

# **African-Americans Seeking Tikar Origin in Cameroon: Notes on Multiple Dimensions of Belonging**

**By Francis B. Nyamnjoh**

Recently I have been contacted by some African-Americans and agents of African-Americans who have traced their origin to the Tikar of Cameroon and would like to know more about this group of people. I have therefore written up these notes to assist them and interested others in their quest to capture their multiple dimensions of belonging.

If you are an African-American looking for Tikar communities in Cameroon, here are the four places to start, once you have landed at the Douala International Airport:

- 1.) Bamenda (Western Grassfields, North-West Province)
- 2.) Fumban (Eastern Grassfields, Western Province)
- 3.) Bankim (Tikar Plain, Upper Mbam, Mayo-Banyo Division, Adamawa Province)
- 4.) Ngambe (Tikar Plain, Upper Mbam, Mbam Division, Central Province)

## **Tikar Migration**

The Tikar have not attracted much direct scholarship as a group (David Price being one of the few exceptions – see 1979), but many studies of various other groups, of groups claiming Tikar origin, and of the Grassfields in general include accounts on the Tikar.

According to historians, anthropologists, archeologists and oral tradition, the Tikar originated from north-eastern Cameroon, around the Adamawa and Lake Chad regions (present-day Adamawa, North and Far-North Provinces). Tikar migration southwards and westwards probably intensified with the raid for slaves by invading Fulani from Northern Nigeria in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, there is reason to believe that such migration was ongoing for centuries long before the invasion. The pressure of invasion by the Fulani raiders certainly occasioned the movements that led the Tikar to their

current locations in the Western Grassfields (Bamenda Plateau) and Eastern Grassfields (Fumban) and the Tikar plain of Bankim (Upper Mbam) (Mbuagbaw, Brain & Palmer, 1987:26; Mbaku 2005:10-12). Upon arrival in the Grassfields, the Tikar found other populations in place, populations which had either migrated from elsewhere or had inhabited the region for centuries. Their arrival occasioned population movements, just as did the arrival of others after them (Chilver 1966; Chilver and Kaberry 1968; Warnier 1985; Nyamnjoh 1985; Nkwi 1987; Nyamndi 1988; Fardon 1988; Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996; Yenshu 2001). Pre-colonial Cameroon, like the rest of Africa, was richly characterized by population movements not always induced by conflict or invasion.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, those who claim Tikar origin include Nso, Kom, Bum, Bafut, Oku, Mbiame, Wiya, Tang, War, Mbot, Mbem, Fungom, Weh, Mmen, Bamunka, Babungo, Bamessi, Bamessing, Bambalang, Bamali, Bafanji, Baba (Papiakum), Bangola, Big Babanki, Babanki Tungo, Nkwen, Bambili and Bambui. Their alleged migration from the Upper Mbam River region was in waves, and mostly led by princes of Rifum *fons*, desirous of setting up their own dynasties (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:16; Nkwi 1987:15-28). The authors of *A History of Cameroon* capture the Tikar migration as follows:

“It was about three hundred years ago that increasing pressure from the north and internal troubles plus the desire for new lands led to the splitting up of Tikar groups into small bands, which, having left Kimi, drifted further west and south-west. Some of these moved under the leadership of the sons of a Tikar ruler who later called themselves *Fons*, the most common Bamenda term for paramount chiefs. These groups, at various times reached what is now Mezam. Among the earlier were those who came from Ndobbo to the Ndop plain in the south of Bamenda, where they formed small, politically independent villages a few kilometers apart. No semblance of political unity was achieved. In the north-east we have Mbaw, Mbem, and Nsungli, also settlements of Tikar, and below the escarpment of a later date settlements of Wiya, Tang, and War. The main body of this group however, set off under the leadership of their *Fon* and founded the

kingdom of Bum. The Bafut, Kom, and Nsaw were among the last to arrive.” (Mbuagbaw et al. 1987:30).

### **Tikar Structures and Institutions**

The political structures and institutions of the Tikar chiefdoms are very similar, and have influenced and been influenced by those of neighbouring non-Tikar groups. Some useful studies of Tikar political structures and institutions exist (see for example Chilver Kaberry 1968; Nkwi 1976, 1987, 1989; Price 1985, 1989; Aletum 1990; Aletum & Fisiy 1989; Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996; Yenshu 2001; and [http://era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era\\_Resources/](http://era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era_Resources/) for Sally Chilver and Phyllis Kaberry’s “The Kingdom of Bum”). Like other communities in the region, a Bamenda Grassfields Tikar community is led by a chief who is popularly known as *fon*, and whose chiefdom henceforth we are going to call *fondom*. The Tikar in the Bamenda Grassfields mostly came as small princely emigrant groups, to occupy areas that were already settled by other groups, with the result that in almost every Tikar *fondom*, are smaller *fondoms* that were either conquered or given protection by the Tikar, but that have largely retained their hereditary dynasties (Nkwi 1987:23-30; Mbuagbaw et al. 1987:30; Warnier 1985). It is in this way that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fondoms* such as Nso, Kom, Bafut, Bum and Ndu expanded their boundaries by incorporating or making tributaries of neighbouring *fondoms*, while at the same time entertaining relations of conflict and tension or conviviality with their fellow Tikar *fondoms*. Bum, for instance, though small, gained importance from its role as an “entrepot for the kola trade with Jukun and Hausa in the north-west during the later part of the century”, and had “intermittent hostility” with Kom, its southern neighbours, while maintaining friendship with Nso and Ndu. Nso was mostly at conflict with Ndu and enjoyed an alliance with Kom, which was in competition with Bafut on its south-western boundary for the allegiance of much smaller *fondoms* (Mbuagbaw et al. 1987:31; Nkwi 1987:23-30; Yenshu 2001).

### **“The Tikar Problem” in the Bamenda Grassfields**

Today, the various groups of Tikar now settled in the Bamenda Grassfields reportedly trace their origin to Tibati, Banyo, Kimi and Ndobbo of north-east Cameroon. Indeed,

many royal lineages of various Grassfields *fondoms* claim to have originated from the “Ndobu-Tikar” country, a region that covers the area between the Upper Mbam and the Upper Noun. In certain cases in the Bamenda Grassfields – Bafut, Nkwen, Bambili and Bambui, their claims to being Tikar are not backed up by traceable direct contact, rituals, exchange or *fon* linking them with Rifum or Bankim, the most prestigious centres of the Upper Mbam valley. Culturally, the only institution of Tikar origin in the *fondoms* in question is the princes’ fraternity known as *Ngirri*, which the *fondoms* of Nso and Bamum for example, claim they acquired along with the paraphernalia from Rifum. Other institutions such as *Kwifon* (*ngwerong* in Nso and its tributaries) are widespread in the Grassfields and correspond to those in the Tikar groups of the Upper Mbam region. In terms of languages spoken, it would appear that the Tikar of the Grassfields have through encounters and conviviality with other languages over the years, lost much of their linguistic similarities with the language of the Tikar who presently occupy the Tikar Plain. Some would argue that this makes of the Tikar of the Tikar plain the “true” Tikar. (Such an argument would find parallels in the argument that you are less American because you speak defective English or none at all, and that your identity is totally independent of what you think of yourself). The lack of any direct connections with Rifum notwithstanding, the *fondoms* in question could well be of Tikar origin, just as they could well not be. Nkwi and Warnier have observed, for some *fondoms* to have maintained oral tradition to origin even with little to authenticate those origin, those *fondoms* must have an interest in doing so, and those traditions must be significant in their life (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:26; Nkwi 1987:23-28). This issue has been termed by scholars “The Tikar Problem”, and remains the subject of much ongoing debate (Chilver & Kaberry 1971; Fowler & Zietlyn 1996: 6-15; Yenshu 2001).

To Jean-Pierre Warnier, an anthropologist and archeologist who has worked extensively on pre-colonial Bamenda Grassfields, in many regards, the “Tikar Complex” is essentially an affair of the relations between *fons* on the one hand, and between a *fon* and his people on the other. First, for *fons* sharing common claims of origin, the Tikar Complex was a sufficient basis in principle to establish mutual obligations and taboos in an assumed alliance without the need for recourse to ad hoc rituals. And for *fons* who did

not share the same myths of origin, the mere reference to Ndobu-Tikar was reason enough to establish difference as legitimate basis for hostility or to render necessary a ritual of alliance, or in other instances to fuel sentiments of aristocratic superiority on the part of a “Tikar” *fon*. The prestige that came with declaring oneself as Tikar even when one was truly not was the fact of being seen as brother of renowned *fondoms* such as Nso and Fumban. With the claim to being Tikar came a certain sense of entitlement or legitimacy to power over non-Tikar populations even when these were in the majority. Hence it must be stressed that Tikar traditions are first and foremost associated with royalty and royal lineages than with the wider group, and that acquiring either through payment or otherwise ‘authentic Tikar’ signs of legitimacy (e.g. regalia, *Ngirri*) directly from *fons* of Tikar descent was capable of bestowing some of that Tikariness on non-Tikar (Warnier 1985:264-266). Claims of Tikar origin mean less for most of the population than they do to their *fons* who seek political capital through such claims (Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996:6-15). This means that Tikar identity, like identities everywhere, is not only subject to renegotiation with new encounters, but that it cannot be understood divorced from the power dynamics that accord or deny value to identities.

The same argument is developed in *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, which Jean-Pierre Warnier co-authored with another anthropologist, Paul Nkwi, a Tikar from the *fondom* of Kom. “Claiming a Tikar origin was tantamount to claiming high status and legitimate political power”, and the closer to Bankim in rituals one was, the greater one’s legitimacy and power. Thus the Bamoun, Nso and others, by recognizing the ritual ascendancy of the *fon* of Bankim and by maintaining a tradition where new paramount *fons* must be blessed at Rifum, a sacred lake near Bankim, earn themselves enough symbolic capital to pull their political and economic weight vis-à-vis their own subjects who may or may not claim Tikar origin, and especially in relation to other *fondoms* and the agents of the state who are constantly shopping for local authorities as vote banks and auxiliaries of the government. Similarly, the further and further away from Kimi one got, the more remote and difficult to substantiate their claims to be Tikar became (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:26-27).

Given that the Bamenda Grassfields were occupied long before alleged Tikar migration, the fact that the royal lineage claims Tikar descent does not imply that the *fondom* as a whole is Tikar, as the situation of Bum and Bafut would attest (Nyamnjoh 1985; Yenshu 2001). Among groups where Tikar origin is claimed by both royal and commoner lineages are Kom, Nso, Mbem and Weh (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:14-16). However, given how common it was for people to move between groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for reasons of trade, witchcraft, conflict, diplomacy and marriage *inter alia*, it is hardly surprising that few Tikar groups were pure and that fewer still are, even where commoners and royal lineages continue to claim Tikar origin. It was and still is commonplace for potential successors to compete for the throne on the death of a *fon*, and for the unsuccessful candidates to take refuge in other *fondoms*, taking along with them large numbers of supporters (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:24-28; Nkwi 1987:23-28). Here as elsewhere, the tendency to trace descent exclusively through the male line has often had the effect of oversimplifying the complexity of identities. Personally, I grew up in two palaces and belong with at least three *fondoms*, two Tikar (Bum and Mmen), a third Widikum (Mankon), and my biological and social origin can be traced to a lot more, such that answering simple and often simplistic questions such as ‘where do you come from originally?’ is no simple feat (Nyamnjoh 2002). There is therefore no such thing as the essential, pure or homogenous Tikar community even amongst the so-called “true” Tikar of the Upper Mbam Tikar Plain, just as there is no essential African or American, as long as physical, cultural and ideological mobility are part and parcel of our reality and history. Being Tikar, being American or being anything for that matter, is always a negotiated reality subject to constant renegotiation in tune with new encounters, the aspirations of the moment and the relationships that engender such aspirations and make possible or impossible their realization (Nyamnjoh 2002, 2005, 2007a&b).

### **Trading and Relations with Others**

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Grassfields were a largely isolated region. Given the high altitude, mountainous and difficult landscape of the Grassfields, the lack of navigable waterways, and the fact that transportation prior to the opening of motorable roads was largely done by human portage, the region did not benefit from the vast trading

networks that crossed Africa in various directions, and which coastal chiefdoms took great advantage of. The mountain range that extends from the Grassfields to Lake Chad and the Jos Plateau of Nigeria remained largely undisturbed until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:78). Trade was mainly in slaves (see Chem-Langhëë 1995, for more on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century slavery in the Grassfields), ivory, kola nuts, salt, oil, iron, cloth pearls and cowries, which in certain regions were adopted as forms of payment. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bamenda Grassfields was still very largely outside the trading networks of the Benue and Adamawa. But these two networks would spread themselves into the Bamenda Plateau at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, thereby offering the communities of the region the possibility for differentiation (Rowlands 1978; Warnier 1985:141-148).

Two Tikar *fondoms*, Bum and Fumban, occupied strategic positions as trade routes, Bum for trade with Wukari and Fumban for trade with Banyo. At first, trade between the Benue and the Grassfields was still mainly in the hands of the local population, which was not the case with trade with the Adamawa region, which was totally under the control of the Hausas, whose impact in the Grassfields has been such that there is hardly a local market today where one does not find a Hausa trader on a mat with items such as herbs, salt, powder and little packets of mixtures of cooking ingredients of all sorts. The mountainous nature of the region added to many rivers to make it difficult to travel, especially at the rainy season, meaning that only certain routes were possible for traders. Kola nut mostly produced in Nsungli and Nso was sold in Nigeria through Banyo, Yola and Takum, and the importance of the Banyo route was only diminished when the French and British set up customs posts. The donkeys seen today in Nso (where they are called “the kola animals”) and elsewhere in the Grassfields were probably introduced during the kola trade (Warnier 1985:141-148). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *fon* of Bafut was allegedly so powerful that he used to send traders as far away as Takum (Warnier 1985:267). The Western and Eastern Grassfields along with their Tikar *fondoms* have yielded some of the most enterprising entrepreneurs in present day Cameroon (Warnier 1993).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, what these brief notes on the Tikar tell us is that pre- and post-colonial identities in Cameroon and throughout Africa are complex, negotiated and relational experiences that call for a nuanced rather than an essentialist articulation of identity and belonging (Nyamnjoh 2002; Pelican 2006). With the Tikar, as well as with any other group in Cameroon, Africa, America or elsewhere, being 'authentic' is a function of the way race, place, culture, class and gender define and prescribe, include and exclude. These hierarchies assume different forms depending on encounters, power relations and prevalent notions of personhood, agency and community (Nyamnjoh 2005, 2007a). Africa offers fascinating examples of how the term 'indigenous' was arbitrarily employed in the service of colonizing forces, of how peoples have had recourse to indigeneity in their struggles against colonialism, and of how groups vying for resources and power amongst themselves have deployed competing claims to indigeneity in relation to one another (Nyamnjoh 2007b). Being or not being Tikar should thus be understood within this framework of the politics of recognition and representation. It should also be understood in terms of how cosmopolitan communities have been and are being forged in Africa despite colonial and post-colonial politics of strategic essentialism and divide-and-rule. The Tikar experience, both imagined and real, in a way is an invitation to contemplate a deterritorialized mode of belonging where relationships matter more than birthmarks and birthplaces in whether or not one feels at home.

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