and diviners and those of ordinary people have different

fate after death. Royal ancestral and respect of the death demands the presence of indigenous people, who support the *fon* either morally or financially. In the course of the events, the diviners and priests visit the palace shrines to pray while seeking for the ancestors' protection and cleansing of the land against crisis like warfare, famines, epidemics, locust invasion and mystical assaults.

It should be noted that the commemoration of the deaths of these royal heroes and heroines form integral part of the religious mores of the society. Ancestor reverence to family is fundamental elements of traditional religion. Kedjom tradition stresses the importance of commemorating the death of palace children as well as ordinary deceased. This constitutes part of their religion of self-examination and reflected in social stratification. It is a spiritual debt they ought to pay. As highlighted by Makiyighome (2021: p. 253), spiritual debt as a cultural activity entails ritual performances and practices to prevent illness, heal an emerging and pending illness episode or prevent an impending doom.

2. Methodology

The method of data collection for this paper is qualitative. Underlying this method, we used techniques such as direct observation, in-depth interviews, life histories and many more to collect data. We attended the death celebration of palace children held recently at the palace of Kedjom Keku from the 17th to the 21st of November 2022. Our interest during this occasion was to observe the different rituals conducted. The observation equally gave us the opportunity to see the attire of the princes and princess and the objects which they carried throughout the ceremony. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 Kedjom Keku inhabitants; 4 notables, 14 princes and princess and 6 commoners both males and females. Here, the researchers wanted to understand how Kedjom Keku people perceive children, how the death celebration of palace children especially is performed. As concerns life histories, we discussed with two notables; who were princes and a princess to understand how palace children are different from other Kedjom Keku children. We also sought to comprehend the different rituals performed during the death celebration of palace children and their cultural significance. Data was analysed during and soon after the fieldwork was over using content analysis. The data was interpreted using the interpretive anthropology approach of Geertz. Geertz saw this approach as being fundamentally about getting some idea of how people conceptualise, understand their world, what they are going about doing it.

3. Findings and Discussion

Children in Kedjom Keku like elsewhere in the Grassfields are perceived differently depending on the compound in which they are born. This portion of the article handles the perception of children in general and palace children in particular. It also examines the ceremonies and rituals performed during such celebrations and the cultural significance of the ceremony.

3.1. Palace Children (Vu'ntuh) in Kedjom Keku

Palace children are children born of a *fon*. The umbilical cords of these children are buried in the palace. The site where the umbilical cord is buried symbolises the connection among the individual, his or her family group, the land, and the spiritual world. The ritual is said to give protective powers over the child. The Kedjoms believe that this ensures that the child will always return home. The social structure of the fondom clearly differentiates princes and Princess from other children of the fondom as earlier discussed. It is important to note that *ntuh* or the palace is the home of the *fon* and his children. Furthermore, the *ntuh* is the centre of political as well as religious power in all Cameroon Grassfields fondoms. A notable and king maker (*chefon*) in Kedjom Keku had this to say about the palace:

The people of Kedjom like Grassfields people believe that ntuh is a “store”, a store of village properties and cultural heritage. As a store, a care taker is needed to carter for the village and its heritage. The kwifon (the supreme body) has the power to decide on whom to put on the head of this store. The person selected is called the fon meaning “care taker” of the store and leader of those who own the store. The ntuh therefore, is the heart of the fondom. The people think that as head of the village, the fon has to be taken care of, the palace has to be constructed by the villagers, the village have to work on his farm and make sure that he lives well. It is therefore, difficult for anyone, not even the fon to claim that he owns any palace property. Although he is the care taker, the fon, his wives and children live in the ntuh, hence, the name palace children (20/12/2022).

The *ntuh* is composed of a series of buildings and courtyards which define restricted levels of access. They have many external sections, one reserved for notables, one for quarter heads and one for the reception of villagers. The latter is opened to all, both men and women. The palace thus, comprises different quarters which Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 63) divide as follows:

the living quarters of the royal wives, the quarters of the main regulatory society (kwifon) where a number of retainers live, the living quarters of the fon, built close to the shrines that shelters the graves of his ancestors, and a few utilitarian buildings (kitchen, shrines, latrines). Access to the inner palace, where the fon's residence is located, is accessible only to important titleholders, visiting fons and other guests of honour. Another section is reserved for fon's wives and the children. The children live here, only when they are young and when they grow up and get married, they form their own homes, where they live with their wives and children.

As already mentioned above, palace children can be placed under two categories namely; children born before the *fon* became *fon* and those born when the *fon* is crowned as *fon*. An elderly Kedjom Keku man had this to say about children born before the *fon* is enthroned as *fon*:

Children born of a fon before his enthronement become princes and princesses just because his father is fon. Such children are deprived of certain privi-

leges. For instance, when it comes to taking certain decisions and actions in the palace, they are limited. This is because they were not born when their father was already a fon. That is why it is said that a prince or a princess is someone born on the royal bed or bed of a tiger (kebo) skin. The royal bed is decorated with the skin of a tiger (10/01/2023).

The above quote brings to light the situation of the child of the *fon* who died in 2021 and was not buried in the palace but rather in the father's compound because the *fon* gave birth to him before he was enthroned as *fon*. A tiger or leopard means that once enthroned as *fon*, he no longer sleeps on a normal bed. His bed must be decorated with the skin of any of the animals listed above. Children born before the *fon* became *fon* may bear the title of princes but none can ever succeed their father (*fon*) when he "disappears"³.

If the *fon* gives birth to a child whose mother is not a queen, the child might live in the palace but having some limitations. This is as a result of the belief that a *fon* cannot go to the extent to bear a child without lying on the sculpted tiger bed. If it happens, the child is strip off from certain rights. There are limits to him or her within the royal circle. Villagers would consider such children as palace children but within the palace such children have their status and limits. For instance, in the palace, there are traditional institutions and *jujus* or masquerades of different calibres and such children cannot belong to some of these institutions or sacred societies. Even if they are part of such institutions, they cannot be leaders. An interlocutor had this to say:

A child who is born by the fon whose mother is not a queen is not considered as a prince by the Kedjom Keku society. If this child dies, he is not buried like a prince or princess (palace child) because he or she is not a child of one of the wives of a fon. This is because a queen is one who is customarily married to the fon (22/12/2022).

Another interlocutor told us that:

A son of a prince is not a prince but has some slight privileges because in extreme situations he can become fon. In case a fon comes up and does not have male children, the son of his brother ndifon (who is equally a prince) can become the fon. Although it is very uncommon, sometimes if the fon "travels beyond" without having a male child, and the ndifon has a male child, there is the possibility that the son of the ndifon can succeed the fon (20/12/2022).

The second category of palace children are those born of the *fon* and the queen. These are children born when the father was/is already enthroned as *fon*. These princes and princesses have an urge over other children in the fondom. They are born on the leopard or tiger skin and as it is said in Kedjom Keku, "the son of a tiger is a tiger." They therefore occupy a special place in Kedjom Keku as a prince can become a *fon*, a *ndifon* or a *tihfon*. A queen can become *mphifon*

³In all Grassfields chiefdoms, the *fon* does not die, he disappears or he journeys. And this goes with most of the things that have to do with *fonship*. Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 61) note that no one would say "the *fon* is ill" but "there is sickness in the palace;" or "the palace is hot." His eyes are "stars" and his feet are "things". No one could talk to him unless he/she bows, cuffs his/her hands over his/her mouth and speaks through them in a low voice.

(queen mother) if the queen mother had died. Meaning that the daughter of the *fon* can become a queen mother. These children are therefore regarded as true palace children and they are entitled to a lot privileges. They can enter in most of the compartments of the palace. When the *fon* is missing, one of them has to inherit the position since Kedjom Keku fondom is patrilineal. Although a patrilineal society, a princess could equally inherit the position in the case where her father, *fon* before missing had no male child to inherit the throne.

Palace children are therefore, direct children of the ruling *fon*. In case the ruling *fon* dies, they still remain princes and princesses, alongside children of the newly enthroned *fon*. They have contributions to make on issues pertaining to the palace. They serve as gurus, relics as well as traditional dictionaries that remain very resourceful to the fondom.

3.2. Differences between Palace Children and Other Children of the Kedjom Keku Fondom

Princes and princesses are different from other children in the Kedjom Keku fondom. The fact that they are children of a leader goes with some degree of reverence or respect. A *fon* or a chief has extra power, extra character and extra abilities. By virtue of these, he is regarded as a different person within the fondom and as such, his sons or daughters are seen as having some of these qualities. He or she is therefore different from the ordinary child or the daughter or son of some other notable. There is an adage within the fondom which states that the child of a tiger is a tiger or better still the dog of a king is the king of dogs.

Many of the notables who are equally princes made us to understand in a focus group discussion that:

Palace children have some privileges that an ordinary Kedjom man does not have. For instance, the kwifon cannot put an injunction in the compound or the farm of a prince or princess. The kwifon cannot put an injunction in the compound in which a princess is married. In case there is a very serious matter concerning a prince or a princess, he or she shall not be taken to the normal village court like any ordinary villager. There is a particular way of handling matters pertaining to princes and princesses. They can only be called up for concertation with the quarter head and a decision taken. They cannot be judged in the quarter courts. Even if the matter is sent to the palace, the place where they seat and discuss it is different from the place where they seat and discuss matters pertaining to other commoners in the village (14/12/2022).

The *keto'oh ke vu'ntuh* is where prince and princess are judged. *Pheting fu mbamukum* is a royal court only for palace princesses. *Pheting fu vu'ntuh* is a royal court to solve problems between a prince and another prince. The seating position of palace children during cultural festivals shows how different they are from others in the society. *Ke'toh ke-ntuh* is where the *fon* and other notables seat during cultural events or manifestations in the palace. Nobody passes in front without bowing down even if the *fon* is not on seat. This signifies respect

and humility to royalty. *Ke'toh vu' ntuh* is a section reserved for all the princes during cultural celebrations. The masquerades of princes come out from this section during celebrations such as that of palace children. *Ke'toh ke-kee-ntuh* is the position in the palace where queens and few princesses seat during celebrations. It is situated at the right side when one is entering the palace. Princes and commoners are not allowed to seat there. Only kingmakers can seat there because they act as messengers between the *fon* and the queens.

Only a princess can become a *mphifon* (queen mother), a position occupied by the *fon's* sister from the same mother and the status is acquired the day the brother becomes *fon*. She is mostly concerned with advising the queens on how to live and women in the society respect her. The position of *tihfon*, who is a brother to the *fon* is equally acquired the day the *fon* is enthroned. He is in charge of the palace masquerade known as *ndong* a cap is always on his head no matter the situation and he commands a lot of respect from the public. The *ndifon* is equally a brother to the *fon*, he acts as an assistant to the *fon*, he also assists *tihfon* in the management of the palace juju known as *ndong*, he always has his traditional cap on. He only removes it when he is sleeping. The public also respect him. An interlocutor said:

If there is a meeting concerning all the princes and princesses in the palace, the ndifon (immediate assistance to the fon) is the one to preside and take decisions. No matter his age, the fact that he occupies that position, everybody respects him (10/01/2023).

Palace children are thus children of the tiger or of the leopard (the *fon*), born on the leopard skin (Moffor, 2022c), and because of this, they occupy a special position in the fondom. They are seen as potential *fons*. A *fon* while reigning selects a successor amongst them and informs the king makers. The deaths of princes and princesses are not celebrated in the same manner like those of an ordinary Kedjom Keku man and woman. The manner of celebration according to Tsongwain (2007: p. 47) is like that of the *fon* except that there is no uphill gun firing and wood ash rubbing. To show how different they are, the immediate split of Kedjom fondom into two was caused by the death of a prince as earlier highlighted.

3.3. Commemorating the Deaths of Place Children

In Kedjom Keku culture, numerous activities and rites are performed during many if not all cultural events. Some of these occasions include birth, coming-of-age initiation, marriage, and death. Death celebration in general and the death celebration of palace children is the focus of this paper. Jindra (1997) comments on death celebration by saying:

Every year during the dry season in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, large, smoky blasts from aging flint-lock guns announce the start of yet another "death celebration," a festival of sight, smell and sound. These events dominate social life in the Grassfields, drawing family and friends together from far away.

Whole villagers turn out. They are so frequent during the dry season that people often attend several on one day. In the days before the event, food is bought at markets, palm wine tappers are kept busy supplying the celebrations, men stock up on gunpowder for the firing of the guns, bright "Grassfields" gowns are donned and proudly displayed, and dance groups perform. Drums are played, and participants dance in wide circles, chanting and singing together. One's social life during this time is often taken up with organising or attending death celebrations (p. 1).

Generally in Kedjom Keku, before a death celebration begins, an event known as *cho* (exchange of gifts), is organised. This is an occasion where the individual concerned in the ceremony inform or invites their friends, neighbours and well-wishers. These invitees prepare gifts in kind and in cash which they give to persons who invited them in his compound. The gifts received from benevolent friends, neighbours and well-wishers is usually followed by entertainment. As regards the celebration of the deaths of palace children, the individual children of the late prince or princess do the *cho* on the market day in their individual compounds. This is a way to tell friends and relatives that they are celebrating the death of their parents, popularly known as cry die in Pidgin English.

The gesture of giving gifts to a person or persons during a ceremony has to be paid back the day that that friend, neighbour, well-wisher has an event. The 'pay back' ceremony could be funeral, death celebration, twins' ceremony or even a wedding occasion. The people in this cultural universe therefore practice the gift and counter gift of Marcel Mauss (Moffor, 2022a: p. 100). Mauss comments that because gifts are inalienable they must be returned: the act of giving creates a gift-debt that has to be repaid. He argues that gifts are never "free." Rather, he noted that human history is full of examples that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange. To him, gift entails three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.

The death ceremony of palace children is special and it takes place on specific days and to comprehend these days, it will be important to examine the eight days weekly calendar of Kedjom Keku. *Kyezthing* is the market day in Kedjom Keku and equally "county Sunday." On this day, there is no farming in the entire fondom. It is known as the day of the *Kwifon*, a day where there is no drumming, playing of xylophone, and gun firing until after 4pm. It is a day for the start of the twin celebration. It is on this day that the clan gives sacrifices to the gods. *Zhing* is the day preserved for celebrations of men's death. The village annual dance equally commences on this day. *Mbiityeli* is the day for spiritual worship. It is a day set aside for the celebration of females' death. It is equally one of the days for twin celebration. *Mbiwi* is a day of which the gods of the land can be worshipped. It is equally a market day in some quarters like *Mbaya Quarter* and *kezon Quarter*. *Le* is the missing day for *fons*, that is, when a *fon* disappears, it is on this day that the announcement is made. *Kyepfen* is the day reserved for celebrating the disappearance of Kedjom Keku *fons*. *Wengang* is a

day for medicine or better still traditional doctor's day. *Ajung* is another day of the *Kwifon*. On such a day gun could be fired only after 4pm. The *kwifon* therefore has two days; *Kyezthing* and *ajung*.

Before the death celebration of palace children begins, there are certain rituals conducted at the limits of the village and at important junctions. They are destined to purify the village (ridding it of evil and bad fortune), protect the village, ensure success during the celebration, permit the people to carry on life-sustaining activities successfully, and to bring harmony to the village.

The celebration of the death of princes and princesses is an occasion which rallies the entire fondom, bringing home Kedjom Keku people from far and near. The ceremony last for five days; all the days are full of activities meanwhile some of the days are marked with a series of rites. Before the occasion commences, the *fon*, palace children and kingmakers meet at different levels to plan the event. That is, there is usually an internal discussion between the *fon* and palace children, and then between the *fon* and the *vu chehfons* (king makers). When this is done, the *fon* and *vu chehfons* discuss it with the *kwifon*. The *kwifon* makes a public announcement regarding the ceremony on a market day (*kyezthing*), stating the month and day of the celebration.

On the first day known as *ajung*, the eve of the market day, that is two days before the commencement of the ceremony, *kwifon* makes some announcements as regards the death celebration of palace children at its quarters in the palace precincts. Still in its quarters, the *kwifon* produces its music with the drums and gongs. The drumming of the instruments of the *kwifon*, is a way to alert the villagers that an important ceremony will begin in the days ahead. The drumming starts exceptionally in the afternoon, precisely as from 4 pm. It is worth noting that it is exceptional because the activities of the *kwifon*, a very powerful secret society are usually carried out at night when everyone is asleep.

On the second day which is the Kedjom Keku market day (*Kezthing*), *kwifon* goes to the market and informs the entire village to be present in the palace square from the next day because the deaths of princes and princesses have to be celebrated. A masquerade known as *natang* dances from about 4 pm to 5 pm to give a go ahead for the celebration. Some masquerades leave the palace on this day and run to the different compounds of princes and princesses and collect food and other items. For princesses who got married and died, the masquerade goes to the compound in which they got married and collect dresses of theirs called *kebenteh* and take to the palace as a symbol that their death have to be celebrated. In a compound where a prince died, a royal masquerade known as *ageh* goes and performs there at night to indicate that they are taking him back to the palace where his death has to be celebrated. Movement of the *jujus* to those compounds and around the village communicates to the villagers that a very important event will take place, the death celebration of palace children.

Days 3 and 4 are reserved for traditional dancing. That is, these are the days that all the masquerades or *jujus* found in the fondom have to dance to showcase the culture of the land and to demonstrate their allegiance to the departed palace

children that some are considered as ancestors. The dancing by the different traditional dances is equally to show their faithfulness to the *fon*, the father of the fondom. The *kwifon* thus lays down the procedure which these jujus have to follow. A notable had this to say concerning the participation of jujus in such celebrations:

When there is a celebration in the palace such as the death celebration of the fon or that of palace children, all jujus in the entire fondom have to dance in the palace plaza to show their allegiance to the fon in particular and the fondom in general. In a situation where some dance groups or masquerades cannot be represented, they have to go to the palace and indicate and give the reasons why they are not going to participate. There are punitive measures in case a masquerade or dance group does not take part in the ceremony. Not taking part means that the said juju has disrespected the laws of the land and the kwifon would send an injunction to the compound housing that particular juju, prohibiting it from taking part in any ceremony in the village till further notice (04/01/2023).

The *jujus* in the fondom are therefore divided into two with the palace used as a reference point. The masquerades found in compounds from the palace going northwards have their own day to dance while those from the palace to the west have theirs. This grouping is very necessary because the masquerades found in the fondom are many and all cannot dance on a single day. Besides, according to the village weekly calendar, and as earlier mentioned, *zhing* is the day preserved for celebrations of men's' death and *mbiityeli* is the day set aside for the celebration of females' death. The jujus in compounds from the palace northwards dance on *zhing* and those westwards dance on *mbiityeli*. **Figure 1(a)** and **Figure 1(b)** below is a demonstration of some of the jujus which dance on *zhing*.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) Juju dancing during a death celebration palace children; (b) Juju dancing during a death celebration of palace children. Source: Makiyighome (19/11/2022).

Masquerades are believed to be a representation of the dead. It is believed that the dead visits the living from time to time through this medium. The masquerades are considered as a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors. When the *jujus* and other dance groups are performing, the *fon*, the elites and anyone present who feel moved by the performance of the *jujus*, give incentives to the different *jujus* as a form of encouragement. Although these individuals use their discretion to motivate the dance groups, most times the motivation is based on performance. There are some incentives like fowls that are given to the head of the *juju* group and to the *jujus* themselves. The latter incentive is regarded in the Grassfields in general and among the Kedjom Keku in particular as food for the *juju*. It is important to mention that in this part of the country before an individual invites a *juju* to take part in his or her ceremony, the food of the *juju* is given and this is done in two phases; the first is handed when the invitation is given and the second is given when the *juju* has already participated in the event. In this second phase, two fowls are given to the *juju* (one goes to the owner of the *juju* and the second goes to the group) and cooked food.

We have mentioned earlier that the display of masquerades in death celebrations in general and that of palace children in particular is a way to demonstrate their allegiance to the departed palace children that some are regarded as ancestors. The people of Kedjom Keku, like those elsewhere have many ways of responding to the spiritual world. They combine the physical, natural and spiritual aspects of the universe as well as moral principles to inform and explain what they know, how they know and why they know. This is what is called African theory of knowledge (Anyanwu, 1984: p. 81) or African epistemology. The an-

cestors are the “living dead” compassionate spirits who are blood related to the people who believe in them. The ancestors continue to show an interest in the daily lives of the relatives that are still alive (Van Dyk, 2001). They are superior to the living and include, amongst others, departed parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles. These spirits, because they have crossed over to the other side of life, act as mediators between the living and God. This way of life is regarded as ancestor reverence, veneration or remembering and not as ancestor worship (Berg, 2003) as is the case with royalty and ancestral veneration in commemorating the death of palace children in Kedjom Keku.

The ceremony ends on *mbiwi* which is the 5th day. This day is more of a working session that has to do with concerting between the *fon* and princes and princesses in the palace. They examine the entire event, trying to identify the aspects of the occasion which did not work well. That is, they make a retrospect of the event and think the way forward for the next occasion.

3.4. Symbolism and Importance in Celebrating the Deaths of Palace Children

In Kedjom Keku like in most parts of the Cameroon Grassfields, rites are performed at the family as well as village level in the course of the year and at the end of the year. Such traditional rites and ceremonies have their foundational beliefs. Rituals and ceremonies do have their accompanied practices, rules and regulations. Each ritual serves a particular purpose within the society. Celebrating the deaths of palace children is a rite performed in Kedjom Keku on behalf of the whole fendom. It is performed in order that the offspring of these palace children and the entire society should be blessed, stay blessed and prosper. It is a means of linking the Kedjom Keku man with the spiritual powers and forces and seeks to cleanse the people from known and unknown evils. According to Jindra (1997), death celebration can be described as a “focal” institution that involves all sectors and spheres of society and plays a crucial role in transmitting culture.

The cultural significance behind celebrating the death of princes, princesses and past *fons* is to cleanse the family, cleanse the village and clear the future for everybody. Through these ceremonies it is believed, that all impending dooms, threats amongst others are sent away. Where they are celebrating the deaths of palace children in Kedjom, no other death can be celebrated in the fendom during that period. This is to avoid divided attention in the village, show respect and dignity towards palace children as they occupy a special place in the society; they are children born on the tiger bed and their umbilical cords are buried in the palace. The purpose of performing rituals at death celebrations is not to come to terms with the horror of death itself, but to facilitate the passage from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors or living-dead (Mbiti, 1969).

When there is death celebration in the palace, it has to do with princes, princesses and queens. A celebration is done in their honour because they (princes, princesses' and queens) are very important to the Kedjom society as seen above. They help in manning the tradition and keeping the institution of the palace

strong. If certain dances are surviving today in Kedjom Keku, it is thanks to the princes and princesses. Furthermore, the princes are potential candidates to the throne. This explains why when a prince or princess dies the final death celebration is not done in his compound or her compound but in the palace. This is different from other deaths in the community that have to be celebrated in the compound of the concern.

The celebration of the death of palace children is equally an opportunity to expose or demonstrate the cultural heritage of Kedjom Keku fondom. This can be seen in the traditional attire of the people. Among the groups dancing, the dancers put on the royal *ndop* dress (a fabric reserved for the royalty) and the *togho* (embroidered gown) as a demonstrated in **Figure 2** below. Three of those who wear this *ndop* dress also put on feathered headgears. This is a dance reserved for princes' reason why majority of the dancers are cloth in the *ndop* fabric.

The traditional regalia in most cultures is a cherished garment which carries the spirit and culture of the people. Like every other traditional regalia, the *toghu* or *atoghu* carries a vibrant reflection of the people of the North West region in Cameroon and the Kedjom Keku people in particular and their history.

Most of them (dancers) are carrying the peace plant (*dracaena*). Peace is a commitment not to harm, but to nurture love in all individuals. Peace is a relationship of living well together. It is strong and lasting, based on respect, serenity, cordiality and mutual understanding among people. It comes from the expression of the heart just as much as from the mind. It is through human affection motivated by peace that we can transcend violence (Moffor, 2022e: p. 21). The use of this plant by these dancers or the dance group is an indication that these princes wish that the ceremony goes on well and in peace. On their own,



Figure 2. A prince dance in Kedjom Keku. Source: Makiyighome (19/11/2020).

they do not have the ability to do it, they are therefore symbolically calling on the ancestors and gods to accomplish this.

The next **Figure 3** portrays a *juju* and a set of dancers in procession. This is another palace dance which is intended to grace the occasion. The leader handles a spear as he leads the dance group round the palace plaza. The spear is used in Kedjom Keku fondom as a hunting tool to kill wild animals. In the days of old, this weapon was used by the people to fight in inter-tribal war. The leader of this dance holds the spear not to harm but as a way to demonstrate the strength of the dance.

During the death celebration of place children, there is a dance known as *ketoh* or *ketoh kekintuh* that comes out and performs. Though the dance group is made-up of queens, princesses, their children and grandchildren. The dance celebrates only on behalf of queens and not for princes and princesses. If they come out, dance and go round the palace square once, it means that one queen died between the former celebration and the present. If they dance and go round twice, it means the two queens died between the two celebrations. Therefore, the number of times they dance and go round the palace plaza communicates the number of queens who died. In the course of this, the queens carry along items like the calabash and the royal stool.

They are led out from the women's side of the palace by one of the queens holding and hitting a split top rattle Indian bamboo, following the rhythm of their low voice song. The rest of the people hold their hands together in a prayerful mood and march in a line round the esplanade and back to the queen's section of the palace. Prayer is a dimension of life in Africa, the disposition of one who believes himself or herself to be in communion with divine reality, and it is expressed typically in symbolic action, dance and ritual.

Majority of these palace women carry objects, a veritable display of the material culture of the Kedjom Keku fondom. These women with beads round their



Figure 3. A palace dance which graces the death celebration of palace children. Source: Makiyighome (18/11/2022).

heads are queens' meanwhile princesses together with their children and grandchildren do not dress in beads and do not carry any objects. The objects which they carry include calabashes, stools (with human and animal motifs) as demonstrated in **Figure 4** and a human statue as portrayed in **Figure 5** below. The calabashes are not ordinary, they are specially designed (with handles and a kind of support at the bottom) showing that they are meant to be used by the *fon*, the highest personality in the fendom. The calabash is very instrumental in Cameroon Grassfields cultures; they hold palm wine which is used in all cultural ceremonies no matter the magnitude.

Figure 4 also demonstrates a number of stools which they carry. They are royal stools and this could be depicted from the different animals: human and leopard. These royal animals which symbolise power attributed to the *fon* alone and as noted by **Nkwi and Warnier (1982: p. 59)**, among the notables, the chief



Figure 4. Queens's carrying gifts to the *fon* during the death celebration of palace children. Source: Makiyighome (20/11/2022).



Figure 5. A gift of human statue taken to the *fon* during the death celebration of palace children. Source: Makiyighome (20/11/2022).

or *fon* was first and far above the others. In the same picture, a queen carries a human statue, a symbol of authority and wisdom. These symbols are all what they wish the *fon*, the custodian of the culture authority and wisdom in the management of the affairs of the fondom.

Among the art objects carried as gifts by the queens to the *fon* is a human statue as discussed above. This statue like the royal animals is emblematic because it stands for wisdom. The peculiarities of this statue is that it is a young female as can be observed in the nature of her breast. She (the statue) has a special hairdo, an illustration of how female folks in Kedjom Keku used to plait their hair in the days of old. They (Kedjom Keku women) depended on their natural hair, which could be plaited in a simple and modest manner. These women therefore did not depend on artificial human hair to make themselves decent and beautiful (Moffor, 2016: p. 155). The young girl is the symbol of youthfulness a way of saying that the *fon* needs young people who are more agile to help in the management of the fondom. The statue also carries a container which is a symbol of generosity. The *fon* the “father” of his people has to be generous as Nkwi and Warnier (1982) note that one of his numerous duties is to bring villagers together from time to time and give them food, drinks and oil, especially during very important cultural festivities.

Cowrie shells used by the queens symbolise power. The shells are known to bring good luck and a protection to the wearer. The cowrie’s shape represents the female form, its rounded top reminiscent of a pregnant woman’s belly (Moffor, 2022b: p. 73). Thus it is a symbol of fertility. That is, the cowries are a sign of femininity and fertility, with women often wearing them not only to help them conceive; but to help them give birth safely.

Death celebrations of princes in Kedjom Keku in particular and across the Cameroon Grassfields as a whole are followed by enthronement rituals in which a successor is chosen or empowered to officially take over the “chair” or throne left behind by the predecessor. Such an activity is conducted in the compounds of the different princes soon after the death celebration of the palace children at the palace. Before the coronation proper, a ritual known as *nkuh mfuh* is performed. The ritual normally begins with the harvesting and preparation of assorted foodstuff, symbolising the farming activities of the deceased or ancestor, going onto the sharing of the foodstuffs to the public in small baskets. This aspect is followed by the “rubbing”—enthronement which entails dressing, anointing the successor with camwood or palm oil, and decorating him/her with beads. After decorating the successor, he/she is presented to the public before the throne is handed over. Upon receiving the throne, the successor becomes a title holder and is given the title cup, also known as *ndu nji*, literally translated as the cup of a successor or the cup carrying the head(s) of the dead. Henceforth, he/she bears the name of the deceased or ancestor. The title cup now becomes one of the essential links between the ancestor and his/her living kinsmen and it is used for pouring libations and making sacrifices to the ancestors whenever need arises.

Performing ritual during ceremonies brings comfort and ensures a sense of belonging, thus, strengthening the individuals and the society. The people in this fondom are strongly attached to their tradition. They feel highly indebted to their parents, the Supreme Being, the gods, the ancestors and the environment. They have internal and external gods and these gods are feed especially during rituals (such as death celebrations) and or during the offering of sacrifices. The rituals are performed to appease, prepare and bring solidarity and equally avoid distress. Jindra (1997: p. 4) notes that the death celebration is the biggest event hosted by a family, and is the most important ritual/festival of the Grassfields. It takes more time and resources than any other family event, and, unlike other events, attendance by family members is compulsory. Death celebrations bring distant family members home, unifying them in the cooperation required for a successful death celebration and in the ritual passing of the cup at the “family meeting.” Death celebrations redistribute resources from urban “elites” to villagers, and provide a way for these elites to be recognised and incorporated into their natal villages, to which they inevitably return to be interred, near where their umbilical cords were ritually buried after birth. Death celebrations and similar types of “sacrifices” are the main channel of communication to the ancestors, who underlie legitimacy for all traditional authority. By studying the death celebration, one immediately gets an understanding of family and social relationships, the importance of ancestors, and the increasing influence of Christian beliefs. One can witness gender roles, the significance of Grassfields staples of food and drink, and also the aesthetic richness of the music, dance, and dress. Urban and rural come together at the death celebration, as “elites” from the cities provide many of the resources for the event.

Celebrating the deaths of princes and princesses bring about social bonding amongst the people. Social bond can be understood as the extent to which a person is incorporated into the society. Hirschi (1969) cited by Chriss (2007: p. 16), assumed that elements of social bonding include attachment to families, involvement to activities and the belief that these things are important. At death celebrations and especially when it concerns princes and princesses, one notices the relationships that participants have with wider groups, the interdependencies and reciprocities that sustain a satisfactory life. Death celebrations and other cultural activities help friends and family members meet and interact with one another and equally help elites maintain contact with their home village. At the same time, it serve as special occasions in which people return home to celebrate with their family and society, reaffirming their identity and link to the traditions of the fondom. Unity of the group is reinforced through ancestor veneration, offering of various kinds help to keep the ancestors happy in the spiritual world, who, in return, will bless the family. Spiritual debt payment such as celebrating the deaths of palace children is the affair of the family as well as that of the entire fondom. It is held in homes, graves, and shrines and consists of performing incantations, libations and the offering of sacrifices, serves as a means of communication and greetings to the deceased, the ancestors and the gods.

3.5. Death Celebration of Palace Children in the Face of Modernity

There are a lot of changes which are taking place in Kedjom Keku like in most of Cameroon Grassfields because of the people's contact with the external world. One of such changes is noticed in the status and death celebration of princes and princesses or palace children. These categories (palace children) have a special status within the fondom but this status is dying down as a result of modernity. The advent of Christianity, Islam, and other religions on the African continent affects the practice of rituals in Kedjom Keku. Some indigenes are still expressing feet dragging attitudes towards some of these traditional rituals under the pretext that they see nothing beneficial in them. There are equally cases in which some successors have denounced prominent seats in the palace which they were supposed to succeed. Some have denounced the family masquerades and some who occupied traditional prominent positions in the village before their death requested to be given a decent Christian burial and no death celebration. Sometimes the church and the family have had some misunderstandings and serious confrontations, especially, during burial rites and death celebrations of church members, who are from royal families. While the church wants to offer its deceased member the required Christian burial, the family believes that the dead member is of royal descent and cannot just be buried like any ordinary member in the society. Some of the off springs of these palace children especially Pentecostals refuse at times to take part in death celebrations under the pretext that it is not in line with their Christian doctrine.

Commenting on death celebrations in the face of modernity, [Jindra \(1997\)](#) notes that:

The death celebration can also be a way of remembering ancestors without having to do formal libations or sacrifices. There is certain uneasiness among Christians over the pouring of libations, depending on how much they see certain traditional practices as "pagan." A death celebration is a way to please the ancestors without doing the formal libations or sacrifices associated with paganism. Christians prefer instead to have "memorials" and have thus made the "memorial service" a standard part of the death celebration. Indeed, the "remembering" of ancestors seems to have taken on Christian overtones (just as Christian overtones have been added to notions of gods, the land of the dead, and the ancestors/saints (p. 317)).

Tourists and members from other communities are increasingly participating in the death celebrations of palace children and other festive events in Kedjom Keku. While there may be positive aspects to tourist involvement, the festivals often suffer in the same way as traditional performing arts. Some cultural artifacts that were to be preserved for posterity are sold to tourists. The viability of social practices, rituals and especially festive events may also depend quite heavily on general socio-economic conditions.

4. Conclusion

Death celebration is one of the many aspects of Kedjom Keku culture. This is done only for indigenes that are mature. It comes soon after the funeral of a departed member of the family is conducted. Some families choose to perform it after a number of years, time enough to prepare for the occasion. The death celebration of palace children is different because when theirs is organised, it involves a number of these palace children who had died and the occasion takes place in the palace to show that they are of royal descent. Therefore, the death celebration of palace children may be conducted once in a decade. The ceremony runs for a number of days with each day having a series of activities including rituals. During the celebration, all dance groups in the village take part compulsorily. Commemorating the deaths of palace children helps to mirror the structure of the Kedjom Keku society. Ancestor veneration and reverence to family are fundamental elements of Kedjom Keku religion. Rituals to honour ancestors are a spiritual debt and extremely important and must be performed in precise ways. By carrying them out properly, an individual can receive the aid and cooperation of deceased relatives. Any mishap is a sign of displeasure by the deceased, indicating that the proper rituals have not been conducted. A ritual serves as a way of communicating with the ancestors, the gods and the Supreme Being in order to appease them and seek their protection.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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