In two articles which appeared in a recent number of this journal, Dr. Maquet and Dr. Mair were both concerned with isolating in some political systems a relationship of a contractual kind in which rulers and/or those in positions of authority and influence get services performed for them by subordinates in return for protection and other rewards.* In the Bamenda Grassfields of West Cameroon the element of contract is absent: the problem of staffing the palace and the households of the great and the execution of tasks originating from these is resolved by various systems of recruitment which can be clearly distinguished from feudo-vassalage and political clientship. A distinctive feature of these kingdoms is the recruitment in boyhood of palace retainers by a closed regulatory society (known as ngwerong, kwifon, nggumba, ngwose, etc.) with its headquarters at the palace. Its methods of recruitment, the composition of its inner college, and its relations to other governmental institutions—the sacred kingship, privy council and military organization—varies from kingdom to kingdom. Therefore a discussion of retainerdom involves a limited comparative study of the servicing of royal households and, at the same time, an analysis of the balance of authority and power in the Bamenda kingdoms.

The kingdoms with which I shall be principally concerned had close relations with one another. Many of their dynasties claimed an origin in the region of the Upper Mbam river and its tributaries in East Cameroon. Some described the area as "Tikari", some as "Ndobo", and some specifically mentioned Kimi or Rifum, now associated with

* J. J. Maquet, "Une hypothèse pour l'étude des féodalités africaines", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, vol. II-II (n° 6) 1961; and L. P. Mair, "Clientship in East Africa", *ibid*.
the modern Tikar kingdom of Bankim (Bamkin). The etymology of the word ‘Tikar’ is obscure, but the evidence suggests that it was used by outsiders and not by the peoples of the chiefdoms concerned, though it has now gained a wide currency throughout the Federal Republic.¹ Traditions collected by French administrators state that the Tikar people originally formed part of the Mbum and occupied (according to one investigator) the western part of the Ngaundere plateau, their cradle area being Lake Atsum (Assone). From there they moved in a NNE-SSW direction, Kimi being the first important stopping place and a centre of dispersal for princes who went to found other kingdoms to the south and west.

The relation between Tikar and Ndobo requires further investigation. On Moisell’s map Ndobo lies north of Bamum and south of Banyo and overlaps with the area marked as Tikar on Dugast’s sketch map.² Lyée de Belleau collected two versions of Tikar origin at Bankim: both agree that the Tikar dynasty was of Mbum origin, left ‘Ngaundere’, settled along the Mbam between Banyo and Fumban two centuries ago among the ‘Mundop’ and adopted their language but remember their Mbum origins.³ Martin points out that the Bamum translate the word Tikar as “those who wander” and that today they refer to them as pa-ndusbs.⁴ In several of the Bamenda Assessment Reports chiefs, when discussing their origins, used ‘Tikari’ and ‘Ndobo’ interchangeably and sometimes explicitly identified them, e.g. “Faw Rifum, Tikar king of Ndobo who lived at Kimi”, “Ndob in Tikari”, and “in Tikari at Ndobo”. It may prove to be significant that the chiefdom dynasties which specifically claim to have come from Ndobo and do not mention Kimi are in Central Bamenda, and that in them the relation between privy council and regulatory society differs from that found in the north-east where many claim a Kimi origin. I shall use the word ‘Tikar’ to indicate a culture area within which a number of dynasties claim an origin from the Upper Mbam River (the region of the ‘Tikar proper’), and which possess similar political institutions though they differ in language. Within this area one may distinguish sub-groups: ‘Tikar proper’, Bamum, Bamileke and Bamenda-Tikar; within the last (and possibly the Bamileke also) it may prove useful to distinguish dynasties which claim a Ndobo origin from those which claim a Kimi origin.

1. It is significant that in 1959 the eastern section of Bamenda Division (comprising Nso and the Bafut and Ndop chiefdoms) was known as the Bamenda-Tikari Native Authority in contradistinction to the Bamenda-Widekum and Bali Native Authorities.
3. Lyée de Belleau, Du Cameroun au Hoggar, 1945, p. 79 ff.
For the ‘Tikar proper’ we have information in Njoya’s History of Bamum, and scattered references in the works of early German explorers—Barth, Morgen, Flegel, von Bary, von Stetten, Dominik, Moisel, Zimmerman and especially Thorbecke; there are later accounts by Froelich, Dugast and Lyée de Belleau. The Tikar proper have a total population of some 10,000 distributed among the following: Bankim (Kimi or Rifum), Bandam, Ditam, Ngambe, Yakong, Ina, Oué, Beng-Beng and Ngume. Bankim, a centre of dispersal for several kingdoms in East and West Cameroon, exercised what may be called a ritual hegemony or pre-eminence over six of them—Bamum, Nso, Ditam, Bandam and two others, but this did not, as far as is known, involve tributary relations or interference in local affairs. The princes who left Kimi (Rifum) are of course held to have derived the ‘things of Kimi’ from it, their legitimacy in some respects, a model of sacred kingship and possibly of a privy council, ideally of seven members. But Kimi pre-eminence was not a hegemony which shaded off towards the periphery: in fact, one of its nearest neighbours was the powerful kingdom of Bamum. Each Kimi-derived king had the same relationship with Kimi as every other Kimi-derived king.

The area principally dealt with in this article is the former Bamenda Province (population c. 430,000) comprising the western part of the high corrugated plateau called the Grassfields. The whole area is rather dramatically divided from the southern forest by an escarpment, and from Nigerian and Cameroons Adamawa by the Donga affluent of the Benue and by the Gendero Mountains and their outliers. Throughout the Grassfields, apart from small pockets, Bantoid languages are spoken. These have been grouped by Richardson and Jacquot into the Ngkom group (spoken mainly in the west), the Bamileke group (including Bamum) spoken in the south and east, and Tikar (or Tumu) in the north-east. The other small language pockets include Chamba, Wute, possibly Mbam, and unclassified languages along the Adamawa border, some of which show lexical similarities with Jukun. Descriptive linguistic research has barely begun in the area. Bamileke-type languages are spoken in Bamum and Bali chiefdoms whose dynasties respectively claim Tikar and Chamba origin; Ngkom languages in kingdoms and small chiefdoms whose dynasties claim Tikar (or Ndobo), Widekum (Upper Cross River) or autochthonous origin.

The kingdoms were founded at different periods and in different

5. Part of this article was the basis of a joint paper given by my colleague, Mrs. E. M. Chilver, and myself to the African History Seminar conducted by Dr. John Fage at London University in 1962. I am greatly indebted to Mrs. Chilver for detailed discussion of this article.

circumstances. The political nucleus of some may well have been established in the 17th century, e.g. Nso, Ntem and Bamunka; others in the 18th and early 19th centuries, some being successor states to those already established near Bamum. According to oral traditions, the area was disturbed during the late 18th and early 19th centuries by unidentified raids (possibly Chamba) from the direction of Banyo. For the early 19th century this tradition is confirmed by Koelle’s recaptives. Traditions also refer to famine, epidemics, stool disputes and overcrowding. The expansion of Bamum in the first half of the 19th century, following on Chamba (?) and perhaps early Fulani raids, led to a flight of chiefs to the Bamileke area to the south-west and into the Ndop Plain and on to the Nso plateau.

The political geography of the Bamenda Grassfields at the entry of German administration in 1901 bears the marks of re-groupment in the more isolated and defensible areas and the inhibition of the growth of hegemonies in the ‘soft areas’, easily accessible to raids from the known centres of slaving enterprise, including Bamum which by that time numbered some 70,000. For example, an area within a 40-60 mile radius of the Chamba kingdom of Takam was reported by Zintgraff to be practically empty of population in 1889 and still is. The populous Nsungli area (now part of the Nkambe Division), in which the Ndu chiefdom, claiming a Kimi dynasty, was beginning to assert a pre-eminence, never became more than a region of strong village chiefdoms: it lay within the raiding path of the Banyo lamidat, and its leading chieftaincy entered into an equivocal relationship, prior to its temporary destruction, with the Fulani. The now minuscule chiefdom of Ntem (pop. c. 800 and a Kimi dynasty), was even more easily reached from Banyo, and suffered a complete eclipse. The village chiefdoms of the Ndop Plain, bordering the Upper Nun River, were disturbed by refugees from Bamum, and Chamba and then Fulani raids. Most of them claimed a Ndobo origin for their dynasties. This thickly settled and fertile area of Bamenda never developed an important conquest state, but rather an uneasy balance of power between two intrusive chiefdoms, one of Chamba origin (Bali-Kumbad or Nepkolbe) and one of Bamum origin (Baba or Papiakum).

Between the Ndop Plain and Nsungli lay the kingdom of Nso (with a Kimi dynasty and a population of c. 20-30,000). This appears to have been given a rude shock well before the 1820’s and to have reconstituted itself in a new capital with an accretion of strength from refugees from the south, north and east, and from the conquest of small village chiefdoms. It was in a position to repel later Fulani raids. The rather smaller kingdom of Kom (Bikom) with a Ndobo dynasty to the west in difficult country managed not only to defend itself against sporadic raids but to maintain its hold over a number of petty chief-
doms in its neighbourhood. On its northern boundary Bum or Great Bafum (pop. c. 4,000), with a dynasty derived from Mbot in Nsungli, was the weakest of the larger kingdoms in Central Bamenda. It offered another example of the re-siting of capitals in more defensible positions and the absorption of village chiefdoms within its neighbour

hood. It was the entrepôt for the salt, kola and cloth trade with the Benue region. In south-west Bamenda the intrusive conquest state of Bali-Nyonga (pop. c. 20,000) with a Chamba dynasty had established itself among Widekum peoples (alleged to have derived from the Mamfe forests) in the middle of the 19th century. Its two most powerful neighbours to the north-east were Mankon, a Tikarized Widekum city-state (pop. c. 6,000), and the kingdom of Bafut with a Ndobo dynasty. Its capital had about 8,000 inhabitants: Widekum village tributaries numbered some 12,000.

Most of these units possessed similar political institutions, though some of them had, according to their own traditions, acquired one or more of them recently from their neighbours. In most there was a sacred kingship, a distinction between royals, commoners, tributaries and slaves, certain titles reserved to princes and princesses, constituted privy councils, a closed regulatory society, and, lastly, princes’ fraternities—only indirectly political. The palace was the focal point of religious and ceremonial life and the headquarters of the principal associations. The interrelations of these institutions varied from kingdom to kingdom: one of the objects of our fieldwork was to analyse the balance of authority and power in each kingdom and to attempt to relate differences to what was known of their respective histories—the circumstances in which they were established, subsequent internal and external events, and environmental conditions. Of course we can never do more than warily suggest that some factors were favourable to certain political developments, if these recur frequently enough. Three main political models occur in the Bamenda-Tikar area, represented by Nso, Bamunka and Bafut. At the centre of each system stood the sacred king who through his ritual installation took on certain attributes of immortality: he was, on occasion, addressed as God; he was never ill—it was the country that swayed the palace that was hot; he never died—he was lost or the sun was extinguished.

7. Joint fieldwork was carried out by Mrs. E. M. Chilver and myself in 1960, and my thanks are due to the Department of Anthropology of University College and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for grants. My fieldwork in Nso in 1958 was made possible by a Leverhulme Fellowship and a supplementary grant from the Colonial Social Science Research Council.

8. There are of course intermediate situations: these occur particularly in the area of Central Bamenda, characterized by relatively recent dynastic immigration, e.g. Bum, Oku, and Kom, and will require further investigation for the light they throw on state-formation.
His ritual powers were associated with the fertility of the land and its people; he was the chief priest of the cults of the royal ancestors and God—sometimes identified with the earth. But if the earth refused, if the country did not prosper, then he had been rejected by his ancestors and God, and those who were responsible for the enforcement of order and the maintenance of the palace might also refuse their services; it was the regulatory society that took action.

In all the states of the Bamenda Grassfields (and by states I mean political systems with a centralized authority and offices associated with governmental functions), the regulatory society had among its duties the recruitment of palace retainers. As the executive arm of government, it could be regarded as a body of recruited retainers. But the membership of its inner college might be hereditary or appointive or a mixture of both, and it might have advisory, judicial and ritual functions. It was everywhere a secret society in that it was a closed society with its sacra of gongs and named masks. One day in the eight-day week was reserved to it: members met and no one else in the capital might fire a gun or strike a drum on pain of punishment. At important national events or the death of a member the society put on its masked dances. In the execution of its state duties, its retainers appeared clothed in net gowns which masked face and body; its authority was of an impersonal kind and its agents could not be held to account. It was everywhere seen as supporting the king; without it there would be disorder.

With these political features in mind I shall discuss retainerdom in Bamenda, with particular reference to the states I have mentioned, and then glance across administrative boundaries at neighbours which offer some parallels and some contrasts, namely Bamum and Benin. I am concerned with the last part of the nineteenth century, a period for which the political systems in Bamenda can be reconstructed with a reasonable amount of certainty; but many of the institutions described persist today though shorn of some of their traditional functions.

In the 1890's, the kingdom of Nso had recently achieved a major victory against its largest neighbour, Bamum, and had held off Fulani raids from Banyo with success. A generation or so earlier, two rulers (Sembum I and his son Tamanjo) had rendered tributary a semi-circle of village chiefdoms along its west and southern frontiers. The political physiognomy of Nso in 1890 obviously owed much to the personalities of these two rulers and to their successor, Sembum II—father of the present king Sembum III. The period with which I am

dealing can also be associated with greater Hausa trading activity on
its borders at Bum, Ntem and Bamum, and consequently greater
possibilities for the acquisition of valuables, the possession of which
was governed by sumptuary laws. It had treaties of friendship with
some of its neighbours (Bum, Kom, Baba, Ntem and Bamunka); and,
like Bamum, it had started on a process of military and economic
expansion. But while Bamum engaged on a deliberate policy of
enslavement and resettlement of border populations (the flight of some
of which was an accession to Nso's strength), Nso demanded of its
tributaries only the minimum regalities and the surrender of the
right to make war or to execute criminals. Like all Nso villages, they
provided labour for the repair of the palace which, in Nso ideology,
'belongs to the country and not to the king'.

Village-headships were hereditary and vested in patrilineages but
all appointments required the approval of the king (fon). Each
village had its military lodge or lodges linked with one of the two
senior lodges in the capital of Kimbo, both of which were presided over
by appointees of the king—one of them invariably a member of
ngwerong (the regulatory society). A hereditary council of great lords
(vibai), the majority of whom were of royal descent, attended the
palace regularly and had advisory and judicial duties. The great
councillor, Lord Ndzendzef, enjoyed a political rank second only to
that of the king. Like the king, he saw 'the things of ngwerong' and
automatically entered the title society associated with it (see below).
He and six other councillors of royal descent were collectively known
as "The Seven Vibai": among other privileges they had access to the
inner part of the palace; with one of the priestesses they constituted a
succession council, and they might enter the national shrine of the cult
of the earth, the lawong. Like other councillors, they were also heads
of their respective lineages, had mensal lands, and had retainers drawn
from among boys with whom they had a distant uterine connection.
The main priests of the state-cults were all blood-royals—the king,
prince- and princess-priests; and they were assisted by a group of
seven minor priests whose titles were vested in royal lineages, many of
them established by former prince-priests. In addition to the titular
queen—mother of the reigning king, usually a sister or daughter, a
number of princesses represented the mothers of former kings; they
enjoyed a ceremonial rank second only to that of the king and they
attended council.

Nso viewed their society as divided between freemen and slaves.
Freemen included royals, commoners, retainers (known in pidgin-

10. Cf. E. M. Chilver, "Nineteenth Century Trade in the Bamenda Grass-
fields", in Afrika und Ubersee, XLV, 4, 1962.
English as chindas) and tributaries. Men of retainer status, however, were liable to a period of service in the palace, either as pages or as boy-servants of ngwerong, the premises of which adjoined the palace. Boys might be conscripted as follows: 1. by virtue of a remote connection with the royal house through their mothers (pages were frequently of this status); 2. first-born sons of marriages between commoners and women of retainer status, i.e., women who were themselves daughters of male retainers; 3. sons of men of retainer status; 4. sons of refugees; 5. sons surrendered by persons of rank in mitigation of a penal offence; and 6. boys presented by tributary chiefs. The first three categories were easily the most important.

Association with the palace conferred status: in certain contexts both royals and retainers were referred to as ‘people of the king’. The boy—retainers were recruited by ngwerong for a period of service of 7-9 years and automatically became members of it. During their period of residence (the resident complement was formerly about 100) they were fed mainly by the king’s wives in return for minor services. They were divided into two groups according to the districts in which their parents resided, and were under the authority of two older boys with the title of Cefon or Shey-ngwerong. They took an oath of secrecy never to reveal what went on in ngwerong quarters; they were subjected to discipline and trained to remember complicated instructions, messages and the eponyms used by the king for men of title. The effect of the system was, on the whole, to weaken ties with their respective lineages and replace these by a corporate sentiment of belonging to ngwerong and a personal loyalty to the king.

Ngwerong owned sacra and masks; when it was on public business its members wore net hoods and tunics and it provided mortuary celebrations for members and persons of high rank. Its authority was anonymous and its members could not be brought to account. The Nso say “Ngwerong is not a person; it is government.” Like other regulatory societies in the Grassfields, it apprehended wrong-doers, policed the market, inflicted punishments imposed by the king and his council, tried cases of witchcraft, murder and adultery with the king’s wives referred to it by the king, disciplined its own members, and dealt with infringements of its injunctions. These took various forms which involved prohibitions of movement, use of disputed land, raffia and kola plantations and immobilisation of persons for breaches of law. All this was done in the king’s name, although he escaped the odium. Nevertheless ngwerong possessed a measure of constitutional independence: it could immobilize the palace and fine the king for flagrant disregard of custom, e.g. persistently rejecting the advice of his councillors, absenting himself without due cause from the capital, infringing ngwerong regulations and, in general, imperilling the welfare
of the country. *Ngwerong* could not depose the king but, by depriving him of all services, it could isolate him from his people. Before this could happen, the king generally appealed for help in the payment of the fine to the people of the country, aligning himself, as a person, with them against the impersonal masked authority of *ngwerong*.

Closely associated with the work of *ngwerong* were four hereditary offices held by commoner lords, known as the *wonjem er ve fon* (literally, "sisters’ sons of the king"). They could not enter *ngwerong* but had a meeting house close by where they kept their masking gowns and whips. In witchcraft trials and in particularly difficult criminal cases they were ordered by *ngwerong* to conduct an inquisition; and, when the king had confirmed judgement of hanging, they saw it was carried out. In the performance of such duties, as the instruments of *ngwerong*, they went masked. They also kept the royal grave-huts repaired, were present at certain sacrifices, and might be sent on important missions by the king to neighbouring kingdoms. They were assisted by the *vimbaa ve fon*, retainers taken from subject chiefdoms, who performed menial tasks, one of which was to waken the king each morning by blowing a horn.

The governing body of *ngwerong* was composed of former heads of boy-retainers, the *ashey ve ta* (of whom there might be six to nine resident in the capital), and the hereditary palace stewards or *atartmo* (literally, ‘fathers of the palace’). Among the latter seven were more important than the rest, and some of these had special roles in the organization of the thatching of the palace, the supervision of the king’s wine-tappers, the hostelling of visitors to the capital, the performance of sacrifices for sick royal wives and children, and the arrangement of the marriages of the king’s daughters and grand-daughters to commoner lords. In general, they were collectively responsible for the economy of the palace and the care of its inmates; they attended meetings of the council; they acted, though not exclusively, as the king’s delegates on public occasions and at the installation of lineage and village-heads. Like other lineage heads, they were maintained by their wives and dependents; they also docked a share of what came into the palace by way of gifts and tribute. Minor stewards who also had the title of lord (*jai*) or lordling were in charge of smiths, the king’s raffia plantations and, formerly of dwarf cattle.

There were a number of societies in Nso which had their lodges, dances and maskers; the ‘owners’ of these were lineage lords (some of them palace stewards), though the king was *ex-officio* head. There was one, however, called *ye-ngwerong* (literally, ‘mother of ngwerong’) which was specifically associated with the palace and was presided over by the king. Membership was by invitation only and fees were heavy; full members had the title of *nggang-ngwerong* and the privilege
of walking behind the masker at mortuary ceremonies. The two most senior councillors were automatically members even if they never did any more than make the preliminary payments or, as the Nso say, 'stirred the pepper' (provided the minor ingredients of a meal). The rest included one or more councillors, three or four palace stewards and a number of lineage lords—most of them commoners—who had wealth, intelligence and influence. Members saw 'the things of ngwerong', they had their sacra, met weekly in a room in ngwerong quarters, and performed sacrifices when ordered to do so by the king. The exact nature of their political functions is not clear, but the society brought into the palace men of influence in the countryside and gave them the opportunity to meet regularly some of the more important councillors and stewards. The evidence suggests that, apart from the convivial gatherings, members had exceptional opportunities for access to the king and that they discussed high matters of state in secrecy after nightfall.

From this outline of the Nso polity, with particular reference to the system of retainerdom, certain features emerge. There was a distinct social category of retainer freemen which was recognised and perpetuated by various devices. From among people of this status the officials of the regulatory society recruited boys for service in its own quarters or for attendance upon the king. When their period of service was ended, pages and ngwerong retainers left the palace, frequently endowed with a wife by the king who would have a claim on her children. They might be called on for occasional duties and renders; they were the 'eyes' of ngwerong in that they brought in information to the weekly meetings; and they enjoyed some of the prestige of intimate association with the palace and were always in the background at public functions. A few of their number—those who had acted as junior officers—became lordlings and potential founders of retainer lineages; with the palace stewards, they composed the governing body, which, in addition to its executive functions, had both judicial and ceremonial duties. Former pages were often privileged persons about the court; they were sometimes granted the title of lordling and might exercise considerable influence as confidants of the king. Among their number two held the titles for life of tamfon (literally, 'father of the fon') and ntailaf, and were in charge of the young pages. A retainer who excelled in war might be chosen by the king to act as head of one of the two military lodges in the capital. It is clear therefore that, in a kingdom where many offices were hereditary, ngwerong provided opportunities for advancement for men of merit.

The system of titled hereditary palace stewardships, some with a defined sphere of competence, seems to have been peculiar to Nso in the Bamenda Grassfields, with the possible exception of Ntem, a
chiefdom for which our information is unfortunately thin, though there are many points of resemblance to Nso. Elsewhere, the functions of palace stewards were carried out by senior pages, sometimes titled and sometimes transmitting their titles but not functions to their descendants. In Nso, the stewards had the title of lord; they had, as the king’s functionaries, access to all associations except the princes’ fraternity; they sat in on the councils of the kingdom, and one or two of their number were taken into ye-ngwerong. While the king’s councillors enjoyed a higher rank, socially and politically, the stewards were in a strong position through their daily attendance on the king whose ear they had; they enjoyed great influence as frequent intermediaries between him and people who came to the palace on business.

The great majority of the councillors were of alleged royal descent, and some by virtue of this had priestly functions and a voice in the succession of the king. They sat in council, judged civil offences, and referred crimes for trial to ngwerong. Though three or four of their number might become members of ye-ngwerong, the council did not, as a group, constitute the governing body of ngwerong, as it did in many chiefdoms to the south and west. Hence, in securing support for a course of action, the king had to obtain in practice the consent of his council and the body of retainers who had the task of enforcing it. In theory, this placed restrictions on the king’s authority and power: council and ngwerong were complementary organs of government and the support of both was necessary. But in times of crisis it was possible for the king to play off one group against the other; with the breakdown of traditional organization there was a tendency for the king to rely to an increasing degree on his retainers.

Standing apart from palace politics, except for the favoured few who were members of ye-ngwerong, were the lineage heads—commoner and royal lords—living for the most part in villages. Many attended the palace weekly to drink in one of the halls facing on to the piazza; they reported and took back news. The commoner lords and their dependents of full commoner status were rigorously barred from access to the princes’ fraternity and to ngwerong. Commoner lords alone had the right to marry princesses; they freely gave women to the king as wives, and it was from among the children of such women that a king was chosen. Commoner lords saw themselves as heads of immigrant groups who had long ago freely associated themselves with the early kings of Nso, in return for which they received symbolic privileges, notably the return of leopard pelts presented to the king. They were jealous of maintaining their status, and safeguarded it by demanding that successors to the headships of their lineages should always be men of full commoner status.
The Nso system of retainerdom was the most elaborate in Bamenda: in part this was due to the size of the kingdom, but not entirely so. Among the other Bamenda-Tikar kingdoms, the main social categories were royals, commoners, tributaries and slaves. The category of retainer was reserved for those who had served or were serving the palace in some capacity. Daughters and grand-daughters of kings were given in marriage to commoners irrespective of whether they had served in the palace in their youth or not. Where no bride-price was given, and this was the usual practice, one of the sons of a princess might be brought back in to the palace to act as page or a youthful member of the regulatory society. Other adult sisters’ sons could pay for the privilege of membership in its ceremonial aspects. As the king’s sisters’ sons, they also had access to societies reserved to royals. Consequent upon this pattern of princess-marriage, king’s sisters’ sons were links between regulatory and royal fraternities. In addition to such men, the regulatory society received the bulk of its recruits from among the sons of commoner family heads, and twins (‘children of God’) born to commoner families. As far as the people of the kingdom proper were concerned, the main social distinction was between royals on the one hand and commoners on the other; the regulatory society was the institution of the commoners.

There were, however, more important differences between retainerdom in Nso and that in other kingdoms, to one of which I have already referred: the absence of a constituted group of titled hereditary palace stewards. In Ndu (and probably Mbot), the king was served by young pages in charge of whom was an appointed senior retainer. Royal raffia plantations were in the care of former retainers of ngwarung who had excelled and whose sons might succeed them, but not invariably, in the discharge of this duty. In Bamunka (a village chiefdom with a Ndobo dynasty in the Ndop Plain), two outstanding youths from the pages were selected by the governing body of the regulatory society or ngwose to act as stewards on the accession of a king. They had the title of lefon; like all in the palace service they had been recruited by ngwose in their youth. On retirement from active service, they received wives and a compound site and retained their title of lefon, which thereafter became hereditary if they established a lineage. Their successors, however, did not act as palace stewards; they entered ngwose, formed the junior section of councillors at the king’s durbar, and waited on him when required. Some of them were members of the priesthood connected with the state cults. In Babungo, a few miles to the north-east, the king’s personal pages or vendifoang were selected by the governing body of the regulatory society (tifoang); those who had served well continued to frequent the palace and might be put in charge of the king’s property. In addition to these, there
was a group of hereditary junior councillors, the *vecu*, whose titles were vested in patrilinages established originally by pages of one or more of the early kings. All had access to *tifoang*; a few were priests of the state cults. In the kingdom of Bafut, well to the west of Babungo, princes occasionally waited on the king, but the bulk of the pages were youths recruited to the regulatory society, *kwi'fo*, and selected for their duties by its governing body, the seven *bukum bu kwi'fo*. In charge of them was an appointed, and not hereditary, official called *tanto* who was also one of the seven *bukum*. The management of the palace, including the king's stores of oil, salt, wine, hoes, gunpowder and ivory was in the hands of the seven *bukum* who, when necessary, delegated tasks to junior members.

The *kwi'fo* of Bafut also differed in other ways from the regulatory societies of the Bamenda-Tikar. Membership of it was so essential to advancement that princes, although they were rigorously excluded themselves, would seek its permission to enter a son and start paying dues to secure a son's membership when they died. No one entered *kwi'fo* by hereditary right, and *kwi'fo* could refuse to accept a candidate. Once a man had paid the entry fees he might aspire to the title and office of *ngkum* (pl. *bukum*); members of this rank set the price. In some cases the king would assist in their payments men who had served meritoriously in the palace. From among the *bukum* seven were co-opted, with the king's approval, to act as the governing body. In their priestly role they were known as the *bandansie* ('those of the house of the earth'); with the king, they were the principal priests of the state cults; and they constituted his privy council. They also acted as a succession council, installed the king, and controlled conferment of all titles, though always in the king's name. They judged crimes, though here again sentence was confirmed by the king; they could fine the king and, as a last resort, have him put to death. The titles reserved to blood-royals were few: prince-holders were patrons of the princes' fraternity and of the war clubs; they acted on occasion as spokesmen of the king, attended durbars and had a role in the state cults of *Takumbang* and *Lela*.

The role of the regulatory society in government, apart from its duty in recruiting and directing palace retainers, reached its greatest intensity in Bafut. Apart from the handful of titles reserved to blood-royals, all the great state offices were reserved to commoners and all were appointive. The path to eminence led through *kwi'fo*; and its seven elders became, by virtue of their position in *kwi'fo*, a constituted state priesthood and king's privy council. The polities of Babungo

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**Footnote:**

and Bamunka presented some analogies to the Bafut system, some to Nso. In Babungo the king’s council, consisting of commoners, was divided into a senior section of five hereditary officials (the vetughong) and a junior section, the seven vecu. All of these, by virtue of their hereditary office as king’s councillors, became automatically the governing body of tifoang. The most senior councillor, Bighai Gwejju, was second in authority only to the king himself; as head of tifoang he held the title of Ba-Tifoang. In Bamunka, there were seven hereditary privy councillors, the becefon, all regarded as commoners; the most senior held the title of Ba. They likewise constituted the governing body of ngwose, the regulatory society. In their work in council and in ngwose they had, as their adjutants, a group of lefon. In these three systems then (Bafut, Babungo and Bamunka) the privy council and governing body of the regulatory society had the same personnel; but in the two latter the hereditary principle was important: a hereditary councilship carried with it an office in the regulatory society.

In Ndu (and probably Mbot) a hereditary and predominantly royal privy council had similar functions to that in Nso. As a group it had no access to ngwarung, but two of its members (not the most senior) acted as intermediaries between council, ngwarung and the princes’ fraternity. The governing body of ngwarung was called ma-ngwarung and had similar ritual and ceremonial functions to its Nso counterpart. It was headed by two hereditary titled officials drawn from royal collateral lineages. They were responsible for market announcements decided on by the king-in-council; they gave orders to retainers; they controlled the conferment of the non-hereditary tanto title on outstanding retainers. The latter had no palace duties but they brought in information to the weekly meetings of ngwarung; and they might, if they had the wealth and intelligence, become members of ma-ngwarung. Unfortunately, we have inadequate information about the neighbouring village chiefdom of Mbot, but Bum, whose dynasty derived from Mbot, presents an interesting variant and what appears to be a combination of principles, as illustrated by the Nso and Bafut systems. The king took his advice from two groups of councillors: one, the cesu-ntutso, a hereditary group of nine royals associated with the state cult of ntut; and the other, the nda-cum, an appointive group of five or more commoners who had achieved the highest status in kwifon by virtue of their wealth and personality. The cesu-ntutso under the leadership of Ndito acted as a succession council; it performed sacrifices for success in hunting, the fertility of land and women, and the cleansing of blood pollution; it met weekly to drink with and advise the king, and judged minor civil offences. But, as the king explained to us, ntut was concerned with peace and the ‘things of peace’; kwifon with enforcement and justice. However the male members of the cesu-
ntutso might enter kwifon in a subordinate role for the judgement of crimes, and some had the right to see 'the things of kwifon'. The ndacum, under the presidency of the king, made decisions about war and peace terms, proposed laws for discussion by ntut, and organised the annual hunt and the repair of the palace. They too had the right to attend the weekly meetings of ntut as onlookers.12

I have examined some of those kingdoms among the Bamenda-Tikar for which our information is more detailed and which present certain contrasts. In all, the regulatory society had a pivotal role in government: it recruited from among the free commoners most of the palace retainers, and trained them within its quarters. As a corporate body it serviced the palace, carried out orders issuing from it, and provided messengers and police. Its masked impersonal authority, behind which stood the sacra of gongs, was seen as supporting the kingship, as the arm of enforcement, as the maintainer of law, holding all persons to account from the highest to the lowest. In most of the kingdoms, judicial functions of a limited kind were delegated to it by the king-in-council; it was only in Bafut (and possibly Mankon) that the triad of king, council and regulatory society gave way to a dyarchy of king and regulatory society.

How far was the system I have described peculiar to the Bamenda Grassfields? The combination of sacred kingship with palace associations having governmental duties does not occur, as far as is known, to the north among the Jukun and Adamawa peoples. There is as yet no evidence that it obtained among the Mbum and the Durru to the north-east of the Tikar proper. For Kimi itself, a centre of origin for many of the Bamenda dynasties, the published material is thin: a constituted hereditary council of seven existed, and there are references to the institution of nggumbe in its religious and ceremonial aspects. It is possible that the latter had regulatory functions, but only research can clarify the situation. My information for Bamum is second-hand and incomplete, but its system of retainerdom presented an interesting variant of that found in Bamenda in the greater complexity of political institutions, in the prominence given to appointive office, and in the role of palace associations.13 The king was advised by three appointed retainer lords (titamfon), one invariably a legacy from his successor. There were two regulatory societies, borrowed from the submerged Bamileke kingdoms of Batie and Papiakum. The

13. I am indebted to M. Claude Tardits for this information. See also Sultan Njoya, *op. cit.*
older, mut’nggu, retained its right of fining the king and its head usually came from a Papiakum estate. The more recent, mbansie, adopted from Batie was a graded society open to high-ranking retainers who were not members of mut’nggu.

No regulatory society had the duty of recruiting retainers; moreover the latter only became eligible for membership after they had paid dues. Retainers were recruited from all categories of the population except princes and their sons; but as service in the palace provided the means of social promotion for ordinary men, the opportunity to acquire wealth, land and women, most family heads accepted it as a career for one or more of their sons. These were under the authority of the three titamfon and mancut (a senior retainer and war leader) and might rise to become stewards, commissariat officials and officers of the regulatory societies. A few became retainer lords, and from among these the three titamfon were chosen. By the end of the period of Bamum expansion, c. the 1880’s, the seven hereditary councillors (pakom), though treated with great respect and endowed with important ritual functions, do not seem to have played a part in day-to-day government of the country as they did in Nso.

The Bamileke material at our disposal is unfortunately very thin, but it seems clear that palace associations with regulatory functions and a retainerdom recruited in much the same way as in Bamum was general. What distinguished the Bamileke from both Bamum and Bamenda-Tikar was the proliferation of these societies, and the association of royal and retainer lords in a supreme council.14 West and south-west of Bamenda title societies with some police functions occurred in small village chiefdoms.

So far I have only glanced across Bamenda boundaries at neighbouring kingdoms, but it is significant that the most elaborate development of palace associations linked with a palace retainerdom is to be found in Benin, and that title societies occur in the surrounding region and farther east in the southern part of the Cameroon Republic. In Benin palace titles were divided into three main sections: chamberlains, household-officers, and harem-keepers. The normal progress to a palace title was by initiation into and promotion through the grades of one of the three palace associations, and involved payment of heavy fees. All freemen were eligible and all were potentially affiliated to one or other of the associations, though participation in activities was only obtained by an initiation ceremony.15 Dr. Bradbury’s

14. The main features of the Bamileke political systems have been summarized by M. Claude Tardits in Les Bamileke de l’Ouest-Cameroun, Paris, 1960.
discussion of the introduction of an immigrant dynasty from Ife into the culture area of the Edo-speaking peoples where title societies were an important institution presents some analogies to the situation in Bamenda, where many of the dynasties were also of immigrant origin; but whether the regulatory societies of the area had a southern origin cannot as yet be established. What is clear, however, on the basis of the evidence available, is that the combination of a sacred kingship and palace societies vested with retainer functions has a very limited distribution in West Africa and does not appear to occur in other parts of the continent. It is hoped that the present article will stimulate the publication of comparative studies of the system of palace retainer-dom in other parts of Africa.