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Introduction: the Grassfields and the Tikar

Ian Fowler and David Zeitlyn

The Grassfields in History

Chilver and Kaberry brought to light the complexities of the societies of the Grassfields of Cameroon. These comprise a multiplicity of political communities predicated on heavily stressed linguistic singularity, varying modes (and extent) of centralisation of powers and the seemingly idiosyncratic parcelling up in individual polities of elements from a common core of cultural forms and practices. While not unique, this multiplicity of fiercely independent and linguistically distinct groupings is clearly distinct from other broader and more homogeneous ethnic blocks such as the Yoruba or even the Tikar (see below) from whom, paradoxically, many Grassfields dynasties claim origins.

The political and linguistic diversity of Grassfields societies is susceptible to differing interpretations. If the word 'fragmentation' were substituted for that of 'diversity' in the sentence above, we might be led to consider the Grassfields as an example of a 'shatter belt' phenomenon. In other words, as some formerly more homogeneous entity that has been fragmented into the great multiplicity of sets observed by the first European travellers to the Grassfields in the late nineteenth century. This is a negative view of Grassfields society and history. It is paralleled by a negative linguistic view of small language populations in the Grassfields as instances of language death or decline.

Explicitly 'negative' views of the diversity of sets and multiplicity of languages in the Grassfields are exemplified in the recent historical works of Eldridge Mohammadou (1990 and 1991) and the earlier work of the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Warnier (1984). In their studies a picture emerges of a hammer-blow from the north, in the shape of mounted raiders sweeping in and shattering a homogeneous and politically relatively uncentralised population. The historically attested incursions of Chamba (Jeffreys, 1962), and later Fulani raiders are taken to have disrupted local organisation leading to compaction of mixed groups in defensible positions and increasing political centralisation. We examine Eldridge Mohammadou's development of these ideas below in a discussion of the Tikar origins claimed at one point in time by certain Grassfields groups.

That mounted raiders penetrated the Grassfields in the nineteenth century is undeniable, but the actual forms of Chamba and Fulani activity were very different indeed, and moreover, the nature of their respective impacts susceptible to conflicting interpretations (Fardon, 1988). There is no space to go into this in detail here, but in principle the Chamba incursions did lead to permanent settlements in the heart of the Grassfields while Fulani returned whence they came. However, it is important to stress that the largest of the Chamba successor states in the Grassfields, Bali-Nyonga, is highly composite, includes non-Chamba elements from within and beyond the Grassfields, and presently speaks Mungakka, a Grassfield language (Chilver, 1967). The smaller, less powerful Chamba successor states, notably Bali-Kumbad and its small neighbours the Bali-Gashu and Bali-Gangsin, retain their Chamba-Leko dialect. In this there is an indication that the Grassfields have, in many ways, assimilated the

Chamba; and further that the greater the degree of this assimilation the more successful the Chamba successor state, especially the Bali-Nyonga, has proved to be. (See Fardon [below] and Pradelles [1995] for further discussion).

Later Fulani raids were not associated with settlement. The pastoral Fulani only arrived in the first decades of the twentieth century (Chilver, 1989). Fulani raids seriously disorganised northern groups but their greatest influence was on Bamum in the later part of the nineteenth century. Between 1895 and 1897 forces from Banyo were sent to support the young king Njoya against a palace revolt led by the retainer Gbetnkoum (see Tardits below for a discussion of wider Fulani influence on Bamum). This example of Grassfields elements inviting mounted military forces from the north to support local factions competing for power represents an alternative and more positive view of Grassfields history and relationships with the exterior. Indeed, rather than seeing the multiplicity of political sets and languages of the Grassfields as an outcome of processes of fragmentation by external forces, we can offer an alternative and more positive view.

When the Germans arrived in the Grassfields in the late nineteenth century they perceived it to be a distinct region. They made this judgement on the basis of the material culture, architecture and political forms they encountered. The region was not culturally homogeneous but it was perceptibly different both from its southern forest neighbours and from northern groups on the Adamawa Plateau. The kinds of groupings that the Germans found included individual chiefdoms ranging in size from 200 to 60,000, often physically bounded by large-scale earthworks and fixed in dynastic time by lengthy chief-lists.

The Germans encountered chiefs, palaces, elaborate forms of retainerdom and secret male associations with political functions. Nonetheless, these communities varied considerably in the degree of centralisation of political powers, which correlated inversely with population density so that the largest and most centralised polity, Bamum, had lowest densities whereas groups such as the Meta' or Moghamo on the western margins of the Bamenda Grassfields, described in the literature as acephalous (and in some oral traditions as slave-marches) had the highest densities of all (Warnier, 1985). Patrilineal succession and virilocal marriage, large compound units with sons, brothers and their wives were predominant. However, a large section of the Bamenda Grassfields practised matrilineal succession. Put in these terms it hardly sounds like a region that was culturally, politically or socially homogeneous. Indeed, when it comes to economic activity the diversity is even more striking, with locally specialised production of a wide range of craft and agricultural products apparently unconstrained by ecological factors.

Whence then a distinctively Grassfields character given all this diversity? It is clear from early German written material and photographic records that the Germans were very much taken with the material culture of the region they called the Grasland. Christraud Geary presents astonishing accounts of German collecting activity at the beginning of this century when 'booty' was sent home in the form of masks, stools, thrones, et cetera in order to win a medal from the Kaiser (1988: 85-6). Indeed, it is precisely in these material realms, of domestic architecture, carved portals, masks, iron-ware, decorated cloth and beadwork that things, people and places become distinctively Grasland. Materials, objects and skills were the substance of an intense

system of exchanges that served to negotiate status between individual descent-group heads and between communities and chiefs. Hence, no one is innately Grassfields; rather, one becomes more or less Grassfields relative to one's position in the regional structure of exchanges and the opportunities that this presents.

This pattern of economic specialisation upon which participation in exchange networks was based is distinctive of the region. Jean-Pierre Warnier (1985) represents this pattern in abstract as a series of concentric rings. On the periphery is a surrounding belt of palm-oil production, then an inner ring of cereal and agricultural production associated with entrepreneurial trading houses. Finally, a central zone characterised by production of high-value low-unit-volume commodities, such as fine ceramic-ware and wood carvings, woven caps and decorated raffia-work, and a great deal of iron-ware. Physical - topographic, edaphic and climatic - factors do not account for this regional specialisation. We may, as Warnier does, adduce Ricardian notions of comparative cost advantage - we may point out the apparent ordering of production according to relative transportation costs - but there is no reason to expect that the conditions that brought this pattern of economic specialisation into being should necessarily survive its continued existence.

Central to all of this is the nature of control by male seniors over access to women, prestige, ancestral favour and other mystical sources of power; for instance, at the centre of the Grassfields in the Ndop Plain. At the end of the nineteenth century, with very few exceptions, all the necessary materials - palm-oil, salt, cowries, camwood, et cetera - which a junior male required to progress through society to social adulthood through participation in recreational and political associations, marriage, et cetera - were not produced locally, and were obtainable only through regional trade networks (Fowler, 1990). These networks were jealously guarded by senior males. In order for juniors to get anywhere it was necessary for them to contribute raw materials and labour to seniors in the specialised production of local commodities. The advantages to senior males in this scenario are clear, and it is interesting to note that this goes hand-in-hand with an extraordinary degree of economic control exercised by the secret male political associations linked to the palaces of Grassfields chiefs (Warnier, 1985).

Harter (1986) has argued that specialisation in the production of high-value objects at the centre of the Grassfields is an outcome of economic necessity: i.e., since they had nothing else they were obliged to make all this fine craftwork to sell in order to make ends meet. There is evidence to support an opposing view (Warnier, 1975). Early reports from the western Bamenda Plateau talk of the chiefdoms of the Ndop Plain in terms of great wealth. Administrative reports suggest that there were on average twice as many people per compound unit than in the very much larger chiefdom of Nso' to the east of the Plain (Anon., 1929).

The small chiefdoms of the northern Ndop Plain were no smaller than individual settlements anywhere else apart from Fumban. They were fiercely independent both from each other and from the larger neighbours that surrounded them. Chiefs engaged in more or less continuous bouts of exchanges with other chiefs that had dimensions of competition and alliance. In their production of high-value, low-unit-volume items of material culture, that incorporated powerful immaterial forces of transformation,

chiefdoms at the heart of the Grassfields were extremely powerful in terms of local cosmologies (Fowler, 1990).

This is the nature of competition for regional power here; it has little to do with population size or military clout. The intense competition between chiefdoms was mainly not warlike but centred on the competitive exchange of materials and objects. People also entered this arena of competitive exchange, and recent research points up the highly composite nature of their populations. There were winners and losers in this ongoing regional game for power. The multiplicity of political sets in the Grassfields may be viewed less as a result of fragmentation by external forces and more as a result of local processes of competition for people and other resources.

The Problematic Tikar: Questions for History and Ethnography

The issue of the Tikar origin claimed at one time by many of the kingdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields provides the perfect case with which to introduce a collection of essays that celebrate the work of E.M. Chilver. Each of these essays concerns a different aspect of the relationship between history and anthropology, taking Cameroon as the case in point. History is illuminated by, and in much of Africa cannot be practised without appreciation of, the methods of anthropological fieldwork. So too, ethnography is enriched and enabled by the depth and awareness of change that is comes from a historical perspective.

What has become known as the 'Tikar Problem' has been raised (Jeffreys, 1964), allegedly solved (Chilver & Kaberry 1971; Price, 1979) and yet it will not go away (Mohammadou, 1990). The problem has to do with the construction of identity in the colonial period and the regalisation of chieftaincy. This constructed royal or 'Tikarised' identity retains limited currency in local contemporary dynastic contexts and in some western academic discourses, particularly art-history and museological studies. It has also been subject to a curious reversal in the context of recent political debate over the future of the post-colonial state (Fowler, forthcoming). Hence, this problem is a useful exemplar of the collaborative nature of the production of knowledge and construction of identity, and also of the incorporation of academic or historical knowledge in contemporary political conflict.

What then is the Tikar problem? At its crudest it may be presented as follows: many Grassfields dynasties claim Tikar descent, yet neither the languages spoken nor the cultural traditions of the groups concerned bear much relationship to the language and culture of the Tikar who presently occupy the Tikar Plain. This situation contrasts starkly with the dynastic origins of the intrusive Bali-Chamba chiefdoms (see Fardon, below). In Bali-Kumbat, for example, the royal lineage unquestionably originates from the Chamba of northern Nigeria and Cameroon. Language lists from the royal court clearly reveal that the Samba-Leko language was spoken. Further, some ritual continuity can also be demonstrated for Bali-Nyonga (Pradelles, 1995).

The question of Tikar origin, by contrast, rightly deserves the label of 'problem'. First, and perhaps most telling, is the linguistic issue, itself linked to a puzzle (Warnier, 1979). The puzzle concerns the co-existence of two major groups of Grassfield languages, Mbam-Nkam and Western Grassfields, which in their common lexical innovations and basic vocabulary counts are closer to each other than to any of their

neighbours. However, the evidence from innovations in noun classes gives a different picture; on this basis Mbam-Nkam would be included in Bantu, but Western Grassfields would not be so easily placed. In other words the lexical and grammatical evidence is contradictory. One hypothesis is that the Bantu Mbam-Nkam moved into the region splitting the Western Grassfields language group from their grammatic cousins, and that intense interaction between Mbam-Nkam and Western Grassfields led to a relexification of both language groups; hence the puzzle. According to what we know of the intensity of exchange and contact between Grassfields groups (see above) this is not an implausible solution. The intensity and long-term nature of this situation is highly relevant to the Tikar problem.

Whatever view is taken of the set of Grassfields languages, it is an inescapable conclusion that they are distinct from the language spoken by the Tikar of the Tikar Plain, the 'true' Tikar. Price makes the point that, although 'following the 1953 census, the Tikar were regarded as the largest ethnic group in the former Bamenda Province', (McCulloch, Littlewood and Dugast 1954: 11) 'there is no linguistic, ethnic or truly historical evidence that justifies using the term "Tikar" in relation to any of the Grassfields peoples' (1979: 89).

There are in fact two questions at stake here, and failure to distinguish between them has been the main cause of the persistence of the problem in the literature. Question one: how should we explain the Grassfields polities' claim to a Tikar origin? Question two: what is the origin of the Tikar people themselves? Recall that we term 'Tikar' only those who speak the Tikar language, and the separation between the two questions is *prima facie* absolute, in theory if not in practice.

We have briefly summarised the argument in light of Eldridge Mohammadou's recent work which raises once again the issue of Tikar origins for the political formations of the Grassfields. This is far more than mere origin fetishism. It is a live political issue with great currency today, just as it had a quarter of a century ago when Chilver and Kaberry found themselves confronted with origin claims that were both relatively new and unsubstantiated, indeed contradicted, by the available evidence. At that time the key political question centred on the political trajectory of that section of the former German colony, Kamerun, which was administered by Britain. The question then was whether the British Cameroons would remain effectively under Nigeria or enter into a process of 'reunification' with that part of Kamerun that had been administered by France (see discussion in Paideuma 1995). The Tikar live immediately across this colonial divide, in the French section of Cameroun. Before considering in more detail why Grassfields rulers claim linguistically and culturally unlikely Tikar origins, let us look briefly at the more recent work of Eldridge Mohammadou which, albeit from different perspectives, reaches much the same conclusion.

Eldridge Mohammadou has devoted many years of research to the oral traditions of local groups in the 'middle belt' of Cameroon. His work constitutes an unparalleled survey of historical traditions through a wide, and largely undocumented swathe of central Cameroon. Eldridge Mohammadou has been conscientious and systematic: we know whom he interviewed, when and where. This allows us to be critical of the results and we must emphasise how much it is to his credit that we are able to do so. For what he presents is a set of official histories by those holding power in the Cameroon of the 1970s and 1980s. While these are not all warrant chiefs (Afigbo,

1979) or their French equivalents, there is little doubt that some contemporary holders of traditional posts do so by warrant of the French administration and their successors (the best documented case is probably Geschiere [1980 and 1982] on the Maka chiefs further south in the forest zone). These chiefs are particularly keen to legitimate their positions by reference to history and the weight of tradition.

The historical impulse, widespread in this area, that has received a century of encouragement from colonial and post-colonial administrators and researchers, is to account for identities (however fragile, shifting and situationally defined) in terms of historical origins. These origins are usually elsewhere. The autochthones appear to have received short shrift in the received accounts. Just what is being explained is rarely questioned. To say 'we come from xx' where 'xx' may be nearby, or as far away as Palestine in some celebrated local accounts, is to make a complex claim that may mean different things to different people. As such Eldridge Mohammadou reproduces political discourse without analysing the varieties and purposes to which it is put. Colonial officers conducted historical research with a view to establishing hierarchies of chiefs and structures of tax collection. The effective power of a village head could be radically altered by convincing an administrative officer that a neighbouring village was descended from a sister of his founding ancestor. What the population outside the royal palaces thought was rarely asked, and it was not important in any case.

The mere concept of subaltern studies changes this. One of the ways in which progress has been made is that we are far more sensitive to the political significance of narratives be they our own or those we report (and, according to some, expropriate). As anthropologists we are committed both to the multiple voices and varying narratives of the people with whom we work, and to the academies within which a large part of our audience is found.

Hence we are led to ask what function does a claim of Tikar origin have in a Grassfields kingdom? First of all it does very little for most of the population that owe allegiance in some form or other to the Fon in question. Yet for the Fon the claim leads to being one of the major players in the political arena, or at least to be as worthy. Grassfields claims to Tikar origins are dynastic claims both in the sense of descent ties with Tikar kings, but also in that these claims are made by Grassfields chiefs in Grassfields palaces to outsiders addressing themselves to chiefdom-wide issues through the chief and council.

Hence, a claim to Tikar dynastic origin may also be a claim to the qualities of kingship attributed to Tikar kings. The Tikar remain poorly documented. Apart from the early publications of Thorbecke we have the field research of David Price in the 1970s but unfortunately relatively little of this has been published to date. Enough is known, however, to be clear that Tikar society as described by Thorbecke (1914-24) and Price (1979, 1985, 1987) is not a Grassfields society. For Price the distinguishing feature of Tikar political organisation is the very high degree of concentration of powers in the king who had the power of life and death over his subjects. He sees the Tikar king as a truly sacred form of kingship. The king selected his six senior councillors and they might not overrule him; he could not be dethroned as there was no formal mechanism to do so. Unlike the Grassfields case the regulatory association of the Tikar could not act against the king but was a straightforward executive branch

of government under his control. Accordingly, although political and ritual institutions of the Tikar appear to parallel 'similar sounding descriptive titles' in the literature on the Grassfields a very major difference lay in the nature of the king. Hence it is not insignificant that claims to Tikar origin were made by Grassfields chiefs and paramounts certainly not unaware of the quite different dimensions of a sacred and absolutist Tikar kingship. The latter almost certainly represents a pole to which the Fons were strongly attracted.

The regalisation of Grassfields chieftaincy is expressed in terms of an increasing separation of individuals and groups on the basis of presumed powers of agency (largely mystical in our terms) recast in the imported European binaries of royal and commoner. This works alongside a complimentary restriction on the expressive use of objects (precisely those collectibles that adorn our museum cabinets) to allow for the creation of a new class of beings ('Fons'), with shared characteristics that are bounded in time and space. Collective dynastic origins are thus projected both backwards in time and outwards in space.

The exercise of contrasting the geographical spread of such dynastic claims with the total picture of claims to origins of individual patrilineages that make up individual chiefdoms reveals a very interesting scenario. It appears that the regional pattern of dynastic claims to origin mirrors the diverse composition of the individual communities. If we introduce language into this equation a very important point emerges. Common claims to dynastic Tikar origins cross-cut internal Grassfield linguistic groupings and bear no significant relationship with languages present on the Tikar Plain. Yet claims to diverse origins in the composition of the general population have very real expression in terms of multilingualism, trade, exchange and marriage relationships with chiefdoms of origin.

Real, imagined or, perhaps transformations of some other principle or relationship, such common dynastic claims have been picked up quite uncritically by art-historians such as Northern (1973) and raised up to the level of tribal groupings into which local forms and styles of art-working can be bound up for expositional purposes. In some ways this is an advance over the earlier efforts of collectors and documenters of local material culture who often erroneously conflated point of acquisition with provenance. A good example of this is the chiefdom of Bali-Nyonga. The material upon which Bali's earlier false reputation as a centre of artistic excellence was based came largely from the central zone of the Grassfields, from Kom, Babanki, Oku and the Ndop Plain. By the 1970s these real centres of production have long since been recognised as such. Yet they are still referred to in some of the literature as the so-called Bamenda-Tikar (see e.g., Northern 1984). Part of the complexity confronting visitors to the area is that some local cognoscenti who have had feedback from the literature may well articulate such claims. However, any such claim can really only be based on an uncritical reading of the existing literature.

In fact the Bamenda part of this nomenclature derives from a very small chiefdom, called Mandankwe, quite near Bali where the Germans built a fort and set up an administrative station around 1902. From this point on the region administered from here becomes known as Bamenda. The Tikar element of this curious tribal nomenclature reflects what has been outlined above regarding common dynastic claims to origins. In other words inclusion in this group does not follow linguistic

lines, nor do the languages of the Grassfields chiefdoms claiming Tikar origins bear any meaningful relationship to that of the actual Tikar, a relatively small group living either side of the Mbam river. It is worth pointing out that the art of the Tikar is scarce and little known by comparison with the arts of the Grassfields chiefdoms that this version of history would have them to have spawned.

We can read this in two ways. Firstly, these claims only appear in the administrative records of the 1920s in the historical context of a new and British colonial regime seeking to establish some form of effective administration. Hence, this may constitute a specific form of representation to that nascent colonial administration by individual communities as associational groups of relatively equal value. However, there is a wider context - that of the partition of the former colony of Kamerun, and just as in Europe post-Yalta, the political debate did not cease. The Tikar lie to the east in the francophone region. Hence, claims to Tikar origins may reflect a desire to reject incorporation into Nigeria.

There may, of course, be a material kernel from which such claims have been elaborated. Bamum, the largest Grassfields chiefdom claims dynastic links with the Tikar, and borders the Tikar area with which it maintains some ritual ties. Geary (1983a) recounts Bamum traditions that up until the reign of an early Bamum chief the material symbols of the chieftaincy - especially the double-gongs and other iron sacra came from the east, from the Tikar area rather than the centre of the Grassfields as was the case in more recent times. So, in one sense, powerful objects of material culture may well come to 'transmit' identity independent of movement of peoples although it may be represented as the latter rather than the former.

Bamum had become a major regional power by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century with an absolutist monarchy firmly established at the time of German contact in 1902 (Tardits, 1980). The Bamum, like their neighbours the Nso' and some others, recognise the 'ritual' ascendancy of the chief of Bankim. New paramounts must be blessed at Rifum, a sacred lake near Bankim, and during these rites only the chief of Bankim sits on a stool. To sit on the ground in his presence is a clear symbol of subservience. Such ritual power does not correspond to political power, and, has not done so this century, and we can say with some confidence for last century also. Such conundrums do not mean in any simple sense that the Bamum, or the Nso' are Tikar or come from Bankim. There may be parallels with the origin claims made for North American identity. We do not know how many Americans claim to be descended from the passengers on the Mayflower, but one suspects that it is a demographic impossibility (one that parallels the total number of fragments of the True Cross to be found in churches throughout Europe).

We are ethnographers. Our strength lies in detailed knowledge of areas that are tiny by comparison with the span encompassed by Eldridge Mohammadou's survey (1990 and 1991). What our detailed knowledge reveals are some of the complexities that any survey must miss by its very nature. To take but one example from the history of the Mambila on the Tikar Plain - if one talks to the heads of the hamlets that fall within the authority of the major villages, one receives a very different history from that obtained in the central palaces of those villages. Mambila immigration onto the Tikar plain appears to have occurred in several waves, each one conquering less of the Tikar than those Mambila that preceded them. A historical text that makes this point from

Duabang hamlet has already been published (Zeitlyn, 1992). The degree of complexity of the problems of local population shifts and the changing patterns of political allegiance, let alone political structures, is such that it cannot be done justice by a broad picture of invaders from the north who sweep in on horseback and change all those that they touch.

What Eldridge Mohammadou argues, in essence, is that not the bulk of the population but the ruling Grassfields dynasties come, in some sense, from Bankim. Why else would their coronations have to be confirmed at the sacred lake outside Bankim? Let us push this argument to its logical extreme and consider the following scenario. Were it the case that some hypothetical Grassfields paramount should claim a European dynastic origin, would then the necessity to register the succession with the post-colonial administration (itself ultimately of European colonial origin) similarly confirm the claim? To describe the Bankim rite as 'confirmation of coronation' may be misleading and perhaps 'endorsement' is a more useful way of describing what is going on. Certainly we have no reason to preclude the existence of various ritual ties between some Tikar kingdoms and some Grassfields groups. For instance, following the death in 1913 of the noted Bamum queen-mother, Njapdungke, emissaries were sent from Rifum carrying fire and smeared with the white clay of mourning. Jeffreys suggests that sacred water from Rifum was also sent at the death of the Bamum king (1964). Therefore, such ritual endorsements may take many forms and may also be ongoing between paramounts who continue to exchange gifts and to send masquerades to each others' important ritual and ceremonial occasions.

The mutual dependency of Grassfields Fons may reach far deeper even than this - to the extent of a neighbouring Fon coming to occupy the stool of the deceased paramount until the succession has been assured (Chilver, pers. comm.) - but this is not public knowledge and may well be concealed, especially from outsiders. One reason that the problem will not go away is that since the Bamum and Nso' do have a visible link with Bankim this serves as a model for other Grassfields groups with aspirations to wider political influence. The argument is almost syllogistic in form. High-status groups have historical links with Bankim. We are a high-status group, therefore we have historical links with Bankim.

Similar processes can be documented at work among the Mambila (immediately to the north of the Grassfields) where origin accounts which include mention of founders coming from 'The East' may be re-interpreted as meaning 'coming from Bankim'. For instance, in the 1970s Adda (1975) and Hamman (1975) documented some Nigerian Mambila as claiming Tikar origin. They say they come 'from the East' from Bankim (the centre of the Tikar living on the Tikar Plain) or from 'Shomi'. Yet one of us, as an intermittent resident of Somie (Shomi) for the past ten years, can state with some confidence that the population there claims to come from the West, descending from the Mambila Plateau in several waves over the last 150-200 years.

The general picture presented by Eldridge Mohammadou is one of Bare-Chamba raiding groups mounted on horseback sweeping down from the north in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, i.e. long before the Fulani raids of the eastern-most wing of the Sokoto jihad arrived in the area. The subsequent Fulani raids have often obliterated memory of the earlier Bare-Chamba raids. These raids are considered by Eldridge Mohammadou to have radically changed the political and

demographic map of north and central Cameroon, pushing local groups on to mountain fastnesses or into nucleated polities that were centralised as a defensive strategy against the raids. This is the picture presented of the 'crystallisation' of the Tikar from the more or less acephalous indigenes of the Tikar Plain. Though here it proves necessary to introduce the complicating factor of the Mbum. Once the Tikar proper were established raiding continued with Bankim as its base. These raids went further south into the wider Grassfields, giving rise to what we now recognise as the Bamum, Nso' etc. Our argument with this is in the detail of the final sentence, 'giving rise to' is deliberately vague. We believe it cannot be fleshed out satisfactorily. Similarly Bamum, Nso' etc. The et cetera is a movable feast.

The problem for Eldridge Mohammadou is that he is either trying to explain too much or too little. The high degree of lexical convergence among Grassfield languages implies that they have been spoken in the same area for a long time, far longer than the few centuries covered by Eldridge Mohammadou's reconstruction. Thus he cannot claim to be accounting for the origins of the languages spoken in the area. Along with language we could include a greater or lesser amount of 'cultural baggage', but we leave that argument for another place. What he could still claim to be describing is the origin of the main institutions of the main polities. Although this is a far lesser claim it is itself weakened by the evidence of Tikar ethnography. Eldridge Mohammadou's raiders seem to have carried little with them, and, especially by contrast to the Chamba that established Grassfields Bali chiefdoms, left little behind them. The best comparison does seem to be that of the Lumbee of the United States (Blu, 1980): the Grassfields 'Tikar' are the Lumbee of Cameroon - they are united by an assertion of identity that is its own warrant!

In 1971 Chilver and Kaberry themselves considered the issue of claims to Tikar origin as a Malinowskiian charter, as a political statement legitimising sacred kingship. In seeking legitimacy there is implied both a claim for validation as well as a claim to certain qualities of kingship or chieftaincy and the context in which it is manifested.

It is the case, as we have noted, that both Tikar kingship and its social and cultural context differs markedly from its Grassfields neighbours. Price states that 'there is a high degree of cultural homogeneity amongst the six Tikar kingdoms. They share similar institutions. They are quite distinct from their neighbours. They speak one language...' (1979: 91) None of these characteristics are easily applied to Grassfields chiefdoms which are to a much greater extent linguistically and culturally heterogeneous. It is perhaps not insignificant that the Tikar strongly exhibit the characteristics of 'tribe', i.e., they speak one language, share common culture characteristics that mark them off from their neighbours. Fardon (1987) has proposed that ethnic identity as a universal class of difference is not necessarily present until it is learnt or introduced. May we extend our reading of Grassfields claims to Tikar origin as a response to the introduction of ideas to do with tribe, bounded identity and so on? In other words the Tikar present a model 'tribe' and the Grassfields chiefdoms seek to emulate this condition by claiming a dynastic link or origin from them. This, of course, begs the question why the Tikar should have achieved, or be perceived to have reached, the status of tribe or discrete ethnic identity. One clue may be the many mentions in early exploration literature of the Tikar from a northern perspective. These include accounts of brave and successful resistance by Tikar kingdoms, such as the Ngambe, against Fulani sieges. It seems plausible that the Tikar may have acted as

both buffer and intermediary between northern and Grassfields groups during the course of the nineteenth century. In this respect we may concur with the thread of Eldridge Mohammadou's argument that stresses the significance of the role played by Tikar groups as intermediaries between Grassfields and northern polities.