Objects of everyday use, as well as succinct expressions of personal style and status, the tobacco pipes of the Cameroon Grasslands provide a unique entry point for exploration of the intersection between aesthetics and utility in the society that produced them. Cameroon is situated in Western Central Africa, along the Guinea basin and just north of the Equator. It is home to several distinct ecological and geographical regions, including mountains along the northwestern border, south and central grassland plateaus, and dense rainforests along the western coastline. Where plateaus and valleys permit, fertile soil creates favorable conditions for grazing animals and agricultural settlement. These conditions, as well as artifacts dated to the Stone Age suggest a long history of human habitation in modern day Cameroon, but the earliest confirmed settlements are associated with the Sao civilization in the 10th century CE.

The first recorded contact between the residents of Cameroon and seafaring Europeans occurred in or around 1472, with the arrival of sailors from Portugal. Among the myriad consequences of European colonial involvement in central Africa, the introduction of tobacco for cultivation is of particular interest here. Cameroon was recognized officially as a German protectorate in 1884, and political affiliation with Germany continued to 1916, when allied forces drove the German military presence into neighboring Spanish Guinea, and the country was divided into British and French mandate territories by 1922. The modern-day United Republic of Cameroon was established in 1972, with the confederation of Southern Cameroons (previously French-administered) and the Northern Cameroons (which had achieved independent self-government from Britain and formed a federation with Northern Nigeria). Modern-day Cameroon is a presidential republic with a Parliamentary legislative system, but the customary law of Grasslands feudal kingdoms continue to inform cultural and religious observances, and hold considerable social weight. In particular, social hierarchies are clearly represented in their artistic and decorative tradition, where privileged community members have access to the best materials and craftsmanship for decoration and personal adornment. Since Europeans first brought tobacco back with them from North America, its popularity and significance among the peoples of Africa has been well established. In Cameroon, the plant’s incorporation into religious and political observances complicates its role as a recreational intoxicant among the country’s common people. Pipes made by Cameroon craftsmen accompany workers into the fields, and are found amongst the most celebrated displays of monarchic regalia.

The stylistic language of these pipes is an effective synthesis of Cameroon craft and visual culture. On stems and stem covers, the intricate carved posts of the feudal palace are echoed in miniature. The same tastes that inform everything from court furniture and masks to pottery are recognizable in the dense visual embellishment of the pipes, and the same symbolism is legible. Decorative motifs can identify these pipes as the exclusive property of this feudal courtier or that religious society, and pipe makers have the wisdom to safeguard this cultural information against changing tastes and markets, keeping model pipes packed away to document stylistic development.
Pipes vary widely in size and decoration, and this variation has functioned historically as an effective predictor of the owner’s social status. Small pipes for travel and everyday use were common, and ranged from plainly patterned to intricately decorated, depending on the intended user, but the largest and most elaborate pipes were reserved for chiefs and kings. Certain decorations, including royal figures and elephants, are exclusive to these royal pipes.

In traditional Cameroon Grassland society, the king and royal family sit at the center of the religious and political systems, alongside the secretive Kwifon society (made up of the heads of the communities’ extended families), who are also based in the palace. With the Kwifon, the king administers the laws and customs of the kingdom, and their careful observance of religious practices ensures the safety and prosperity of the community. Of these observances, annual dances and the ceremonial demonstrations of the Grasslands’ various masking societies are of central importance, serving to unite society around their shared values and traditions.

Art in Grassland society is made in service of religious practice (as in the case of masks and figurative sculpture), or to reinforce the position of the owner in an established social hierarchy. High ranking members of society have access to the most flamboyant costume and the most elaborately decorated objects. Certain stylistic motifs, including human and animal representation, are the exclusive right of the male nobility. The king’s stool, for example, is lavishly embellished and uniquely prized.

Commoners will not touch it, fearing the dangerous medicines with which it and he have been treated. A similar reverence is paid, of course, to the King’s royal tobacco pipe.

The distinctive pipes of Cameroon are made by specialized craftsmen, most often in two components: the bowl where tobacco is packed and burnt, and a long stem where smoke is allowed to gather and cool before inhalation. Smaller pipes made in one piece are popular amongst common people. Pipe bowls are made from clay, terra cotta, and metals like iron or brass. Stems are carved from wood, or in the case of especially elaborate pipes, cast in brass or carved from ivory, and decorated with copper, brass and tin. The most prized pipes are made entirely of brass or iron, because of the additional skill required to cast them in these metals.

Wood pieces are carved using many of the same tools and techniques as other wood objects, like sculpture or architectural embellishment in the case of the traditional palace complex. Clay and terra cotta pipes are still manufactured using traditional tools and practices: the pipes are partially dried in the sun for carving, and then fired between layers of dry grass. After firing, variation in color can be achieved using a liquid derived from the raffia palm. Metal pipes and pipe-components are made using lost-wax casting. The Tikar people credit themselves with the introduction of this technique in Cameroon.

Today, the commercial cultivation of tobacco under the plantation system undermines traditional patterns of its growth and use. Pipes are still produced for personal use and display, but the ubiquitous cigarette continues to grow in popularity. The value of this centuries-old crafting tradition is not
forgotten, but has been continually weighed against ever-greater profit potentials in light of drastic economic and industrial change.

Bibliography
• https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/12?start=14
• https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/chapters/everyday-endeavor/smoking-and-drinking/
Pottery smoking pipe featuring bulbous cheeks and a stylized hat (2017-02-0011) [photos v01, v02]
Carved wood smoking pipe in shape of stylized figure with large horns (2017-02-0019) [photos v01, v05]
Cast bronze smoking pipe in the form of a human head surmounted by headdress in delicate openwork (2017-02-0027) [photos v02, v04]
Cast bronze smoking pipe featuring human face and two chameleons (2017-02-0029) [photos v01, v02]