

# The Concept of Aspectism in the Traditional Arts of the Bamileke People of Western Cameroon: Myth or Reality?

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## Abstract

Aspectism is an aesthetic approach that underscores the significance of visual appearance in artistic works, highlighting elements such as shape, color, texture, and other visual components as crucial for appreciating and interpreting art. This artistic style prioritizes the visual and formal aspects of artworks as channels for communication and creative expression. The Bamileke art object, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions, aligns with the principles of aspectism. Notably, many objects from this cultural milieu are featured in Western museums due to their striking physical beauty. This observation prompts questions regarding the applicability of aspectism to Bamileke art and whether it represents a myth or a reality. This inquiry delves into the intrinsic nature of Bamileke arts and the broader grassfields region. To address these concerns, the study unfolds in three key stages: introducing the concept of aspectism, delineating its artistic characteristics, and examining its manifestation across various

artistic mediums within the Bamileke community. Additionally, the study explores the philosophical underpinnings of beauty within this population. The study concludes that the Bamileke art object embodies two distinct entities: the physical, or apparent aspect, and the symbolic or functional aspect. While aspectism emphasizes the apparent aspect, the argument can be made that the notion of aspectism within Bamileke arts leans more towards being a myth than a reality.

**Keywords:** Bamilekes, aspectism, traditional arts, western Cameroon, visual arts

## 1. Introduction

Although aspectism is a well-established concept in the psychology of perception, it also occupies a significant place among the various artistic genres in the visual arts. This aesthetic approach prioritizes the visual appearance of artistic works, emphasizing form, color, texture, and other visual elements as crucial for appreciating and interpreting art. Aspectism celebrates the beauty and aesthetics of artistic creations, highlighting the emotional and sensory impact that visual elements can have on the viewer.

This artistic approach can be explored through various techniques and styles, ranging from abstraction to figuration, incorporating elements such as color, light, movement, and composition. By focusing on the visual aspects of artworks, aspectism invites viewers to immerse themselves in a rich and complex aesthetic experience, where sensory perception plays a central role.

In African culture, particularly among the Bamileke people, the notion of beauty is integral to artistic creation. This is evident in the creation of objects following precise canons, such as the disproportionate limbs in statuary or the exaggerated representation of certain body parts, reflecting the artist's aspirations or the work's intended purpose. The visual aspect of the art object is given particular attention, making it attractive and worthy of being displayed in Western museums, such as the "cup bearer" Bamileke statue in the Quai Branly Museum.

Contrary to common perception, Bamileke art, with its physical and spiritual dimensions, shares its visual aspect with the concept of aspectism. Aspectism in art originates from aesthetics and art theories, emphasizing visual and formal aspects as vital means of communication and artistic expression. The idea that visual elements like color, shape, texture, and composition are fundamental to creating a meaningful aesthetic experience is rooted in artistic and philosophical movements such as formalism, structuralism, and semiotics.

By focusing on the visual and formal aspects of artistic works, aspectism seeks to explore how these elements contribute to creating a rich and meaningful aesthetic experience for the viewer. This analysis raises a critical question: can the concept of aspectism truly be applied to Bamileke art, or is it a misinterpretation? Is aspectism in Bamileke art a myth or a reality? The problem lies in understanding the intrinsic nature of artistic achievements in this cultural area of Cameroon.

To address this issue, the study will be structured around three key points: presenting the concept of aspectism, examining its characteristics in art and their application in Bamileke arts, and exploring the philosophy of beauty within the Bamileke culture.

## 2. Presentation of the Concept of Aspectism

This section will introduce the concept of aspectism in the visual arts and psychology.

### 2.1 In the Visual Arts

Aspectism is a form of visual art that aims only to represent visual appearance (Note 1), external appearances. According to this approach, everything in nature consists of matter and

consciousness. Visual art does not fully convey the inner emotional experiences of the artist, nor does it control the emotional experiences when the audience views the work. The art itself should focus on the beautiful appearance of the object.

Aspectism traces its origins to deeply ingrained societal attitudes and beliefs that have persisted for centuries. Its roots can be traced back to ancient times, where physical attributes were often linked to moral, intellectual, or social traits. For instance, societies in antiquity often associated physical beauty with virtues, power, or high social standing.

In the realm of art, aspectism is grounded in the philosophy of beauty and art theory. This approach accentuates the visual and formal aspects of artistic works as mediums for communication and expression. The notion that visual elements like color, shape, texture, and composition are pivotal in creating a meaningful aesthetic experience has its origins in artistic and philosophical movements such as formalism, structuralism, and semiotics.

Formalism underscores the significance of a work's formal and visual qualities, highlighting composition, color, and texture as crucial components of artistic expression. On the other hand, structuralism delves into the underlying structures of artistic creations, including the formal relationships among visual elements. Semiotics examines the meaning conveyed by visual signs and symbols in art, emphasizing how these elements can convey ideas, emotions, and concepts. By amalgamating these approaches and underscoring the visual and formal facets of artworks, aspectism endeavors to explore how these elements contribute to crafting a rich and meaningful aesthetic encounter for the observer.

Moreover, the term "aspectism" is akin to "lookism," denoting discrimination based solely on aesthetic criteria. It manifests as the marginalization of certain individuals, often based on unpredictable aesthetic standards. For instance, it can discriminate against individuals who are not tall, those who dress in a particular manner regardless of their physique, or those who do not conform to a specific beauty standard dictated by a particular trend.

Irrespective of the degree of its detrimental impact, aspectism is recognized as one of the most prevalent forms of discrimination globally, with profound effects on self-esteem and overall quality of life.

## *2.2 In Psychology*

A psychological effect of aspectism: the halo effect

The halo effect is a psychological concept where a specific characteristic of an individual influences how we perceive their other traits and, consequently, their overall persona more positively or negatively. For instance, individuals with a tidy, stylish, or appealing personal appearance may benefit from the halo effect in various aspects of their lives, including personal relationships and job opportunities. This is because some recruiters may lean towards the belief that these candidates possess social skills, creativity, and other desirable qualities.

The intersection of aspectism and the halo effect underscores the significance placed on appearance, which is often seen as indicative of a person's value. Additionally, it assumes that other aspects of the individual, beyond their appearance, are also commendable and desirable.

Faced with this disadvantage, people with less socially valued aesthetic characteristics find themselves increasingly stuck and have less room for maneuver in many areas of their lives.

## **3. Some Characteristics of Aspectism in the Visual Arts**

Aspectism in art encompasses various essential elements that highlight the visual and formal aspects of artistic creations. These include an emphasis on visual elements, the significance of composition, exploring formal relationships, interpreting visual signs, providing an immersive

aesthetic experience, valuing craftsmanship, restricting the conceptual dimension of the work, disconnecting it from its social and cultural context, and stimulating the senses, among others.

### *3.1 Appreciation of the Artistic Achievements of the Bamileke People in Light of the Characteristics of Aspectism in the Visual Arts*

Within this section, each of the aforementioned characteristics is elaborated upon to draw inspiration from them and establish a parallel with Bamileke arts, selected from a multitude of artistic traditions.

#### 3.1.1 Focus on Visual Elements

Aspectism places significant emphasis on visual elements like color, shape, texture, line, composition, and light as fundamental tools of artistic expression. In the traditional arts of the research area, beads and beaded objects (Fig. 1-2) serve as illustrative examples.

In Western Cameroon, beads serve multifaceted purposes beyond adornment and attire, extending into the realm of the most esteemed plastic arts, frequently employed in ritual or religious contexts.

These beads encompass a range of shapes, colors, production methods, and origins. Bead artisans have significantly enhanced the expressive qualities of certain Bamileke art pieces, resulting in a diverse array of beaded objects.

- Royal thrones or stools
- *Ntu* beaded gourds
- Dance whips
- Beaded panther skins
- Wooden or fabric masks
- Dance hairstyles, belts

#### 3.1.2 The Importance of Composition

Aspectism highlights the significance of artistic composition, emphasizing how the arrangement of visual elements can impact the way a work is perceived and interpreted. Traditional Bamileke statuary (Fig. 3) serves as an excellent example of this concept.

Among other articles, we can cite:

- Royal commemorative statues, representing kings and queens,
- The figures of the guardians and protectors of sacred places, mfo or great notables,
- The statues of kadi or justice,
- Cup holders,
- Sculptures of healing, divination, twins,
- Ritual statuettes forming part of the cultic or ceremonial material of initiatory societies...

#### 3.1.3 Exploring Formal Relationships

Aspectism explores the formal relationships between different visual elements in a work, highlighting how these relationships contribute to harmony, balance, or tension in the work. Let us illustrate this characteristic by the large royal hut ("the happy hut", Fig. 5) found among the Bamileke.

The large hut is a sort of sumptuous temple-palace that can exceed 20 m in height, richly decorated, and which was found, until the middle of the 20th century, in each chiefdom where it must have been the most important building. The large huts with their characteristic style, the heritage of an architectural tradition dating back several centuries and widespread throughout the Grassland, are now only found in a few chiefdoms (Bandjoun, Bafoussarn, Bana, etc.). This is the consequence of the transformations that indigenous architecture underwent in the second half of the 20th century, accelerated it is true by the civil war in Bamileke country at the end of the 1950s, during which several of these imposing palaces were destroyed then replaced, in many cases, by constructions marked by European influence.

#### 3.1.4 The Meaning of Visual Signs

Aspectism is concerned with the meaning of visual signs and symbols used in art, emphasizing how these elements can communicate ideas, emotions, and concepts nonverbally. Traditional textile, adornment and hairstyle objects sufficiently illustrate this point.

the *ndop*(Fig.8)

*Ndop* is a cotton fabric, made of narrow strips sewn edge to edge, and decorated with a characteristic combination of shapes based on white sketches with a blue background. The decorative motifs (stylized animals, geometric shapes, moon, star, sun) are similar to those woven, from basketry, to those carved on wooden objects, or to the motifs drawn by stringing beads. The *ndop* is the result of an improvement, made in the 18th or 19th century, of a fabric of the same type and older, some specimens of which still in use date from the 16th or 18th century.

Adornments and symbols of royalty and leadership play essential roles in ceremonies, dances, and daily life. These items hold symbolic, religious, ceremonial, and prestigious significance. They encompass a wide range, including hairstyles, jewelry, fly swatters, panther skins, elephant teeth (whether worked or not), headdresses, spears, parade weapons, poles, and sticks. The design and embellishment of each piece were tailored to the rank and status of its owner. The highest quality and most valuable pieces were reserved for kings and dignitaries of the kingdom.

The headdresses are decorated with feathers, animal figures and valuable products (cowries, old pearls). Fly swatters, or even dance whips, each have a carved wooden handle (generally anthropomorphic or zoomorphic), fixed on a horse or buffalo tail. These are war trophies, displayed during ceremonies and dances. Spears are used in traditional ceremonies by the king, his servants and powerful members of customary secret societies, as attributes of royal power and the unity of the country.

#### 3.1.5 An Immersive Aesthetic Experience

By emphasizing visual and formal aspects, aspectism aims to create an immersive aesthetic experience for the viewer, inviting them to fully engage with the work of art through its visual qualities. Here we have the example of *bom'dya* (Fig.16) door frames.

They are made up of an assembly of four wooden angles, the main plane of which is pressed against the exterior face of the wall, and the other around the edge of the opening over its entire thickness. Two vertical pieces, or straight legs, are located on each side, the other two horizontal pieces form the lintel (top) and the threshold (bottom). The *bom'dya*, sometimes polychromed in red, ocher, white and black, are indifferently engraved, sculpted in bas-relief, in high-relief, or even in the round with sometimes a more or less openwork cut-out. They are decorated with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures as well as geometric patterns. Some chiefdoms retain fragments of door frames from ancient palaces, dating from previous centuries.

### 3.1.6 Promoting Craftsmanship

By highlighting the visual aspect of works, aspectism can also highlight the craftsmanship and know-how of artists, which can contribute to their recognition and enhancement. Take the case of *kodya* sculpted beds.

*Kodya* carved beds(Fig.11)

Possession of a carved bed was reserved for great dignitaries and the head of the chieftom. Such objects were really used for sleeping, but also for the secret exhibition or in restricted council of a deceased fo, before his burial. The wooden bed, whose length can vary from 1.70 to 2 m, often has only two vertical walls, in the longitudinal direction, and decorated with geometric shapes, animal or human figures.

*Kuo* seats(Fig.17)

The current seat is made either from raffia palm stems or from wood. The carved *kuo* seats are exclusively reserved for the fo, important figures of the chieftaincy (or secret societies), and for specific rituals. The shapes and decorations of each of them depend on the rank and place of the owner in the community.

The *mfo* stools and thrones must be counted among the most impressive symbols of Bamileke royalty. Some specimens can reach or even exceed 1.90 m in height. The ceremonial throne of a fo constitutes such an expression of his sovereignty, it expresses the sovereign himself to such an extent that honors are paid to him even when the sovereign is absent.

The fo, upon his accession, commissions a ceremonial throne (sometimes covered with pearls) which retains a commemorative value after the death of its owner, and plays the same role as the effigy statues. The thrones and stools of former mfo are piously preserved, generally in the chieftom's treasury, but sometimes in a shelter, among influential notables.

### 3.1.7 The Limitation of the Conceptual Dimension of the Work

By focusing primarily on visual aspects, aspectism can sometimes neglect or downplay the conceptual, narrative, or symbolic dimension of artistic works, which can limit the depth and complexity of interpretation. Let us take the case of Bamileke pictorial art which, however, presents a fundamental conceptual dimension.

Defining painting as the application of color pigments onto a surface using a binder for aesthetic purposes, we can observe that the Bamileke had a modest yet existing pictorial tradition before the Europeans arrived. Their mediums included the human body, man-made objects, rocks, and caves. Common colors used were white, red, black, and ocher. Body paintings included *padauk* anointings, ritual dance paintings, therapeutic art, and war paintings. Significant changes occurred during the colonial era with the introduction of new materials, supports, and production techniques in painting(Fig.9).

### 3.1.8 The Work Disconnected from Its Social and Cultural Context

While aspectism prioritizes visual elements, it may overlook or minimize the significance of the social, cultural, and historical context surrounding an artistic creation. This oversight can diminish the comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the artwork. For instance, the traditional pottery of this particular group is inseparable from its social and cultural context, highlighting the necessity of considering these broader factors in art analysis.

There is a wide variety of cups, pots, terracotta or wooden bowls, each having their own use, both for cooking and for other uses (case of use as ritual material for example). Containers used to preserve, keep or prepare religious or prestige products (red mahogany powder and various

beverages for initiations, wine and palm oil for libations, sauces, tobacco, etc.) and belonging to fo, mkem or notable, are sculpted or richly engraved, with great care. They are decorated with sometimes exuberant symbolic geometric or figurative motifs. The most characteristic productions are:

- Sauce or wine vases, in terracotta with walls with geometric and zoomorphic patterns(Fig.4-7-10).

### 3.1.9 Stimulation of the Senses

By emphasizing visual aspects, aspectism can stimulate the viewer's visual and emotional senses, creating an immersive and captivating aesthetic experience. Let us illustrate this point through masks and traditional musical instruments.

#### Masks(Fig.12)

The mask, which is one of the most striking symbolic expressions of Bamileke plastic arts, is generally not designed to be contemplated. It belongs to a specific customary society, which uses it during processions, ritual ceremonies or dances. It must suggest and prove the presence of the supernatural.

Among the Bamileke, the mask does not only include the piece of wood used to hide the face or head (although this is a fundamental element), but also the costume and accessories which are an integral part of it. It is associated with dance, choreography and appropriate music during demonstrations. The colors and decorative patterns it carries are of great importance. Masks have specific functions on the political, religious, therapeutic, ritual, social or judicial levels. They are of great diversity. They can be divided into several categories, with, of course, more or less wide margins of overlap.

#### Musical instruments

Various musical instruments crafted from wood, metal, or ivory play integral roles in leisure and social activities among the Bamileke (Fig.13-14). Many of these instruments, belonging to the Fo, notables, and Mkem secret societies, hold a liturgical function, providing accompaniment and rhythm to songs, dances, and processions. Certain objects like drums and bells, possessing sacred significance, were sanctified through sacrifices and magical rituals. Among the wide array of musical instruments, double bells, flutes, and drums stand out as particularly significant in Bamileke social and religious contexts, with some examples adorned with intricate decorations.

The preceding arguments have illustrated how specific aspects of aspectism relate to the artistic accomplishments of the Bamileke community. However, some of these aspects do not align perfectly with the aesthetic standards of this population. This raises questions about the essence of aesthetics within the Bamileke cultural sphere. What defines beauty in this community? The answer will be explored further in the remainder of this presentation.

## **4. The Notion of Aesthetics in Bamileke Arts and in Grassfields in General**

All forms of art are represented among the Bamileke. Jacqueline DELANDE writes on this subject:

“Multiplicity of artistic crafts, practice of monumental arts, but also of meticulous arts such as embroidery, beading, resist dyeing, lost wax casting, the very advanced division of labor, the inscription of these activities in a very finely hierarchical system of social and political relations, these are the essential features of the aesthetic life of these societies” (Note 2).

The artistic output of the Bamileke people is exceptionally diverse, encompassing a wide range of object types such as statues, panels, lintels, posts, masks, seats, pipes, drums, fabrics, gourds, containers, and furniture. These objects feature motifs that blend figurative representations with stylized and abstract elements. While not every object, be it masks, statues, or bas-reliefs, attains masterpiece status, they must be understood within a complex context: masks are often displayed in groups, fabrics adorn market fences during festivals covering vast distances, and monumental posts for "large boxes" can reach eight meters in length and number in the dozens. However, certain masks, lintels, royal thrones, and commemorative statues of sovereigns stand out as marvels, capable of rivaling the most exquisite artworks from Africa and around the world.

The diversity of styles and expressive freedom evident in the intricate details, while maintaining distinct characteristic features, is remarkable. Artists primarily utilize materials such as wood, bronze, iron, pearls, ivory, terracotta, plant fibers, offering a plethora of options to diversify their creations. Bamileke arts, known for their realistic tendencies, often emphasize the intensity of expressions (Fig. 15). The thematic range is extensive, covering scenes of chieftdom, warfare, celebrations, religious rituals, and more.

The production of art remains a specialized domain, often associated with artists recognized by notables and leaders, although in some cases, the identities of these artists have faded into obscurity behind their works. It's worth noting that Bamileke arts are deeply decorative, where symbolic art objects can serve as both symbols themselves or as supports for symbolic motives.

Bamileke artists, while predominantly focusing on human figures in their artistic representations, also draw inspiration from animals, plants, celestial elements like the moon, sun, stars, and minerals. Human and animal figures appear in two primary forms: direct representations and the fusion of animal and human elements (such as shells, horns, skins, hair, skulls), creating what Elliot PICKET termed as conglomerate art, where these elements blend seamlessly to form integrated artistic expressions (Note 3).

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the preceding discussion, aspectism can be understood as a visual art approach that prioritizes the representation of aesthetically pleasing appearances. In this context, the value of an art object or work is determined by its visual appeal or attractiveness. This concept also extends to psychology, where aspectism can refer to discriminatory judgments based on physical appearance, applicable to both artworks and individuals.

Having introduced the concept of aspectism, the study then delved into highlighting key characteristics of this artistic genre as applied to visual arts. These characteristics include a focus on visual elements, the importance of composition, exploration of formal relationships, interpretation of visual signs, creating an immersive aesthetic experience, valuing craftsmanship, limiting the conceptual dimension of the work, disconnecting it from its social and cultural context, and stimulating the senses, among others.

The subsequent analysis aimed to assess Bamileke art objects through the lens of aspectism's characteristics in art. This evaluation revealed that many artistic creations within this population do not align with the criteria or characteristics of aspectism as viewed from an artistic perspective.

In the realm of Bamileke arts, the concept of aspectism appears more as a myth than a reality. Art objects within this tradition possess both a physical presence and a spiritual essence, embodying a blend of the tangible and the intangible. The notion of aspectism tends to emphasize the physical aspects of artworks at the expense of their spiritual significance. As noted by Léopold Sedar Senghor, Negro arts are often deeply symbolic and functional.



However, this does not preclude them from manifesting in works that elicit aesthetic responses from viewers, proving that they serve more than just symbolic or instrumental roles (Note 4).

Exploring traditional African objects from an aesthetic perspective has sparked numerous studies and new interpretations from the colonial era to the present day. Several authors have contributed valuable insights, although we can only mention a few examples here.

Thus, E. MVENG made a formal although symbolic analysis of Bamoum art and sought to formulate the laws of African aesthetic (Note 5) creation. J. LAUDE (Note 6), J. DELANGE (Note 7) have devoted several studies to the aesthetics of African arts. It emerges that in Africa, art is a “marker” not only of the culture of different peoples but also of their social, political, economic and religious organization, hence one of those which allows men to act on their own environment; all forms of art being intimately linked to each other.

In Bamileke art, as observed by Jean Paul NOTUÉ, artists demonstrate a conscious effort to transcend the mere utilitarian function of objects, whether ceremonial or technical, by imbuing them with aesthetic value. This art form is characterized by abstraction, distortion, asymmetry, and a non-optical yet functional perspective, evident in many Bamileke artistic productions. Contrary to misconceptions, these artistic techniques reflect skilled craftsmanship rather than clumsiness. Artists adhere to specific laws and principles of aesthetic creation that distinguish their work from that of other cultural groups.

Despite the emphasis on physical appearance in aspectism, it has significant drawbacks. It can lead to harmful discriminatory biases that operate automatically and often beyond individuals' control. Personal image plays a pivotal role in social dynamics, resulting in discriminatory practices across various aspects of life. This form of discrimination must be actively addressed and countered.

However, combating aspectism proves challenging because discrimination based on appearance is often subtle and difficult to detect. Companies may use excuses related to appearance to terminate employment, prompting the need for legal protections. Nevertheless, addressing discrimination requires not just legal measures but also cultural shifts and education on the value of equality. Collaborative efforts are essential to foster inclusive cultures that do not limit self-esteem or personal, professional, and economic freedom based on beauty standards.

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### Notes

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ILLUSTRATIONS OF FIGURES



Figure 1: Beaded calabash

Figure 2: Bamileke beaded animals



Figure 3: 1. Pair of large beaded figurines 2, famous Bamileke ebony sculpture 3, Bamileke wooden sculptures of woman and child



Figure 4: Terracotta plate (kei), clay, early 20th century, reign of King Forteto of the West, height 16 cm, diameter 16 cm, depth 18 cm, Bandjoun, cited by Knott and Bianca, 2005



Figure 5: The Bandjoun chiefdom



Figure 6: Helm mask, before 1880



Figure 7: Clay soup plate (ngwang ndoeb abom), clay, height 17 cm, depth 10 cm, Kong Museum, Northwest Man Prairie, Noti, Bianca, 2005

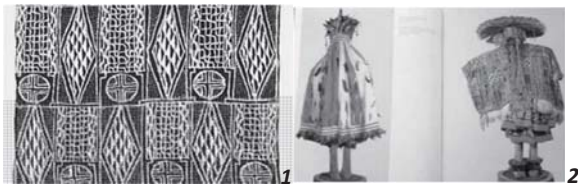


Figure 8: 1, ndop fabric; 2, traditional outfit worn by celebrities during dance



Figure 9: 1-2. The biannual initiation ceremony (secret organization) of the Baleng people 3. The fresco at the entrance to the traditional chiefdom, 4. Other body painting



Figure 11: Kodya carved beds



Figure 10: Terracotta pot (ta'a), terracotta, raffia, date unknown, height 37 cm, diameter 34 cm, Bandjoun, cited by Knott and Bianca, 2005



Figure 12: 1, Té mambu mask, Bamileke, 2, Bamendu-Cameroon mask called "Kacho" 3, mask called "Bacham"



Figure 13: balafon



Figure 14: double bells or kwi' fo



Figure 15: Queen BANGWA, Bamileke



Figure 16: "bom'dya"



Figure 17: Bamileke Traditional Seat



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Not applicable.

**Authors contributions**

Dr. Djoukwo Tsanetse Majolie Carine was responsible for study design and revising. Also, she drafted the manuscript. Mr. Emmanuel J. Guia was responsible for data collection. Prof. Michel Mbessa revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In short, authors contributed equally to this study.

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