

TOWARDS RE-TRADITIONALIZING AND REVALORIZING CHIEFTAINCY IN CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS STUDIES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Narcisse Saturnin KAZE TINDO¹, Chantal YOUNG KINEH²

¹PhD, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences
The University of Yaounde I (Cameroon)

Email: kazenarcisse@gmail.com

²PhD, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences
The University of Yaounde I (Cameroon)

Email: youngchantal@gmail.com

Abstract: *Studies on chiefs and the chieftaincy institution in Africa/Cameroon since the colonial period have introduced many deformations and mal-characterizations in the descriptive content and meaning of the indigenous cultural foundations. Quite understandably the prism through which many writers articulated their works reflected the scientific and cultural backgrounds from where they had been brought up. This paper explores the way language related to chiefs and the chieftaincy institution has been used in studies of the Grassfields in Cameroon. Methodologically this study adopts a qualitative approach which consisted of a content analyzing existing primary and secondary literature on chieftaincy institution in Cameroon. The study finds that the cultural mindset of colonial administrators was a major influence in the roles that chiefs were assigned and the duties they were called upon to perform thereby bringing about alterations in the role, status, function, content, and symbolism of the chieftaincy institution. A proper understanding of these changes could be useful for a more appropriate appreciation in the revalorization of any framework in which chiefs might be used especially given the penchant for the avowed preservation and sustenance of the cultural heritage and civilization of the Grassfields, in particular, and of Cameroon, in general.*

Keywords: *Traditionalization; Revalorization; Chieftaincy; Chiefs; Fon,*

1. Introduction

For several decades now the literature on the traditional leadership has continuously and wrongly used the term chiefs/chieftaincy to designate pre-colonial traditional leaders/institutions. The use of the terms “chiefs” or chieftaincy only came into use following colonial intrusion in Africa. In reality, before the advent of colonial rule to Africa and precisely the Cameroon Grassfields the political entity in area was characterized by socio-political entities commonly referred to today as *Fondoms* under the leadership of sovereigns locally and variedly called *fon*, *foyn*, *fua* depending on the community (Kaze 2020: 36).

However, with the advent of colonial rule, these local appellations witnessed a systematic change as they were all referred to *chiefs* designating traditional rulers, *chiefdom* referring to the socio-political entity. The introduction of this new appellation was repeatedly consecrated in colonial and post independent literature and historiography thus changing the original meaning, role, status, function, content, and symbolism of the institution. This change significantly dealt a big blow in the

understanding of traditional leadership and governance. In fact, at independence, the new political elite rather than changing the appellation (chiefs) given to pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields traditional institutions by colonial authorities went further to consecrate the appellation “chiefs” in the judicial, political, and administrative ecosystem of modern Cameroon. The perpetuation of the colonial appellation for Cameroon pre-colonial traditional institutions only contributed to the deformation of the content and role of traditional authorities in Cameroon.

Anthropological and sociological studies have revealed that no society can sustainably develop without considering the fundamental institutions of its historical past. If the African society and modern state today is confronted with multiple crises today, it is partially linked to the fact that the present “State” in Africa and particularly in Cameroon is an imported whose mode of functioning and actors do not necessarily tally with African local realities. Imagine a government that will have to take an oath in a sacred shrine before taking function; this could dissuade many from indulging into bad practices such as poor governance which only contribute in exacerbate social tension as result of lack of efficient public service delivery to the people. This paper seeks to answer two important questions: Did the change in the appellation of pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields traditional institution affect its form and content? And what have been the implications of this change on the socio-cultural and traditional heritage of Cameroon?. With reference to the above, the rest of the paper is structured as follows: literature review section, section on the features of Cameroon Grassfields traditional institutions, evolution and impacts of the colonial appellation of Cameroon Grassfields traditional authorities’ section, recommendation and conclusion section.

2. A review of traditional authorities in Cameroon grassfields

There is considerable literature on chieftaincy in Cameroon and Africa as a whole because of the crucial role it plays in politics in times past and present political equations. The vast literature has looked at chieftaincy as an institution that has evolved over the years to remain relevant in post-independence African states. Considerable literature could be found on chieftaincy on pre-colonial, colonial and post independent Cameroon Grassfields. The underlying conclusions of most works on chieftaincy in Cameroon and Africa as a whole is that the chieftaincy institution is robust and dynamic; and continues to re-invent itself to become relevant in the changing political environment.

The term chieftaincy is derived from the word chief and refers to the office and the institution of which the chief is the principal operator and stakeholder (Boakye 2016: 14). Chieftaincy may, thus, comprise among other things the personnel holding offices such as chiefs, queen mothers, notables, counselors and staff; rituals, symbol and other paraphernalia. The *fondom* is first and foremost a political unit created out of a multitude of kin groups all centered on a leader (Eyenga 2015: 8), the chief or the traditional rulers or leader who may be known and called chief or some other variant of the word.

Timothy Earle stresses the fact that the chiefdom is the society associated with the chief's polity. The social forms of chiefdoms can often be quite hierarchical, meaning that competing hierarchies and spheres of action exist, as between a political, religious, and social hierarchy, between the regional polity and constituent communities and kin groups, and between ethnic and gendered divisions (ibid). The

chief is involved in royal things and could be expected to meddle with community and household activities in only quite specific ways that affect the operation of the chieftaincy.

This presupposes that the chieftaindom as a form is highly variable based on conditions of household and community structure, each with their own histories (Feinman and Neitzel 1984: 44). Chieftaindoms thus have little coherence as a type and even further interesting because of the flexible power strategies of chiefs and their chieftaincies. Although often based on principles of kinship and rank, the chieftaincy institution was understood as personalized through patterns of fealty or loyalty somehow comparable to a lesser degree to the early stages of feudalism in Europe during the 8th Century (ibid).

E. Aggrey-Darkoh and Bossman E. Asare (2016: 3) ensued; traditional authorities are the leaders of traditional communities. The term “traditional” refers to historic roots of leadership, which legitimizes the execution of power. There are many existing forms of traditional leadership. In Cameroon as in most of Africa, traditional rule finds expression in forms such as religious leadership, extended family leadership, and chieftaincy. It is interesting to note that chieftaincy is, however, the fullest expression of traditional rule in its institutionalized form (Antwi-Boasiako and Bonna, 2009: 89). It encompasses the critical characteristics of prescribed kingship and lineage succession to office, awe and sacredness of office holders, specific form of contractual relationships between chiefs and their subjects, and institutionalized procedure for decision making and implementation at the local community and community participation and sometimes rallying support for the central government (ibid). In the same vein, Michael Mbapndah Ndobegang (1985) examines the position of chiefs in the Grassfields region of Cameroon in the 19th century. Ndobegang illustrates the way Grassfields chiefs manoeuvred their positions to mobilise their subjects and to protect their own interests. The author ponders on the nature of the relationship that existed between Grassfields chiefs and the elite during the decolonisation period. The author also examines the mechanisms and strategies that Grassfields chiefs used to secure their position and interest in the post-colonial structure of Cameroon.

Kaze Tindo Narcisse Saturnin (2012) argues that, throughout history Grassfields chiefs have been at the centre of the political, socio-economic and cultural life of their respective societies. Although chiefs are referred to by various appellations in the region, the core content and significance of chieftaincy and the functions of chiefs have lots of things in common. Also common among the chiefs of the Grassfields are such matters as the way chiefs come to office and how they exit. Chieftaincy is hereditary in the Grassfields, and chiefs remain on the throne till death. The author however notes that in the past years, there has emerged a very noticeable trend in the way chiefs are removed from office. Whereas chiefs customarily stayed in office till death, there is becoming an increasing trend to remove or expel chiefs from office, using methods that are increasingly violent. One of the main factors for this change of attitude towards chiefs was the important role colonial authorities played in the instrumentalization of traditional authorities who ended up serving colonial interest than their own people.

Examining the impact of colonial presence in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon, Paul Nchoji Nkwi (1987) focused on German penetration and establishment

in the Grassfields region, and the reaction of traditional rulers and their people to this penetration. The author shows how some Grassfields chiefs resisted German penetration while others did not. The author holds that the welcome and reception given to the Germans by the Bali fondom in the Cameroon Grassfields acted as a steppingstone for the transformation of traditional institutions in this area. Furthermore, Paul Nchoji Nkwi and Jean Pierre Warnier (1982) in a co-authored study handles almost all aspects of the Cameroon Grassfields history from the pre-colonial to the post independent era. They lay special emphasis in handling the concept of traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields from the colonial to the post-colonial period. It emerges from their study that traditional rulers lost most of pre-colonial and post-colonial source of power, sacredness because of colonial manipulation and perpetuated by the post independent state.

Michael Tabuwe Aletum (1974) dealing with the conflicts between traditional institutions and modern institutions after independence. The author ponders debate over the value of traditional rulers in Cameroon after independence as they were considered an anachronism. The author rejects the thesis that traditional institutions are not anachronism today arguing that even though colonial serious impacted the modus operandi and vivendi if the latter, the organisation of traditional authority, especially with regards to the control and exercise of power, has so many merits which should boast modern government today.

S.D. Nzefa (1994) argues that chieftaincy as a traditional institution was seriously threatened by new functional equivalences and power sharing equation designed by the post independent state through the social modernist agents to suit their whims and caprices. The author justifies this by arguing that the visible transformation the chieftaincy in Cameroon went through especially on the mode and choice of chieftaincy succession. Within the same framework,

C.N. Mback (2000) argues that traditional rulers in post independent Cameroon are yet to recover from the trauma caused by their first contact with the European colonisers. The post-independent political elite have perpetuated the emasculation of traditional authorities appointed by the colonial administrators by legitimising illegitimate candidates to contested chieftaincy positions.

By devaluing the status of chiefs, traditional rulers were enlisted in single party system giving the chieftaincy institution more of political orientation than traditional one. As such some political elites saw chieftaincy as a means of achieving national recognition. In fact, chieftaincy became a Trojan horse for politicians, and this has led to the emergence of numerous conflicts. In both cases, they have lost an important part of their creditworthiness among their subjects. The latter however sometimes remain devoted despite all. Chieftaincy conflicts became the gateway for non-eligible members to the post of the chief to contend as well. This sufficed to buy off some disgruntled notables whose position has been neglected by the colonial and post-colonial administration yet essential to the smooth functioning of the chieftaincy institution.

3. Methodological approach

This study adopted the historical methodology which comprised of field preparation, data collection and analysis.

3.1. Fieldwork preparation

To carry out this study, initial contacts were established with some traditional authorities, administrative officers and politicians through emails with follow up phone calls. The initial emails and phone calls shall explain the objectives of the study. In this initial correspondence, we ask for permission to conduct the interviews with the representatives of the traditional authorities and local government authorities. We profited from this to enlist their support in having access to other key informants for the interviews.

3.2. Data collection

The research was predominantly a desk study one and therefore entailed the review of the existing literature in the form of books and journal articles around issues of chieftaincy in Cameroon and their resilience throughout the various historical periods in Cameroon while taking into account the change of attitude towards traditional authorities since colonial times to the present. Instances of the dynamic nature of the relationship between the institution, civil society and the state in the context of electoral competition, conflict and violence were also examined. Moreover, the bases on which the institution is a legitimate force to be used in promoting the peace in grassroots communities and achieving local development was explored by consulting historical and modern records.

Besides the review of existing literature, we also made use of face-to-face interviews with traditional authority or their representatives; local government, government authorities, politicians and civil society organizations. 20 in-person interviews were conducted with 06 traditional rulers (1st class, 2nd class and 3rd class traditional authorities), 02 local government officials (mayor and his councilors), 2 government authorities (senior divisional officer and Divisional officers) and 5 civil society personnel (NGOs, and Cultural associations) and 05 politicians.

In these interviews, informants were prompted, through an interview guide, to provide information about such issues as on the motivation for the profound transformation and alteration of the chieftaincy institution. why despite this transformation the chieftaincy institution continue to be resilient. A quantitative data approach was applied to gather and analyze information on the population's attitudes on deformations and mal-characterizations in the descriptive content and meaning of the indigenous cultural foundations.

3.3. Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed through a content analysis approach and thematically based on the objectives of the study. The interviews were complemented the existing literature on chieftaincy studies in Cameroon.

4. Findings and results

Colonial transformation of Cameroon Grassfields traditional indigenous institutions

The term “traditional” refers to historic roots of leadership, which legitimizes the execution of power. In the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon¹, these traditional leaders are generally referred to as *fon* (Fanso 1989: 4). There are many existing forms of traditional leadership. In Europe, the rule of kings and nobles was the dominant governing force for a long time until it was gradually replaced by democratic structures.

Traditional leaders are the monarchs and aristocracies of Africa who have pre-colonial roots and their African language titles are often translated into English as “chiefs”, “traditional leaders”, “traditional authorities”, “traditional rulers”, “kings” and “natural rulers” (Ray and Eizlini 2004: 8). They include those political, socio-political and politico-religious structures that are rooted in the pre-colonial period rather than in the creation of the colonial and post-colonial states, these offices which can be considered to be “neo-traditional” today. Thus, traditional leaders could include kings, other nobility holding offices, heads of extended families, and the office holders of decentralized polities whose offices are rooted in the pre-colonial states and other pre-colonial entities. Traditional leadership is anthropologically defined as including “those political, sociopolitical and politico-religious structures that are rooted in the pre-colonial period (Ibid). In most *fondoms* of the Cameroon Grassfields the traditional leader is addressed using various appellations such as *mfon*, or *fon* or *efo*, *Ifuo* or any similar word depending on the ethnic group (Nkwi and Warnier 1982: 59).

The advent of colonial rule and the implementation of colonial policies in Africa as a whole and precisely in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon had significant impacts on the socio-political institutions that predated their arrival. Before the advent of colonial rule in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon, the area was territorially made up of socio-political polities known locally as *fondoms* under the leadership of a traditional and customary leader generally called in most Cameroon Grassfields *fondoms* as *fon*. The appellation “fon” was the consecrated term to designate that leader whose authority and legitimacy stemmed from the social fabrics of the creation of that *fondom*. This explains why in most Cameroon Grassfields only descendants or closer relatives to the founding fathers of a *fondom* are authorized to access the throne / inherit as *afon*². It is worth noting that each *fondom* was generally named with the dialect spoken by inhabitants of each *fondom*. This was the case with *Kom*, *Nso*, *Bafut*, *Mankon* and *Bali Nyonga* whose *fondoms* names represent at the same time their venacular and the name of their polity territorially.

¹ The term Cameroon Grassfields is used to refer to the former administrative division of Wum, Nkambe and Cameroon. Administratively, the Cameroon Grassfields corresponds roughly to what is known today as the North-West Region of Cameroon with headquarters in Cameroon. In a wider sense, the grassland geography is similar but a microscopic glance at the states and kingdoms forming the regional setting reveal some interesting features which are tacit indications that, there are some minor differences. Dankler, the German explorer, describes it as the “sea of grass which stretches for hundreds of kilometers providing one of the most magnificent panoramas on earth For details see., Paul Nchoji Nkwi and Jean Pierre Warnier., *Elements for the History of the Western Grassfields*, Yaoundé: Publication of the Sociology Department, University of Yaoundé, 1982.

² The term “*afon*” stands for the plural of “*fon*”

Traditional Rulers (*fon*) in the Cameroon Grassfields

Traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields before colonial intrusion were considered the mystical and religious heads of their various polities (MINAC 1984, 11) and are not regarded as ordinary men. They occupied a special office and symbolised the link between the ancestors and their people. The title by which the *fon* is bound and has meaning only within a given culturally defined group that varies from one ethnic group to another. The largest political unit is the *fondom* or kingdom that is made up of many villages under the command of a *fon*. The *fon* was a singular ruler, and the incarnate of the customs and traditions of the group. He presided over all major rituals of the *fondoms*. The *fon* could confer on his territorial agents (clan, quarter and village heads) titles, powers and privileges of owning associations having corresponding functions at village or sector level. Titles were conferred upon persons either because of their lineage affiliation, social rank or wealth (Nkwi 1986: 39-40).

Change of Appellation and attributes of Cameroon Grassfields traditional leaders

The advent of colonial rule later witnessed a change in the appellation of leaders who ruled kingdoms, empires and *Fondoms* to chiefs and thus the term chieftaincy. Even though this change of appellation did not fundamentally change the core content of kingdoms, empires and *Fondoms*, but its nature was affected to an extent. Thus, the dynamic in chieftaincy is as old as the institution. The colonial powers in Africa, principally Britain and France, after gaining control of African states and peoples through treaties and forceful conquest, took away some of the prestige associated with the position of kingship in the conquered states. Thus, the word 'chief' rather than 'king' became their preferred reference used for African rulers both those who governed strong states and those who were appointed in acephalous groups (Crowder and Ikime 1970b, v).

The coming of Colonial Rule and the need for African intercutors-valables;/the search for and finding of leaders, various types found, cultural carry-overs in perception of African leaders (primitive, uncivilized, needing training) Meaning of chief, why call them chiefs. The attempt to make a difference between chiefs is a colonial creation which has nothing to do with tradition. In pre-colonial times, each society had its own term for the occupant of the royal office or traditional ruler, for instance, *fon*, *nfor* or *mfor* in the Grassfields of Cameroon and *Lamido* or *Sultan* among Fulani of Northern Cameroon just to name a few (Samah 2011: 71). However, the appellation of traditional rulers was later denaturalized from its content and substance following colonial intrusion into African traditional political systems, thus traditional rulers came to be addressed simply as chiefs (ibid).

Why were European monarchs and kings not called addressed as "chiefs" whereas they had almost and in some cases less mystical, religious and socio-political attributes as Cameroon Grassfields traditional rulers. It is worth mentioning that the term chief did not exist in the socio-political lexicon of pre-colonial African societies (ibid). It was coined and used administratively by the European colonizers to designate African indigenous rulers and collaborators. This was consciously done within the perspective of eurocentrism philosophy in a bit to demonstrate that Africa had no civilization before European arrival. Thus, colonialization brought out Africa and its

institution from darkness to light. This perception has been highly debated in the works of Samuel Huntington (1993: 22-49). Upon their arrival in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon, European colonial authorities notably the Germans. Upon their arrival in the area, they found out that the area was a distinct region in all their exploration series. They made this judgment on the basis of the material culture, architecture and political forms they encountered (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996: 3).

The kind of human groupings that the Germans found included individual Fondoms ranging in size from 200 to 60,000 inhabitants often physically bounded by large-scale earthworks and fixed in dynastic time by lengthy chief-lists (ibid). The Germans encountered chiefs, palaces, elaborate forms of retainerdom and secret male associations with political functions. Nonetheless, these communities varied considerably in the degree of centralization of political powers, which correlated inversely with population density so that the largest and most centralized polity indeed demonstrated the importance of the people manning such societies. This of course contradicts the Eurocentric philosophy or theory on the non-existence of an African civilization that the Cameroon Grassfields and Africa had no civilization before the advent of European colonizers.

Noticing that traditional rulers had a stronghold on their people, the colonial authorities notably the German decided to collaborate with the *afon* by recognizing their authority as a means to subdue the people. Their preference was on those *afon* who could adapt to their laws and could easily be manipulated in order to accomplish their exploitative ambition (Ngale 2001: 67). The denaturalization of the appellation of traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields was in line with European cultural domination which was geared among other reason not to give the same value and significance to African pre-colonial rulers who had the same mystical, religious and socio-political attributes like European monarchs and kings. In so doing, the contributed in influencing the symbol, scope and role of traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields.

New Role Assign to Cameroon Grassfields Traditional Rulers

Colonialism changed the standing of pre-colonial traditional leaders in strong centralized states from kings with some accountability to the king-makers and other elites, to chiefs appointed by the colonial authority with no mechanism of accountability to their subjects (Abwa 1989: 141). This change was perpetuated by the post independent that state that gradually used traditional rulers, now chiefs to consolidate its territorial and administrative presence in the within the new state.

Existing literature on traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields reveals that the change impacted on traditional rulers apart from their new denomination from the pre-colonial appellation (*afon*) to chiefs, their scope and role was altered from a purely traditional to a more modern administration one under the supervision colonial authorities. As a matter of fact, with the advent of colonial authorities in the Cameroon Grassfields, *afon* were forcefully assigned new role such as the collection of taxes, recruitment of labor for plantations. This was the case with the German colonial authorities who were the first colonial authorities to set foot in the Cameroon Grassfields. From the beginning of their colonial mission in Cameroon, the Germans recognized the need to use the local traditional institutions as agencies on which to anchor their rule. As a matter of fact, even before colonial occupation took place,

representatives of German commercial houses and other trading concerns that were present in the territory sought the collaboration of traditional rulers for the purpose of "striking" trade deals and later, to obtain labor for plantations which were being opened up at the coast.

Under the British administration, Cameroon Grassfields traditional rulers were introduced into a new system of tax that had change from tributes to taxes in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields traditional political system no taxes were paid, but tributes were given which often took the form of material payment, like agricultural products or manual labor (Aletum, 1980: 95). The payment of tribute was not a rational affair like the payment of taxes which set fixed amounts to be paid in English currency within a limited period of time. Thus, the tax system under the Germans and British administration became what Chilver and Kaberry termed "From Tribute to Tax" (Chilver and Kaberry 1960: 9). The authors showed how some institutions of traditional political system in the Cameroon Grassfields were converted into tax collecting authorities.

In the Bafut fondom in the Cameroon Grassfields, the system was that, out of every English pound the fon collected, he was paid one shilling. It therefore implied that the *fon's* livelihood depended on the amount of tax he collected. If he did not submit to the local native authorities of his area the sum of money prescribed, he was held responsible. So, *afon* needed helpers and lineage-heads to collaborate in the system of tax collecting. The system also required a territorially based organization census, a regular collection and an efficient method to impose the per capita amount of tax.

In certain cases, some *afon* exploited the situation to their own advantage by not handing over money collected to the Native Council Authorities. This was difficult to trace because no adequate records were kept showing names and numbers of residents in any of the territorial areas (ibid). In areas where traditional rulers did not exist, the colonial authorities did not hesitate to create new one though without any historical and traditional basis. According to Richard Morris (1973: 147) and Goodson, the survival of a nation depended on the total exploitation of the man power available and the material resources therein. The German and British colonial authorities seemed to have exploited this theory so well that the establishment of the German and British administration opened up the area to human and economic exploitation that came to dominate the socio-economic arena.

Peter Geschiere (1996: 2) contends that an important issue in understanding the varying performance of traditional authorities in present Africa is the degree to which their power was rooted in local societies. At first sight this might seem to be a somewhat strange query: the adjective "traditional" seems to imply that such authority has per definition "traditional" roots. However, it is clear that in Africa the "traditionality" of these authorities was highly variable. If one adopts a stringent historical perspective, the appropriateness of the adjective "traditional" becomes in many cases a moot point. Many so-called "customary" or "traditional" chieftaincies were in reality colonial creations, born from the urgent need to 'pacify' and administer large, newly conquered territories (ibid). And by so doing created chieftaincy conflicts at the level of the traditionality of the successor as well as the legitimacy of the acts posed by some traditional rulers. The German colonial administration in Cameroon particularly in the Grassfields created these chiefs in order to solve their urgent

administrative problems. However, appointed chiefs created significant problems and engendered large-scale resentment among some Grassfields people.

The new role of chiefs; that of serving more of the colonial administration than their Fondoms sharply contrasted with their role in pre-colonial period. Instead, the regulatory society and other palace institutions executed his orders. The new role of Cameroon Grassfields *afon* was detrimental to their authority as the instructions they executed more often than not conflicted with some traditional values and aspirations of the people. This weakened the authority of chiefs and created avenues for clashes with chiefs, which in the long run weaken the chief's position in the society. As such, the mystical and sacred value attached to chieftaincy was challenge as some subjects use this weakness to contest the decision and even doubt the legitimacy of chiefs, who according to them had betrayed the people by serving the colonialists.

At independence, traditional rulers in the Cameroon Grassfields, just like in other areas of Cameroon made auxiliaries of the administration which was more or less a continuation of colonial domination. This was because the post independent reserve almost the same threat and, in some instance, worst treatment for the chieftaincy institution. Colonial rule in the Cameroon Grassfields had a significant impact on the socio-political and economic institutions existent in the area. One of such institutions was the chieftaincy institution. Generally, opinions among scholars hold that colonial rule did more harm than good to African traditional system incarnated by chieftaincy, even if others suggest that the colonial administration actually molded the chiefs and the chieftaincy institutions in the colonial image (Van Nieuwaal, 1996: 102). In the period following independence, there were new considerations which came to affect the perceptions of aspirants to chieftaincy, be they deserved or not. Also, there was an intensification of attempts by the urban elite turned politicians to associate themselves and their actions with traditional rulers and chiefs in the Cameroon Grassfields.

In simple terms, the issues which affected the whole process of access to chieftaincy or influenced it undoubtedly underwent noticeable transformations in the period since independence. At independence, the injunction for chiefs in participating in the functioning of the modern state was very brief as a decree³ was signed to regulate its functioning. It can be deduced that the multiplied chieftaincy conflicts faced by the chieftaincy institution some of which had their roots from colonial period actually threatened the State as some of them were marked by violent manifestations. To Van Nieuwaal (1996) dreading the threat chieftaincy could cause the modern state as rival governance and in terms of stability, the African modern states just like colonialist co-opted and marginalize the chiefs within its bureaucratic models as mere auxiliaries as a means to resolve the threat posed by chieftaincy and at the same time use it to consolidate its existence.

Colonial administrators in the Cameroon Grassfields kept *afon* at the forefront of socio-political and economic management of their polities, but with the advent of the post independent state, chieftaincy was not only threatened by the new political elites, it was transformed into a valet institution to the new state. They were later engulfed and aligned as the lowest administrative unit and representative of the state or what was administratively called auxiliaries of the administration. The fact that chieftaincy institution became a valet institution at the mercy of the modern state, capable of

³ Article 16 of Decree No.77/245 of 15th July 1977 to organize Fondoms

making and unmaking a *fon*, a number of troubles increased within the *fonship* institution. It is worth noting that the constitutional reforms of the 1990s were preceded by the legalization of political parties, which paved the way for open competition for elective posts (Gwaibi 2017: 339). This was in stark contrast to what existed during single-party rule, under the dictatorship of Cameroon's first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo. During that era everyone, including traditional chiefs, in principle belonged to the Grand National Party, and any form of dissent was often violently suppressed (Geschiere 2009: 29). The liberation of the political scene in the 1990s gave chiefs the opportunity to bounce back into the political scene with some becoming mayors, and members of parliament.

The main question is that of the implication of *afon* and how the democratic transition in Cameroon came to be considered as a factor in the various efforts to access *fonship* in the Cameroon Grassfields. As Jude Fokwang (2003: 107) indicates, the introduction of democracy in Cameroon in 1990 created conditions for the return of old political actors such as chiefs to the "national political scene", despite the popular demand for "actors" of a new kind. This was because in the days of the single party state, Paul Biya had prohibited chiefs from participating in national politics (Bayart 1979: 34). Nevertheless, pluralism prompted by the demand for "Jacobin democracy", compelled Paul Biya to backtrack from this position as he needed *afon* to consolidate his powers and the dissemination of the party. For example, the *fon* of Mankon was co-opted as the first Vice President of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). At the same time, the *afon* of Bali and Bafut became alternate members of the Central Committee.

5. Conclusion

The clash of civilizations between the emergences of modern conceptions of democracy, governance and principles of human rights on the one hand and the entrenched cultural traits in Cameroon on the other hand has left the country at a crossroad in relation to the fundamental alternative forms of governance available to move the nation forward. This could partly be explained by the fact that the colonial legacy seriously undermined the relevance of traditional institutions that hitherto dominated the way of life of communities before the arrival of the colonialists and the modern State. Consequently, the fate of chieftaincy in the Cameroon Grassfields and in Cameroon in general has been put on the edge of peril. The need to re-traditionalize and revalorize the chieftaincy, without being extensive requires; the constitutionalization of the latter, a systematic pedagogy on the institution and their rational implication in modern governance.

There is no doubt that colonial rule contributed significantly in undermining the value of traditional rulers in Africa and specifically in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon. However, the contribution of the post independent states and as well as the historiography on traditional rulers which is essentially inspired from the colonial perspective. Despite the attempt to devalue the *fonship* institution in the Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon, the latter has continued to attract the reverence and legitimacy of the people. Its capacity of popular mobilization is so strong that most administrative and political elites rely on it for their political sustenance. Traditional institutions and leaders in Cameroon despite their depravities and weaknesses remain a very significant element in society which cannot be ignored. Its capacity to participate

and contribute to nation building is very crucial if only it is reorganized on the basis of the fundamental traditional, historical and cultural principles that regulated the institution before the advent of colonial rule.

References:

1. Abwa, D. (1989). The French Administrative System in the Lamidate of Ngaoundere, 1915-1954. In M. Njeuma, ed., *Introduction to the History of Cameroon Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 137-169.
2. Aggrey-Darkoh, E and Asare, B.E. (2016). Understanding the Nexus between Traditional and Modern Political Orders in Ghana. *Archives of Current Research International*, 3, No.1: 1-11.
3. Aletum, M. T. (1974) *Political conflict within the Traditional and modern Institutions of Bafut- Cameroon*. Louvain: Vender.
4. Aletum, M.T. (1980). *The One-Party System and the African Traditional Institutions*. Yaoundé: SOPECAM.
5. Antwi-Boasiako, B. K. and Bonna, O. (2009). *Traditional Institutions and Public Administration in Democratic Africa*, Bloomington: Xlibri: Corporation.
6. Bayart, J-F. (1979). *L'Etat au Cameroun*, Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.
7. Boakye, P.A. (2016). Chieftaincy Conflicts in Ghana: A Case Study of Ga Mashie Chieftaincy Conflict under the Fourth Republic. M.A. in Political Science, Calgary: University of Calgary.
8. Chilver, E. M. and Kaberry, P M. (1967). *Traditional Cameroon. The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of The Cameroon Grassfields*, Buea.
9. Crowder, M and Obaro, I (Eds). (1970). *West African Chiefs: Their Changing Status under Colonial Rule and Independence*. New York: Africana Publishing.
10. Chilver, E.M. and Kaberry, P.M. (1960). From Tributes Tax in a Tikar chiefdom. *Africa*, 30, no. 1: 1-19.
11. Eyenga, G. M. (2015). Crise de Succession Politique dans les Chefferies Bamiléké au Cameroun. Le cas de la Chefferie Banféko. Master II en Science Politique, l'Université de Yaoundé 2.
12. Fanso, V.G. (1989). *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges, The Colonial and Post-colonial periods*. Vol 2, Cameroon: Macmillan Publishers limited.
13. Feinman, G and Neitzel, J. (1984). Too Many Types: an Overview of Sedentary Pre-State Societies in the Americas. *Archaeology Method and Theory*. 7: 39-102. [online] available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20170177>. Accessed on 12th July 2021.
14. Fowler, I. and Zeitlyn, D. (1996). Introduction: the Grassfields and the Tikar. In *African crossroads: Intersection between History and Anthropology on Cameroon*, Ian Fowler and David Zeitlyn (Eds), Berghahn, Oxford.
15. Geschiere, P. (1996). Chiefs and the Problem of Witchcraft varying Patterns in South and West Cameroon. *Journal of Legal Pluralism*, 37, 38: 307-327. [online] available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1996.10756485>.
16. Gwaibi, N. W. (2017). Wrath from the Gods': Traditional Institutions and Electoral Politics in Bali. *Journal of Asian African Studies*, Vol.52, no.3: 324-345.
17. Huntington, S. (1993). The Clash of Civilizations?. *Foreign Affairs*, 72, n^o 3: 22-49.

18. Kaze, T. N. S. (2020). *The Dynamics of Chieftaincy Succession Conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, CA. 1800-2013. A Historical Exploration*. PhD Thesis in History, The University of Yaounde 1-Cameroon.
19. Kaze, T.N.S. (2012). *The Dethronement of Traditional Chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields Historical study of the chieftaincy Crisis in Kedjom Keku 1984-2008*. M.A Dissertation in History, University of Yaoundé 1.
20. Mback, C. N. (2000). La Chefferie Traditionnelle au Cameroun : Ambigüités juridiques et dérives Politiques. *Africa Development*, Vol. 25, No. 3/4 : 77-118.
21. Ministry of Information and Culture (1984). *Discover the North West Province of Cameroon*. Yaoundé, Ministry of Culture and Information.
22. Ndobegang, M.M. (1985). *Grassfields Chiefs and Political Change in Cameroon ca. 1884-1996*. Ph.D Thesis in History, Boston University.
23. Ngale, A.N. (2001). *Chieftaincy Dispute in Central Ejagham, Eyumojock Sub-Division of the Manyu Division: Case of Kembong 1972 to 1996. A Historical Study*. Master Dissertation: The University of Yaoundé 1.
24. Nkwi, P.N. (1986). *Traditional Diplomacy. A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North-West Province of Cameroon*. University of Yaoundé.
25. Nkwi, P.N and Warnier, J.P. (1982). *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, University of Yaoundé.
26. Nkwi, P.N. (1987). *The German Presence in the Western Grassfields, 1891-1913. A German Colonial Account*. Leiden: African Studies Centre.
27. Nzefa, S.D. (1994). *Les chefferies Bamiléké dans l'enfer et le modernisme, une chefferie de demain*, Yaounde, S.M.E.
28. Ray, D. I. and Eizlini, G. (2004). *Chieftaincy, Sovereignty and Legitimacy and Development: A Pilot Newspaper Survey of the Role of Chiefs in Three Aspects of Development*. Unpublished paper.
29. Richards, M. (1973). *A Sketch Map of the Two World Wars and After, 1914 - 1973*, 6th Edition, London.
30. Van Nieuwal, V. T. (1996). From administrative to civil chieftaincy: Some problems and prospects of African chieftaincy. *Journal of Legal Pluralism* 37, no.38: 79-108.