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Michika Chiefdom: A Brief History of Existence, Resistance, and Restoration

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Abstract

Michika is a traditional kingdom located in the Mandara Mountains of northeastern Nigeria and serves as the historical and cultural center of the Kamwe (Higi) people. Established around 1200 CE, the Michika Kingdom has played a crucial role in the political, judicial, administrative, and spiritual life of the Kamwe community, while maintaining active diplomatic and commercial relations with other regional powers, including the Borno Empire under Mai Idris Alooma. According to oral tradition, the Kamwe trace their ancestry to a legendary figure named Gelmai, who is believed to have migrated from Ethiopia around 900 CE. His descendants founded early settlements such as Sukur, Sina, and Zah, which formed the genealogical foundation of Kamwe leadership and culminated in the establishment of Michika by Kwada Kwaka around 1450 CE. Despite colonial pressures from British, German, and French forces—often allied with Fulani elites—the Kamwe people preserved their sociopolitical structures and cultural identity. Michika is also noted for its resistance to Islamization and slave raids, as documented by European explorers and local slave raiders such as Hama Yaji. Economically, Michika thrived through trade in agricultural produce and iron ore, particularly

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supported by the *Lighyei* artisan class renowned for blacksmithing. The 21st-century restoration of the Michika Kingdom under the leadership of His Royal Highness Prof. Bulus Luka Gadiga marks a resurgence of Kamwe customary sovereignty and a rejection of colonial and Fulani-centric narratives that have historically marginalized local histories. This study affirms that the Michika Kingdom is one of the oldest indigenous political institutions in Nigeria, now reasserting its identity as a symbol of cultural resilience, local autonomy, and historical reclamation.

Keywords: Michika Kingdom; Kamwe; Local History; Colonialism; Customary Autonomy; Mandara Mountains

Introduction

Michika Chiefdom as a heritage and a rallying point of the people of Michika Local Government Area, whose existence and influence as one of the Chiefdoms and Kingdoms of the Mandara Mountain Region dates back to 1200AD.Oral and written sources on it by British Colonial Administrators, Explorers, Scholars, Ethnographers, Anthropologists, Missionaries etc., showcased a flourishing Chiefdom that exercised political, judicial, administrative and spiritual powers over its citizens and as well established external relations with other Kingdoms and Chiefdoms within and outside the Mandara Mountain area like Borno Empire under the famous Mai Idris Alooma of the influential Sefawa dynasty 1571-1608. Like the great Jamaican political activist, Marcus Garvey advocated, "A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

The storied existence and resistance leading to its present creation (restoration) as a Chiefdom headed by a reputable second class Chief, His Royal Majesty Prof. Bulus Luka Gadiga, in the 21st century, has brought out clearly the merit of what Michika Chiefdom was as indeed the expected Kamwe people's commitment to the sustainability of the once glorious principality that suffered setbacks from deliberate suppression, distortion, and even attempted abolition by the combined forces of British, German and French Colonial authorities and their easy found local collaborator, the Fulanis for optimal socio- economic control and exploitation. The British indirect rule policy was a cheap and viable vehicle to implement and maximize the desired outcomes. (Sa'ad Abubakar 1972, 1977; Dada 2005, A. Kirk Greene 1958). Today the Chiefdom created by His Excellency, Rt Hon. Ahmadu

Umaru FinFintiri has administrative structure of 12 districts and headed by a graded chief. The districts are Michika, Madzi, Wambillimi, Dakwa, Bazza, Zah, Vi- Boka, Garta, Futu, Kamale, Nkafa and Chubunawa.

The Kamwe (Higi) ethnic group is one of the Afro-Asiatic groups of the Chadic cluster including the Hausa, Bura, Margi and Bwatiye (Bachama) that historically occupy the central slopes of the Mandara Mountains in central and western part of Africa. Presently they are mainly found in Uba Askira, Madagali, Mubi South, Mubi North, Maiha, Hong, Gombi and Song Local Government areas. They are equally found in large number Rhumisiki in the Repubic of Cameroon. A British Anthropologist, C.K. Meek generally described the Higi as a large group of people inhabiting the slope of the Mandara Hills between Wabav (Uba) and Madagali. It was first conferred on them by the Margi in the sense of aboriginals and adopted by the Fulani as Hiji (Higi). It was accepted by the people who commonly refered (prefered) to themselves as KAMUN or KAKHUMU Meek (Vol.II. p19).

The Kamwe people are descendants of their legendary ancestor, Gelmai who was said to have left the East (Ethiopia) around 900AD (Nicholas David, University of Calgary, Canada) to a place called Mchekili considered to be in the center of Mandara Mountains. He became the first Mbege Kamwe (Higi) in Mchekili. His first three sons migrated to Sukur, Sina and Ghye (Zah) 1200AD, forming the core royal family tree of the Kamwe (Higi) people. Tizhe (Breme) the first son migrated to Sukur, Zira (Zhindauwa) the second son migrated to Sina and Tumba (Jaemani) to Zah (I.Y. Kwache Vol.1 p.35-40, Kamwe (Higi) Oral source). This record agrees with the publication on this subject by Prof. Van Beek, a retired Research Fellow, who carried out studies on the ethnography of the Mandara Mountain and its plains. According to him, “the Kaptsiki/Higi have lived in their present location since 1200AD. They have lived there for over five (5) centuries. The Kaptsiki/Kamwe/Higi lived on a Plateau in the far North Province in the centre of Mandara Mountains. They are considered one of Cameroon 's Kirdi (pegan) ethnic group due to their resistance to Islamization during the Fulani Jihad of Modibo Adama and Hama Yaji.” Equally, Mai Idris Alooma of Sefawa Dynasty in his Chronicles, (1571- 1583 p.68) and Henerich Barth, a German Explorer, both agree on the flourishing existence of "Mishiga"(Michika) and "Mechika"(Michika) respectively, a town later transformed to become the central town engaging in large scale commerce and industry within and outside the state and as well becoming the headquarters of Michika Local Government and

the created(restored) Michika Chiefdom headed by His Royal Majesty Prof. Bulus Luka Gadiga, Mbege Ka Michika.

Michika Chiefdom

The pre- 1800 history of the Chad Basin Trough, the Benue Valley and the entire Mandara Mountains Region points to the existence, influence and prominence of Kamwe (Higi) Chiefdom as one of the four independent "pegan" Kingdoms that predates the Fombina Kingdom of the 19th century established by Modibbo Adama, the leader of the Fulani Jihad in 1809.These Chiefdoms were FALI, MARGI, HONG and HIGI and have graciously been restored but for FALI.

Anthony Kirk Greene, one of the early Colonial administrators, historian, and ethnographer, emphatically wrote, "Before the rise of the Fulani in what was eventually to become in the XIX (19th) century under Modibbo Adama, the kingdom of Fombina, the Yedzseram Basin appears to have consisted of four(4) independent pegan Kingdoms: Fali- Cheke axis of Mubi; the Kilba -Margi Union based on Hong which included martial Wamdeo and Uba; Ngolo now Higi, the Higi of Chubunwa focused on Bazza and Sukur" (A.K Greene 1954). He categorically referred to these Chiefdoms as States based on their structure and influence with his said, "each of these Yedseram Valley States centered around prominent mountain feature, whose ample Plateau land and plentiful water resources offered to the plains form a tenable sanctuary against slave razzias; be they by Borno, Mandara or Fulani calvary (A.K Greene p.68)". Equally, Sa'ad Abubakar is no different when he wrote that, "but before the Fulani Jihad and subsequent conquest of the Mandara area, except for Michika (Kamweland), the Fulanis, an alien minority that met their host (Kamwe) and live among them were subjects to Kamwe Chiefs. The Fulbe village heads called Ardos paid tributes and taxes to Mbege Kamwe". (Sa'ad Abubakar 1972). The Chiefdom was respected by both the Fulani and the other ethnic groups in the region extending to Cameroon Republic for its organized tax administration, trade, commerce and community services. Mbege Kamwe exercised powers and leadership charisma, control and overriding mystical powers on communal issues said to generate from Mbege Gelmai recognized and recorded in Kamwe Oral source as Mbege Mchekili, who was assisted by a cabinet of advisers knowledgeable on specific traditional and communal matters such as Yemi (water), Degwi (youth), Ha (grains), Hyla (spirits),

Gamba (forests and Lands),Tiyi (hunters), Va (rains), Linghye (black smith), (I Y Kwache p.123-124 and Kamwe Oral tradition).

Michika Chiefdom from available historical records engaged in trade relations with neighboring Kingdoms and Borno Empire during the reign of Mai Idris Alooma under the Sefawa dynasty (Mai Idris Alooma 1571-1608).The valuable trading relationship was equally reflected in the publication on Studies in the History of Pre-colonial Borno edited by Bala Usman and Nur Alkali, 1983.The publication brought out the encouraging volume of trade with the Mandara Mountain groups (Kirdi (kanuri)) particularly the Kamwe in Maskwar(a draught resistant and quick ripping variety of Sagum), Mangul (manda), Natron, in exchange for Iron Ore produced and traded in with Sukur Kingdom. The Kamwe and Sukur people attached great importance to the Iron Ore trade because of the value and importance of minerals in the production of various types of tools and equipment. Interestingly, the two Kingdoms have in common a social class Llidi (Sukur) and Lighyei (Kamwe), known for expertise in Iron Smithing, producing Iron Bars and Blades used in the production of farming and war equipment. These Iron Bars were also used as essential items in the payment of bride price in Kamweland upto the second half of the 20th century.

The deficiency of Iron Ore in the Chad Basin largely explained why Borno Empire showed interest in the region rather than the much-emphasized Borno Empire's conquest and expansionist hegemony over neighboring Chiefdom and ethnic groups. Writing on sukur Kingdom and the divine Kingship of the Llidi of Sukur and the Iron smiting Nicholas David observed that the development has made it possible even today for Sukur smitten Iron Bars known as Dubul can be found in any pegan market in Northern Adamawa. (N. David p78-89). According to him, “it is a tenable thesis that the local monopoly of Iron may have contributed to Sukur Kingdom's pre- eminence in the past” (p78-81). This could have contributed greatly to its global recognition and declaration as World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Kamwe people, who hitherto have affinity with Sukur additionally took advantage of the development and benefited immensely in the production of farming implements and weapons like spears, arrows, swords, knives etc. They used these weapons in the defence of their ancestorial land against Slave raiders, Fulanis and Europeans who, because of their stiff resistance to external attacks, described them as primitive savage pegan. In his published works on this subject, Herinch Barth qouts Fra Mauro (1459), describing the Kamwe people as an aggressive "pegan tribe" with poisonous

arrows that fight fiercely and that his gun and his entourage are always cocked whenever he passed through Kamweland until he reaches Uba. Similar view on resistance by Kamwe people was expressed by Hama Yaji, the Fulani slave trader in his travel account and raids known as Hama Yaji's Dairy 1912-1927.

Kamwe (Higi) Kingship And The Chubuni Royal Family Factor

The knowledge of the Kamwe (Higi) Kingship has often been misrepresented and only presented from the narrow perspective of the 19th and 20th centuries era of Fulani and European conquest, control and sustainability of their paramount economic and political interests. The pre-18th century "pegan", "Kirdi", or aboriginal" Chiefdoms and Kingdoms of the Mandara Mountains Region extending to the Yedzseram plains, Chad Basin and Benue Valley Trough were hardly recognized and reckon with to reflect their past glorious existence and influence. From records, it is a fact of history that Kamwe Chiefdom pre-dates the Fombina Kingdom, as it was in existence as one of the four (4) independent pegan Kingdoms of the Mandara Region extending to the Yedseram Basin before the establishment of the Fombina Kingdom in the 19th century (A. K. Greene 1954).

The Chiefdom suffered from deliberate suppression and distortion from the perspective of the "VICTOR'S history account known for forceful suppression of indeginous establishments and institutions in favour of the overrated protection and promotion of the interests of alien minorities using superior structures and weapons of imposition. According to Prof. Van Beek, a retired research fellow who did alot of studies on the ethnography of the people of Mandara Region and their Kingdoms and Chiefdoms, Michika (Higi) had their ancestorial Chiefdom as early as the 1200AD.The usual erroneously held view of Ardo Hama Chubuni family claim as the royal family that founded Michika and ruled it from 1828-1861 when the Lamido of Adamawa began posting of District Heads to Michika after Ardo Garga in 1914, therefore is not acceptable and hardly occupies a place in the facts sheet of the history of Michika Chiefdom and its Kingship lineage. Rather, what can be clearly noticed and inferred is the emergence of an era that saw the deliberate whitling of the institutional base, power and influence of Kamwe Chiefdom through active collaboration with the colonial administration (Sa'ad Abubakar 1972,1977; A.K Greene 1958).

Charles Temple equally observed this development when he wrote, " The independent, autonomous and flourishing tribal Kingdoms and Chiefdoms became systematically whittled and became more pronounced in the second half of the 19th century with the conquest of Northern Nigeria by Britain leading to the adoption of indirect rule system which empower the Native Authority structure to control and subject the tribal Chiefs and Kings to their control" (Temple 1919).

It is on record in both Kamwe Oral tradition and other written sources on Kamwe history that Kamwe anscenstor, the legendary GELMAI, migrated from the East around 900AD and settled in MCHEKILI (MBEGE MCHEKILI) to become the first MBEGE KAMWE. His first three sons migrated to Sukur, Sina and Ghye (Zah) in 1200AD. The three sons form the royal family tree of the Kamwe people. Prince Tizhe (Breme) migrated to Sukur and became Mbege in Sukur. Preharps this explains the common names and Sub-clans today shared by Kamwe and Sukur ie Zira, Kwaji, Yana etc, as well as social class that specialises in Iron Smithing, Llidi (Sukur) Linghye (Kamwe). Zira (Zinduwa) migrated to Sina and become Mbege which became the royal family tree of Mwekule(Ka Tsekeye), Kamale, Tskumo (Dakwa), Twei (Nkala, Garta, Ghumci) and Futu. Prince Tumba migrated to Ghye (Zah) and had children namely Natawa, Mberazhiwe, Mezigwi, Gappa, Lughu and Yamwe. Around 1300AD, Prince Natawa moved with his siblings to Nkafamiya and he became the first Mbege in Nkafamiya. His family became known as the KA MBEGE in Nkafamiya. Mbege Natawa had children namely, Watsine, Milesha, Vwataghi, Ghwalya and Kwada. Kwada was said to be a good hunter (IY Kwache, 2016, p.36).

The slopes of the Mandara Mountain which constitute the present-day Michika town and environs, was a favourite hunting ground for Kwada which according to Kamwe Oral tradition earned him the title "Dlankengye" (vecemwe) meaning an expert and professional hunter. He formed the habit of silently leaving his family to go down the slope to hunt and stay longer than usual. His father Natawa began to ask of the where about of Kwada and was always told that he has gone down the hills to hunt(Kwada Li dzigwa Ka Njaa Cika Tli).Thus the name Mwecika (Michika) originated from (vecemwe) "Mue-che-ci- ka - ra- kwada- Kwaka" translates to," the hill where Kwada Kwakaa goes secretly to hunt. Kwada Kwaka became the founder of Michika as recorded by Mai Idris Alooma as early as 16th century (p68). Another version is that one Tangla of the Smith sub clan under Ka Lughui (Lughu) clan was the first to creep into the empty lowlands of what is now Michika. But this view is being disputed based on Kamwe social stratification norms and

the fact that there is no observed strong link of Tangla to royal family lineage. The emphasis is on Kwada kwaka from Munkurehe (Wabila p.159), thus, “the word Michika, no doubt is a corrupted word from Mu-chi-ka” and the branch of Higi (Kamwe) which claim to have founded Michika came from Zah. They are originally part of Sukur origin and a fusion of a group from the Mukurehe, Kalughi and Kagappa claim to have founded Michika". He further said, " in the circumstances therefore, the Higi found the territory which they named "MU-CHIKA" and which even CUBUNI acknowledged at the inception of his administration in Sebore."He went further to conclude on his findings on the founder of Michika by saying," Kwada (Kwada Kwakaa) from Munkwrehe became founder and Mbege of MUKUBA (Michika)" (Wabila p.159-163).

The Chubuni Family claim as the founder of Michika and its only know ruling family is hardly a true position of the historical fact on the Kamwe Chiefdom and kingship lineage which has a recorded existence as far back as 1200AD. The pertinent question that keeps re-occurring on this subject is, who is Hamman Chubuni and what is his place of origin? In attempting to find convincing answers, one must examine the three main sources on this subject and his emergence to prominence in the history of Michika as the leader of the Chubunawa family.

Kamwe sources has it that, during the war between the Fulbe and Kamwe because of constant raids by Hamman Yaji in the 19th century, a woman carrying her child was trying to escape from Fulani men on horseback on their way to Yola. She abandoned her child by the roadside at Dlere Kwelke, an area between the present Watu and Tudun Wada Bazza and covered him with Chumbwi used by Kamwe women for the protection of children from rain and sun rays. The child was taken to Yola, brought up and named Chubuni after Chumbwi (in Kamwe language).

Hamman Chubuni based on fulbe version, is an indegine of Fufore by birth. His father was a Fulani from Fufore while his mother is Higi. When the mother was pregnant, the relations from Fufore came and took the father back while the mother was entrusted in the care of Ardo Kopa, Suluman Kyari. His mother was killed in the war during the Mandara raids. Ardo Kyari's senior wife called Chubuni took care of him and named him after her. Chubuni was not the son of Ardo Kyari but was used on errands and usually sent as emissary to Mbege Kamwe (Higi) and other Fulbe settlements. He eventually became the Ardo of Kopa instead of one of Ardo Suluman Kyari's sons.

The popular version with the Chubuni Family is that which says, "the Fulbe came, which became known as Chubunawa following the name of their leader, who had already been familiar with the Kamwe through Ardo Kyari and the Kamwe accepted his leadership. Those that were already Mbege of the various clans agreed on their own without a fight."(Wabila p 161).

There are hardly any credible available sources that suggest that Chubuni royalty predates Kamwe (Higi) Chiefdom and Kingship lineage. Rather, what obtains is the record on the promotion of Chubuni family in the 19th and 20th centuries by the colonial government and Fulani expansionist agenda of the Sokoto caliphate strongly back by the British indirect rule policy. This arrangement was deliberate to distort, suppress and maximally exploit established tribal Chiefdoms and Kingdoms. Usman Wabila stressed this view while writing on the subject, “Higi and the Jihad"; "since 1826 when Cubuni set up himself at Hore Sebore, Michika, as an entity operated as a governorate system on the style of Mubi, Gella and Gude. Yola endorsed Cubuni whose Ardo ship in the first place, set out to establish special relationship with the Lamido of Yola. So, between the middle of the 19th century Yola Lamibe exerted considerable influence on Michika"(Wabila p.163).

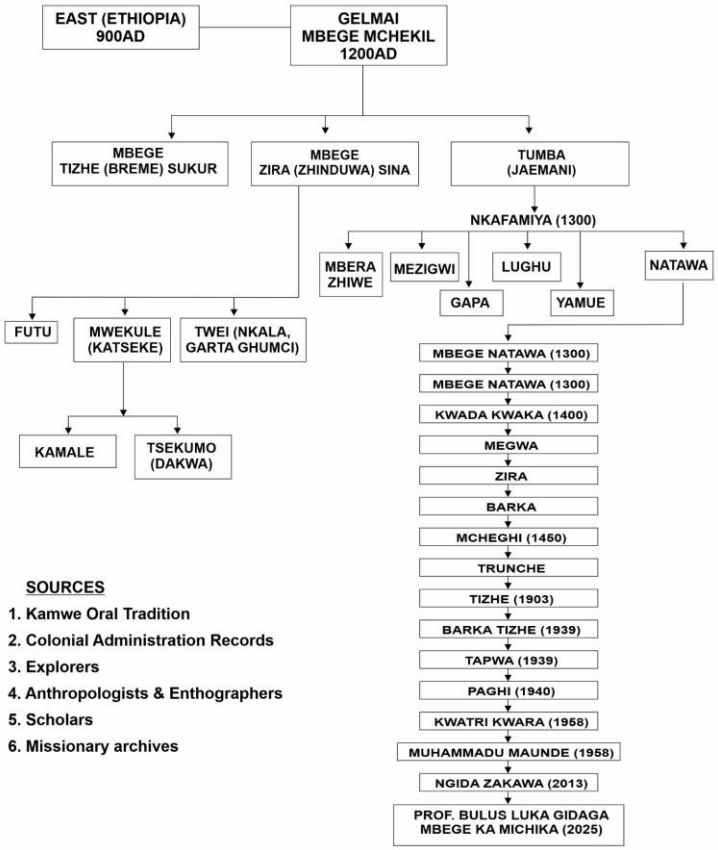
As a result of prolonged persistent attacks, distortion, suppression and control by the colonial administration and their local collaborators, the Fulbe, amidst spirited resistance by the indigenous establishments, it proves difficult to produce with the required precision and coherence the chronology with accurate dates of Michika Chiefdom Kingship lineage. However, Kamwe sources driven from Kamwe Oral sources, Reports and Publications by Colonial Administrators, Historians, Explorers, Anthropologists, Scholars Missionaries etc, as earlier presented in this write up, provide reasonable information with dates on the existence, resistance and influence of the historic Michika Chiefdom.

Chronological Lineage of the Present Mbege Ka Michika

- **900 AD** – *Mbege Gelmai*: Founder of the Kamwe royal lineage following migration from the East.
- **1200 AD** – *Mbege Mchekili*: Consolidated leadership and expanded Kamwe influence.
- **1300 AD** – *Mbege Natawa of Nkafamiya*: Strengthened regional authority and cultural identity.

- **1450 AD** – *Mbege Kwada Kwaka of Michika*: Established Michika as the political center of Kamwe Chiefdom.
- **1850 AD** – *Mbege Mcheghi*: Preserved traditional governance amid growing external pressures.
- **1903 AD** – *Mbege Tizhe*: Kamwe kingship was downgraded to District Head (DH) status by British colonial administration.
- **1939 AD** – *Mbege Tapwa* (Acting): Temporarily held leadership during transitional colonial governance.
- **1940 AD** – *Mbege Paghe*: Reinstated traditional authority under colonial oversight.
- **1958 AD** – *Mbege Kwatri Kwara*: Elected leader whose appointment was annulled by the Lamido of Adamawa.
- **1958–2013 AD** – *Mahamadu Maunde*: Initially served in an acting capacity, later recognized as leader.
- **2013 AD** – *Ngida Zakawa*: Continued the lineage with efforts toward cultural preservation.
- **2025 AD** – *His Royal Majesty Professor Bulus Luka Gadiga*: Kamwe Chiefdom officially restored and elevated to Second-Class status, marking a significant revival of indigenous authority.

ORGANOGRAM OF THE KINGSHIP LINEAGE OF MICHIKA CHIEFDOM



Recommendation

To preserve the rich cultural legacy of Michika Chiefdom, it is essential to establish a heritage museum that archives oral traditions, historical artifacts, and colonial records. Digitizing these materials and producing multilingual educational resources will help safeguard Kamwe history for future generations. This initiative would also promote cultural literacy and pride among the Kamwe people, reinforcing their identity and historical significance.

Academic institutions should be encouraged to collaborate with the Chiefdom to conduct ethnographic and archaeological research. These partnerships can deepen understanding of Kamwe metallurgy, social structures, and their historical ties to the Sukur Kingdom. Engaging youth through mentorship programs and digital storytelling will ensure that traditional knowledge is passed down and adapted to modern platforms, fostering a vibrant cultural renaissance.

To boost recognition and economic development, Michika Chiefdom should invest in tourism infrastructure around the Mandara Mountains and Sukur-Michika corridor. Guided tours, cultural festivals, and historical exhibitions can attract visitors and generate revenue. Additionally, advocating for federal heritage status and integrating Kamwe history into school curricula will institutionalize its importance and secure long-term support for its preservation.

Michika Chiefdom, with its deep historical roots as one of the four pre-Fombina "pegan" kingdoms in the Mandara Mountains region, deserves strategic preservation and promotion. To honor its legacy, a cultural center should be established to archive oral traditions, artifacts, and historical records, while academic partnerships can explore its unique governance, iron-smithing heritage, and trade networks. Engaging youth through mentorship and digital platforms will ensure cultural continuity, and integrating Kamwe history into school curricula alongside tourism development and federal heritage recognition will elevate Michika as a model of cultural resilience and historical significance.

To restore historical accuracy and cultural dignity to the Kamwe (Higi) Kingship and Michika Chiefdom, it is recommended that a comprehensive historical review be undertaken to correct misrepresentations rooted in colonial and Fulani narratives. This should include the formal recognition of Kamwe oral traditions and documented sources that trace the Chiefdom's lineage to the legendary ancestor Gelmai and his descendants,

predating the Fombina Kingdom and the Chubuni family's emergence. Educational institutions and cultural bodies should collaborate to produce scholarly publications, digital archives, and community outreach programs that highlight the authentic origins and royal structures of the Kamwe people. Furthermore, the government should support initiatives to institutionalize Kamwe history in school curricula, promote cultural festivals that honor ancestral legacies, and establish a heritage center in Michika to preserve and showcase the true narrative of the Kamwe Kingship, ensuring that future generations understand and celebrate their rightful heritage.

To enhance the exploration of Kamweland's rich tourism potential, it is strongly advised to leverage its strategic proximity to the Sukur Cultural Landscape—an esteemed UNESCO World Heritage Site. This unique advantage can significantly strengthen efforts to attract both tourists and investors, not only in the tourism sector but also in complementary economic activities such as mining and mineral exploration.

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