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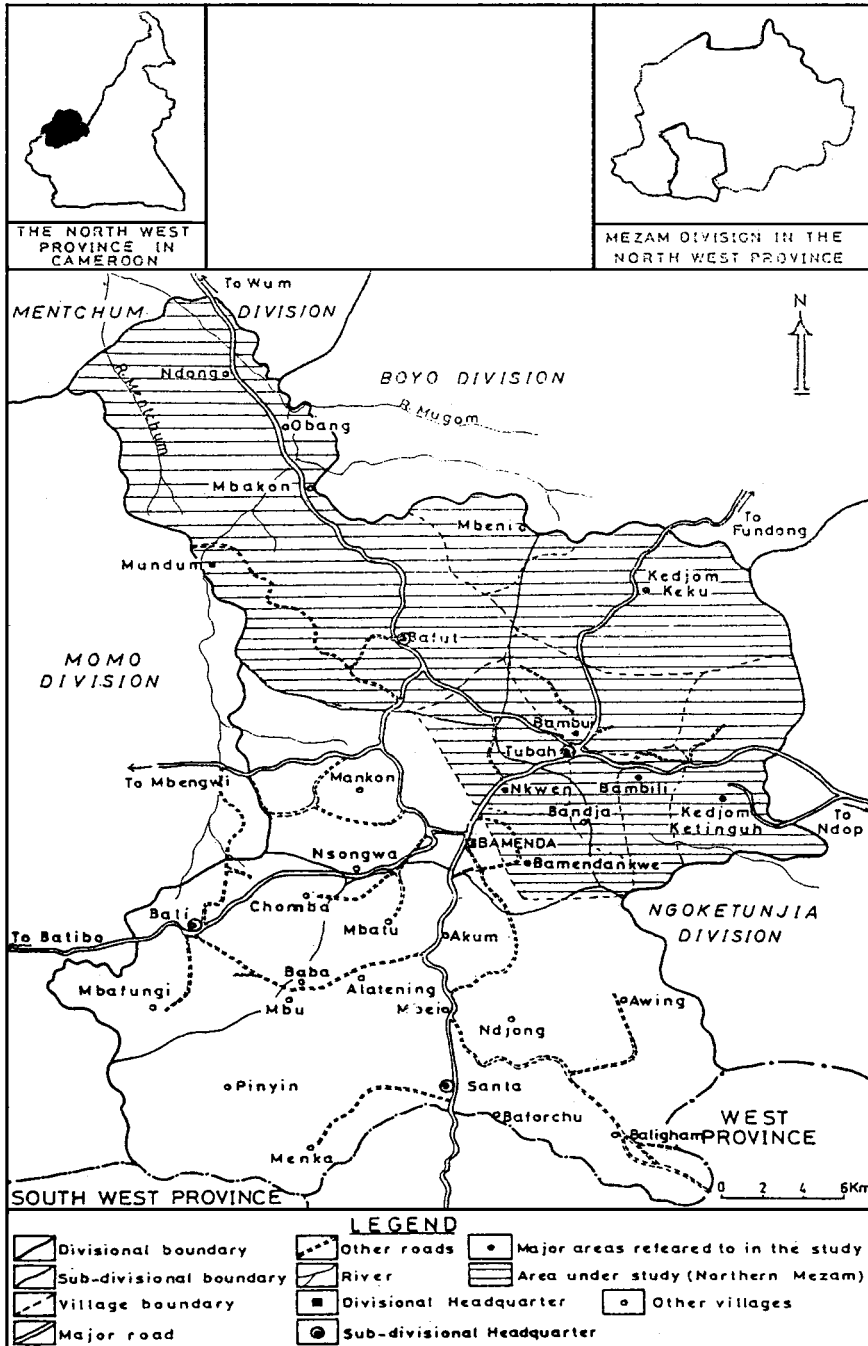
Changing Intercommunity Relations and the Politics of Identity in the Northern Mezam Area, Cameroon*

The introduction of modernity in Africa has resulted in the transformation of intercommunity relations. It has also set in motion new forms of competition for prestige, power and position among communities, as well as new forms of co-operation. Such relations have generally tended to contradict the demands of modern universalistic principles contained in the nation building project. This has thus led to a crisis of modernisation as local communities try to grapple with the demands of a modern setting while living their essential communal substance. This has become evident in the political arena with the competition over resources (scarce land, boundaries), positions of pre-eminence and the delineation of administrative units. The forms these processes take can be traced back to the colonial period, which is responsible for the introduction of modernisation in Africa.

This paper seeks to examine how the concept of communal identity in the northern part of Mezam Division in the North West Province of Cameroon has influenced the relations between local communities on the one hand and the influence of these relations on the response to the policy of Indirect Rule in the area. The specific objectives will be to describe the policy and practice of Indirect Rule in the area under study, to describe local reactions to this policy and to analyse the impact of these processes on local politics in the colonial and subsequently the postcolonial period. This will enable us to relate this to the concept of ethnicity. The argument we wish to make here is that the concept of identity fluctuates as people assert both similarity and difference from each other with differing political

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MEZAM DIVISION SHOWING NORTHERN MEZAM.

processes. We attribute this to the complex precolonial historical process, which resulted in the configuration of the northern Mezam area and the character of colonial policies, which both pretended to take into account local realities and brutally ignored these when they did not tie in with metropolitan interests. We will attempt to show how the precolonial processes affect the political activities as I interpret the data. The data we are using are primarily documentary, complemented with interviews we conducted in the area under study.

Background

The area under study covers what is referred today as Bafut Sub-Division, the Tubah subdivision and parts of the Bamenda subdivision in Mezam Division, North West Province, Cameroon (see map). The communities under study are the composite Chiefdom of Bafut, the chiefdoms of Bambili, Bambui, Kedjom-Keku (also referred to as Big Babanki) and Kedjom-Ketinguh (also known as Babanki-Tungo), which make up the present Tubah Sub-Division and the chiefdoms of Nkwen and Mendankwe, presently part of the administrative division of Bamenda Central Sub-Division. We can also include Bafinge (Finge), whose attempts to assert its independence from Bambui during the colonial and postcolonial period have led to a political crisis of considerable proportions, and Mundum which is also involved in an equally complex struggle to disentangle itself from Bafut hegemony. These crises inevitably lead to competition for prestige and position that has characterised intercommunity relation during the colonial and postcolonial period within the area.

The area has been chosen for one reason: during the colonial period, and for some time into the postcolonial period, it formed one administrative unit. This situation, which was largely a making of the colonial regime, was predicated on the assertion of similar identity, a principle derived from a truncated political reading of the history of the peoples. It was also dictated in part by the need to create Native Authority units within the Indirect Rule framework. The structure of the present administrative organisation is not only dictated in part by the contiguity of territory but also by pressures elites of the areas concerned wishing to stress difference where co-operation is difficult to come by. This will be demonstrated in the latter part of this study.

The present paper studies the evolution of the intercommunity relations that resulted from the attempts to create a single administrative unit out of people who had formed separate entities but who entertained various relations between themselves in precolonial times. We will attempt to prove that the politics of identity fluctuated from *co-operation* when these communities tended to stress on similarity and to *conflict* when differences were

more apparent. The latter situation largely debunked the illusion of common descent at the basis of these administrative arrangements. One of the basic arguments that I will attempt to make is that this fluctuation between assertions of similarity and difference respectively were the result of the processes of social formation, which characterised the Grassfields during the precolonial period.

An understanding of the history of the peoples who make up the area will help in an understanding of the political process at play in intercommunity relations. The area under study is situated in the area that has come to be referred in ethnographic literature as the Cameroon Grassfields, an appellation derived from the savannah vegetation that covers the western highlands of Cameroon. In precolonial times it was inhabited by a mosaic of centralised political units ranging from small chiefdoms of around a thousand persons to what Engard (1989: 131) terms petty conquest states which could number several tens of thousands. These state-like structures were generally organised into a hierarchy comprising sacred kings, nobility and commoner categories although the degree of complexity varied considerably depending on the size of the group.

The area under study was inhabited in the majority by peoples speaking a group of inter-intelligible languages classified as Ngemba (a term coined in the colonial period from the local expression for "that is to say", which is common to these groups). The chiefdoms of Bafut, Bambili, Bambui, Nkwen, Mundum and Mendankwe all speak languages which fall into this category, which is a subgroup of the Mbam-Nkam group of Grassfields Bantu (Ayuninjam 1998). The Kedjom of Kedjom Keku and Kedjom Ketinguh and the Finge (Bafinge) speak languages, which are generally classified under the Ring groups of Grassfields Bantu. Their languages bear similarities to the ItangiKom (Kom), Lamnso (Nso), Oku and to some degree Babungo, all languages of central and eastern Ring.

Linguistic distinctions are clear in tone, syntax and phonology although there may be a high degree of inter-intelligibility in terms of lexicon all over the Grassfields in general and in the area under study in particular. A closer lexico-statistical study may point to a closer relationship between these two language groups, which have been co-existing for a considerably long time. It is also in the domain of language where similarity and difference become a salient feature.

The real history of the area as observed in fact and material evidence needs to be distinguished from the mythical or ideological/political history. The question of similarity and difference are also reflected in the contemporary processes. The Ngemba speaking peoples who form the bulk of the substrata of the area under study are said to have moved westwards from the Bamboutos-Menoua area (Engard 1988) or the area to the south of the Bamenda plateau and several centuries ago, inhabiting the latter area and areas extending to the Southern part of Kom in the 18th and 19th century (Warnier 1975). The Kedjom and their affines, on their part, have been

itinerant smiths and herdsmen who changed several settlements over the past five centuries within the area delineated by Warnier (1982) and Warnier and Fowler (1979) as the Iron belt. Their latest settlements were in Oku, the Southern part of Kom (Nggvinkijem sector), and Kuwee (Kedjom Ketinguh area) in the 18th and 19th centuries. These constant shifts in settlement were conditioned by defence needs, the search for fertile areas, salty water and pasture for dwarf cattle, surface deposits of iron ore and wooded area for carving and charcoal and trading posts. Chilver (1990) notes that Kedjom historical traditions point to "a form of upland use associated with herding dwarf cows, and with smelting, smithing and carving as important occupations. Fragments of this group are scattered over a large area. They appear to have moved their settlements frequently".

The oral traditions of the Kedjom also point to dramatic events such as a natural catastrophe around Lake Oku and dynastic disputes, which led to the dispersal of significant segments of its population over a wide area. The Kedjom that claim their princes founded the communities of Finge and Kedjom Ketinguh while another was awarded the Fonship of Bafut. These claims, which are echoed in different forms in these communities, form the basis of some of the competition and struggles that characterise the area under study.

The Bambui (Mbui), Bambili (Mbilegi), Nkwen and Mendankwe form part of an East-West movement, which brought Ngemba speakers from the Mbouda-Dschang area via the Bamenda, plateau to the Belo valley (Nggvin Kijem). Causes for these movements are obscure but they seem to first have been motivated by the desire to control trade between iron producing areas and oil producing areas as Warnier (1975, 1982, 1985) has shown and then by the incidence of the Chamba wars, which affected a large area (Chilver & Kaberry 1970; Chilver 1981). Engard (1988) summarises this in the following manner: "...the desirability of occupying interstitial positions between oil and iron producing areas, or of creating and maintaining alliances and trade partnerships in neighbouring kingdoms, provided one important impetus to movement and admixture on the plateau."

In fact movement forward and backward either from the Mbouda-Dschang area via Widekum to the Kom Highlands and back to the Bamenda plateau are all parts of a complex process where both economic and politico-military motives are at play. Bafut's history has been characterised by a convergence of Ngemba speaking peoples (Mambu, Bawum, Mankanikong, Banji) in a nucleus around the settlement of Mbebeli, the seizure of power by elements said to be kinsmen of the Kedjom (Babanki), the enlargement of the polity through the conquest of indigenous peoples (Buwe-Bukari, Mbekong, Bugiri, Buka be Neban, Mbetang, Bunoh, Mantaa, Banji, Tingo, Obang, Bukaa, Buwi) and the assimilation of smaller groups (Tardits 1981). As one of the relatively large petty conquest states of the Bamenda plateau (Warnier 1975), it could also exert a hegemony or protectorship over Mankon. In political terms it was a regional power with which the

other chiefdoms entertained one relation or the other. Most of the chiefdoms (with the exception of the Kedjom) replicated the Bafut model of political organisation, tied their history to the development of Bafut and implicitly accepted its dominant position.

On the whole the type of relations between the chiefdoms ranged from kinship and friendship ties to diplomatic relations in the model described by Warnier (1985) and Nkwi (1986). Kedjom and Nkwen claimed kinship ties with Bafut (we will come to that later) while Bambili and Bambui tended to share a closer linguistic community only situating vague origins in the Mbembeli settlements. According to some informants Bambui was on close diplomatic relations with Kom in the 19th century. The Finge, who echoed the claim of their origins in the Kedjom group floated between integration into Kom, the Kedjom and Bambui, who eventually became their overlords. In the second half of the 19th century the Nkwen/Mendankwe group, Bambui and Bambili lived within the area considered to be under Kedjom dominion in present southern Kom (Geary 1980: 67; Chilver & Kaberry 1967). The cohabitation at this area must have been a forerunner to co-operation later in the colonial period. Conflicts are hardly mentioned in the records and by informants. Only one conflict is mentioned in Kedjom traditions between Bambili and the Kedjom and another between a "Babanki group and a Bafut group" (Aletum 1971)¹.

As one can observe, these relations evolved in the manner described by Samir Amin (1998), who prefers the term "peoples" to "tribe" (as used in colonial literature) or ethnic group (in current literature). According to Amin (*ibid.*: 54-55) such relations coincide with matrimonial exchanges, exchanges over a wide distance, the accumulation of surplus, political centralisation, mythologies of ancestry and of origin, religious beliefs, and common language. In these systems, there is a sense of community at the various stages without necessarily developing into a sense of "ethnic" belonging: there is the village community and the surrounding villages characterised by the same elementary dependent unity and/or intricate matrimonial relations. The area also had the pluralistic character of pre-capitalist societies where there is cohabitation between zones of a denser crystallisation of population and the development of productive, political and religious forces, intermediate zones dependent more or less vaguely on the former, and "enclaves which have escaped the homogenisation (linguistic, religious, economic, or political) imposed by larger states" without the question of minorities arising (*ibid.*: 55). It was this situation that the colonial administration was trying to transform. What one observes here is a colonial construction of the tribe as Amselle and M'Bokolo (1985) have shown or the "dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere" of politics

1. This is referring to the legendary forebears of the present Bafut kingdom and should not be confused with Bambui.

(Hobsbawm 1983: 13). It is the transformation of this norm of plurality under the imperative of the modern state formation first as a colonial process and then as postcolonial process that we are going to examine.

Historiography, Administration and Politics during the British Mandate

Colonial Ethnography and Administrative Practice

The area under study fell under the Southern Cameroons² part of the League of Nations and, later on, United Nations mandated territory under British rule, which resulted from the partition of the German colony of Kamerun. This territory was administered as part of Eastern Nigeria with which it was contiguous and broken down into divisions, and then provinces, manned by a hierarchy of imperial colonial officers responsible to a Lieutenant Governor in the Eastern region of Nigeria. At local level a system of Indirect Rule was instituted wherein local chiefs were accorded considerable powers in the administration of their areas (Ngoh 1990: 147-149; Niba 1995: 67). The policy of Indirect Rule required among other things the designation of chiefs or headmen through whom it could control “lesser members of their tribes”. The area under study formed part of Bamenda Division, one of the four administrative units into which this territory had been divided. The principle underlying the organisation of administrative units within the Indirect Rule were Lord Lugard’s request that “care should be taken to write a concise historical and ethnological account of the people” (Lugard, in Niba 1995: 68). As such, Hal Cadman was sent from Northern Nigeria with the task of preparing such a report on the precolonial history and models of political organisation in the Cameroon Province “as a guideline for administrative officers” (*ibid.*). This type of report was therefore to combine two concepts derived from the practice of anthropology and historiography of the time and linked to filiation: kinship and descent, all terminology intimately associated with the concept of ethnicity (Weber, in Parsons 1965: 306; Chazan *et al.* 1992).

The use of these twin concepts could have eased the task of geographical demarcation but resulted in a “gross oversimplification of the diversities and complexities” (de Vries 1998: 20) that characterised the area. At times, this practice also led to a distortion of historical and social anthropological facts to suit the demands of the Indirect Rule framework. This resulted as much from the difficulty of adapting this principle to a culturally diverse

2. British colonial appellation of its mandated territories in Cameroon. The northern part was referred to as Northern Cameroons while the southern part was referred to as Southern Cameroons. The colonial terminology is used throughout when referring to colonial realities.

area as from the attitude of local chiefs to the issue of sharing administrative units with peoples with whom they had defined and flexible contacts during the precolonial period.

I have shown elsewhere (Yenshu 1991: 174) that the system of Indirect Rule as developed in Northern Nigeria and recommended for implementation in the British territories was lacking in universal applicability especially in the Cameroons province. Unlike Northern Nigeria where the indigenous system of political organisation was characterised by large, populous, hierarchical state system under the command of Muslim warlords, communities in the Cameroons were diverse in terms of socio-political organisation ranging from acephalous groups in most of the forest region (present South West province) to semi-state like structures in some parts of the North West Province and the territories dependent on the Sultanate of Sokoto (Northern Cameroons). Within the Bamenda Division (present North West Province) the indigenous socio-political units varied in terms of population size, land area and socio-political organisation. Most of these groups lived in relative independence and in some cases as sovereign micro-states within a system of economic and political exchanges which ensured local balance unless otherwise disturbed by large scale wars as in the case of the Chamba (Fardon 1998; Nyamndi 1988) and Fulani invasions (Chilver 1969). The British were thus face with a dilemma of a totally different sort: they neither had large state structures comparable to what obtained in Northern Nigeria which could play a relay role in the area nor could they appoint warrant chiefs as in Southern Nigeria since this would be vehemently opposed.

The first act of the British administration in the Western Grassfields was to secure the "confidence, loyalty and support of the most influential and powerful chiefs namely those of Bali, Bikom (Kom), Bagam, Bafut, Bansa, Babungo and Bameta (Meta)" (Che Mfombong 1980: 58) and construct the system of Indirect Rule around them. The rationale for this system was provided by the ethnographic studies of colonial administrators or staff of colonial office on assignment which did not present an impassionate, objective analysis of social data for their scientific value, but an exploration of institutions to adapt to the strategy of Indirect Rule. On the basis of assessments and intelligence reports relations of domination between prominent and less prominent groups were sought. Very often, more prominent groups were elevated to positions of paramount chiefs over less prominent ones, depending on whatever historical ties had been reconstructed from the ethnographic and administrative reports. The functions of presidency over Native Authority councils and courts often devolved on the prominent chiefs. This succeeded in some cases but the constant experimentation in various forms of self government by the British points to the difficulties encountered in the implementation of this policy as there was resistance from groups which had enjoyed high levels of autonomy during the precolonial period. A better understanding of the British colonial policy in the area would be to contrast it with the German policy of Direct Rule, which

used intermediaries but in a more violent and repressive manner. Chilver (1969) examined the role of Bali Nyonga as an intermediary chief in the German colonial regime and showed the incompatibility of the roles that the Mfon (king) of Bali Nyonga was expected to play. He was both expected to administer the whole of the region in the name of the German crown and act as recruitment agent for the WAPV plantation (a private firm) established at the coast. More recently, O'Neil (1996: 81-100) has explored in detail this intermediary position of the Bali and this style of German Direct "Indirect Rule" showing the abuses that this resulted in. There are reports of neighbouring peoples being transformed into vassals, continued slave—dealing, terrorism and collaboration in the brutal subjection of the resistant people. O'Neil has demonstrated that this led to "open rebellion. . . and a lasting, although sometimes ill defined, bitterness towards Bali-Nyonga". The Bali Nyonga relationship to the Germans had a two-fold impact on the British presence in the area. While some people were ready to adopt the Bali-style collaboration in the search for paramount chiefs, the British were careful not to run into the same type of difficulties as the Germans. This explains the caution exercised in the demarcation of Native Authority areas and the various forms of administrative units experimented during this period. A look at the situation in the Northern Mezam chiefdoms points to this type of difficulties.

Between the assessment reports of 1922 and 1948, when British administration in the Cameroons was reorganised, the Western Grassfields (Bamenda Division) comprised a variety of Native authority areas within which five of these had a single chief (Fon) as Native Authority (de Vries 1998: 20). Initially, the histories of most of the Northern Mezam seemed to point to some degree of affinity between the Kedjom chiefdoms, Bambili, Bambui, Nkwen and Mendankwe on the one hand and Bafut on the other. The task of establishing this relation proved daunting with the administrator-cum-social scientist resorting to other spurious strategies of establishing fact.

Basing his argument on a pseudo-Hamitic hypothesis, Hawkesworth, the Assistant District Officer, reconstructed a history of Bafut which ultimately brought them from Bornu via Mbumland (near Ngaoundéré), Tibati and Ndop (Ndobo) or Tikar country as ultimate point of ethnogenesis. He then concluded that it is from this area that "Tikar" dispersions took place as a result of demographic pressures and internal dissension, which would explain the headship of each migratory movement by a chief's son. Although the administrator stumbled on obstacles presented by a political undertone in the narratives as the chiefs were likely to "exaggerate for political reasons the actual number of their ancestors", he could identify waves of migrations from Tikar country. A movement comprising Bafut, with a king-list of eighteen and comprising the villages of "Bambili, Babanki (Kedjom), Babanki-Tungaw (Kedjom-Ketinguh) and Bafreng (Nkwen)", was identified. A contemporaneous group involving Bamenyam, Bamenda (Mendankwe) and Bambui was also identified. Attempts at piecing a single

history out of the various clan histories proved complicated as “the accounts given by the chiefs all [placed] self-glorification before fact to such an extent that little [could] be made of a narrative of historical worth” (Hawkesworth 1926: 8). The solution chosen was to present all accounts with “such minor criticisms as [were] possible” and then compare with reports from other parts of the Division. Such a study showed that these groups were united by some common origins in “Ndop”. This report however pointed to the paucity of this approach of using history and supposed clan relationships in establishing a Native Authority. Hawkesworth indicated that this was partly a result of the British aversion to the German style experiment with the Bali Nyonga and other large chiefdoms, which had resulted in chiefs being “intensely suspicious of any attempts to super-impose individual licentious powers” placed at the disposal of bigger chiefs. His major argument in placing Bafut at the headship of the Native Authority was based on demography, historical records and a longer king list. Hawkesworth was however quick to recognise that “the chief of Bafut never had an atom of authority outside the Bafut territory and any attempt to extend his individual authority was fiercely resented”. As such, caution was taken in making recommendations in the organisation of the Native Authority. Hawkesworth felt that it would be unrealistic expecting that the groups in question “will at once re-coalesce into clans and immediately function under a District Head”. His decision to proceed with the organisation of this area into one group was based on his alleged discovery of “an intensely strong spirit and that whenever the chiefs were brought into mutual contact, their discussions revealed a common basis and inspired enthusiasm as to their collective welfare as opposed to the spirit of parochialism which [German] Direct Rule [had] done much to foster. Eventually, they declined to give any important ruling on Native Customs without consulting their colleagues. . . Even chiefs who were inclined to dispute individual seniority were constantly found to be using the phrase ‘but we are of the same family’ and the privilege of performing the rites of ancestors worship on brother chiefs’ heads is strictly preserved within the family” (*ibid.*: 27). He even indicated the interest shown by Bambui and Mendankwe in “coalescing with the Bafut” and regretted having Bamenyam in French territory.

The principle underlying the organisation of the Native Authority Unit was the “corporate spirit” (*ibid.*: 28). The recommendation was therefore that the administration of the area be entrusted to the seven chiefs in council with Bafut and Babanki (Kedjom Keku) acting as senior members and Native Authority. The alleged difference of the so-called members of the Bamenyam movement (Bambui, Mendankwe) was dismissed on demographic reasons since they were a staggering tenth or so of the population of the area. It was to be expected that Babanki and Bafut would “gradually assume control over this area” but it was considered premature to force them into such an organisation (*ibid.*: 28).

This shaky organisation was immediately fraught with problems, which subsequent reorganisations could not surmount. This was largely because of attempts to build on a history, which was largely misunderstood by the colonial administration. Duncan, Divisional officer for Bamenda, reported in 1929 that, on the basis of this assessment, a council had been established and a Native Court established in 1927 and that the members of this council were “co-operating”. The observation seemed to be only at the surface as by 1931 the Divisional Officer was cautious not to emphasise that the chiefs of Babanki and Bafut were “the only Native Authorities for the whole area”. The other chiefs also resented not only the central position of Bafut in the area, but the practice of paying taxes through the Bafut Native Court.

A conciliar form of administration was proposed alongside the recommendation that the Native courts whose, co-presidents were Babanki (Kedjom) and Bafut, be transformed into Native Authority³. The formula agreed upon by the administration of the Cameroons Province was “the chiefs of Bafut and Babanki in council with the chief of Babanki-Tungaw, Bafreng, Bambili, Bambui and Bamenda”⁴.

Neither these nor the recommendations of the Assessment Report of 1926 to the effect that Bafut would eventually be transformed into Native Authority ever materialised fully (Hook 1934: 29). It was thus recommended that each chief in council “representing the highest organised unit of government should constitute the Native Authority for the particular village group” (*ibid.*). Hook’s Report was more inclined to a loose arrangement where the District Officer would occasionally “convene a meeting of all chiefs and councils with a view to discussing matters affecting the area; at such meetings the pre-eminence of the chiefs of Bafut and Babanki could be recognised” (*ibid.*). When the Resident toured the area he reported that he had met the seven groups and after full discussions, the latter “confirmed their unanimous and urgent desire for re-organisation, the seven groups in council to form the Native Authority⁵ [each] to be individually responsible for authority in one’s own village group, but to work collectively in a common council”. In judicial matters, he reported that although the Native Court existed in Bafut, there were proposals for recognised “village group courts with limited. . . powers for each of the seven groups, and a confederate court which will act as a Native Court of appeal at a common centre” to be at a central site in Nkwen. These were also contained in the Resident’s proposals for the reorganisation of the area (dated 19 March 1935). The inspection notes of the acting Governor also confirmed the dissatisfaction of

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3. Cf. Memorandum No. B 197/a of 10th June 1931 from the Divisional Officer, Bamenda to the Senior Resident for the Cameroons Province.
 4. Cf. Memorandum of 28 December 1931 from Resident of Cameroons Province to Secretary Southern Province, Enugu.
 5. Cf. Extract of Resident’s Touring Notes on the Bamenda Division, February-March 1935 in File No. 1303, National Archives, Buea, Cameroon.

the six chiefs with the siting of the Native Court in Bafut. A decision was thus taken to move it to a central and neutral site, Tubah, near Nkwen while village courts operated in each unit⁶.

Kedjom-Led Resistance

When these recommendations were implemented, they resulted in a mini-state system akin to the one that existed in precolonial times. However, this did not solve the problems linked to the heterogeneity of the area. The Kedjom Keku who claimed seniority based on a totally different sort of argument immediately challenged this argument. Informants in Kedjom Keku report the vocal opposition of Fon Vugah I (ruled c1896-1936) to the attempts by the British to decree the Fon of Bafut as paramount chief in the area. Debates and competition among the chiefs of the area over the question of who was supposed to be paramount were intense and only occasionally put to rest through the use of traditional procedures such as oaths. On one such occasion the Fon of Bafut is report to have been summoned by the Fon of Kedjom to swear on his grand father's drinking horn to prove the veracity of his argument.

Vubangsi, who became Fon of Kedjom Keku in 1936, continued his father's opposition to the dominant position of Bafut in the Native Authority area. In fact, his reading of the new arrangement was completely at variance with the position of the colonial administration. In July 1943, he petitioned the administration on this issue, arguing that Bafut Fons were descended from Kedjom Fons and thus, it would "obviously not be correct" that a descendant from their town, "however large his empire may be", lord it over them. This petition evoked issues of differential treatment such as the presentation of a portrait of King George of England to the Fon of Bafut alone, as well as substantive issues such as the abolition of his title of co-president of the Native Authority Court, and the demotion to that of a vice-president. He argued that his earlier objections had been ignored. He would thus object to the suggestion that he "learns the language of Bafut" with his people in order to join the Bafut Native administration against their wishes. He went ahead to indicate that two other groups had been forced to join another group. Rather tribal differences were respected in the organisation of the Native Authority scheme. In substance, he was invoking the principle of kinship albeit in a different form to argue his case. The relation to the Fon of Bafut was only to "a certain extent", in fact, not strong enough to warrant his "objection" to the former. He was not only asserting his independence, but also objecting to the principle of using demographically

6. Cf. Extract of the Lieutenant Governor's Notes on Cameroon Province dated 7/5/35 in File LG 1303, National Archives, Buea, Cameroon.

prominent chiefdoms in the administration of areas generally varied or composite in nature.

The reply to this letter, which confirmed the Bafut claim to the headship of the Native Administration of the area and his position of Vice President, also rejected the request to break off from the Bafut Native Authority. Fon's Vubangsi's dissatisfaction with this arrangement led to another petition to the chief Commissioner for the Southern Provinces of Nigeria, in April 1944. In this petition, he felt that local colonial officials had misconstrued his request. He continued to challenge the principle of a grandson of the Fon of Kedjom having privileges over the titular head of the Kedjom, qualifying such a relationship as "indisputable". He felt that the situation he was challenging could only have been "brought about by misapprehension or misunderstanding from a genealogical and historical point of view during any assessment on the two villages". He thus continued to assert his right to the Presidency of the Native Authority in an area where he was the rightful successor to a genealogical line to which the Fon of Bafut was in a junior or grandson relationship. He thus sought to represent the area as did the Fons of Bali, Kom and Nso in their own areas. He also requested that the practice of holding Native Administration meetings in the Bafut Fon's palace be abandoned in favour of the central courthouse in Tubah. Finally, he did not forget his earlier request that a portrait of the King of England be given to him as was the case with other important kings in the Division.

This request was simply rejected, as was another petition he jointly sent, in association with the other Fons, against the status of the Fon of Bafut. The latter petition argued that the treatment of the other chiefs as village heads and sub-chiefs of Bafut, qualifying this as a very serious error, which required immediate redress since "the Bafut Fon had no authority over them". They also argued for a rotatory presidency of the Native Authority court. Their objection to the dominant position of Bafut was based on their assertion of autonomy and independence from Bafut during the precolonial era. In substance, the petition stated that:

"We the seven chiefs who make up the Bafut area should be called Fons or village heads in the place of giving the title to the Bafut chief alone which is not correct. If he is to be called the District head or clan head in our area, he should then have a separate court from us because we have not recognised and given him the title under dispute and do not give him such undue position in our council House and it is a European organisation wish. We firmly believe that, under the Native Administration rules, except matters of criminal nature, all the entire organisation has to be built on the basis of Native laws and customs agreed by the population; and we are sure that we have the right to decide who is to rule us and the government we best like"⁷.

7. Cf. Petition of 23rd February 1944 by the Fons of Kedjom Keku (Babanki), Kedjom Ketinguh, Nkwon, Bambui and Bambili to the Chief Commissioner for the Southern Provinces of Nigeria on the question of the Headship of the Bafut Native Authority.

They rejected the appellation of Bafut as applied to the area and suggested that the area be referred to as Atuabah, the name of the central area in which the court was situated. They also prayed for the name Bafut to be restricted to Bafut proper. The petition requested that their salaries be 10% of tax returns and not an arbitrary rate in favour of Bafut.

This was a blunt challenge not only to the dominant position of Bafut in the Native Authority but to the British system of Indirect Rule which was qualified as “European”, thus alien. The argument for an indigenous principle in organising relations between chiefdoms was a bold affront on a colonial administration, which believed in its inherent superiority. In other words, the Vubangsi-led petition argued that if the system of Indirect Rule was taken to its logical conclusion, then the only guiding principle would be “Native Laws and Customs”.

The decision to shove aside these petitions did not lay the matter to rest as the Kedjom Fon kept harping on attempts to relegate him to a subordinate position even with the reorganisation of the Native Administration in 1948. The latest in the series of petitions were totally oblivious of the fact that the proposed reorganisation of a south eastern Federation was on “more democratic lines”, since “none of the members [had] precedence over the other”⁸. In fact, we can say that in every respect the petition against the position of *primus inter pares* enjoyed by the Fon of Bafut had had the intended effect of respecting the precolonial arrangements in the organisation of the Native Authority.

The new South Eastern Native Authority Federation comprising the Northern Mezam area (then known as Bafut), Ndop and Nso which came into being with the creation of a Bamenda Province in 1948 was short-lived. This unit based on the principle of an alleged Tikar origin was as fragile as the “Bafut Native Authority”. By 1958, Nso opted to withdraw and the area was thus broken down into Bafut-Ndop and Nso Native Authority areas. The Bafut-Ndop arrangement also fell apart after independence as the areas were carved out into Bafut and Ndop as area councils. Within former Bafut NA area carved into a Bafut and later Tubah Area Council Bafut continued to enjoy a dominant position but in a less systematic manner than before. The name of the area came to be known as Tubah as had been requested by the other six chiefs.

Resistance from within

Following the decision to recognise the seven community heads as the Native Authority of the area in council issues pertaining to integrating other smaller units began to surface. This concerned principally small groups, which had either been dependent on bigger chiefdoms or had enjoyed some

8. Reply from Resident, Cameroon Province, 25 September, 1948.

protection from them in precolonial times. Some of these issues were addressed immediately and never resurfaced again while others have constituted a veritable *casus belli* for the area. Two of such problems would illustrate the point.

In 1941, the Fon of Bafut acting as president of the Bafut Native Authority, petitioned that Banja, a village situated between Mendakwe and Bambili, should be included in the Bafut Native Authority area on the grounds that when the former migrated from the Santa area, Mendankwe provided them with land. The argument implied that Mendankwe was landlord to the Banja and the latter could not therefore seek to enter into independent arrangements with other parties. The implied consequence was that if such a thing happened land belonging to "him" (notice the expression "my land") will be alienated. Moreover in the emerging system which was partially based on a precolonial arrangement the boundary existed only between Bambili and Mendankwe. This meant that in the worldview that dictated this system no intermediary groups existed. As a subordinate to Mendankwe, Banja had to channel taxes through the former to the Native Authority treasury. In fact Banja had been included in the Ngemba Native Authority due to their preference for this group. A more plausible reason, which could have militated in favour of putting this group together with the other groups, should have been spatial. Banja, which was sandwiched between two villages of the "Bafut" group, had elected to join the Awing (Bambuluwi) Village court allegedly on grounds that their customs were similar, although both differed in language, historical origins and culture. Consequently, the colonial administration rejected the request by the Fon of Bafut and recommended the association of Banja with the Ngemba Native Authority to the centre of present day Mezam. Such a policy seemed to have continued right to the end of the British Colonial period and until a Bamenda Urban Council was formed federating two of the groups which had belonged to the "Bafut" group (Nkwen, Mendankwe) with some of the Ngemba group (Mankon, Mbatu, Chomba, Nsongwa) and the urban area lying-in-between to constitute the modern town of Bamenda.

The Finge case proved more difficult to handle. Finge although apparently living in a dependent position vis-à-vis Bambui, decided to sue the Fon of Bambui to the Native Authority court in 1954 so that a boundary be fixed between them. Their argument was that the Germans had established a precolonial boundary on a consensus basis but that the Fon of Bambui had instigated his subjects to bring up a case against them. He was thus asking for a boundary between the two communities. The Native Authority court dismissed this under the grounds that Finge was a "sub-town" and it would be absurd establishing a boundary. A subsequent appeal in October 1954 and July 1955 for a review of the lower court's decision was rejected on the grounds that the only recognised boundary was between Bambui and Kedjom Keku. An attempt in 1960 to settle matters by the

Premier of West Cameroon simply confirmed the “seven-chief-only” system. In fact he only confirmed the colonial decision by stating that:

“All chiefdoms were fully established and that there could be no question of creating new ones. He said there was no empty space in Cameroon since all land was owned. This meant that new settlers on any land must be prepared to subject themselves to the jurisdiction of the owners of the land”⁹.

Besides reaffirming an earlier ruling in favour of Bambui, the Premier stated that “government had no intention of recognising an eighth chief” and that there was no way the Finge village head could be “made a chief” i.e. achieve the status of the other chiefs as recognised by the system or even be integrated into it. Not much was achieved as the Finge continued to assert their autonomy from Bambui till of recent. This has resulted in hostilities and attempts to resolve them have yielded little fruit. Such hostilities culminated in violent conflicts in March to August 1996 when many people were killed and the whole of the Fingie village rendered homeless with one of the principal underlying causes of the dispute being Fingie assertion of autonomy from Bambui¹⁰. The interesting issue here is the constant reference to colonial records to argue for legitimacy. While Fingie people are referring to German maps showing Fingie as an independent village¹¹, Bambui people argue their case for supremacy over the former in reference to British colonial court decisions¹².

This conflict would merit a separate treatment on its own right but it only points to the fragility of the system that was instituted and which has survived as the basis of even the postcolonial system of administration in the area.

In the case of Bafut it seems that the British colonial system had given the Fon of Bafut more powers than had been wielded by such status occupants during the precolonial period. Aletum (1974: 94) has argued that conflicts in the traditional sphere were exacerbated during this period because the colonial regime had the effect of intensifying arbitrary rule. The transformation of a *primus inter pares* position, wielded by Bafut proper within a quasi-confederate arrangement with Bawum and Mambu, into a position of dominance has continued to be resisted by the Nto¹³ of Bawum. Autonomy which had been won through “competition and conflict” (*ibid.*: 53) and which set limits to autocratic rule was corroded with the recognition of a single chief for Bafut and the extension of his powers beyond what

9. Cf. Minutes of the meeting to settle the dispute between Bambui and Finge people by the Premier, Hon. J. N. Foncha on 23rd January 1960.

10. *The Herald* (Newspaper), No. 343, August 14-15 1996; No. 345, August 19-20 1996; No. 358, September 18-19 1996.

11. *Ibid.* No. 358, p. 1, 3.

12. *Ibid.* No. 345, p. 3.

13. Local Bafut term for clan head.

constituted his dominion in precolonial times. The most recent manifestation is the quarrel over a boundary between Bafut and Bawum, a quarrel that bears similarities to the Bambui-Finge case.

“The *ntoh* of Bawum has long been a thorn in the side of the *fon* of Bafut. . . He continues to press traditional claims to ownership of large sections of the quarters of the south eastern expansion area (Nso-Agyati-Nsem), even though the palace has constituted these areas as independent quarters. He hopes ultimately to regain these lost hunting lands and thatching grass hills (categories of land which are also *njoo nufoa*, ‘things of chiefship’), obtain recognition of Bawum as an independent chiefdom, and secede from Bafut altogether” (Engard 1989: 144).

The classification of Bawum as second class chiefdom, a status equal to that enjoyed by some rulers in the area, may lend some credibility to the Bawum case.

One can but present an overview of these internal crises since they are too specific to be treated in the present study. It is important, nevertheless, to point to the complexity of the internal organisation of these communities that simplistic and reductionist colonial visions hastily overlooked.

Impact on Postcolonial Visions and Political Practices

The processes set in motion by colonial politics had an evident effect on postcolonial visions and political practices, especially in terms of intercommunity relations and local charter and foundation histories.

Impact on Local Charter/Foundation Histories

The use of local charter histories in carving out local administrative units had a profound impact on local peoples’ reformulation of their foundation histories. Most of the histories have thus been integrated into a claim perspective (Chilver 1990), in response to the demands of the colonial administration which was evidently impressed with the alleged superiority of a supposed Tikar peoples as against “despised” Moghamo (Hawkesworth Assessment Report, p. 27). The Tikar hypothesis has come under serious scrutiny over time until of relatively recent times. Chilver and Kaberry (1971: 13-14) dismissed it at an earlier period as a theory of political legitimisation adopted by some Grassfields people while, in an exhaustive analysis, Jeffreys (1964: 152) concluded that: “It is doubtful, therefore, whether one is justified in continuing to use the name Tikar because its connotation is uncertain: the answer to the question *Who are the Tikar?* is that as a distinct tribe there is no such people.”

Price (1979: 89-98) revisited the issue by trying to restrict the appellation to the "six contiguous Tikar kingdoms" of Bankim, Ga, Nditam, Ngoumé, Kong and Ngambé, situated in the Upper region of the Mbam river to the West of the Adamawa highlands. He showed that there was a degree of similarity between these kingdoms and some Grassfields polities but also marked differences which could put them as different peoples.

The intrigue with the Tikar issue also led Eldridge Mohammadou to interpret claims by some western Grassfields Kingdoms to the exportation of the Tikar model by Chamba invasions into the Grassfields (Zeitlyn 1995: 104). Fowler and Zeitlyn on their part (1996: 9) argue that it was linked to the independence within the two-alternative framework. They also argue that the ritual and genealogical relation of the powerful kingdoms of Bamum and Nso mediates in favour of the claims to Tikar origins. The argument goes thus: "Since Bamum and Nso' do have a visible link to Bankim, this serves as a model for other Grassfields groups with aspirations to wider political influence. . . we are a high status groups, therefore, we have historical links with Bankim."

Yenshu (forthcoming) has argued elsewhere that the Tikar claim was neither linked to the two-alternative question of the plebiscite for Southern Cameroons independence nor to the quest for a status similar to that of the power kingdoms of Nso and Bamum. He attempts to show that these were fostered by colonial administrators in search of regularity in ethnographic and historical data intended for political purposes. Data available show that the local peoples were totally ignorant of the Tikar country until they were informed of alleged kinship ties with a certain distant Tikar people by the colonial administration.

An examination of the realistic relationship between these groups will show a totally different picture from the colonial reports. Kedjom sources insist on a direct kinship relationship between the Kedjom kingdoms and Bafut but claim they were friendly and provided protection to the Nkwen/Mendankwe group, Bambui and Bambili as they fled Chamba raids to seek refuge in the Nggvinkijem sector (Geary 1980). It is unlikely that these claims will be accepted nowadays by the other peoples. Thus, while relations with Bafut are considered kinship relations, those with the other groups are considered as based on friendship.

Even when one examines the Babanki-Bafut relationship, one finds glaring disparities, which rather point to relations in time rather than common ethnogenesis (Yenshu, forthcoming). However it is difficult trying to establish the reality of these relations in a context where historical accounts are also political (i.e. ideological) data and where supposed relations do not only result in co-operation. In any case the relation to the Kedjom should be read as only one aspect of the histories of these peoples who also have their own independent historical charters, which express their essentially heterogeneous nature. We would agree with Chilver (1990 working notes) that "it looks as if the dynastic and other myths, at least in their official

versions, have been elaborated and consolidated since the succession troubles of the late sixties". In fact there have been a progressive stabilisation of the versions of origins since the colonial period probably with the post-literature effect and the cross-fertilisation of historical traditions as background to political arrangements. In the latter count we will only partly share Engard's (1989) view that the imputed relationship between Babanki (Kedjom) and Bafut "seems to reflect modern political developments rather than actual common historical ethnogenesis"¹⁴.

The other groups have tended to become more realistic in the quest for their primordial origins. Bambili has resorted to a Widekum centre of origins common to most Ngemba speaking peoples (Warnier 1975). An interesting version brings the so-called Baminyam group from the Widekum area through the present Bambili area to the present Ndop plain and back to the lake area from where there is a dispersion (Soh Bejeng 1981). A more recent version tends to integrate both perspectives when Bambili is presented as: "... a breakaway village of the Tikari tribe that migrate from northern Cameroon and settled in Ndop. They were supplanted by another larger migrant group from Widekum that has hitherto been the ruling family in Bambili" (Ayuninjam 1998: 6).

This may explain the politics of difference practised by some Bambili elites vis-à-vis other groups in the area such as the Kedjom communities and Bambui, politics which has resulted in boundary disputes and escalating to "random but fierce acts of hostility between the villages, hostilities which even the government appears incapable of ending" (*ibid.*). Despite these modifications in historical traditions as a result of the disputes, a wide range of ethnographic and anthropological literature has continued to reproduce the patterns of politically motivated literature of the British colonial period. Local versions of history still point to origin in Tikar country or Widekum showing that advances in research have not had an echo in the popular mind. On this regard we will be arguing with Hobsbawm (1983: 13) that a new historical tradition was invented for these people and at times in total disregard for their own real histories which evidently propelled their political life in its own way. The invention of this tradition was definitely an attempt to create or even re-create the tribe as a mode of colonial government. This attempt failed but kindled a new distorted sense of awareness obviously ambiguous: asset common origin and hence a common heritage while engaging in a politics of difference with the aim of achieving ascendancy over each other. The frustrations resulting from this type of political game have not led to the type of conflicts reported in other contexts in Africa but they bear its germs.

14. This suggests that these succession disputes were not unconnected to foundation history intrigues as some Kedjom versions seem to suggest. The elaboration of an official version of Bafut history such as the recent version collected by Engard may therefore be an attempt to lay to rest conflicts of insider—versus outsider—type underlying succession disputes.

Modifications in Intercommunity Relations and the Politics of Identity

The most important fact that characterised the colonial period in the Northern Mezam area was an attempt by the British colonial administration to extend Bafut hegemony over surrounding communities which were not only geographically contiguous but also historically related. Although the officers were initially cautious about the effect of this policy especially as it had proved disastrous in the case of Bali and the Germans they obstinately implemented it. This resulted in the protracted resistance from the Kedjom Keku Fons. This process of extension of hegemony and a counter hegemonic drive continued right into the postcolonial period. This has led to a renaming and then remodelling of the administrative district. From Bafut Native Authority it first became known as Bafut-Babanki Native Authority, then was also known as Bafut Area council where Bafut proper was known as Bafut West and the rest of the area as Bafut East. This nomenclature which was originally part of the Bamenda central sub-division of Mezam Division later became known as Tubah District to become Tubah Sub-division later and split into two with Bafut proper (including Mundum) constituting a separate administrative unit. One has to note that at some point the villages of Nkwen and Mendankwe, which had found substantial parts of their territories engulfed by the expanding town of Bamenda, were separated from the other seven units to be included in the Bamenda Urban council and integrated into the predominantly Ngemba speaking Bamenda Central Subdivision. The politics of the latter case will evidently constitute the subject of a separate study.

This constant remodelling is proof of the uneasy relations that continued to characterise an administrative unit, which was built on a shaky theory of ethnicity. This uneasiness is most evident in the conflicts over community boundaries. Apart from the communities of Kedjom Keku and Bafut, which have continued to maintain a principle of *no-boundary*, which enables farmers from their communities to farm across natural boundaries, almost all the other boundaries have been characterised by conflicts. One can identify the Bambui-Kedjom Keku conflict of the 1950s, the recent conflict between Bambili-Kedjom Ketinguh and the Bambili-Nkwen conflict¹⁵. Competition over the Bambui-Bambili boundary is a latent issue. These conflicts are proof as well of the shaky nature of inter-chiefdom relations as well as the fragility of precolonial boundaries which demographic pressure is bringing into focus.

Beyond the issue of boundaries the heads of the communities have continued to compete over issues of procedure and protocol. In the immediate Tubah district, the Presidency of the customary court, which devolved on

15. *The Herald*, No. 291, 296, 348.

the Fon of Bafut, then fell on the Fon of Kedjom Keku after Bafut was carved into a separate unit, is now hotly contested by the three other Fons.

In the larger framework of relations between traditional rulers, the Fons of Bafut and Nkwen are attempting a bid to play a leadership role. This is through the North-West Fons Union (NOWEFU) which is trying to federate some of the most prominent traditional rulers in the province. It may be symptomatic of earlier competition between their forefathers that the Fon of Kedjom Keku, still considered the most prominent of the Fons in the Tubah area, has chosen to join the rival North-West Fons' Conference (NOWEFCO) which brings together historically dynamic and powerful chiefdoms under the Ga¹⁶ of BaliKumbat.

In terms of legacy, the village or community councils and arbitration courts introduced with the 1935 reforms have become a permanent feature of all the chiefdoms recognised then. These features are absent in some of the smaller communities not recognised by this convention. Unfortunately, the central administrative area either as Bafut or Tubah or as two or three separate units has continued to bring together different communities under one principal council. The politics of these councils would point to the fact that the politics of rivalry and competition for ascendancy is far from over. Apart from Bafut whose position in its separate sphere is indisputable, competition is rife between the communities when it come to the question of who is mayor and from where and what section of the municipality it originates from. Even the most vocal opposition political party, the Social Democratic Front, is careful not to hurt tribal sensibilities. This becomes the issue of heated debate and political manoeuvring, even to conflicting levels. This is also true as concerns the choice of candidates for parliamentary elections and the choice of a minister.

In looking at the impact of these developments on the contemporary politics of the area one would have to investigate the strategies of accommodation and ascendancy in terms of the following: the competition for positions of pre-eminence (parliamentary representation, presidency of courts, ministerial positions, mayors, municipal councillors) and infrastructure that characterises the modern transformation of the area, e.g. administrative facilities (offices, buildings), social infrastructure (roads, schools, health units), and economy (markets, produce marketing cooperatives, project). These do not specifically constitute the subject of our study.

The question one is bound to ask is: what is the alternative in the present situation, i.e. a situation in which histories are consciously tailored to the needs of administrative demarcations. Such a question is important in an African context where the question of cohabitation between peoples within the modern nation state context is a crucial issue. Proponents of the state as "the only system that exist in a world" (Amin 1998: 48) are still using "legitimate force" to ensure that people of diverse origins are coerced into

16. Chamba term for king.

coexistence. Paradoxically, there is a new awakening to “regionalism, linguistic and cultural assertion, ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ loyalties, devotion to a religious community, attachment to a local community...” (*ibid.*). One wonders then what the best mode of cohabitation could be in such a contest where the state is an imperative and loyalties to the local community an ambient reality. It is not enough to condemn the latter for a new reality, namely the nation-in-the-making, to become a reality. Neither is it in fostering the ideology of difference as modernist elites are often seen to be doing. This could be best achieved through learning from the strategies of accommodation that were effective in the past, vestiges of which persist in present times. I use accommodation here in opposition to co-operation or cohabitation because the former bears within it the concepts of co-operation and difference, independence and interdependence. It is also void of the colonial notion of superiority which colonial notions of paramount chiefs introduced. This reflects the precolonial situation where communities of various sizes and strength existed side-by-side. It does not however exclude the possibility of disagreement but excludes resolution of these disagreements through violent conflict.

The Relation to Ethnicity

Our analysis tends to confirm the view that ethnicity was created by the colonial situation (Amin 1998: 56; Kuklick 1978). Amin (*ibid.*) has associated this process with the reorganisation of colonial territories and the search for intermediary chief in the need “to gain control of vast areas, often disorganised following the decline of the slave trade” in the “absence of states, or of a dependent or feudal class.” What we see here is an attempt by the “administrators and the military, poor amateur anthropologists” trying to invent a tribe (*ibid.*). The colonial practice in our area of study tended to resemble in all respects the practice in other British Colonies where “the anthropology written by full-time political officers, presumably reflecting their administrative inclinations” was of some significance (Kuklick 1978: 101). In this case the priority was to “restructure African societies for administrative convenience” (*ibid.*) by ensuring that “district boundaries were fixed to enclose areas of cultural and ethnic diversity” (de Souza & Porter 1974: 41). The use of oral traditions, with all its inconveniences, in the design of colonial administrative boundaries or the recognition of hierarchy is not new as this is reported in Ghana (Kuklick 1978: 106-107) with astonishingly similar results: resistance and accommodation.

The British attitude in our case was dictated by a reading of the political situation in terms of the needs of the colonial administration, which was inclined to exploit imbalances in its favour. Although Bafut was not a warrant chief as elsewhere his new transformed status was a creation or a novelty. Resistance only went to underline the inconsistency of the policy.

When all chiefs were eventually recognised as exercising collegial authority this transformed their status into a new class within the emerging peripheral capitalist set up. This is evident in the remuneration they were awarded, their status of auxiliaries of the colonial and then postcolonial administrations and the role in the management of courts and taxation. Their reactions or responses in terms of competition for scarce resources within the emerging structure at times divorced them from local interests. This explains their ambiguous status of custodians of culture (that is impressed by some members of the public on chiefs) or auxiliaries of administration devoid of any political role (cf. Cameroon law of 1977 on the organisation of chieftaincies).

What we have been trying to describe and explain is a two-way reconstruction of history and identity and its manipulation for political purposes. The British colonial administration created the present heightened sense of awareness about similarity that one can describe as latent in the peoples occupying the Northern Mezam area by transforming the various modes of co-habitation into a common denominator of kinship or common ethnogenesis. The local peoples re-appropriated this reconstruction and attempted to manipulate it for purposes of political competition. This explains the attempts to build similarities into one historical framework and use such for political ends. Since then other factors arguing for new criteria for the political categorisation (demography, strategic situation), have come into play. This shows that the politics of identity is not a static but a dynamic concept which feeds on changing political, economic and cultural contexts. It is as it were a situational variable. We have argued that neither coercive policies based on truncated histories nor the use of force lead to peaceful coexistence. The best strategy could be that of accommodation.

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ABSTRACT

Politics of identity, which often fluctuate between ethnicity and tribalism even resulting in armed conflict and genocide in some cases, can be traced to colonial attempts to reorganize peoples who accommodated themselves in the precolonial past. The paper attempts to show how relations based on accommodation in precolonial times have been modified to competing relations in colonial times and how this has affected postcolonial politics in the Northern Mezam area of Cameroon. Hoping to build on pre-existing relations of cooperation the colonial regime sowed the seeds of discord, division and tension that have given birth to divisive politics that does not serve the interest of national integration even at local level.

RÉSUMÉ

La dynamique des relations intercommunautaires et la politique identitaire dans la partie nord du département de la Mezam, Cameroun. — Les politiques d'identité, qui souvent fluctuent entre le repli identitaire et le tribalisme et débouchent parfois sur des conflits armés et des génocides, trouvent leur origine dans la politique coloniale. Celle-ci visait à restructurer les relations entre des communautés qui s'accommodaient du passé précolonial. Cet article essaie de démontrer dans quelle mesure les relations basées sur l'arrangement entre les communautés dans la partie nord du

département de la Mezam au Cameroun, ont été transformées en relations de concurrence sous la colonisation britannique. La tentative de construire des unités administratives coloniales basées sur les relations de coopération préexistantes a plutôt engendré le désaccord, les divisions et les tensions qui donnent naissance aujourd'hui à des politiques de discorde sociale qui ne servent pas l'intérêt de l'intégration nationale, même au niveau le plus élémentaire qu'est la communauté.

Keywords/mots-clés: Cameroon, accommodation, colonial ethnography, ethnicity, history, identity, politics of identity, postcolonial ethnography/*Cameroun, compromis, ethnicité, ethnographie coloniale, ethnographie postcoloniale, histoire, identité, politique identitaire.*