



Chieftaincy as an Indigenous Institution of Governance Before Colonial Intrusion in the Bamenda Grassfields

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ABSTRACT

Chieftaincy is one of the most enduring indigenous institutions in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Headed by a chief, or a local variation of the title, it has demonstrated remarkable resilience from the pre-colonial period through colonial rule to the post-colonial era. As the oldest politico-administrative institution of governance in the region prior to colonial intrusion, its structure, organization, and system of governance remain central to understanding local political history. This study examines the nature, structure, and organization of the chieftaincy institution, its sources of power and authority, its pivotal societal role, and the mechanisms through which officials gained access to power within the pre-colonial governance machinery. Findings, based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, reveal that prior to colonial rule, the institution ensured effective administration of the political, economic, and socio-cultural life of various polities through the chief, traditional councils, regulatory societies, princes' associations, women's associations, and ward heads., the study argues that chieftaincy was not merely a cultural relic but an indispensable system of governance that set the foundation for subsequent administrative organization in the Bamenda Grassfields. It concludes that chieftaincy remains a resilient feature of Africa's cultural heritage that should be valorized and sustainably integrated into contemporary governance, rather than vilified or instrumentalized for opportunistic ends.

Keywords: Chieftaincy, Traditional Institutions, Traditional Ruler, Governance, Pre-colonial Administration, Bamenda Grassfields, Colonial Intrusion

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines chieftaincy as an indigenous institution of governance prior to colonialism in the Bamenda Grassfields. It analyzes patterns of political, economic and socio-cultural organization, as well as the nature and structure of power and authority held by Grassfield traditional rulers before European colonization. It also handles the sources and methods of chiefly wealth, its distribution and importance in administration. Its importance in the construction of the traditional governance mechanism and the control of power within the traditional political system cannot be exaggerated. Using the historical methodology (grouped into primary and secondary sources) as described by Milville Jean Herskovits, this study explore the chieftaincy institution as a system of governance in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. It highlights the political, economic, judicial and socio-cultural functions of traditional rulers prior to colonial intervention.

Organization of the Bamenda Grassfield Traditional Society

Chieftaincy is one of the most enduring traditional institutions in the Bamenda Grassfields, headed by a chief or a variation of that name, which has displayed remarkable resilience from pre-colonial through colonial to post-colonial times. Before colonial rule, traditional rulers were considered the indisputable custodians of the tradition and culture of the people. The position of the chief is guided by specific institutionalized traditions with respect to accession to office and performance of functions.

In pre-colonial times, traditional rulers were custodians of the people's tradition and culture.¹ Their authority was global, covering persons, goods and land. As such, they were custodians of land and effectively wielded

¹ Gluckman, Max, "The kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa," Fortes, African Political Systems, pp. 30-31



executive, legislative and judicial powers in daily administration.² They were the political, economic and socio-cultural heads of the traditional state. ³He was the guardian of the fundamental values of his people and mediated between them and the ancestors. However, he ruled with the advice of a council, variously termed the Privy Council, alongside the queen mother who safeguarded him against dictatorial tendencies and acted as a check to his powers.⁴

Traditional rulers derived their powers from age-long traditions of the ancestors who were recognized and revered over time. ⁵ Among the powerful Tikar tribes of the Bamenda Grassfields (Nso, Mankon, Kom, Bafut), traditional rulers were regarded as representatives of the ancestors who ensured liaison between the living and the dead and were considered masters of the land.⁶

The Bamenda Grassfields chieftaincy institution is one of the most documented and cherished traditional institutions in the political and social history of Cameroon. The taboos relating to chiefly conduct and mannerisms remind them and their subjects that the position they occupy is sacred and must be respected.⁷ In fact, chieftaincy emerged from the social fabric of the land; it is nobody's creation and therefore cannot be easily destroyed.⁸

The foundation of governance in pre-colonial Africa was based on the conception that "the king or queen ruled but at the pleasure of the people, for a king without subjects is no king or queen." ⁹ The people set the standards by which the actions of their ruler were judged. His actions were sanctioned by the people's representatives named kwifor. Indigenous societies had varying forms of political, economic, social and legal institutions. Chiefs put in place binding machinery, with the direct descendant and heir to the throne holding power at the center and delegating authority to subordinate rulers. ¹⁰ The organization of fondoms was thus linked to the complex interplay of economic, social and political power.

Traditions hold that the chief must be of royal birth (born on the tiger skin by a legal and legitimate Queen). ¹¹ This is the first condition to ascend the throne, though many changes came with colonialism. The culture of respect for traditional rulers still holds despite external influence. Like the biblical King Solomon, judgment passed by traditional rulers was without fear or favor and their wisdom was considered divine.¹²

According to Max Weber, the right of a traditional ruler to command power comes from three sources: tradition, charisma and legality.¹³ Traditionally, chiefs exercise continuous political power thanks to hereditary rule. Charisma results from the exceptional strength of the ruler's personality. Legality is attached to the authority of a political office when duties are performed in a legal and constitutional manner, as seen during the stoning of a newly crowned ruler in Bafut and fetching of wood in Kom, which signifies acceptance. After this act, he is considered supreme and must be revered. Legality is exercised through different traditional institutions working in close collaboration with the chief. As Nkwi notes, the chief was seen as a singular

² Fisiy, Cyprian F., *Power and Privilege in Administration of Law: Land Reforms and Social Differentiation in Cameroon*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 1992, pp. 212-213.

³ Oduro-Awisi., "Chieftaincy Disputes in Akuapem Traditional Area: A Search for Solution", MA Desertation, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi Ghana, August 2013, p.36

⁴ Ibid, p 37

⁵ Fisiy, *Power and Privilege in Administration of Law* 1992, pp. 212-213.

⁶ Ibid; Bentsi-Enchill, Kwamena, *Ghana Land Law*, London, Sweet and Maxwell, 1964, p.46, note 5.

⁷ Gyekye, K., 1996. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, p.109 Gyekye, K., 1996. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, p.109

⁸ Interview with Syracuse Lee Been, 59 years, member of the Nso *ngwerong* traditional society, 8th November 2016, Bafoussam

⁹ Interview with Abumbi II, 67 years, *fon* of Bafut, November 2017, Bafut Palace.

¹⁰ Ndobegang M., "Grassfield Chiefs and Political Change in Cameroon, ca. 1884-1966", PhD Thesis, University of Boston, 1985, p36

¹¹ In Bambili and Nso *languages*, the prince is referred to as a *muo ntoh* and *wan ntoh* respectively

¹² The Good News Bible with Deuterocanonical/ Apocrypha, First King, chapter 3:16-28, Claretian publication, march 10 1993, pp. 397-398

¹³ B. Amaazee's *Traditional Rulers (Chiefs) and Politics in Cameroon History*, Presses Universitaires de Yaounde, 2002, p10



figure, the incarnation of customs and traditions.¹⁴ In the same line, Busia says:

When a chief was selected and initiated into his office, he became at once a judge, a commander-in-chief, a legislator, and the executive and administrative head of his community. It was not many offices, but a single composite office to which various duties and activities, rights and obligations were attached...¹⁵

Chieftaincy as an institution under a traditional ruler is assisted by traditional institutions that act as administrative agents and serve as the eyes and ears of the ruler.¹⁶ They represent the chief in different parts of the chieftdom and help realize communal goals.¹⁷

Territorially, chiefdoms are stratified from the smallest to the biggest unit. The smallest unit is the nuclear family, *nfeu* in Nso,¹⁸ made up of parents and children. Above it is the compound; *achan*¹⁹ in Batibo and *ndugu* in Bafut, headed by *mbongndugu*.²⁰ Next is the extended family, *ngwe-enda* in Bafut, then the lineage (*acheu* in Bafut), headed by the lineage head (*Ta-cheu*).²¹ Depending on village and size, a lineage could be split. In Nso, people of the same lineage cannot marry; the contrary holds in Bafut and Batibo.²² After the lineage comes the quarter (*aba e nghaku* in Batibo) headed by a quarter head. Many quarters make up a village (*nteh* in Bali), headed by a chief. Many villages make up a *fondom* under a paramount ruler/*fon*.²³ This brings the notion of primary executive authorities who handle political office directly and subordinate authorities who deal through an intermediary.²⁴ Political power emanates from the *fon* and flows downward. The *fon* is the supreme commander.²⁵ Most chiefdoms were heterogeneous as classified by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard: centralized, administrative and judicial systems.²⁶

Socially, *fondoms* are stratified into two main classes under the chief's authority: members of the royal family and commoners. A third class of slaves existed but faded away. Members from the commoner class could climb the ladder of nobility by serving in the palace or paying huge sums. The structure is hierarchical like a pyramid with the chief at the apex.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, traditional administration takes into consideration the existence and respect of ancestors represented by the chief. According to Mbiti, existence for Africans is a religious phenomenon.²⁷ Ancestors occupy a unique position as far as governance is concerned; watching over families like a "cloud of witnesses".²⁸ According to the *Fon* of Nso, ancestors act²⁹ Libation pouring is a way of communication and a traditionally accepted method of administration.

All taboos have sacred connotations, and because chieftaincy has connections to spiritual purity, the chief must not go against them. Some taboos include:

¹⁴ Nkwi., *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of inter-Chieftdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon*, Yaounde, SOPECAM, 1987, P. 39

¹⁵ K.A. Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, p41

¹⁶ Amaazee., *Traditional Rulers (Chiefs) and Politics in Cameroon History*, Presses Universitaires de Yaounde, 2002, p10

¹⁷ Oladimeji Aborisade (ed) *Local Government and the Traditional Rulers in Nigeria*, Ife: University of Ife Press, 1985, p.156

¹⁸ Interview with Shey Banla Federick, 56 years, Driver, August 2016, Jakiri.

¹⁹ Interview with Achia Vasco, 41 years, a trader, August 2016, Ntarikon

²⁰ Interview with Francis Ngwa, 54 years, Lineage head, Plumber, Bamenda, August 2017, Alakuma.

²¹ Ibid, August 2017

²² Interview with Elisabeth Manka'a, Age 92, wife of a chief, 23 September 2012, Mankanikong

²³ Interview with Divine Tangang, Age 39, Private Secretary to the *Fon* of Bafut, , 25th September, 2012, *Fon's Palace*, Bafut.

²⁴ Samah, "Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon, 2006, pp. 3-4.

²⁵ The Constitution of Cameroon, Part V, Article 37(3), 18th January 1996

²⁶ M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchards (eds), *African Political Systems*, London, Oxford University Press, 1940, p.1

²⁷ Mbiti, J. S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann 1969, Sited in Oduro-Awisi's "Chieftaincy Disputes in Akuapem Traditional Area: A Search for Solution", MA in Religious Studies, August 2013, pp 20-22

²⁸ Interview with Semh Mbinglo II, *Fon* of Nso, August 2019, Yaounde. as friends at court to intervene between man and the Supreme Being.

²⁹ Ibid



1. A chief must not strike anyone and should not be struck.
2. A chief should not walk barefoot lest misfortune befall the community.
3. He should not speak to or greet a woman in her menstrual period.
4. He is not allowed to eat certain foods and should not be seen eating in public.
5. When he sits in state, he may not speak directly to the audience but through an interpreter.

Structures of the Chieftaincy Institution

The structure of traditional authority emanates from a system organized to maintain law and order, improve wellbeing, and manage external relations. These structures comprise traditional institutions including regulatory societies. Their moral essence and legal authority is enveloped in mystical and religious connotations.

a) The Position and Powers of the Fon

Traditional rulers are heads of the political, economic, and religious structures of their polities. Their position is reinforced by the near-sacred nature of their personality. Their power enabled them to introduce development projects. As Bello-Imam states, the traditional ruler was more or less the executive, legislative, and judicial arm of government and the spiritual leader.³⁰

Among the Bantu, the traditional political system was based on kinship structures.³¹ According to Amaazee, chiefs are more powerful than a westernized president if left alone.³² A clear illustration is Achirimbi II of Bafut, who appointed favorites, abolished laws, dispensed titles,³³ and concentrated power, sidelining the Kwifor.³⁴ He even scrapped the post of Ndinfor, equivalent to prime minister.³⁵

This power is reflected in appellations such as "lion, eagle, python." The fon enjoys both sacred and secular authority.³⁶ His office is composite. His power is kept in check by regulatory societies which enforce decisions. The fon is an exalted, sacrosanct personality, making him the wealthiest person,³⁷ yet he was expected to be benevolent. He had everything, yet he was poor,³⁸ because his wealth belonged to the community, hence "father of all."³⁹

As Chilver and Kaberry noted: "He had become suzerain, the distributor of rewards, dispenser of honors, head of all associations... and supreme judge."⁴⁰ As Kaptué noted: "...when the chief gives an instruction, it was executed, when he commanded, the subjects obeyed... Nobody contradicted nor opposed the chief."⁴¹

Externally, rulers established relations with neighboring chiefdoms through taxes, tributes, gifts, marriage alliances, agriculture and trade. Galega I of Bali, for example, maintained relations with Bafut and Mankon. External security also aimed at acquiring additional land to increase resources. Since wealth meant power,

³⁰ B. Bello-Inam, "The Paralysis of Traditional Rulers in Nigerian Politics", cited in Amaazee V. Bong's Traditional Rulers (chiefs) and Politics in Cameroon History, Press Universitaires de Yaounde, Octobre 2002, p8

³¹ K.A. Busia, Africa in Search of Democracy, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.30.

³² Amaazee V. Bong Traditional Rulers (Chiefs) and Politics in Cameroon, Octobre 2002, p8

³³ Ngwa "Paramountcy and the control of land", 2013, p 88

³⁴ Aletum, Political Conflicts within the Traditional and the Modern Institutions of the Bafut, Cameroon, Louvain, Vander, 1974, p.97

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Robert and Pat Zitzenthaler, Cameroons Village: An Ethnography of the Bafut, Milwaukee, Public Museum, 1952, Fuhwi "Fon, Chief and People in Conflict, 2011, p.30

³⁷ W.T.T. Samah, "Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon and Modern Governance 1961-2000", PhD Thesis in History, University of Yaounde I, 2006, pp.3-4

³⁸ Ngwa., "Paramountcy and the Control" p.53, Interview with Nyuyse Mathias, 53 years, farmer and elder in the Nso Fendom, December 2018, Bamenda

³⁹ Interview with Atanga Muwah Nforbi, 53 years, Chief of Mekanikong Bafut and Teacher, 18th September 2017, Yaounde

⁴⁰ E.M. Chiabi, "Traditional rulers in National Politics" in the *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences*, Vol II, No. 1 and 2, January-July 1990, p. 26

⁴¹ L. Kaptué., "Rois et (chefs) dans les états Africains de la veille des indépendances à la fin du XXe siècle ; Pris entre le Marteau et Enclume, Le Pouvoir Traditionnelle choisit –il de se prostituer au Cameroun. Endoscopie de la situation de 1884 à 1992", Paris : Sorbonne, 8, 9, 10 November, 1995. p.16.



rulers did everything to acquire wealth, which formed the cornerstone of Bali domestic and foreign policy under Galega I.

b) Traditional Institutions of Governance

Traditional institutions derive their powers and legitimacy from customs and traditions.⁴² Identified institutions include: traditional rulers, traditional councils, regulatory societies, princes' societies, women's associations, and ward heads.

The Traditional Council: Known as Nda-Kwifor in Mankon,⁴³ it is third in rank after the fon and regulatory society.⁴⁴ Members must be honest elders representing village heads. In Nso, it is called Takibu, made up of seven members called vibai.⁴⁵ The council has a stabilizing influence, characterized by predominance of commoners and absence of royals, giving it authority to curb princes.

Regulatory Societies: These defended traditional institutions.⁴⁶ They were the most powerful, and their activities are not widely known to non-members, hence sacred societies.⁴⁷ They operated as supervisory organs or legislature. In Bamunka, Nkwifon is comparable to the House of Commons while Gueiteh performs House of Lords functions. In Nso, the regulatory society was the only institution representing various social strata and opposing excesses of the fon. Its secrecy gives it an aura of omnipotence, described as having "eight hundred eyes."⁴⁸ Other societies like Takumbeng manage crises among princes.

Women in Traditional Administration

Women played an invisible but crucial role. Far from Western feminist assumptions, women in the Grassfields were considered sacred beings, source of prosperity and perpetuation of fonship.⁴⁹ The founder of the Nso fondom was Ngongso, a woman; hence the festival Ngongso was named after her. In Kom, the would-be fon was received at the center of the Efum⁵⁰ by Nafuyn (mother of the fon) for enthronement ritual. In Bafut, the location of the present palace was discovered by Ndelaah who was later murdered for fear she might claim recognition. In Babanki, the first girl in the royal family shaves the head of the successor and rubs him with camwood. In all chiefdoms, women are involved through the Queen Mother (Maamfor), who advises the fon and exerts moderating influence.⁵¹

Military and Judicial Functions

The chief is supreme commander; he could declare war and conclude peace after consultation. Mankon had a citizen army called Manjong. Any chief who ignore military protection forfeited trust and was liable to deposition.⁵² All justice was passed in his name. Trial by ordeal was common.⁵³ Offenses like treason, witchcraft, adultery with the chief's wives were punishable by execution or exile by Kwifor. In Bafut, a public

⁴² Omole B., *Traditional Institutions, Democracy and Development: role of oba and his citizens*. Accessed on April 1st 2017 from :<http://www.nigeriatoday.ng/2016/06traditional-institutions-democracy-and-development-role-of-oba-and-his-citizens,2016>

⁴³ Aletum, "African Politics Yesterday and Tomorrow", p.28.

⁴⁴ Interview with Ngam Nestor, 52 years, traditional council member, December 2017, Belo. In cases where divergent views arose in the course of deliberation, the traditional council did consultations and struggle to reconcile those involve through a general consensus.

⁴⁵ Faay Woo Lii Won., *An Introduction to Nso Culture*, vol 1, Bamenda, Copy Printing Technology, 2001, p.75

⁴⁶ Aletum, "African Politics Yesterday and Tomorrow", p.28.

⁴⁷ P. N. Nkwi., *Traditional Government and Social Change: a study of the political institution of Kom of the Grassfields of Cameroon*, Yaounde, 1986

⁴⁸ Interview with Nyuyse Nestor, 67 years, councilor at the Nso palace, 28th December 2017, Jakiri

⁴⁹ W.T. T. Samah., *Women and Chieftaincy: Some Reflections on the Evolution of the Position and Role of Grassfields Women*, Cameroon. Paper presented on radio on the programme, "Women to women", Thursday 31st may 2006

⁵⁰ Efum refers to the shrine for princes of Kom where enthronement rituals are carried out.

⁵¹ W.T. T. Samah., *Women and Chieftaincy*, 2006

⁵² Economic Commission for Africa, *Relevance of African Traditional Institution of Governance*, Adid-Abeba, 2007, p.33.

⁵³ O. Ikime, "Traditional System of Government and Justice Among the Urhobo and Isoko of Delta Province, Nigeria", *The Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, Vol. 7, No.3, November 1965, p. 297



execution site was at Mbebali called Ntaribang.⁵⁴

As chief priest, the fon propitiated spirits by offering sacrifices. Praise names like cha-mfor (kicker of things), lum-nyam (king of all animals), nyambo (leopard's cup) were used.⁵⁵ In Nso, praise-singers call their fon "the sunshine of Nso," "father of the Land," "the Lion."⁵⁶ This led to the claim that "the fon never dies."⁵⁷

By virtue of his office, the chief was not to be touched, challenged or insulted. His sacred nature made him like a near deity. An overt denial of authority could lead to dethronement, as in the case of shufai wo Ndzendzev in Nso who called the fon's personal names, a treasonable offence.⁵⁸

The Palace of the Fon

The palace is equal to the Unity Palace in modern administration. In Nso it is known as Ntoh, Ilah in Kom, and Nkentet in Bali. It acts as administrative headquarters. The political, economic, spiritual, and socio-cultural organization is conceived and coordinated from the palace. It serves as capital and seat of highest authority.⁵⁹ The palace hosts other institutions in different quarters.

The inner section is reserved for the fon and his wives. The fon's quarter is at the center, at the back are quarters for regulatory societies charged with protection. Access is restricted, underscoring social distinctions.⁶⁰ As Warnier notes; the chief was like a "container" or "vessel"⁶¹ that bound the people together, pouring out vital substances like breath, camwood, and saliva. No one can enter without passing through main gates, signifying unity and defense. As Akuma notes, "under no circumstance should fire used in cooking at the palace go off," meaning the palace should never run short of food.

Though traditional rulers from their palaces wield power and authority over their polities, the coming of colonialism, Christianity, democratization, western education among others, impacted the content and functioning of traditional administrative system in the Bamenda Grassfield. They face internal power dynamics, succession disputes, or challenges associated with the institution. Despite the challenges, traditional rulership has shown itself amenable to changes, alterations, and various transformations in the whole process of adaptation to its use in various contexts. That notwithstanding, it may not be deemed to be under threat of extinction. In fact, its resilience is very suggestive of the much-parroted opinion by contemporary African governments to use traditional rulers as part of modern governance.

CONCLUSION

The organization and structure of chieftaincy as an indigenous institution in the Bamenda Grassfields was centered under authority of traditional rulers. The chief, council, regulatory societies and female associations influenced governance. Despite roles played by other institutions, the fon had executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Before colonial rule, chiefs enjoyed both sacred and secular authority. By virtue of coronation ritual, they underwent transformation and became virtually invincible. Their authority emanated from tradition, charisma, and legality, which made them great administrators.

⁵⁴ Abumbi II, Tradition and Customs of the Bafut Kingdom, p. 26

⁵⁵ Ibid p.76

⁵⁶ Aletum, Fisiy, Socio –Political Integration, p.35.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p 35

⁵⁸ Aletum, Fisiy, Socio - Political Integration, p. 35.

⁵⁹ Akwo., "The Mbeligi and the Palace", 2006, p.11.

⁶⁰ Ngwa., "Paramountcy and the Control" p.56.

⁶¹ Nkwi, Warnier, Elements for a History, p. 59

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03	Atanga Muwa h Nforbi	53	Chief & Teacher of Makanikong	Yaounde	September 2017
04	Elisabeth Manka'a	92	wife of a chief	Mankanikong	23 September 2012
05	Francis Ngwa	54	Plumber	Bamenda	August 2017
06	Ngam Nestor	52	Council member	Belo.	December 2017
07	Nyuyse Mathias	53	farmer	Nso Fondom	December 2018
08	Semh Mbinglo II		Fon of Nso	Younde	August 2019
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