

# MYTHS, RITUALS AND RESTRICTIONS OF THE AFRICAN IRON INDUSTRY IN THE 18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: THE CASE OF TAAVISA IN NSO' GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON

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## ABSTRACT

*The peculiarity of the African iron industry is its cultural dimension; where in, symbolism was evident in virtually all the stages of the production chain. With the use of archival, secondary and oral sources, this paper investigated the Taavisa slag heap which revealed that smelting residue was cleared to create space for a royal cemetery and a hut constructed over the grave of Fon (king) Sanggu of Nso' around 1750. Sanggu was probably the seventeenth Sovereign of the Nso' Dynasty at Kovifem, who died while in refuge on the peripheries of his kingdom, subjected to Chamba and later Fulani raids. Taavisa was a retreat spot in several situations and developed into a rest palace for reigning Fons of Nso'. Given its strategic location, smelting, pre-forging and sanctity which emanated from iron works, this old iron working site became a place of honour and thus mutated into a shrine. Thus, multidimensional values attached to Taavisa account for Nso' seizure of the area and subsequent expansion towards its southern boarder Fondoms (Kingdoms). A new element therefore adds to symbolisms attached to the African iron industry that is: a smelting site turned into a royal cemetery.*

**Keywords:** Slag heap, Taavisa, Kovifem, Fon Sanggu, Burial Hut.

## INTRODUCTION

Varied possible origins have been attributed to the technology of iron working in Sub-Saharan Africa; first from Meroe in ancient Egypt to Darfur in Sudan and then to the lake Chad region. Secondly, that this know-how evidenced in Carthage was brought down to ancient Gao by Libyan Berbers, from where it spread along the Niger River to reach Mali and Nigeria. These views known as diffusionist theories do not valorise cultures which Europeans encountered when they expanded to Africa. Recent research rather suggests that Sub-Saharan Africa developed an indigenous iron working industry on its own merit. More evidence has emerged in the African continent in Mauritania and Mali and scholars now are inclined to the possibility of multiple independent centers for the origins of iron production in Africa, as opposed to the single center theory projected

by diffusionists (Jemkur, 2004:37-39). The African continent is known to possess iron ore and refractive clay in abundance; which are essential raw materials used in building composite elements of furnaces and its accessories. With the availability of fuel to produce charcoal and labour sources, the iron industry emerged and was sustained in Africa. Natural and human inputs did not appear homogeneously over the continent and thus accounted for variations seen in techniques of smelting, furnace structures and also cultural aspects surrounding each region of iron production (Okafor, 2004:43-45).

A particularly notable element of the iron industry in Africa was its symbolism demonstrated in myths, rituals and taboos. The African industry exhibited common cultural and technical traits within a context of continuity, which is responsible for originality and uniqueness seen in the continent. Amongst the Bantu, the strong relationship between iron production and beliefs or philosophy surrounding iron production is evidenced. Value has also been given to the African contributions towards technological experiences and strives made by humanity as seen amongst the Luba tribe of Central Africa, who besides iron ore reduction processes, fabricated cast iron and could forge iron and steel into a single blade (De Maret, 2004:138). Symbolic references as a major trait in Africa was more imbued in iron smelting than in blacksmithing. The process was viewed like that of childbirth amongst the Bantu of Central Africa; where in cast iron was considered to be the new born child, while the residue slag was the placenta. Iron working was equally equated to a sexual act or human reproduction wherein the furnace was symbolically equated to the female reproductive system, while the bowl and two bellows were the male sex organs. The appearance of the bloom at the end of the smelting process was considered the result of coitus. All of these were linked to a philosophy of fertility, transfer and release of energy and natural elements of chance, luck and destiny (De Maret, 2004:132). Rituals and myths were part of the African iron industry from search of raw materials and its exploitation, to the processes to build furnaces, smelting, forging and usage of iron products. A peculiarity of the African iron industry is its symbolism. As documented, secret texts were orally recited when searching for iron ore, tracing a furnace plan, smelting and protection of the foundry (Dieterlen, 1965:20). The foundry and smithy belonged to a category of shrines; the stone anvil in many situations was transformed into an object or deity for swearing or rites and ritual. The industry had specific taboos related to sexual activity. In any given community, the collapse of an iron ore or kaolin mine and a failed smelt, were signs of non-respect of the smelting code. In some cases there were specific prohibitions linked to female reproductive powers and a particular fear of menses contamination (Essomba, 1991:26; De Maret, 2004:127-134).

McCosh believes that in the study of traditional industries, the ritual aspects cannot be separated from the mechanical processes involved. Besides myths, restrictions and reproductive symbolism elucidated above, he emphasizes the process of invoking ancestral spirits in virtually all stages in the production chain. He adds to this, the mental booster effect it had on smelters. In reference to iron working processes in Africa and Europe, he concludes that one is a sacrament and the other, a means of livelihood (McCosh, 1974:160-170). To fully understand technological strives in Africa, they must be studied within the social context be it a clan, tribe, or region. Andrew Reid and Rachel Maclean used as case study the Karagwe Chieftdom of East Africa, to prove that the king willed power, due to his ability to exercise control over iron production processes and rituals surrounding it. In the same vein, smelters developed and enjoyed an economic strength as producers of wealth. On the other hand they were subjected to rituals and symbolism, dictated by tribal customs or the sovereign ruler. Smelting was a dangerous venture due to manipulation of fire, high, temperatures, malleable bloom, crushing of ores, work duration and pit collapses. These

were threats to life, fertility and agricultural productivity, which they call symbolic dangers. Like J-M. Essomba, they also bring out elements of discrimination, restrictions and reservations observed in the African industry (Reid & Maclean, 1995:144-146).

Furnaces varied according to epoch, region, raw materials, their sources, historical tradition and origins. In the case of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, they were usually situated away from human settlements but within a hearing distance. Where ever the furnace was found in most African kingdoms, secrecy and discrimination were very visible, especially against women and foreigners (Jemkur, 2004:41-46). In various parts of the continent a simple foundry had much in common. It was constructed in the center of a cleared groove in a circular or rectangular form with two openings; one to bring in fresh air and the other as an exit for heat. A smelt could last for three days or less as the technology evolved. Openings (windows) were thus devised to allow for ventilation and the thatched roof high enough so that the grass would not catch fire. A raised platform served as a base for the furnace which could be doomed, shaft, open hearth or open bowl, using induced heating by bellows or natural draught. A larger trench was dug to face the entrance for disposal of smelting residue and a smaller opening at the top rear for smelting inputs. A smaller hole measuring about 5 centimeters was designed from the furnace floor to the larger trench and it was expected that as hot air escaped through the trough, slag dropped from the furnace into this trench. Openings were made at the back side of the furnace having the small trench to which tuyeres were inserted that would regulate the inflow of air (Akinjogbin, 2004:58-60).

Labour was used to obtain raw materials and while men mined the ore, women washed the stones for impurities and pre-pounded them into smaller bits, before it was taken to the furnace. The most important fixture in the foundry was the stone on which pounding and malleability of the iron was done, referred to as "*Ogun*" in Yorubaland and believed to have a spirit and developed varied mystical uses. In some cases and usually in a separate operation at the far end of a foundry, pre-forging could be done on a smaller anvil buried partially into the ground to hammer and obtain rough shapes of objects to be fabricated. Bellows which were either vertical or horizontal heated the furnaces or the bloom as the case may be to allow for hammering when producing iron bars or pre-shaping of objects (Akinjogbin, 2004:59). These processes were accompanied by much rituals, myths, and restrictions as elements of symbolism in Africa. The choice of this paper is unique, as the Taavisa slag heap besides being an 18<sup>th</sup> Century iron working site with all the symbolism earlier described, was used as a burial site for Fon Sanggu, who died while in refuge, having been chased out of kovifem his old capital by mounted raiders.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### The Nso' History in Taavisa

The Nso' are one of the Tikari Fondoms in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. Oral tradition holds that its founder a princess called Ngonso' with her companion, migrated from Tikari or Rifem westward to the Mbo' plain, then to Ndzenso', where they settled for some time and finally moved uphill to establish a Fondom at kovifem. The son of this princess called Leh, following a pact with the aboriginal clans (*Mntar*), became the first Fon of Nso' (Ndzeka, 1980:7).<sup>1</sup> The Nso' built a dynasty with the regulatory society (*Kwifon*) and prince's society (*Ngirri*) which are recurrent in most Grassfield tribes, together with a defense organisation (*Manjong*) (Fanso, 2014:43). New migratory clans from the Nkambe plateau like the *Tang* and *Ya* joined the Nso'. As its strength and influence increased, its territorial span reached the northern fringes of Kimbo' at Tsenla (Kikaikela'aki) and Gwan (Kitiwum), which had status of Fons and soon became their

<sup>1</sup>Chilver & Keberry (1970: 254), hold a contrary view that Ngonso's son was called Jing.

allies. Eighteen Fons reigned at Kovifem, evidenced by thirteen graves all visible today by small *bamboo* grass thatched huts. There is a total of eighteen large funeral head stones in that royal cemetery (fe'em) (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982:133-135).

At Kovifem off shoots of the Nso' are believed to have emigrated to found the Oku and Mbiame Fondoms. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Chamba attacks reached Kovifem twice but the Nso' survived. In one of these raids which the Nso' allude to the Chamba as "*Mbangshuu*" or "red mouths", the Fon sent a message to his counterpart in Babungo as described by Fowler: "...the raiders are too strong to fight and that they should treat it as a sacrifice, tie their spears in bundles and store them away, and simply give themselves up to the fate." (Fowler, 1990:78). Chamba raids occurred around 1780 where in kovifem was ransacked twice. This was not a single episode but, a series war that spanned over decades. The number of early Chamba raids and their trajectory is not known but Ian Fowler presents two possible sources of this attack: first by Gyando of the Dagha and secondly a raiding group of the Peli settlers of Bali-Kontan. Fon Sanggu with his people took refuge at Taavisa, two kilometers away from the Tsenla southern neighboring clan and eight kilometers away from Gwan clan who had status of Fons (Fowler & Zeitlyn, 1996:1-2). While at Taavisa, Fon Sanggu and the royal family were killed. The presence of a traditional hut (see plate 1 below), attests Sanggu was buried following Nso' custom and specific rituals attached to his personality (Chilver & Kebbery, 1970:2). This implies that a return to his headquarters under occupation was not possible at that moment.



Plate1. The Grave site spot of Fon Sanggu in Taavisa (above in 1980; below in 2021)

Source: Above is a photograph by Miriam Goheen in the possession of Ian Fowler, and below Field work GPS photograph by author on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

A close look at the grave site reveals a patterned set of monoliths depicting that the original hut was about 2.5 by 1.60. For four years since 2016 of political upheavals in this region, the annual rites have not been done and the “Kovifem format” hut has been destroyed by stray cattle with a seasonal paddock 100meters away and farming as women keep piling iron residue to have slag free farm beds. The hut photographed by M. Goheen as seen above in 1980 was built in the dry patch of grass visible above.

Ian Fowler describes these attacks on the northern Ndop plain as devastating where in a number of Fondoms were scattered “...never to reform as individual polities again.” (Fowler, 1990: 78). For the Nso’ during this period of a vacant throne, a title holder and trader from Nsunglin called Shaang (*Faay Ndzeedzev*) redeemed the royal line, when he brought a prince called Yiir; believed to had been sold to slavery and crowned him Fon Se’mbum.<sup>2</sup> Yiir returned with the Nso’ people back to kovifem. With the prevailing threats, Nso’ fine-tuned its war tactics and gathered the equipment most likely produced at the Taavisa sixty two (plus) furnaces, to undertake conquest and subjugation of neighboring clans. As this went on, immigrant chiefdoms such as the Nse’, Ndzeen and Ndzerem accepted Nso’ suzerainty in return for protection. Around 1800, Se’mbum I (*Fomukong*) took the decision to transfer his capital further south to kimbo’, which was better protected by steep cliffs of Taayav and kitiwum escarpments and safe from raiders on horsebacks that came from the Adamawa. At Kimbo’ they faced less harassment and acquired greater strength to expand in all directions (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982:132-135).

### **The Taavisa Slag Heap Evidence**

The aboriginal settlers of Taavisa are believed to be the Nkar tribe who had as neighbours the *ki*’to the east, *Visale* to the North and the *Ntur* to the west. Taavisa is found at the southern fringes of the kovifem dynastic territory created by Ngonso’ around the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Later, to the north-west and north-east of Taavisa, the *Do’ kitiwum* and *Do’ kikaikom* clans (also called Vedo’o) from Kovifem settled respectively. While at Kovifem, the neighbours of Nso’ to the south were the Nkar clan, whose northern fringes ran from Shisong to kiyam and up to Taavisa. Nkar princes occupied Kimbo’ (which holds the present palace site) who included: *Faay kilam* and *Faay Sarntoh* (both evidenced as forging families) *Faay Tsenkar* and *Faay Mbinkar*. This is the area described as held by the Fon of Nkar, which stretched across to the southeast and west to present day Kov-Nkar (Kaberry, 2004:40). Fon Se’mbum I tactfully occupied Kimbo’, though the Nkar dynasty maintained its local autonomy. The Nkar leaders could not execute capital punishment, nor could single handedly undertake wars of conquest and defense. While in his new capital Kimbo’, the Taavisa grave of Sanggu and the royal cemetery at Kovifem were subject to regular and routine sacrificial ceremonies by Se’mbum I and successive Fons of Nso. This site at the hill top gentle slope at Mbohlong has slag as evidence of iron works (see plate 2 and plate 3 below). The Nkar princes named above together with the Fumekuuiy and Kah family heads in Nso’ Fondom, constitute evidence of iron working in area (Mbenkum, 1979: 27-38).

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<sup>2</sup> *Faay Ndzeedzev* was a trader involved in the regional trade pattern of the Grassfields and known to trade on Babungo hoes which he exchanged for oil from Mbembe area. He is recounted to have encountered the lost prince whom he later crowned, in one of such his trading ventures while he sang doing farm work. The role he played to reconstitute the dynastic line earned him the rank of second personality in the Nso’ land. He was equally bestowed the statutory procedure to begin every transfer of authority following the demise all Fons of Nso’ till date.



Plate 2. The Upper section of the Taavisa Slag Heap

Source: Field work GPS photograph taken by author on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

Slag residue is clearly visible by its dark colour spread over the Taavisa, Mbohlong gentle slope under cultivation.



Plate 3. A Relic Foundry in Taavisa

Source: Source: Field work GPS photograph taken by author on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

The structure of a relic foundry foundation at Taavisa is clearly visible in plate 3 above with the furnace at the far end. The crushing anvil still lies in place with its stone hammers and a broken piece of tuyere clearly visible.

From Shisong to Kimbo', vast quantities of debris was spread to consolidate laterite roads to Mba' by the Public Works Department. Oral sources indicate the existence of slag heaps at Shisong. . Together with surviving smiths, it is evidence that iron ore sources were in the area and one of such is traced to Taavisa. Today at the spot called Mbohlong two kilometers on the road to Kikoo from Tsenla is found the Taavisa slag heap. At the top of this heap is the burial site of Fon Sanggu; who took refuge following attacks from Chamba (Banyo raiders). This is marked by the same type of hut constructed on Fon's graves in Kovifem royal cemeteries. Taavisa translated literally means "up the site of iron ore".

To investigate slag heaps one of the approaches is to quantify defined slag categories or heaps. This allows us draw insights into past productions. These slag heaps are also useful in chronological differentiation; which are indicative as to estimates for quantities of raw material used and the amount of iron produced. In the same vein physical and chemical characteristics, nonmetallic remains and sediment traced in slag heaps are indicative of productivity, innovation in the industry and the choices made by smelters in the process of smelting. Slag heaps also help locate furnaces (See the marked area in Plate 2 above indicating a furnace foundation, stone anvil and foundry foundation). These put together, are evidence that some technology took place in the past in that area and had an impact or relationship with social or cultural aspects of the society in question. This slag heap evaluated singly or in association with others in the surrounding, gives much information as to the intensity of the production industry, spatial coverage and relationships between smelting sites. A keen researcher equally should consider the possibility that a heap could be residue from multiple working iron sites (Humphreys & Carey, 2011:132-134).

In various Assessment Reports (Hawkesworth, 1922:11) indicates that the Nso' obtained its iron products from Babungo and Oku. Nso' does not feature as an exporter of iron ware in the Grass field's trade route to the Adamawa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In assessing the population of taxable adults in Nso'land 1922, the profession of adult Nso' men who are smelters do not feature in his report. This suggests the number of iron workers were likely insignificant at the time of his report or Nso' production capacity did not permit for extras that could be exported. These indicators show that smelting was possibly not wide spread in the Nso' Upper plateau to the Kovifem area except possibly in Taavisa as described: "Iron workers have no regular work elsewhere nor do they smelt their own iron, as it is done in Oku..."(Hawkesworth,1922:12).<sup>3</sup> The puzzle therefore is what could be the relationship of an iron production residue site and the location of a royal cemetery at the top of it. Strange as a phenomenon but may only boil down to myths, rituals and restrictions seen in the old African smelting industry and its connection to the supreme authority of the tribe. This could also depict continuity seen from the old smelters, to present-day forgers and symbolism which is seen in the African iron industry.

### **Myths, Rituals and Restrictions in the Taavisa Iron Site**

The slag residue mount at Taavisa rises to 30 meters from the flat lands cultivated below facing kikaikom to the west. It has an elongated cuboids shape spread unevenly over six hectares of slag for the gentle slope holding the grave of Fon Sanggu. Like in many areas where human cultivation of food crops is done on slag heaps, the presence of the tomb of Fon Sanggu makes it a sacred

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<sup>3</sup>The evidence in the Grassfields of large scale smelting remains overwhelming but with no dates the case of Taavisa cannot be conclusive as could equally be a center of recycling old slag deposits.

ground wherein no woman of commoner status can till the soil in that location reserved for Queen mother only.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore regularly protected from bush fires as the surroundings of the hut are cleared at the approach of the dry season for sacrifices. The present queen mother Yah Fanka Shella indicated that they perform sacrifices at three spots in that site but could not be specific on the third, which she simply described as a large stone; probably an anvil or monolith.<sup>5</sup>

Taavisa is probably one amongst the many isolated smelting sites that (Warnier & Fowler, 1979:329-351) indicated are found throughout the Bamenda Grassfields and called the “Ruhr” of Central Africa. The area was handicapped by lack of wood to produce charcoal and given the cold nature of the environment; furnaces were designed with the inner walls lined with kaolin to preserve heat. Prior drying of the ore and forced heating by ventilation using tuyeres, were common in the region. This was a predominantly male activity (Warnier, 2012:26-27). There is no surviving relic furnace visible in the vicinity of the slag heap at Taavisa but for their foundations (see plate 4 below). Smelting took place on the flat undulating landscape at Mbohlong and residue deposited to flush down on the west, east and southern slopes. Sixty-two furnace foundations and some with their associated anvils and foundry foundations intact were identified in this location suggestive of intensive iron working. No other visible slag heaps have been seen close to that at Taavisa. This indicates iron works took place in that vicinity directed by several foundry heads commonly called (*Taakilam*). Authorization to run these foundries were most likely given first by the Fon of Nkar while on the spot as the aboriginal clan and later by the expansionist Fon of Nso’ at kovifem, who from time to time took up residence there in his rest palace huts. This possibly explains why he used it as his refuge ground twice and which in the long run mutated into a royal burial ground. This scenario and cultural practice were common in Nso’land. The palace (*Nto ’yee* Taavisa) was given this appellation and according to (Chem, 1987:13-14), this was in reference to both the grave and the entire site located in a thin scatter of smelting debris on a natural hill. He indicates that these royal graves in Nso’ were separated into two Chambers; commonly referred to as palace and upper palace (*Nto ’* and *Nto ’ kuiy*).



Plate 4. Furnace Foundations Identified in Taavisa

Source: Source: Field work GPS photograph taken by author on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Yaa wo Kuiyla, Aged 72 (Occupant of the farm with Sanggu’s grave and huts) Taavisa, 13/03/2020.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Yaa Fanka Shella, Aged 35 (Current Queen mother and Participant to annual rites on the grave site and land marks at Taavisa), Kimbo’, 18/03/2021.

This is one out of the sixty-two furnace foundation relics in Taavisa as evidence of an intensive iron working agglomeration.

A ceremony for the installation of a new foundry required a goat, wine and stirred corn flower as consumables. All were used for rites and libations done in which herbs: kosteletzysya (*kiwoy*) and dracaena deistelina (*kikeng*) were mixed. A host of objects and paraphernalia known to initiates were put inside a pot and buried below the smelting spot.<sup>6</sup> Items and tools left in the foundry after smelting could not be stolen, as it was believed will result in misfortune usually a swollen stomach (*kum*). During funerary celebrations like death in the village, death of the Fon, periodic rites to pacify the earth or *kwifon* diplomatic exchange visits, foundry works stopped for a determined period of time. When the Fon requested for any items from the foundry or smiths, these were equally given priority. When objects for sacred use were fabricated, a spear was pinned on the path leading to the foundry and a soft shoot of elephant grass tied in a special pattern to it. This indicated or barred an unauthorized social or cult class that access was forbidden or more still women on their menses were not only barred from reaching the foundry but should keep a distance.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude this section we assert that in Africa the sovereign willed physical and spiritual powers which emanated from his control and manipulation of the technical processes and rituals attributed to the production of iron. Fon Sanggu thus had these attributes which consequently linked him dead or alive to the Taavisa iron works site. With the demise of Fon Sanggu, the burial process in principle followed a particular sequence as follows: The corpse had to be cleaned and rapped in an expensive handmade royal loin called *kilanglang* and the current crown put on the head. Other items assembled included a cup, round neck gourd, a royal wreath, a new bamboo throne, a hoe, *Nwerong* walking stick, hind legs of a sheep, a common royal loin, cam wood and a piece of Indian bamboo. Items to construct a hut included: local nails, bamboos, local ropes and grass for thatching. A slimy concoction of leaves and wine was prepared (the same as that to install a new foundry) and a leopard skin and entrails of a sacrificed ram or goat equally used (Chem, 1987:16-18).

The grave area was aspersed with this concoction of paraphernalia. It was dug to contain two chambers lined with normal royal loin. Only authorized persons saw the corpse which was taken to the grave and seated on the wooden throne by title holders playing the ritual double headed gong and the Fon's feet arranged to rest on the leopard skin. The Indian bamboo was put in a cup forced into the right hand of the corpse and held by his personal page outside. A creeping stem (*koonteh*) tied to the right hand and held by a virgin outside near the grave. The late Fon was called by his real name as the crown was removed and replaced by a new *Nwerong* cap of rank and file. The grave was filled obligatorily in seven intervals accompanied by chanting the war victory chorus (*Nsii*). Through the hole created by the Indian bamboo wine was subsequently poured through it during ancestral sacrifices by his successors. A hut was constructed on top of the grave (Chem, 1987:9). In principle these were the expected processes carried out at the refuge grave site at Taavisa; but given the context of insecurity, this cannot be ascertained. However for fear of misfortune that may befall the tribe, it is probable that persons in charge would have done all to respect the basics. It is likely that these were carried out, given the visible outside structure of the hut above the grave which is a replica of those in kovifem.

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<sup>6</sup>I witnessed an initiation rite at the smithy of the present day head of the Nso' iron works producer and another one to reinstate an abandoned smithy of Faay Chin in Nkar. As contemporaries of the old iron industries these items were all put into use in a ritualistic ceremony.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with John Laayeh, Aged 55 (Black Smith), Nkar, 07/06/2021.

### Symbolism and Context of the Taavisa Slag Heap

The Mbohlong flat land to the north next to the Taavisa slag heap is an ideal and strategic position to have a clear view of all of the lowland and valleys of kikaikom to the Oku Ngongbaa forest, Meluf, Melim and the land inhabited by the Nkar Fondom from Kiyan to Kimbo' and Shisong. The south west monsoons of the rainy season bring refreshing air directly to this escarpment and it was an ideal place of relaxation and rest. Given that this was not the first time the Fon of Nso' took refuge at Taavisa, it is evidenced that this spot had three of his rest hamlets which were spread all over the Fondom and which was a customary practice.<sup>8</sup> Such rest houses could allow him to have a retreat or rest during visits or missions far beyond his southern borders. In any case, when such hamlets were built, it was referred to as a palace. Having died here with no possibility to transfer the corps to Kovifem under Chamba occupation, there was no option than to bury Sanggu at Taavisa rest palace.



Plate 5. One of the three rest hut Foundations Visible in Taavisa  
Source: Field work photograph taken by author on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

Three relic foundations of his rest hamlets measuring 4 square meters (see the yellow 1 meter ruler on the front right corner). Foundations are still very visible; though gradually dismantled by farm work as plate 5 depicts.

Secondly, extensive land was available at neighboring Ruun (*Fon woo Gwan*) and Tsenla with status of Fons who all had royal cemeteries which could be used as a last resort for burial of Fon Sanggu. Given that only genealogically related sovereigns are buried in royal cemeteries in these Fondoms and in the Grassfields, the only option was the slag heap site.<sup>9</sup> Foundries surely existed at Taavisa which like in other parts of the Grassfields, was in a quiet forest grove, away from settlement (even till date) but within a hearing perimeter of the nearest houses. Taavisa foundries were restricted areas and were virtually shrines. Sexual activity was restricted during smelting. Foundry material was mystically protected from being stolen or polluted and thus an appropriate spot with sanctity for the Fon to be buried there. There is the possibility that the

<sup>8</sup>Earlier raids for slaves or warfare by the Chamba in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century made former Fons to regularly take refuge at Taavisa and Ngongbaa forests.

<sup>9</sup> Given that as refugees the Fon could not live in the open air and with a slag heap presence, foundries and their huts were erected in this vicinity even if it was temporal for rest and iron working.

foundries in Taavisa fell in the category which belonged to the Fon for the production of iron bars used in the fabrication of sacred objects. This was plausible when we consider the closeness of his rest huts with the square shape as opposed to rectangular forms seen in the foundries at Taavisa. These huts were most likely constructed by Fon Ndzefon his predecessor. These factors combined made the Taavisa slag mount ideal for the burial of Fon Sanggu. There are three spots for sacrifices at Taavisa: Mbolong at the center of the slag heap has stones which have the form of monoliths partially affixed to the ground and adorned with peace plants around the rest huts. Below the slag heap is another spot which has a fig tree. This possibly marks the southern limits of the kovifem dynasty zone of influence or boundary in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century; given that the Tsenla lineage which at the time had an independent clan head with status of a Fon is just two kilometers away. The third has the shape of a partial land slide, which according to the land lord (*TaaNgven Shuufaay Kuiylah*), this spot harbors the deity of Taavisa.<sup>10</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The Taavisa slag heap is a reflection an area where in the past large scale iron smelting took place either by an old stock of Grassfield occupants, the aboriginal Nkar or later by the Kovifem Nso' dynasty. Much of the old slag possibly was recycled on the spot or transported elsewhere by the later 18<sup>th</sup> Century iron workers and in the last decades by road works enhancing laterite earth roads. Given the abundance of ferruginous oxides spread all over the upper plateau of the Grassfields and Kaolin available for making tuyeres in the stream valleys with its sixty-two plus relic furnace foundations it is an indicator of an iron working agglomeration of an era yet to be determined. Surviving iron working relics are very similar to those of the Babungo and Oku of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century centers. Till date, a relic forest remains in Kovifem indicative of the forested environment which would have provided charcoal needed by the iron industry. Aboriginal clans who integrated with the Nso' by agreements; together with Ngonso's people provided the necessary labour needed for this industry. Though recurrent evidence in the kovifem dynasty points to a knowledge of iron works, the importance of the Taavisa iron working site remains distinct.

The fact that the Nso' are documented to have been importers of iron products from Oku, Nkar and Ndop at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century buttresses this view. The Taavisa case therefore stands unique and points equally to the view that, even though the Nso' migrated from Tikari with the knowledge of smelting iron, their neighbours of the north in Binkar or Nkar to the South may have been producers of iron ware in much greater quantities. This therefore probably accounts for the imperative to seize and monopolize the Taavisa source of iron ore from the Nkar clan, in order to sustain its efforts to expand its territory by use of weapons fabricated in this site or to defend itself against Wiyaa, Bamun, Chamba and Fulani invaders. It also enabled the Nso' to occupy Nkar and her southern immigrant Fondoms of Kwa'nso', Kiluun, Ndzeen and Ndzerem at the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Taavisa therefore stood out as an observatory, strategically situated for future expansionist ambitions to subdue southern Fondoms and integrate them to the Kovifem dynasty.

Lastly, the burial of Fon Sanggu and slain members of the royal family on the gentle slope cleared of its slag residue adds a new element to symbolism attached to the African smelting industry. Besides secrecy in protecting knowledge of iron working, associated myths, use of local paraphernalia, magic, sexual prohibitions, restrictions to women and non tribes men, Taavisa slag heaps demonstrate continuity clearly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, from old aboriginal Nkar to occupant

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Shuufaay Kuiylah of kikaikela'ki, Age 62 (land lord of Taavisa or TaaNgven), Kikaikelahki, 24/03/2021.

Nso' smelters. Taavisa equally exposes a mythical element when an old iron working site was turned into a royal cemetery and consequently into a shrine of the kingdom. The association of a late Fon to a slag heap buttresses the link that ties the powers of a sovereign, to his control and manipulation of iron production processes in his kingdom. In the same vein, there was the attribution of some foundries to the exclusive authority and control of the sovereign ruler for production of his Sacra items or repairs to avoid contamination or pollution. This site with possibly a palace foundry thus produced special iron bars which were taken to specialised smithies which had the prerogative to produce or repair the Royal iron walking stick, double headed ritual gong, palace knives, hoes, cutlasses, diggers, hammers and Kwifon (regulatory society) Sacra. Taavisa continued with its routine smelting but certainly mutated to have a special status. When corroborated with the closeness of Sanggu's rest hamlets and final burial on a scraped section free from smelting debris; with respect to the burial and post burial traditions elucidated above, his person and institution were no doubt directly linked to this site, even though there was no other alternative. This therefore reveals that Taavisa was not only an old iron working site first under the Nkar and later Nso' dynasties but that it became a shrine as it held a royal cemetery.

Further research will allow us see the smelting capacity of other smelting sites found in the Kovifem polity, evaluate how networking existed amongst these sites and the place or strength of the Taavisa smelting site in relation to any existing sites. This can allow us have a full understanding of the importance of Taavisa in the Nso' kingdom.

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## INTERVIEWS

Laayeh, John. Aged 55 (Black Smith), Nkar, 07/06/ 2021.

Shuufaay Kuiylah of kikaikela'ki. Aged 62 (land lord Taavisa (*TaaNgven*), Kikaikelahki, 24/03/2021.

Yaa Fanka Shella. Aged 35 (Queen mother and Participant to annual rites on the grave site and land marks at Taavisa), Kimbo', 18/03/2021.

Yaa wo Kuiyla. Aged 72 (Occupant of the farms with Sanggu's grave and huts) Taavisa, 13/03/2021.

## GLOSSARY

*Faay*: lineage or family head

*Fe'em*: small bamboo grass thatched huts with two flank roofing built over the grave of a Fon (King)

*Kwifon or Nwerong*: regulatory society; also called *Ngumba or Tifo* in other tribes in the Grassfields of Cameroon

*Jihad*: wars organized Usman Dan Fodio and Madibo Adama in the case of Cameroon with the Objective to forcefully convert people to Islam

*Manjong*: the tribal military structure

*Mntar*: the aboriginal clans also called the *Visale*

*Taakilam*: a foundry leader or head

*Kilanglang*: an embroider fabric reserved for use by royals

*Kikeng*: peace plant (*dracaena deistelina*)

*Kiwoy*: a slimy concoction of paraphernalia when mixed with palm wine (*kosteletzsy*)

*Koonteh*: a creeping plant used as royal paraphernalia during the burial rites of royals

*Kwifon or Nwerong*: a traditional regulatory society of commoners

*Nsii*: a war victory dance performed by warriors

*Ngirri*: a traditional society of royals and princes to second and third generations plus

*Ogun*: name given to the god of iron amongst the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria

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