

# **ZI-FEITI-WUIEYN: FASHION AND BEAUTY IN KOM HISTORY IN CAMEROON AS UNDERSTOOD THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS**

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## **Abstract**

*For a very long time, African history has suffered from Eurocentric biases so much so that the history and civilisation of this continent was understood as European activities. Historians of Africa paid scant attention to fashion and beauty of its people which could be partially known in the social science as sexuality. This is likely because it was considered an exclusive domain of anthropology and perhaps psychology. This situation has dramatically changed since the 1990s as trans-disciplinary studies have been encouraged. On the other hand, historians and social scientists of Africa have little interaction with visual images which can be used as alternative sources of historical phenomena. Photographs as one of the visual sources can be used to understand fashion and beauty in Africa, taking Kom in the Northwest of Cameroon as a case study. On the basis of this, I intend to look at pictures and how these made and remade the body at different times in the history of Kom as a form of leisure and fun. My interest is to showcase indigenous understanding of this type of leisure which the Kom people engage with. What type of indigenous materials was used for their fashion and beauty? From the photographs, how can one understand the socio-cultural basis of sexuality? How can one read meaning into the various forms of body adornment, putting on of various objects such as ear rings and bangles to beautify the body, tattooing, scarification, and different hair styles at different periods of Kom history? I further wish to compare sexual representation in the photographs of Christians and non-Christians, educated and uneducated, members of royalty and commoners, and how this was shaped by ideology or social status. I collected these photographs from private archives in Cameroon and Europe during field work for my PhD thesis between 2008 and 2011.*

## **Introduction**

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On 7 November 2014, most Kenyan women took to the streets of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, to send a message to men to stop attacking women because of the way they dress. Apparently, a woman had been stripped naked by a group of men who accused her of indecent dressing. Protesters marched across Nairobi city with placards that read: 'My dress, my choice', while others donned mini-skirts, which was the same attire the unidentified woman wore when she was attacked. Two years later, on 21 April 2016, female students of the Rhodes University in Grahamstown in South Africa dressed topless and scrawled on their breasts: 'This is mine'. This was in protest against rampant campus rape. Consequently, these girls/women were protesting against campus rape by using their breasts as bullets. These two related incidents had a common denominator - the way the women dressed at different times. Although world television channels beamed the occasions, they missed out that women as well as men have the right to treat their bodies the way they want to at different periods in their societies. The act of how women and men use and treat their bodies has been arguably dubbed as "sexuality" in the human sciences.

This article is about understanding the socio-cultural basis of sexuality in Kom history, using photographs. It sets out to answer the following questions: How can one understand the socio-cultural basis of sexuality in Kom through the interrogation of visual sources such as photographs? How can we read meaning into the various forms of body adornment, the putting on of various objects, such as earrings and bangles to beautify the body, tattooing, scarification, or different hair styles at different periods of Kom history? Are there any striking differences and similarities in sexual representation in the photographs of Christians and non-Christians, educated and uneducated, members of royalty and commoners, and how was this shaped by ideology or social status? An attempt to critically engage with these questions will likely shed new light on and contribute to the scholarship of sexuality in Africa while taking Kom in the Northwest of Cameroon as the case study. Secondly, there is no doubt that taking the photographs and matching them with oral information will lead us to new interpretations from an Afrocentric perspective, thus calling to the fore new ways of seeing sexualities from an African lens, and also understanding the socio-cultural basis of sexuality.

In the past fifteen years or so, historians and anthropologists have become increasingly attuned to the value of photographic materials — including formal photographs and snapshots, missionary as well as colonial photographs, glass lantern slides, and picture postcards — for the study of the modern African past (Edwards, 1991; Ryan, 1997). Yet, a problem facing scholars is that many, perhaps most, photographic materials remain scattered and uncatalogued, inhabiting library archives, museums, private collections,

and even dusty old attics (Zaccaria, 2001). The photographs which were taken at the advent of colonial rule played multifarious roles, depending on who took them and for what reasons they were taken.

Arguably, nothing could better capture the meddling colonial gaze in Africa than the camera and its by-product which was the photograph. In certain quarters, colonial photography was a remarkable success of Euro-American technology and controlled by the white race. It was able to capture and, at the same time, to rearrange the appearance of exotic environments and peoples. The photograph played many roles. It captured landscapes and constructed the idea of wildlife, and simultaneously produced stereotypical illustrations of 'tribe and race'. It identified criminals and gratified colonial desire with some pornographic postcards of naked African women.

Missionaries played a very important role in colonial photography in Africa. They, more than anybody, popularised the role of photography with as much multifarious functions as the colonial buccaneers. Missionaries had a different reason for taking photographs. In one way they were out to evangelise and by taking photographs and displaying them back at home, they showed superiors that their evangelising work was going on well. Taking nude pictures of women was to show that there was need to clothe the Africans. Although, in the same vein, in colonial anthropology, such photographs were showing the backwardness and primitiveness of the African. However, the missionary pictures, which are mostly at the centre of this article, were never taken with the idea of sexuality in mind. Yet, if carefully analysed, they will portray indigenous understandings of sexuality far from the theories and meanings imported from the West.

### **Conceptualising and Contextualising Sexuality**

Like any veneer of human nature, sexuality is almost impossible to define, explain and apply watertight boundaries to. Scholars and researchers have delved into the domain with different methodological tools and have reached varying conclusions. Tamale (2011, p. 11), in her studies of sexuality in Africa, includes in her definition 'sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour, as well as procreation, sexual orientation and personal and interpersonal sexual relations'. The study of sexuality in Africa, or better still, the problematised notion of 'African sexualities', has increasingly become a topic of interest for African scholars.

To say the least, sexuality as theme does not lack literature (Marck, 2009; Msibi, 2011, Foucault, 1998, 1990, 1976; Falola & Amponsah, 2013; Sanchez, 2013; Kapasula, 2006; Lamp, 2002). The African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre has adopted an explanation of the term sexuality concurred with and proposed

by the World Health Organization. According to this definition, “Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships” (ARSRC, 2003, 17).

Weeks (2003) added that sexuality is the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures. It is the manner in which people decide to, or conditioned to, to enjoy or deny their sexual desires. Definitely, sexuality has a lot to do with sex, but it is more than what just meets the eye because there are other processes and activities surrounding it. Although this should be a private matter, it has always remained at the centre of societal organisation. Sexuality contributes to the human definition of the self and its relationship to others. Because sexuality is so encompassing, it has through the centuries influenced the family, the community and even the nation. Sexuality plays an important role in population politics of families and nations. Economic policies have been fashioned to suit sexuality and its consequences. Religious laws and a whole range of taboos have been webbed around the subject of sexuality.

Thus, sexuality has throughout history been subject to manipulation and control by individuals and societies. Sexuality and gender are intricately related so that it might be difficult to speak of one without the other. The term gender is normally used to describe the social condition of being female or male, and sexuality is an important outcome of this dualism. It is in the interplay of this dualism in human existence that sexuality is traditionally conceived, expressed, experienced or repressed. Nevertheless, wherever there is a norm, there is always an alternative expression, which could be referred to as a misnomer. Therefore, in sexuality, though there could be culturally accepted expressions, there is always a form of resistance to what is culturally acceptable, resulting in situations where draconian taboos and laws are used to repress such developments. But throughout history, sexuality has been in a state of flux, always responding to prevailing economic, political, social, and health conditions. Thus, sexuality has been in a state of change as a consequence of other developments in the society (Tamale, 2005).

Sexuality in Africa has seemingly not been given much of an emic understanding. In other words, Afrocentric meanings attached to sexuality have not covered much ground. Consequently, it would appear that a deeper study of sexuality in Africa is conceptually and theoretically borrowed from western paradigms. Yet people in Africa in the pre-colonial times, long before colonialism, have treated their bodies just like any other people in the world in various ways: scarification, tattooing, dressing, singing and dancing all were part of the social and cultural repertoires of sexuality in particular societies. Understanding sexuality through western binoculars, could be misleading because it fails to understand the realities of

African societies. One of the leading scholars on sexuality in Africa, Tamale (2011), has opined that examining methodological and epistemological issues on African sexuality is extremely important because it helps to determine the legitimacy of the knowledge that has been constructed about African sexualities. Through methodologies, such as those used in Marxism, post-colonial theory, feminist theory and post-structuralism, such hierarchical frameworks in research have been challenged and deconstructed by many scholars (Tamale, 2005).

If sexuality has not been well-captured through the realities of Africa, it might also be because of what prompted the various scholars to carry out their research. Most studies on sexualities in Africa suggest that they have been motivated by ideological, political and/or social agendas of donor organisations which mainly are western-based, and they *ipso facto* determine the conclusions even before the field research is actually done. Of course, the saying goes that 'he who pays the piper detects the tune'. Thus, in Africa, the majority of studies have been programmed long before they are actually undertaken because they are donor-driven (For more on this, see Arnfred, 2004, 2009; Undie & Benaya, 2006, Tamale, 2011).

Although sexuality refers to the ways in which both males and females treat their bodies, this article is restricted to women and the way they understood sexuality from an indigenous perspective. What was the socio-cultural basis that announced sexuality? How was it understood by the people of Kom in various layers of their history? These and other questions remain at the crux of this article. Among the Kom, sexuality is known and translated as *zi-feiyti-wuieyn*. This simply means the making of the body to look beautiful. The salient features of *zi-fyiti-wieyn* are scarification and tattooing (*ejainti-weiyn*); dressing (*se laf*); putting on of camwood, scientifically known as *pterocarpus tinctorius*, and translated into *itangi kom* (the language of the Kom people) as *si-yo-abyui*; putting on earrings (*wei-mi-yeli*); hair dressing (*i-fyta-tu*); putting on traditional dress (*fi-bathali*); beads (*ghi-wha*); and modern dress (*dzisi-kfaang*). If these things are all put in proper perspective, they will go a long way to give us a proper understanding of indigenous meanings attached to the concept of sexuality in Kom.

### **Methodology**

The data for this paper was gathered from three principal sources: privately-own archives to get access to the photographs in this article and also conducted interviews. During field work in Cameroon and Holland a few photographs were discovered in private missionary photo albums. The Mill Hill house at Oosterbeek, revealed most of the photographs of Rev. Fr. Leo Onderwater, who had worked in Kom between 1935 and 1988. The following information about Rev. Onderwater is important:

Rev. Fr. Leo Onderwater was born on 8 July 1905 in Holland in a small village of Lisse. In 1931 he was ordained as priest and was posted to Cameroon. He was first posted to St Anthony Catholic Mission, Njinikom. After a few years in Njinikom as curator, he was posted to a number of Parishes, and when he retired, he returned to Njinikom, and was there until he died on 23 January 1993. He was buried in the cemetery of the Mill Hill Fathers at Oosterbeek. As a young Dutch priest, Fr. Leo brought a complete new dimension to the *modus operandi* of missionary work in Cameroon. For more than 60 years, he did not only preach the good gospel, but embarked on improving the social and economic life of people, also people other than those of his Roman Catholic parish. Having grown up in a farming community, Fr. Leo set out to revolutionise agriculture in Kom. He brought seeds of crops that transformed the area. He started an experimental farm close to the Parish house where he grew the major food crops of his village, such as carrots, cabbages, lettuce, tomatoes, and Irish potatoes. Later on he brought eucalyptus trees to the area. Many said that he also brought coffee, a crop of which the introduction into Kom caused some controversy.

Unfortunately, Fr. Leo died in 1993, so it was impossible for me to conduct an interview with him to better appreciate why he took these photos, and the circumstances which prompted him to do so.

Photo albums in Kom constitute one of the social repertoires, but the use of these photo albums is quite intriguing. In most homes, a family album is the first thing a visitor is given. In certain homes the photo albums are displayed on the walls of the sitting room. These photographs were not taken to portray sexuality. Nevertheless, if carefully explored, they could be a useful source of history in this part of the world, despite some shortcomings, because they could identify the time and events surrounding their production (Geary, 1986). The photo albums in houses could be described by those who kept them. These photographs showed different ways in which the Kom people treated their bodies. These included, amongst others, tattooing, scarification, hairstyles and dressing styles. Symbols used in these practices were loaded with meanings if studied well and critically.

To better appreciate these symbols, interviews became a *sine qua non*, essentially because photographs are silent testimonies of the past. The importance of interviews, and/or oral traditions in societies without a writing tradition cannot be overemphasised (See e.g., Erim, 1984, pp. 38-53; Afigbo, 1984, pp. 53-63; Chikindu, 1984, pp. 64-68). Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, which has been generally dubbed

as years of decolonisation, African history was also being decolonised. In many sources, ranging from articles, textbooks and a few popular works, Africans of the past came to 'life' and consequently became active makers and shakers of their own histories. Writings by outsiders, veiled from Afrocentric perspectives, revealed unexpected information about African history. Archaeological findings were recognised as the creation of ancient Africans and not outsiders. Above all, African scholars and researchers realised that the oral traditions transmitted from past generations and recounted by African traditional historians, were valid and important sources for historical reconstruction (Martin, 1984, 69-77). The information transmitted verbally often helps to fill gaps in the archival sources. The doyen of African history, Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1990, p. 3) points out:

Oral tradition takes its place as a real living museum, conservator and transmitter of the social and cultural creations stored up by people said to have no written records ... Oral tradition is by far the most intimate of historical sources, the most rich, the one which is fullest of the sap of authenticity ... However useful the written record, it is bound to freeze, to dry up its subject. It decants, dissects, schematizes, and petrifies: the letter killeth. Tradition clothes things in the flesh and blood and colour, it gives blood to the skeleton of the past. It presents in three dimensions what is often crowded onto the two dimensional surface of a piece of paper.

Although Ki-Zerbo was so particular about oral tradition, it should be noted that oral tradition has its own limitations, which he was careful to point out. According to him, "this spoken history is a very frail thread ... which I use to trace our way back through the dark twists of the labyrinth of time". He added: "Those who are its custodians are hoary-headed old men with cracked voices, memories often dim, and a stickler's insistence on etiquette as behooves potential ancestors". He concluded: "They are like the last remaining islets in a landscape that was once imposing and coherent, but which is now eroded, flattened and thrown into disorder by the sharp waves of modernity" (Ki-Zerbo, 1990, p. 7). Vansina (1985, p. 199), often quoted as the 'high priest' of African oral tradition, concludes his work by stating that "oral traditions have a part to play in the reconstruction of the past and that its importance varies according to place and time. It is a part similar to that played by written sources because both are messages from the past to the present, and messages are key elements in historical reconstruction".

The importance of oral tradition confirmed throughout the interviews, was obvious during the fieldwork. Even though oral tradition might be flawed just like written and photographic sources usually are, a combination of the two can yield significant evidence. Ryder (1970, p. 33) was aware of this problem. He

remarked: “Too often it is assumed that anything written must be more reliable than verbal testimony; but every historian knows that a written document needs to be subjected to exactly the same sort of scrutiny as to the circumstances in which it was produced as does a piece of oral evidence. The word of mouth is no more or less subject to distortion, deliberate or accidental, than the written word”. But the subjectivity of both sources does not mean that their value should be ignored.

Although interviews and archives were also used to gather the data for this article, photographs revealed more than the narratives and archives. They were a separate repository and source. They, like any other source, had their limitations and “require just as much scrutiny and critical interpretation as written sources” (Jenkins, 1985). Photographs are also compelling in that they have a force of command. They command the eye and create more sensations in the viewer than the written narrative. It is important to declare upfront that the bulk of information presented here constitutes the photographs taken by the missionaries and are from private archives owned by individuals in Kom. As such, missionary photographs and some others from private collections are of great importance for this study as they penetrate the ‘private sphere’ (Barber, 2006). Of course, they were taken by the missionaries, especially Rev, Father Leo Onderwater. Photographs can tell more than words alone. Scholars, such as Hartman *et al.* (1998) and Pinney (2004), maintain that only recently have visual sources, especially photographs, become important tools as complements and even alternatives to the written word. Kratz (2002) claims that the value of photographs is also determined by the fact that they have not been fully integrated into the text and they thus always either remain on book covers, or they are inconspicuously hidden in a corner of a book.

Consequently, it has been the intension here to fully integrate photographs into the text. As Edwards (2004) points out, photographs are not disembodied images, but instead, inscriptions which relate to people, their sense of themselves, and their past. Photographs therefore by their very nature, depict social relations, and the way in which people actually tell their histories and, consequently, they demonstrate what existed at a particular point in time in peoples’ histories. In the context of telling stories, photographs as objects become enmeshed in the web of the oral, linked to sound, gesture, social body, and music; they relate to sitting around and passing the photographs from one to another, perhaps in ways that express traditional social relations of history telling. In sexuality, photographs are able to express meaning without necessarily speaking it.

### **Locating Kom**



The Fondom of Kom is located in the Bamenda Grasslands in the present-day Northwest Region of Cameroon. It is the second largest Fondom, after Nso, in the Grasslands (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967, p. 33; Terretta, 2014). A Fondom is a socio-cultural/political entity ruled by a fon who wields considerable power, and performs quasi-religious functions. The surface of the Kom Fondom is 280 square miles – plus, minus 450 square kilometers (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967, pp. 45). Map One shows the location of Kom in Cameroon.

**Map 1: The position of Kom in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon**



Source: A.S. Neba, 1987, 15.

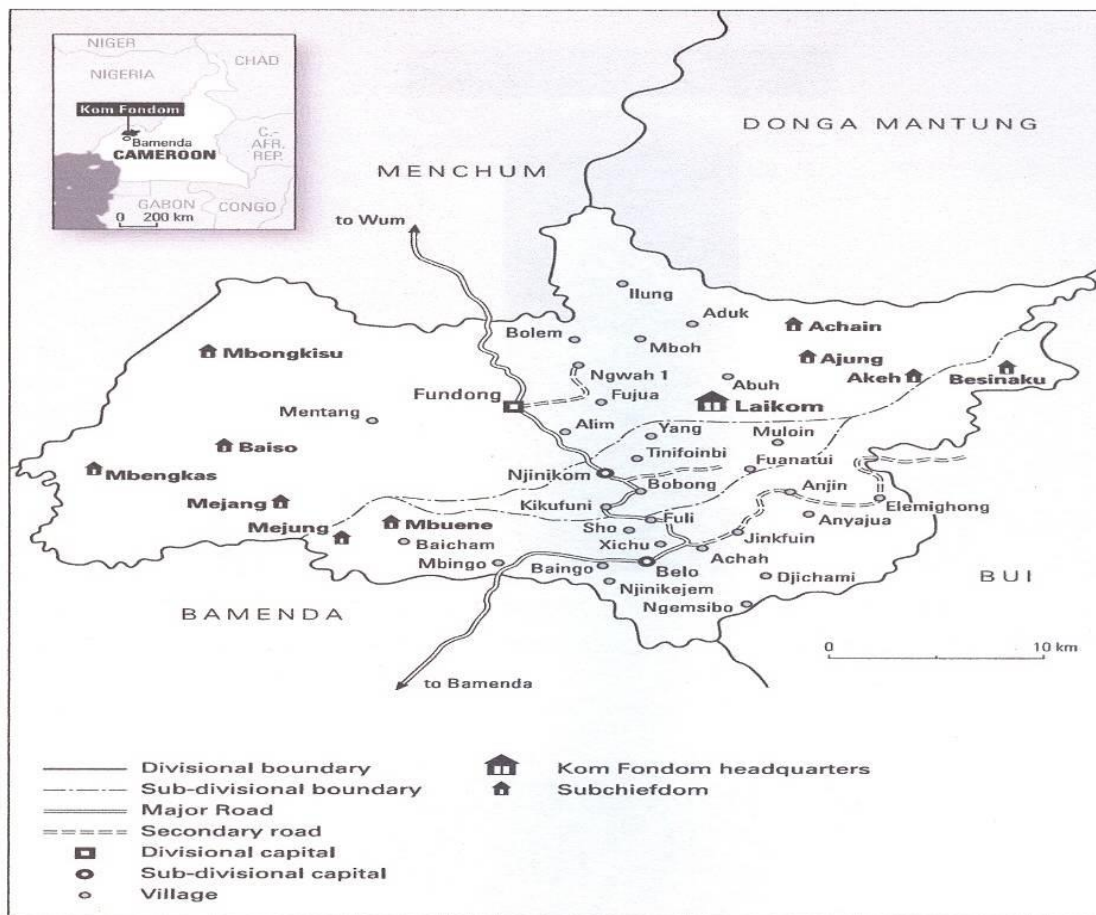
Kom shares its eastern boundary with the kingdoms of Oku and Nso, and the southern frontier with Ke-djom Keku or Big Babanki, and the Ndop plain. Bafut forms the Western border, while Bum and Mmen are situated to the north.

Politics in the Bamenda Grasslands is dominated and organised around the Fondoms ruled by Fons. In general, the Fondoms grew out of conquest and the politics of inclusion and exclusion through warfare, which led to the subjection of weaker neighbours. They were dominated by political and social hierarchies

based on kinship/kingship and lineages of social and political status. Most studies have focused on the Fondoms and on the establishment of political hegemony through social organisations (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967; Rowlands, 1979; Dillon, 1990).

Kom Fondom is believed to have been founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It includes sub-chiefdoms which were incorporated into Kom proper as 'vassal states' by Fon Yuh (c.1865-1912), the seventh ruler of Kom. These tributary chiefdoms included Achain, Ake, Ajung, Mbesinaku, Mbueni, Baiso, Baicham, Mejang, Mbengkas and Mejung (Chilver, 1981, p. 457; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982, pp. 65-68).

**Map 2: Kom, its villages and sub-chiefdoms**



**Source: Chilver & Kaberry, 1967, p. 126.**

Although much has been written about Kom (Nkwi, 2015, 2011; Nkwi, 1976; Chilver, 1967), there has been very little research on photographs, particularly on photographs in relation to sexuality. The historicity of photographs in this area suggests that its introduction is linked to the coming of the Mill Hill missionaries who settled in Njinikom, one of the 42 villages that make up the Kom fondom, during the 1930s. This essay does not deal with missionary photography *per se*. Instead it focuses on photographs that were taken by

the missionaries, perhaps even for different or unknown reasons. Missionary photography is an exclusive domain, which falls outside of the scope of this article (Thomson, 2004). Rev. Father Leo Onderwater, a Mill Hill missionary from The Netherlands, worked in Kom for close to 40 years, and took most of the photographs under study here.

### **Sexuality as represented in photographs**

The body stands out as the pith and kernel of sexuality the world over. In different cultures of Africa, Asia and Europe, and even in the United States of America, the body has become the symbol of power through the choreography of authority. Added to the body is the dress which is associated with it. Among the different African societies in Central, East and West Africa, such as the Kuba (Congo), Turkana (Kenya), Igbo (Nigeria), and Frafra (Ghana) respectively, the dress has been used as a form of shared views and experiences. Bodies are essentially a tool for self-expression. People use bodies to become who they would like to be in different circumstances (Kah, 2011). For instance, for a very long time in Africa, the female body has proven to be the site of women's 'subversive' practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment. Expressing his views on the symbolism of the body, Kah (2011) contends that it is the "constant in a rapidly changing world and has remained the source of fundamental truths about who people are and how society is organized." The display of the nakedness of the African woman was and remains her expression of utter anger and outrage at both public injustice and private male viciousness (Kah, 2011; Connerton, 1989; Smith, 1997; Crawford, 1984; Bordo, 1993; Davis 1997). Throughout African history, there have been relatively extreme forms of body adornment practised in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa.

One of these forms was scarification. It was a form of body modification procedure that offered a perceived sculptural quality to the skin. Sometimes a coloured pigment was added to the incisions forming a kind of tattoo. According to Kom oral traditions, this is also known as *ejainti-iweiyin*. The body *iweiyin* was given much attention. It was a container of many things and the most important was for procreation. This was related in an interview by mamma Anna Ayumchua, Njinikom, Kom on 23 June 2015. Born in 1908, she displayed a firm knowledge of scarification. She had performed it several times in the village. According to her, it needed nourishment similar to plants. Oral traditions further maintain that scarification had social and cultural dimensions. It was meant to protect the body from maleficent forces in order to prevent harm to the person, or that the person would be bewitched, according to Anna Ayumchua. At a time when Christianity was still absent, people had no idea of looking up to an Omnipotent Being and they

believed that the spirits would be appeased by cutting the body and thus be protected by the gods. Writing about scarification among the Kom, the British colonial officer G.V. Evans (1927, National Archives, Buea – henceforth NAB), in a *Kom Assessment Report*, bluntly stated that the cutting marks on the bodies of Kom people was a sign of primitivism. Colonial reports all over Africa carried such derogatory writings, expressing misunderstanding of indigenous African civilisations.

A closer look at scarification suggests that it formed a civilisation in its own right. It was mostly performed by elderly people in the society and, more particularly, by traditional medicine men. After some incantations he or she dipped a sharp razor-blade-like object *iigwe-im* (made traditionally) into the shoulder blades of the person, leaving three slight cuts. This was repeated on the back of the palms, on the chest, back, and the feet. When this was completed, medicine was applied to these spaces. The person was then asked not to take a bath for three days. According to one of the oldest informants met in the field, “this was done to protect the body on all fronts. If somebody greeted you with a poison[ed] hand it will be repelled. If you were walking and smashed something bad then because of the cuts it will be neutralised. If somebody shoots you with a gun, the medicines will prevent the bullet from penetrating the body”. (Interview with Ayeah Nikang, Fundong, 12 August 2015. Ayeah Nikang was 87 at the time of the interview and knew well the reasons why scarification was done. He had learnt the art from his grandfather.)

The Kom attached deeper meaning to the number three. Since the inception of the Fondom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by three leading lineages the number three always had deeper religious and ritualistic meaning, and importance among the Kom (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). The earliest ancestors singled out what they thought to have been meaning for the future Kom people. Thus, they gave birth to what, in modern politics, could be referred to as a motto. The motto was *Wain, Afoy+na NyamNgviyn*, which literally translated as “Children - Food – Prosperity”. It is common knowledge that for any society to be sustainable, there must be food, procreation (giving birth to children to replace the dead ones) and prosperity. Scarification thus reflected some of the central cultural values upheld by the Kom. Further the Kom held that scarification, with all its implications, gives protection, fortitude and strength.

Secondary literature on scarification in Africa appears to be quite scanty, yet rich in meaning (see Rattray, 1932; Barker, 1986). While studying the Wa ethnic group of Northern Ghana, Cullivan (1998) has noted that scarification was/is a unique feature of West African cultures and societies, and can be seen not only on the faces and bodies of West Africans but also through their various works of art, such as poems, short stories, terra-cotta figurines, artistic wooden masks, and carvings. Presently, on display at Cape Coast Castle, are terra-cotta figurines of the Koma Culture found in the Sisili-Kulpawan Valleys in Northern

Ghana. Facial scarification is present on some of these figurines which date back to between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, scarification can be found on the bronze terra-cotta figurines of the Ile Ife culture of Western Nigeria. These date back to between 100 A.D. and the 1600s (Cullivan, 1998, p. 1). In other African ethnic groups, various tools were used to produce diverse scar types, some subtle, whilst others were more explicit. Ash, or some organic saps, were rubbed on a fresh scar to increase the prominence of the scarring (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). Like in Kom, scarification in Africa served as a sign of fortitude, strength, as well as courage for both men and women. Scars were utilised to enhance the person's status and beauty and evoke the society's admiration. Even though the effects of scarification were greatly valued, the process of acquiring it was slow and painful. Complex and beautiful designs depended on both the skills of the artist and a person's ability to tolerate pain.

Tattooing was closely linked to scarification, and similar rated in society. Tattoos in Africa have both socio-cultural and historical significance, and African ethnic groups get tattoos for various reasons, ranging from beauty, royalty, loyalty, fashion, membership, bravery, and to signify the marking of lifetime events. Though it is not common for women in Western countries to get facial tattoos, the practice is quite common among certain African countries. For instance, in Northern Africa, women of some tribes get tattoos of small dots on their faces after giving birth to a son. In addition, they get facial tattoos as a show of their ethnic identities. Certain nomadic groups in Africa get tattoos on their faces as a means to scare away evil spirits (Macgregor, 1909).

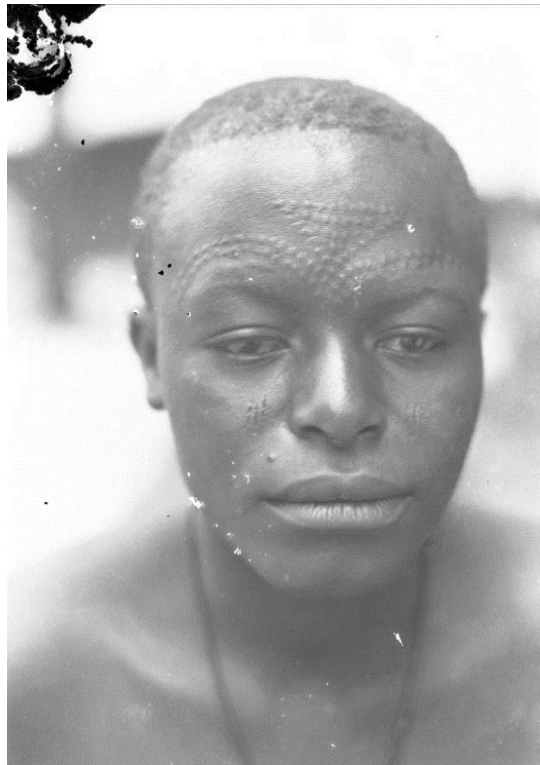
Different tattoos carry different meanings in different parts of Africa. For instance, in the Igbo area of Nigeria, some tattoos on the forehead of women show that they are of high social rank. In addition, tattoos are believed to enhance a person's beauty, and also, to enhance magical protective benefits. Since different persons have developed unique tattoo styles, the tattoos act as a form of identification of the wearer as a member of a particular ethnic group (Macgregor, 1909; Gloria, 2005). The purposes of having tattoos among African indigenous people include signs of membership to ethnic groups, social status in particular societies, tribal unity, beauty, fashion, as well as inner strength and courage of the person. It is vital to mention that, while tattoos have become more common in the modern world, scarification has almost diminished. More and more people get tattoos as a form of fashion and to emulate western culture.

Although tattooing is no longer practised by most Amazigh women of Morocco, a girl's face may be tattooed on her face and/or wrists upon reaching puberty (between the ages of eleven and fourteen - a time generally coinciding with her first menstrual cycle) by her mother, aunts, or family friends. Tattooing was

a rite of passage, marking a girl's transition to womanhood. Usually, small groups of girls were tattooed at the same time, making it a very social activity, shared and passed on by women. Today tattooing is a violation of Islamic law with the result that no one under the age of 30 may have tattoos (Cartwright-Jones, 2008).

In Kom, tattooing was meant for the royal women. The lizard *a-abass* was the royal symbol. This was tattooed on the forehead and the back. Through this, people could see that the woman was from the palace and they should not attempt to vie for her attention. These women chose their lovers themselves. Once the girl had seen her first potential lover, it was time for the tattoo specialist to perform the art. According to the Kom, this was to bestow on her a special status among commoners and also served as a warning to men who intended asking her hand in marriage. In an interview with Georgiana Cheng, a Kom woman on 23 July 2015, this was related to the author. While in Kom such tattooing took place to prevent any reckless pre-marital sex amongst royal women. Amadiume (1987, p. 105) maintains that, in order to prevent pre-marital sex and pregnancy of girls in maidenhood, the Nnobi of the Anambra state of Nigeria used various taboos, rituals, tattoos and waist beads. Waist beads increased in layers as the girl grew older and a waist charm was added later. A closer look at all these practices indicate various ways in which sexuality played out in different societies in Africa, and how similarities and differences were captured in the treatment of people's bodies. Figures one and two show, for example, tattoos on the forehead and back.





Apart from tattooing and scarification, dressing was one of the domains in which sexuality could be expressed by the Kom women. This included hair art. African women rarely leave their hair in its natural state. They spend considerable amounts of time and energy on grooming and domesticating it. The woman's hair has always been accorded particular attention (Sagay, 1983; Balandier & Maquet, 1974). In Kom, oral traditions hold that the domestic skill of dressing the hair has been handed down from generation to generation and, for this reason, it cannot be determined exactly when they started dressing their hair, as is stated by Jacentha Nange, Njnikom, the maternal grandmother (born in 1928) of the author on 14 July 2016. She possesses firm knowledge of the history of Kom hairdressing. Hair dressing experts used ingeniously concocted creams to increase the length, thickness, and for repairing the natural defects of the hair, as stated by Francisca Nyanga, a Kom woman, on 23 August 2015. She is 85 years of age, and lived to have experience hair dressing in the past and still vividly remembers the products that were used to dress the hair. The women used palm kernel grease (locally extracted from the palm trees in the lowlands plains of Mujang) to wash their hair, Francisca stated. The most common hair style is the coiling type shown in the photograph below. In recent times, the quality of hairdressing has vastly improved owed to technological advances as well as newer raw materials. The introduction of shampoo and pomades by the European



colonisers, have largely replaced indigenous cosmetics but have not completely replaced traditional products (Boucher, 1967).

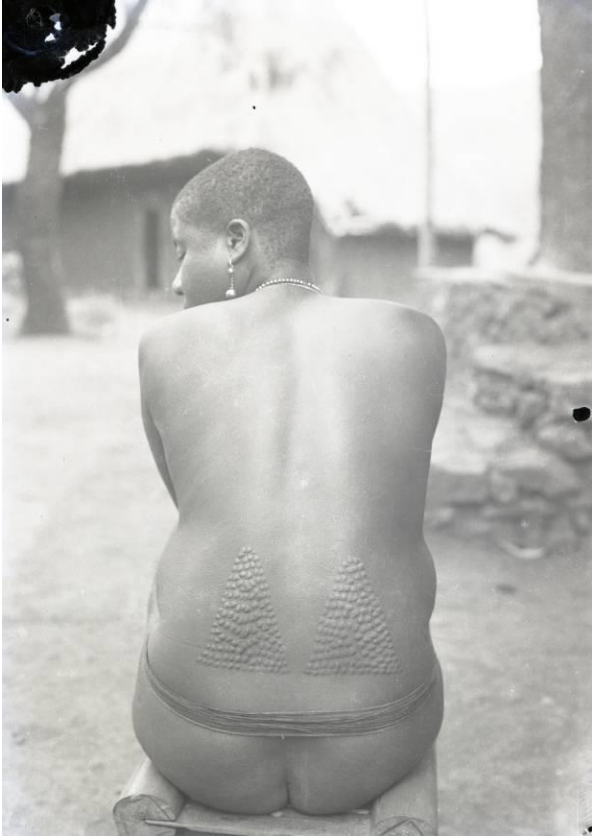
In Kom, like in most African societies south of the Sahara, Europeans are remembered to have triumphantly succeeded in creating the myth that they were an omniscient, super human being in the eyes of Africans. Africans were to be emulated in almost every sphere of life and western lifestyles became the benchmark for individual development and achievement. The more one consumed western goods as opposed to traditional goods, the more their identity changed and with that, their status or prestige (Nyamnjoh, 1997; Rowlands, 1995). At face level, this led to the remaking of hairstyles with western imported pomades. Despite this, traditional hairstyles survive side-by-side with western hairstyles. In Kom, these types of imported phenomena were branded as *kfaang*, which simply translated the indigenous understanding of modernity. Modern hairstyles, modern dressing, and modern shoes announced newer forms of sexuality, such as the one in figure three below.

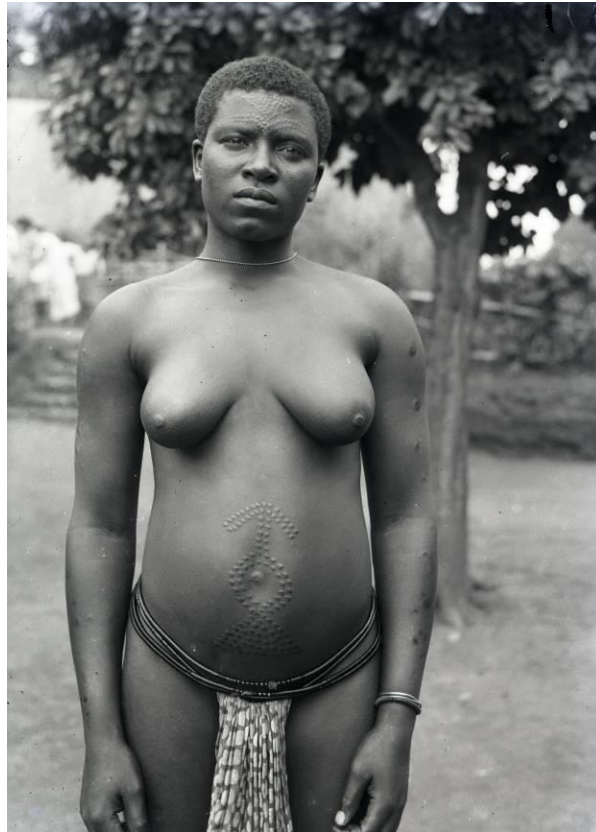


The type of dressing depicted in the figure above shows that the woman was a Christian. Early doctrines of Christianity announced cleanliness, which was encapsulated in white clothes. Kom women who converted to Christianity, testify that such clothes were given to them to mark that they became Christian, and so had changed in identity and even mentality.

Apart from their hair, women were conscious of their dressing. Dressing in Kom evolved from just robes and pieces of cloth to full blown dresses. According to Kom oral traditions, the type of dresses shown in the photographs below, were indigenously made, using local materials. When Kom men started geographical mobility and moved to northern Nigeria, they bought western-made dresses for their women. Sanchez (2013), studying dress culture in Mobutu's Zaire, maintains that dress culture had political implications during the period of Belgian Congo. The situation in Kom was different, and had little or nothing to do with politics. It was about a people's civilisation using indigenous material to meet up with their daily needs. While not prepared to appreciate such civilisation, the European colonisers quickly lumped that as primitivism. Not so surprising during the period of imperial expansion and colonisation, African bodies and sexualities became focal points for justifying and even legitimising the fundamental objectives of colonialism embedded in the creed of civilising savage African natives of the Dark Continent (Tamale, 2011). Not only were African sexualities depicted as primitive, they were widely believed to be dissipated, bestial and lascivious (Gesheker, 1995; Mama, 1996; Magubane, 2001; Osha, 2004; Tamale, 2011).

The waistband actually consists of a dress and the Kom people called it *ti-fouo*. This was manufactured from a forest product. Interestingly, the woman in Figure four below is putting on an earring which appears western. However, the waistband helped to hold a piece of cloth which was a blind to the vagina, translated in Kom as *fi-bathali*. Figure five below, in which the woman is nude, shows how the waistband held the piece of cloth known as the *fi-bathali*.





The women in figures five above were understood as royal women and at the same time non-Christians. The bangle in the left hand and a robe on the neck were enough to qualify her as a non-Christian but the tattoo above the navel gives her a royal insignia. With increased geographical mobility and inter-connect- edness of Kom into the world's global system, sexuality, particularly with a focus on dressing, was given a new twist. Some Kom women migrated out of Kom for several reasons. Some followed their husbands who were working in the cities and others were simply adventurous and anxious to also consume moder- nity. These movements had a remarkable effect on the way they perceived and conceived sexuality through dressing. The photos in figures six and seven below illustrate two Kom women who dressed in a modern way that was not indigenously Kom. These women who dressed in this way were collectively known in Kom as *ghii'ki kfaang*. As I have argued elsewhere, Nkwi (2014), these were women of newness. According to the Kom, *kfaang*, connotes newness – innovation and novelty in thinking and doing, and the material indicators and relationships that result from it. *Kfaang* may be internally generated, but it is al- most invariably externally induced. In many ways, it translates but is not limited to 'modernity' and 'mod- ernisation' in the Western sense, as things of local origin might also be labelled *kfaang*, even when clearly not foreign or western. The most important characteristic of *kfaang* therefore is that which is 'new', and

this might come from within or without or be something simply internally generated that is not the characteristic way of seeing and doing (Nkwi, 2015).



With new dressing attire, the women could have different postures. The figure above illustrates the different sitting forms. With a loin cloth and sandals, she is 'babysitting' a hand bag. All these are foreign dresses in Kom, different from the pre-colonial waistbands and pieces of cloth.





Either sitting or standing exhibited new ways in which women treated their bodies. The two women above are exhibiting just that. With white shoes and earrings they stood in a particular way, perhaps to show their newness.

Some women dressed like men and sat like them. Kom men, just like men in most parts of Africa, had come to believe that certain dresses were meant only for women and those meant for men could not be worn by women. The increased modernisation of Kom was to reverse this trend of thinking. The photograph below shows a woman who is well-relaxed and dressed entirely in attire that was hitherto meant for men in Kom. This was not only in Kom. As a matter of fact, Kapasula (2006) notes that the Garba of Ethiopia and Kenya even have a symbolic gender transformation in which men became women and

women became men. This has come to be known as cross-dressing, which is also seen in traditional African masked dances. A case in point is the Boga dance of the Guinea Coast of Africa, where a group of men dress as women and imitate their movements, erotically undulating their hips and sometimes suggesting sexual intercourse with male bystanders. Durham (1998), while doing research in South Africa, has noted that young men enjoy putting on women's dresses while Lamp (2002) noted amongst the Yorubas that male priests always dress as women with braided hair and operate in the ritual context in which the god is said to mount the priest in a spiritual possession as a male mounts a female in sexual intercourse.



### **Conclusion**

Sexuality is as old as man and various scholars have given it multiple meanings through the years. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997:200) holds that socially, African women are only now starting to find their way and that recent changes have sometimes taken them at lightning speed. She further maintains that today's African women are vigorous, creative and full of promise, and can linger here and there. In this article, Kom

women have shown that long before colonial modernity took root in Africa, they understood their bodies and treated them like any other women in the world. Far from being only creative and vigorous today, they have shown through the way they treated their bodies that they were not passive victims of history. The attempt in this has largely been to heed to the urge of Smith (1999, p. 28) who calls indigenous peoples who were colonised through imperialism to 'rewrite' their position in history, to 'tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes'. The article has used photographs to understand the socio-cultural basis of sexuality in an indigenous setting. It contends that sexuality was not static. The more Kom women became entangled with the global world system, the more they were forced to change the way they treated their bodies. All said and done, this article has shown that photographs can offer much in terms of the history of the people and their ways.

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