

Preface

The Grassfields area, roughly corresponding to the present North West and South West provinces of Cameroon, is made up of about fifty chiefdoms of various sizes, each with its own language.¹ Many of these chiefdoms are renowned for their masquerades as well as for their elaborate hierarchies headed by kings, who are known throughout the region by variations on the term *fon*. These hierarchies are generally centralized in the palace in the capital and divided into a tripartite system composed of the *fon*, a regulatory society of commoners including servants, advisers, and a judiciary body known as *kwifon*, and the society of royal eligibles—the *fon*'s sons and his predecessor's sons—sometimes referred to in the literature, as in local pidgin, as “princes.” Both the *kwifon* regulatory society and the royal eligibles are divided into ranks according to complex title systems that confer unequal decision-making powers, as well as sartorial prerogatives, on their occupants. These palatine courtly societies are marked by a stark concentration of wealth among the *fons* and the few elites gathered around them, and this wealth is measured in the form of people, and in particular in wives, of which the *fons* of the greatest chiefdoms of the Grassfields possess hundreds.

My research was conducted primarily in the Grassfields chiefdom of Oku (known to the Oku people themselves as Ɖbkwo), over an initial period of two years. A two-month pilot study in 1991–92 permitted me to narrow my attention down to the chiefdom of Oku, a relatively small, remote polity of about 65,000 people, renowned for its carving and traditional medicines as well as for its relatively well-preserved primary montane forest, which until the 1970s still sustained leopards. I returned to Oku after a three-month interim period in London for a further uninterrupted twenty-two months from 1992 to 1994. Since the aged *fon*, Sentie, had died while I was in London following my pilot study, I rushed

back to Oku to witness the enthronement of the new *fon*, Ngum III, at the palace: the first such ceremony to take place since 1956. On April 1, 2006, Ngum III passed away, and the ceremonies described in this book took place again. In 1992, after two months and the end of the enthronement ceremony, I moved to the smaller village of Jikijem, where I lived for the remaining twenty months of my time in Oku. Roughly speaking, the first half of this period, apart from my focus on language acquisition, was dedicated to studies of village and palace hierarchy, mostly through informal and semistructured interviews, and of the organization of death ceremonies and masked dance, mostly through participant observation. I also studied domestic rituals and healing practices throughout my stay. I conducted interviews at first in West African pidgin, which I had learned in London before my departure, and then in Eblam Ekwu, the language of Oku, as I became more familiar with it. In the second half of this period I took on the additional task of working with carvers, to one of whom, Francis Wanjel, I was apprenticed (see Argenti 2002a). Francis, to whom I was indebted for a year of companionship as well as for so much of what I came to understand about Oku, passed away very soon after my latest visit to Oku in June 2005, and this book is dedicated to his memory.