



# Politics in the Southern Cameroons: Traditional Rulers under British Administration, 1946 – 1961

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional rulers played a major role in the politics of the Southern Cameroons during the British colonial period (1946-1961). They were used by the British as instruments of indirect rule, but they also used their positions to advocate for the interests of their people and to promote the development of the Southern Cameroons. Traditional rulers were also indispensable for the decolonization of the Southern Cameroons. Despite efforts to replace them, traditional rulers continue to play an important role in the Southern Cameroons today. This study examines the role of traditional rulers in the politics of the Southern Cameroons during the British colonial period. It argues that traditional rulers played a complex and multifaceted role, both collaborating with the British and resisting their rule. The study also assesses the impact of the chieftaincy institution on the decolonization of the Southern Cameroons and evaluates the role of traditional rulers in contemporary Southern Cameroons. The study uses a combination of primary and secondary sources, including oral interviews with informants, to collect data. The findings of the study suggest that traditional rulers played an important role in the political development of the Southern Cameroons during the British colonial period and continue to play an important role today.

**Keywords:** Traditional Rulers, Politics, Southern Cameroons.

## Introduction

The Southern Cameroons now Anglophone Cameroon with a rich history of traditional political institutions. During the British colonial period (1946-1961), the British used a system of indirect rule to govern the territory, which involved delegating power to traditional rulers. This system allowed traditional rulers to maintain their authority and influence, but it also made them beholden to the colonial government. After independence, the Cameroonian government continued to rely on traditional rulers to help govern the country.

The chief or *Fon*<sup>1</sup> was at the head of the political system. The *Fon* had sacred attributes and was responsible for the performing of important rites in the community since he was the custodian of traditions and customs, guardian of the land, and the intermediary between the ancestors and the people. The *Fon* was at the helm of the political structure or set up of the land, vested with powers, and took final decisions concerning important political matters in the *fondom*. He had the prerogatives to be in consultation with the people concerning important matters in the community since they represented his interest in their various areas. The

<sup>1</sup> In the context of our study and as applied in the Grassfields chiefdom and Fondoms. The notion of Chief and Fon is used interchangeably to refer to natural rulers embedded with divine authority. Their chieftainship was and is hereditary. Fons rule over larger Fondoms alongside other subchiefs whereas chiefs rule over smaller chiefdoms with appointed quarter heads. We shall be using the word Fon to denote chief since all of them fall under divine or natural rulers for the convenience of our study.

*Fon* was the main actor in diplomacy and cooperative agreements with neighbouring polities. Men and women responded to the authority of the *Fon* by stooping and clapping of hands and the *Fon* could not be, slapped, insulted, or ill-treated by any of his subjects. Moreover, he was not talked to by anyone directly, except other notables and title holders. He could not share a seat with anyone, and he was the only one who sat on the throne and manifested authority.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between traditional rulers and other political actors, such as the British colonial government, nationalist leaders and ordinary people between 1946 and 1961 is under-studied. More research is needed to understand how these relationships evolved over time and how they shaped the political landscape of the Southern Cameroons. This paper examines the role of traditional political institutions in the Bamenda Grassfields from the colonial period to the contemporary period. The paper concludes with some suggestions for reform.

### **Traditional rulers in the Southern Cameroons**

Traditional rulers were the natural leaders of the Southern Cameroons. They were known as *Fons* in the Bamenda Grassfields and chiefs in the forest region. Chieftaincy was a powerful, influential, and respected institution in the Grassfields, unlike the forest region. In the *fondoms* (chiefdoms) of the Grassfields, the *Fon* was the supreme ruler. The village was the basic political unit in a traditional setting, and it was governed by royals. The paramount *Fon* was the highest-ranking chief in a village. The Bafut and Mankon peoples called their paramount ruler the *Nfor*, the Bali people called him the *Mfon*, and the name of the paramount *Fon* changed from society to society.

In pre-colonial Southern Cameroons, traditional rulers had various titles and appellations, but their powers and administrative functions were similar.<sup>3</sup> Some *Fons* administered extensive territories with multiple dialects, while others had less extensive powers. Traditional rulers were common in the centralized societies of the Bamenda Grassfields and the Muslim states of Northern Cameroon. In non-centralized societies, they were simply known as chiefs and had smaller areas of jurisdiction. The enthronement of a *Fon* differed from society to society, but upon initiation, the *Fon* was imbued with mystical politico-religious powers. Paul Nkwi described the *Fon* as being "strengthened" by these powers. He says:

.....He [the *Fon* once enthroned] became a recognized ruler of all his people who saw him not merely as a person who could enforce his will on them and get services, but he was also the axis of the political relations, the symbol of their unity and exclusiveness and the embodiment of their essential values. His palace was an epicenter for the distribution of wealth offices and specific duties<sup>4</sup>

This portrayed how traditional rulers of the Bamenda Grassfields were regarded with high esteem in the colonial African states and Cameroonian societies. They embodied the diverse stratum of people within their areas of jurisdiction, with the aid of socio-political and economic institutions. According to tradition, the *Fon* had the right to life and protection of his subjects. He was the custodian of the tradition and culture of his people. The *Fon* had the supreme powers of proclaiming war, making peace, and signing alliances of all sorts with distant and close neighbours.<sup>5</sup> As the divine traditional appointees, they were answerable only to the gods of the land and to the spirits of the ancestors. Their duties over their people were fashioned both by necessities and priorities. The supreme leaders were venerated and feared by everybody in the village. The entire machinery of government rested in the hands of the chief and his council whose duty was to assure the political survival and spiritual welfare of the community. They sat on special thrones in palaces in an assemblage of

<sup>2</sup> P.N. Nkwi, *Traditional Government and Social Change*: University Press, Fribourg, 1976, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional leaders were accredited names according to local dialectic connotations, but they shared similar tasks over their subjects.

<sup>4</sup> P.N. Nkwi, *Traditional Government and social change*, p.34

<sup>5</sup> It is taboo in traditional diplomacy for subjects to question the actions of their leaders for they were believed to be acting in the best interest of their subjects.

other royal insignia of authority. The efficiency of leadership rule over his subjects depended largely on his legitimate authority. Legitimacy was obtained from the overall acceptability of the leader by his subjects, the traditional recognition of this choice, and the respect of the traditional institutions. The success of all traditional rulers depended on the amount of respect and value the subjects accorded to them. The political components here referred to the assemblage of royal paraphernalia of the traditional rulers of the Bamenda Grassfields that distinguished the *Fon* from his subjects or ordinary citizens. This was what constituted the power politics of the *Fons* of the Bamenda Grassfields in the administration of their *fondoms*. The political elements include the royal stool, elephant tusk, leopard pelt, horsetail, embroidered calabashes, and carved objects of persons. Every established organization, nation, and state was not only recognized by her name but equally by an embodiment of symbols, ornaments, and emblems that differentiate them from each other.<sup>6</sup>

In the entire Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms, they were organized by a body of insignias that marked out the palace as the royal seat of the *Fon*. When the ruler assumed office; he was given the chieftaincy stool which was the symbol of Office and a sacred emblem. The stool represents the community, their solidarity, and their permanence. The traditional ruler was the link between the living and the dead; his highest role was when he officiated at public religious rites which are an expression of the community values. To act against the people's wishes means going against the sacred stool. The royal stool was a carved wooden chair painted black with special designs representing important persons, ancestors, and notables who had influenced society. This stool was decorated with cowries that bear special connotations in the Bamenda Grassfield's traditional norms. In most circumstances, these decorations symbolize both office and authority. The royal stool is regarded by everybody as sacrosanct and secret emblems believed to have the sanctity of all the deceased rulers. The royal stools according to the Bamenda Grassfields traditional politics help to empower the *Fon* in executing sound judgments over his subjects. Commenting on the value of the royal stool Aletum Michael states that;

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The *Fon*, empowered by the spirits of deceased rulers and ancestors, sat on the royal stool with his feet on the leopard pelt. The leopard had a special status in the Bamenda Grassfields and beyond, and killing or eating one was tantamount to killing a human being. The leopard pelt symbolized the authority of the *Fon* and was a special instrument of power used only by him. Each paramount *Fon* had the right and obligation to own and use the leopard pelt, and in most cases, elephant tusks as well. These elements and other values marked the *Fon* as the traditional ruler and custodian of the people's traditions and culture. In his palace and during important ceremonies, the *Fon* placed his feet on the leopard pelt to manifest his power and authority. It was believed that the *Fon* could transform himself into a leopard, and thus had exclusive rights over a slain leopard and its pelt. This shows that the *Fon* represented and symbolized the fiercest animals in the forest.

### **Traditional Rulers in Politics during the British Administration 1946 - 1961**

Politically, traditional rulers played a complex and challenging role in the British administration of the Southern Cameroons from 1946 to 1961. The British relied on traditional rulers to administer the territory and at the same time, these chiefs pressurized the British for self-determination.<sup>8</sup> The greatest weapon in the hands of the British was the system of native administration. The British however succeeded in winning over the natives

<sup>6</sup> H.T.Mbuy(Rev), *Fons of "Traditional Bamenda" and Partisan Politics in Contemporary Cameroon*, imprimerie de la CENC, Mvolyé, Yaounde, 2021

<sup>7</sup> M.T. Aleutum, "African Politics, Yesterday and Today" in *science and Technology review* vo-w p.3-4, July-December 1985 p.30

<sup>8</sup> National Archives Buea, (NAB), File No. A1918/24 Natives in British Sphere of occupations; Report called for as to whether they wish to remain under British rule or not, 1918.



by introducing a system of administration that was more human and distanced than that of the Germans. It was in this situation that the system of Indirect Rule was introduced in the British Southern Cameroons. This policy of native administration was finally laid down by the Secretary of State and it became the ideal to which the efforts of the British administrators were directed. The policy was based on the belief that it was the one best adapted to ensure the moral and material well-being of the people. The policy also ensured social progress by permitting the development of the people on their racial lines, while entrusting them with the fullest possible measures of self-government with the maintenance of law and order among the different elements making provision for recognition such as political, and judicial, social, and religious Organisations that were composed of the chiefs, elders and peoples. They were to be controlled by the administrative officers. The British through the system of native administration which took the form of reviving the indigenous form of government in the selection of tribal chiefs, his investiture, and the re-establishment of the clan council, alongside the outline of the jurisdiction and powers of the chief and their responsibility to the Divisional Officers who in turn acted as their advisers to the chiefs or council. The main objectives of the Indirect Rule system were the necessity to cut the costs of maintaining law and order in colonial society. The British accomplished this by setting up an effective grassroots administration based on the norms and authority derived from the tradition and history of the people.

Having embraced the Indirect Rule system as the policy for local administration, the British settled down to carve out native authorities. In the Southern Cameroons, a series of assessment reports and intelligence reports were carried out to determine the latitude of the traditional groups, their political structure, and religious or political power. From these reports, the government by 1936 had created a variety of native Authorities most of them based on the nature of socio-political structures. For instance, the *Fons* of Bali, Kom, Bansa, and Bafut in Bamenda Division became native Authorities with courts alongside the four chiefs in the Victoria, Buea, and Mamfe Districts were similarly recognized.<sup>9</sup> When it came to nominating someone to represent the British Cameroons in the Nigerian Legislative Council, the British authorities decided to recommend Chief J. Manga Williams. The choice of Manga Williams was determined not only by the British view that chiefs were the legitimate leaders of the people but also by the disdain that British Officials had for the Westernized African elite.

The favoritism for chiefs was hitherto in place by 1940, when the Richards constitution came into force in 1947, the Southern Cameroons were represented in the Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly by chiefs Manga Williams of Victoria and Galega II of Bali, both of them designated by the British administration in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Native Authorities under the 1954 Littleton Constitution were to be represented in the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly by six members. Two were traditional rulers such as Nformi of Ndu and Manga Williams of Victoria. In the House of Assembly from 1957 to 1959, the number of chiefs increased from two to three; Manga Williams of Victoria, J. Mokambe of Kumba, and W. Nformi of Nkambe.<sup>11</sup> At the revision of the constitution in the Eastern Regional Conference, the Southern Cameroons were represented by Dr. E.M.L. Endeley, Galega the chief of Bali, P.T. Tambe, and J. Manga Williams the chief of Victoria. The two chiefs in the delegation were chosen because they were the recognized political leaders of their people. As for their influences, Chief Manga Williams demanded a severe observation of the Trusteeship Agreement while Chief Galega II requested a separate Cameroons Region with a House of Assembly and direct representation in the Legislative Council. The Chiefs equally represented Cameroon in constitutional conferences in London, for instance, the Fon of Bali in 1957 and the Fon of Bum in 1958.<sup>12</sup>

During the Lancaster House Conference of 1953, for the formation of the KNC and Endeley's initial

<sup>9</sup> Victor Le Vine, *The Cameroons From Mandate to Independence*, Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press, 1964 p.197

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> United Nation Visiting Mission to Cameroons, 1958 p.38

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

stance in favour of separation from Nigeria was not well received by the Nigerian press. The natural rulers (Chiefs) and Native Authorities of the British Southern Cameroons on behalf of their peoples and themselves requested Endeley, J.C Kangsen, and Mallam Abba Habib to represent British Cameroon at the Conference. The authorization letter was signed by the following Fons and chiefs; Chief Sake of Ndop area, Sehm Atar Fon of Bango, Chief W. Nformi of Ndu, Chief of Nkambe, Chief Philip Bama of We, Chief Walang of Wum, Achirimbi II Fon of Bafut, Fon of Mankon, *Fon* of Batibo Mba II for Moghamo and Galega II Fon of Bali for Bali Native Authority. The traditional rulers thus gave their support to the nationalist movement while Endeley and Kangsen represented Southern Cameroons.<sup>13</sup> This marked a significant turning point in their role in politics.

. Having briefly examined the traditional political institutions in the British Cameroons, we will now turn to the transition of traditional rulers from being simply the custodians of culture and tradition to becoming active participants in politics during the British administration 1946-1961..<sup>14</sup>

### **Traditional Rulers in Party Politics of the Southern Cameroons**

The introduction of representative of government by the Macpherson constitution in 1951 resulted in a treachery of the chiefs by the British administration in the Southern Cameroons. The British had brusquely abandoned the chiefs and preferred but the elected Western elite as their new partners in political leadership. The chief had not been prepared to take part in any meaningful roles in the new dispensation. Due to such a situation, the chiefs turned their fury against Dr. Endeley the Leader of the new elite who was groomed to take over from the colonial masters.<sup>15</sup> This was true of the Grassfields chiefs in the Northern part of the Southern Cameroons who in the past had given their support to Dr. Endeley but in 1957, some of them changed their position in favour of Mr. Foncha. They included the *Fons* of Bali and Bafut the main spokesmen. The *Fon* of Nso continued to support the KNC and federation with Nigeria as well as the *Fon* of Kom alongside similar divisions which occurred among the chiefs in Mamfe, Kumba, and Victoria.

One of the most basic questions to be asked was whether it was proper for traditional leaders to align with a certain political party. Most traditional leaders have a close association with political parties. In 1958, the chiefs interfered on the side of the KNDP in the issue regarding the introduction of a Ministerial system before elections could be held, this was for the fact that the KNDP wanted elections first while the KNC/KPP wanted Ministerial government first. For this reason, after his investiture as Prime Minister in 1958, Endeley made a policy statement on the position of the chiefs in general in which he said that the government would focus its attention on their preservation as valuable traditional institutions. Endeley recognized that the chiefs had an influential position among the people and the government, although he played the role of a political chameleon, when he posted that:

But we shall also expect that in their own interest, chiefs and traditional rulers must keep clear of party politics....as this will only expose them to the disdain of a section of their subjects. Any chief who persists, despite this timely advice to participate in party politics does so at his own risk.<sup>16</sup>

It was evident in 1958 that the charge of being involved in party politics was the wish of every political party against any chief who was partisan to it. This followed within the same year when KNC appointed a Grassfields chief, the newly promoted *Fon* of Bum as its adviser at the London Conference in detriment to the *Fon* of Bali who had vehemently participated in the 1957 conference. The chiefs equally complained that the appointment of the *Fon* of Bum was done without their concern, and that they had no trust in the KNC/KPP government. The chiefs further in responding to the government's statement of policy towards them, declared

<sup>13</sup> V.J. Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884-Present* (2018), 2019 p.168

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> The United Nation Visiting Mission to the Cameroons in 1958 had notice the role of chiefs in politics. The Mission noted that the chiefs varied enormously in authority and their influence, many of them appeared to play part in public affairs, not only in local affairs but also in the shaping of opinion on the main political issues which one of the political parties could afford to ignore.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

that while they were fully aware of the fact that chieftaincy was a traditional institution, they never reserved the right to interfere with and correct the affairs of the country when it was realized that things were not moving well. The chiefs felt that the moment had arrived for their interference in government policies because they never wanted to be integrated with Nigeria. As President of the chiefs' conference, the Fon of Bafut sent the United Nations Visiting Mission a copy of the statement which was addressed to the London conference and signed by the Fon of Bali and twenty-two other chiefs. In this light, the Fon of Bafut insisted that the people of Southern Cameroons requested secession from Nigeria. As for him, the purpose of secession was to concentrate on much harder issues towards self-government and independence out of the Federation of Nigeria as a direct member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Notwithstanding the policies of the anti-KNC/KPP chiefs, the United Mission met numerous important Fons and chiefs who became advocates of the programme of the KNC/KPP parties.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1957 constitutional conference in London, the *Fon* of Bali who attended the conference under the auspices of the KNC delegation changed side and declared his intention that he had come to London as the representative of the chiefs. He further requested full regional status for the Southern Cameroons with its governor. The chiefs equally requested that as soon as Nigeria became independent, the Southern Cameroons should become the direct responsibility of the colonial government. Indeed, the *Fon* supported reunification and wanted Southern Cameroons and French Cameroon to gain independence separately before discussing reunification. This was underpinned by the statement of the *Fon* of Bali to the United Nations Visiting Mission in 1958. The role of traditional authorities during the British administration could not be undermined. Their contributions to the Social and constitutional development of the Southern Cameroons gave pressure to the creation of the House of Chiefs.

### **Creation of the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs**

In the 1950s, the chiefs in Southern Cameroons had begun to identify themselves as a politically influential group which, with the formation of a recognized association, could influence in politics and development of southern Cameroon. Following the result of the 1953 Eastern Regional Crisis and the Mamfe Conference, a Southern House of Assembly was created in 1954 underpinned by the *Fons*, Chiefs, and other traditional rulers. At the first session of the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly, the *Fons* and chiefs demanded the creation of the House of Chiefs for the reason that; the Western-educated and semi educated elites defied the authority of the traditional rulers, the democratization of Native administration rejected illiterate chiefs in favour of educated elite, western ideas and education threatened the tradition and customs of traditional societies and elites look upon Native Authority which the traditional rulers upheld as objects used by the colonialists to hold down efforts towards self-government. The traditional rulers during this realized that their authority, influence, and prestige in the society were deteriorating despite the effort made by Endeley and the KNC to acquire authorization for the creation of a House of Chiefs the colonial administration rejected the request. In this light, Foncha of the KNC came out vehemently in support of the creation of a Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs. As for him, the chiefs with their absolute authority over their subjects stood a better chance of enforcing government directives.

The British were influential in the creation of a House of Chiefs in the Southern Cameroons to reinforce their bi-cameral parliamentary system of government. The British considered the House of Chiefs as performing the same function as the House of Lords which included advising the government, proposing, and deliberating bills, and adjusting Legislations. According to the British, their model would function well with the House of Chiefs working together with the House of Assembly. The experience of the chiefs of the Southern Cameroons

<sup>17</sup> Ibid



following their association with the chiefs and emirs of Nigeria equally motivated the creation of the House of Chiefs. In 1952, the chiefs in the Eastern Region formed an Eastern Chiefs Conference and *Fon Galega II* was one of the members. During the 1957 London Constitutional Conference, one of the resolutions adopted was the creation of a House of Chiefs in the Southern Cameroons.<sup>18</sup> The chiefs contributed much towards the maintenance of law and order in the territory.<sup>19</sup> Without the SCHC, the traditional rulers would not contribute to the running of the country. Chiefs ran the Native Authorities and the customary courts and the SCHC would safeguard the tradition and culture of the people.<sup>20</sup>

The advocates for the creation of the SCHC were the traditional rulers of the Bamenda Grassfields and who the population that constituted about 57 percent of Southern Cameroons. Foncha's intention in supporting the creation of the SCHC was to use the *Fons* as vote catchers during elections, referendums and plebiscites. In 1956, under the auspices of *Fon Galega II* of Bali, *Fon Achirimbi II* of Bafut, and *Fon Sehm III* of Nso, there was the creation of Southern Cameroons Chiefs Conference known by the acronym SCCC. In the 1957 elections, Endeley spoke in favour of the creation of an SCHC but his supposed disrepute for *Fon Galega II* during their trip to London was an abuse of authority to the chiefs in a way that Endeley delayed attitude towards the creation of an SCHC was of no use. However, a short-lived pro-KNC association of chiefs and the association of Cameroons Natural Rulers were formed by Chief E.An Ajeh of Kumba. The 1957 London Constitutional Conference rightly called upon the Commissioner of the Southern Cameroons to form a SCHC in the territory. Commissioner J. O Field thus took the initiative to visit all the Divisions in the territory informing and seeking the opinions of the chiefs on matters concerning the formation of a SCHC. As for J.O Fields after the visit, the conditions for the aptitude of chiefs into the SCHC were that the chief must be medically fit, law-abiding, must be a British subject or protected by Britain, and that the Commissioner had the last word on who was and who was not a chief. After a close observation of the conditions, it was finally decided that membership into the SCHC was to be carried out through elections, however, the *Fons* of Bali, Bafut, Nso and Kom were accorded membership status into the SCHC. J.O Field in May 1960, signed the Southern Cameroons House of Selected Members Regulations which officially instituted a SCHC. The SCHC had 21 members distributed as follows. Victoria division had two seats, Kumba division had four seats, Mamfe division had three seats, Bamenda division had six seats, Wum division had three seats, and Nkambe division had three seats. The SCHC alongside the SCCC thence became an influential institution in the politics of the Southern Cameroons.<sup>21</sup>

During the Mamfe Plebiscite Conference of 1959, the parties involved could not reach on a consensus on the questions to be presented to the electorate, as represented by the *Fons* and Chiefs opted for secession. *Fon Achirimbi* of Bafut stated that: We believed in two points during a conference in Bamenda in which Dr. Endeley and Mr. Foncha were present. *I was chairman of that conference. We rejected Dr. Endeley because he wanted to take us to Nigeria. If Mr. Foncha tries to take us to the French Cameroon, we shall also run away from him. To me the French Cameroon is Fire and Nigeria is water. Sir, I support secession without unification.*<sup>22</sup>

The outcome of the Conference was that reunification was not popular with the population and secession was the most popular, followed by association and integration. Because the delegates stood firm in their position the Mamfe Conference as bound to fail. Furthermore, chief Stephen E. Nyenti of Mamfe founded the Cameroon Commoners Congress that advocated for separation from Nigeria and that Southern Cameroons

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> C.B. Langhee, "Southern Cameroons traditional authorities and the nationalist movement 1953-1961", 1984

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

should remain independent for an interim period before deciding whether to join Nigeria or Cameroon or not but was rejected by the United Nations. In the Bamenda All-Party Constitutional Conference of 1961, the House of Chiefs was represented by eight chiefs including the Fon of Bali, Chief Dipoko, and Chief Oben, and in the Fouban Conference of July 1961, the House of Chiefs was represented by the Fons of Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Nso, Chief Kimbongsi, Buh, Oben, Ebanja and Dipoko. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1961, British Southern Cameroons achieved independence after a United Nations plebiscite by joining the Republic of Cameroon. British Southern was hence known as West Cameroon, the politicians of former Southern Cameroons and those of the Republic of Cameroon unanimously agreed that the union would be on a federal structure.<sup>23</sup>

### **Traditional Rulers in Politics at Independence**

The independence of British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroun saw the emergence of a federal system of administration where much was done by the federal authorities (dominated by French Cameroonians) to terminate traditional rulers' membership in local government legislatures. By 1961, the ex-officio membership role enjoyed by traditional rulers in local government legislatures was inherited by the post-colonial government of West Cameroon. Little or no amendments were made about the place of traditional rulers in the setup. The West Cameroon Government worked so hard to maintain them in the governing divisional councils. The unification of all political parties in Cameroon in 1966 signaled the beginning of problems for traditional rulers. To reorganize the country politically, all local government assemblies were dissolved, and caretaker councils were instituted all over West Cameroon.

Though traditional rulers were not forgotten as they were also appointed into these institutions by the Secretary of State for Local Government in West Cameroon, the complete reorganization of the various branches and cells of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) Party by March 1967 did not favour them. The successful political reorganization of the territory dissolution of caretaker councils and institution of reforms about membership in local governments ignored them. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1968, the law appointing caretaker councils was revoked and the harmonization of the electoral laws of West and East Cameroon took effect. Direct universal suffrage and the list system were introduced into West Cameroon.

As aforementioned, the West Cameroon Government worked hard to make sure that natural rulers were maintained in the specifications of compositions for councils. Though was not favoured by the federal government and this was an established policy of the West Cameroon Government that all groups be represented in the management of local affairs. Even when the CNU government instituted changes in 1966, the Fons of Bafut, Kom, Nso, Fontem, and Bali were made natural rulers or leaders of their local government areas. However, in the 1968 elections, the traditional rulers were not taken care of and the Prime Minister (PM) of West Cameroon never took this lightly. He put up strong arguments for their continuous presence and postulated that these natural rulers had and remained very important in local development as they played useful roles in the administration of their areas. They actively participated in community development, collected taxes, handled issues of land, and were the arbiters of customs and conciliation of civil disputes. They thus remained a link between their people and the government, and the PM made it clear that their presence was needed in these institutions. To him, their presence provided local democratic balance at the local government level. Maintaining this social setting was necessary so that peoples' known and recognized tradition that has survived the test of time for generations grows in democracy. It is because of this plea from the PM of West Cameroon to the federal authorities that traditional rulers were co-opted into the political local governing structures of West Cameroon. The mode of selection was through appointment by the Secretary of State for Local Government and elections by universal suffrage. This can be exemplified by the case of the Kom Bum local government where traditional rulers elected their members and Wum Central Council, they were appointed by the Secretary of State. The presence of traditional rulers in local governments' structures remained in force until

<sup>23</sup> V.J.Ngoh, *Abrogation of Federalism in Cameroon 1972, A Historical Analysis*, 2019, p. 2



1972 when the Cameroon Federation was dismantled in favour of reunification. The reunification of the territory, thus, favoured the harmonisation of the two administrative systems inherited from the British and the French colonial experiences and this greatly worked against the privileged positions enjoyed by traditional rulers in West Cameroon. In this direction, the 1974 law on Councils in Cameroon disbanded the special status enjoyed by traditional rulers in the former British colony (West Cameroon) and traditional rulers had to seek representation in local government assemblies by competing with their subjects through elections.

### **Historical Perspective**

The inclusion of traditional rulers in local governance in one form or another offers several opportunities: Non-western approach for governance: recognizing forms of authority other than from Western-style democratic structures offers an opportunity to better adapt political structures to the socio-economic needs of local communities. Development can build on political existing structures at the local level. Better inclusion of the local population: If traditional authorities represent the people more adequately than any other form of authority and organization, the recognition of traditional authority will lead to more inclusiveness. Acceptance of policy implementation: In many areas, it is impossible or very difficult to implement policies without the support of traditional authorities because people follow the decisions of their traditional leaders rather than the government. Even without formal institutional arrangements, local governments typically must rely on the informal support of traditional leaders. Potential for better responsiveness to local needs: As the authority for economic and social matters, traditional authorities are likely to be better informed about the needs of the local population. - Traditional authorities as advocates for peace building (e.g. in Sudan or Angola): The inclusion and recognition of traditional authorities by states can in return guarantee their support for the state. The risk is that strengthening traditional authority might lead to stronger ethnic divisions and increased conflicts.<sup>24</sup>

Dealing with the co-existence of tradition and modernity: A similar problem is linked to the parallel existence of tradition and modernity. Every country with a traditional structure has a segment that lives according to modern values and norms. These different systems can interfere and will more likely do so with increased urbanization. This will lead to having to judge what system is superior when there is a conflict between core elements of human rights and the rights of cultural self-determination. Accountability mechanisms: If substantial new functions are formally transferred from the state to the traditional authorities, adequate accountability mechanisms must be guaranteed. This can be achieved by oversight through higher levels of government over the activities of traditional authorities and establishing participatory approaches actively involving the respective communities.

If a society moves away from subsistence farming and towards modern ways of economic production, there is a need for further service provision, regulations, and administration by the local government. If these functions become part of traditional authority, traditional authority itself becomes transformed because it acquires roles it did not have before. When there is large-scale integration of society into an increasingly globalized world, the complexity and size of the functions will increase. The more a society is integrated into an industrialized production chain, the less the traditional authority will appear as an appropriate means of decision-making. The role of traditional authorities will depend on different functions. Regulating functions has always been a major task of traditional authorities, while some distributive and redistributive functions will fall in the domain of modern functions. The question of responsiveness and accountability towards the local population will be more important depending on the number of resources involved. Overall, the more a society is based on traditional and subsistence production, the more this society can be expected to conform to traditional rules. The more complex and industrialized a society is, the less legitimacy and recognition traditional authority will obtain.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Barister Ayori Cyril, Mformi (title holder), Kumbo, 28/01/2023

Before the scramble for Africa a century ago, traditional rulers were held in high regard. But colonialism, modernism, and politics threaten to end their influence. In Cameroon, traditional rulers are demanding recognition. Long before the coming of the Europeans, African chiefs, fons [chiefs], sultans, and lamidos [emirs] were the indisputable custodians of tradition and culture. Like the biblical King Solomon, they were not seen as embodiments of wisdom and character, discharging their functions, and delivering judgment with neither fear nor favor. Those days are gone. Historians say European colonizers bribed traditional rulers with whiskey, mirrors, clothing, and gramophones to gain access to land and coax them into becoming slave dealers. Since independence, traditional rulers have helplessly watched their power progressively shrink.

At independence, the West Cameroon House of Chiefs was set up in a bid to stem their eroding authority. The government subsequently dissolved it, saying traditional rulers were impediments to nation-building. In other reforms, traditional chiefs were elected or appointed by authorities. Previously, they were based on inheritance. Three decades ago, the government granted several chiefs some recognition for helping to safeguard culture and tradition, partnering in development, troubleshooting tribal conflicts, and enforcing customary laws. But more and more local government structures were created, and traditional rulers complained the recognition was only notional as they were sidelined from decision-making. Many protested in vain about their eroding powers and lack of government stipends. Things changed in the early 90s with the return of multiparty politics. Traditional rulers seized the occasion, assuming the role of political power brokers and forcing their subjects to vote like them or face banishment from the community. Across the country, tension mounted as respect for the chiefs plummeted.

Recently, traditional rulers have set up regional and ethnic associations (NWEFU and SWELA) to defend their collective interests, lobby for development, and recover lost respect. But most of these structures have crumbled from lack of support, embezzlement of funds, and their continuous support for politicians. So, when thousands of monarchs from across the country launched the Cameroon National Council of Traditional Rulers, observers thought they were turning a new page to shed partisan politics and push for effective participation in governance. Normally, a traditional chief is supposed to welcome all the sons and daughters of the village no matter their political inclination. However, the House of Chiefs of West Cameroons was inscribed in the Constitution and their roles were well spelled out in terms of political and socio-cultural development. The Local government was provided for by Laws 17 (on decentralization), 18 (councils), and 19 (regions) of 2004; and it is also enshrined in the constitution, together with a higher tier of regional councils which had been implemented by the government. In conformity with the fact, the recent Bill to institute the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities, Part V, Chapter One by the provisions of Article 62 of the Constitution clearly defined the special status for the Anglophone Cameroon and the role of Chiefs in politics and development.

Some school of thought says traditional authorities are an apolitical organization that advocates equal development, consolidates peace and stability, promotes human rights, and ensures the well-being of traditional rulers. *Fon* Isaac Chafah, pioneer Secretary General of the Council's 50-man Executive Bureau, says the council is not a political forum: Traditional rulers are not against state institutions. Any head of state in this country must enjoy the support of traditional rulers. Finally, traditional rulers have recognized they have a common problem and need to organize themselves. Generally, debate is raging on the role of traditional rulers in democracy. While some are calling for the abolition of traditional institutions, others say they should be incorporated into modern governance systems. However, chieftaincy studies should be introduced in the syllabus of the National School of Magistracy (ENAM) to facilitate a good and harmonious relationship between the government's trained administrators and the traditional rulers. In recent times, in the wake of the strong movements in favour of democracy, there has been renewed optimism about the prospects of decentralization. Traditional rulers are viable partners in decentralization and should be empowered for governance.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of traditional political institutions in the Southern Cameroons since independence, with a focus on dual dispensation. It has been argued that the dual dispensation has failed to achieve its objectives and has instead led to conflict, confusion, and inequality. The paper also concluded that traditional authorities are natural and obvious partners in the development process and governance. No concept of governance or development will be completed without acknowledging the role of traditional authorities. However, the paper has also noted that there is a need to ensure that traditional authorities are accountable to their communities and that they act in accordance with the constitution and the law. The following recommendations are made:

- Adequate institutional measures should be put in place to enforce the constitutional provision that debars chiefs from taking active parts in partisan politics. This may include but is not limited to the establishment of a special court to try chiefs who engage in partisan politics.
- The Regional House of Chiefs should liaise with the Republican institutions to monitor the activities of chiefs in the regions and to be kept informed of what chiefs are doing. The Regional House of Chiefs should also come up with a code of conduct which chiefs will have to abide by as far as partisan politics is concerned. Seminars, public fora, and conferences should be organized periodically for chiefs regarding the content and interpretation of the constitution. Members of the chiefs' council should be allowed to participate in such programs for a better appreciation of the course of democracy and good governance.
- Traditional leaders are also bound by law to be transparent





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