

# Problematizing Chieftaincy Succession Squabbles in the Cameroon Grassfields Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Chieftaincy institution constitutes a significant aspect of the socio-cultural heritage and feature within the Bamenda Grass fields. Its historical role in the maintenance of peace and promotion of development at the local level is incontestable. Recently the institution that was yesterday a symbol of harmony, development and cultural pride has suddenly become an object of discord and rivalry. In reality, the authority and legitimacy of chiefs in the Cameroon Grassfields is increasingly being contested and questioned. It is sustained in this paper that chieftaincy that used to be a problem shooter in communities in the Bamenda Grassfields has become itself a problem to the socio-economic and political development efforts of grassroots population. Following a critical historical approach based on the content analysis of primary and secondary sources, the study reveals that the multiplication of dual chieftaincy crisis in the Bamenda Grassfields is the historical product of the socio-cultural degradation of the chieftaincy institution. In order to carry out this work both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in interpreting and analyzing Data. A thematic cum chronological approach was used in presenting the findings.

**Key words:** Chieftaincy, Succession, Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon

## INTRODUCTION

Successions quabbles was a rampant situation that greatly affected chieftaincy institutions within the Bamenda Grassfields. The resultant effects of this situation were the emergence of composite fondoms. This was the case with Fondoms such as the Nso, Bafut, Kom amongst others. With time other factors such as colonial intrusion and the attitude of the post-colonial state contributed in fashioning and exacerbating succession conflicts. On the other hand, the quests for socio-economic power, political control and access to resources explain the occurrence of chieftaincy and succession disputes in the Bamenda Grassfields.

There is empirical evidence that, major ethnic groups of the Bamenda Grassfields origins, residing both in rural and urban areas believed and depended on traditional authority system for organizing their lives, as a cultural identity despite modern state structure. This is visible with the Fon's representatives in almost all major towns in Cameroon where citizens of a particular community are resident. The traditional authority system remains the de-facto governance system as the state and its institutions deliberately maintained the traditional institutions as arms of the administration

The chieftaincy institution in the Bamenda Grassfields has been resilient in the face of radical mutations for several decades and have managed to survive and adapted to each context. However, the multiplication of chieftaincy and succession disputes is a visible challenge to the resilience of the chieftaincy institution even though it has been able to adjust to this situation. The adaptation of the chieftaincy institution has been up to task because of the struggle of the balance of power between the colonial, post independent state and

chieftaincy institution, which is quite different from conflict arising from political leadership within the chieftaincy institution itself.

These conflicts have steadily paralyzed and discredited the chieftaincy institution in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon like any other conflict, chieftaincy and succession conflicts are as dangerous as modern armed conflicts experienced today with the attendant disruption to the peace and security of the modern state.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF CHIEFTAINCY AND SUCCESSION DISPUTES**

In the Bamenda Grassfields, the struggle to become a Fon in some fondoms lead to violent contestations when the tradition and customs guiding access to chieftaincy are infringed upon. These occur when the historical, political, economic and social circumstances around the establishment of the chieftaincy institution in a traditional system become contested. When the rules of succession become unclear; with the political parties in power supporting one group against the other in a bid to serve their own parochial political interest, succession conflicts with far reaching consequences can be witnessed. (Interview Menka Palace 2017) Most chieftaincy succession disputes examined in this study have had serious socio-economic implications on both the chieftaincy institution and the state itself. Some of these impacts include the, demystification of the cultural symbols of the fondom, changing perspective on the chieftaincy institution, loss of lives and general insecurity that negatively affects the economic and social life of the people..

## **DISRESPECT AND DEMYSTIFICATION OF THE CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION**

It is believed in the Bamenda Grassfields that traditional rulers are mystical persons with extra-ordinary powers. Historically Bamenda Grassfields chiefs were considered and believed by majority of their subjects as the link between the ancestors (spirits) and the living. As a chief priest, according to traditional religion, the chief was the spiritual head of his people and the representatives of the ancestor on earth. Bamenda Grassfields Fons propitiated the spirits of the land by offering sacrifices to the gods and ancestors. The sacrifice offered and the rituals performed were believed to nourish the people's relation with the gods and assured continuity and protection. Owing to his divine function, the chief was looked upon with reverence and respected. No wonder that he went with praise names such as cha-mfor (the kicker of things), lum-nyam (king of all animals) nyambo (leopards cup) nungubu (python) and anti-njong or thorny tree. (Samah, 2006: p.7)

Elucidating with the attributes of the Fon of Nso, Aletum and Fisiy holds that the Nso people praise-singers call their Fon "the sun shine of Nso" "father of the Land", "the Lion". This grandiose way of thinking led most Grassfields societies to claim that the "Fon never dies. (Aletum and Fisiy, 1989: p.35) As a result of all these, everything about the Fon is special, his living as well as his death. Traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields had a number of rights, attributes and prerogatives. They had an exalted personality with a mystical office the person of the fon was sacrosanct. This sort of spiritualisation of the fon's office enforced his powers. Tradition did not condone the disrespect of fons in whatsoever way. Traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields resided in their palaces. The palace remains a symbol of unity as well as the uniting force of the land. Jean Pierre Warnier used a metaphor to aptly capture the role of the chief in the Bamenda Grassfields. To him, the chief was like a "container" or "vessel" that bound the people together, united and protected them and the land from malevolent forces and poured out vital life-giving substances like breath, cam wood, saliva, all these to ensure continuity. To become a Fonie requiresto dedicate oneself totally to the service of the people.

All of these mystical features commanded reverence and gave chieftaincy a deific dimension. AnshaireAveved argues that, the transformation of chiefs from human forms to animal forms can be

explain by most artifacts found in palaces walls and decorations (royal's animals) that incarnate the powerful nature of the chief.(Aveved, 2015: p.61.)

All of this helped maintain social harmony in the traditional society as respect for the chieftaincy institution as the guarantor in charge of enforcing laws and taboos established by the ancestors.

Unfortunately because of the proliferation of chieftaincy and succession conflicts, the legitimacy and authority of some traditional rulers is been put to question either by ordinary subjects or administrative authorities and politicians. In fact the population is gradually becoming irreverent vis-à-vis the chieftaincy institution thus the mystical part of chieftaincy seems more and more eroded by modernity. More so, the fact that the resolution of some of these succession conflicts are done in state courts and at times by the administrative authorities has eroded chieftaincy of its mystical dimension. Chiefs have been seen insulted in public by their people in ways that were in the past a taboo. Because of succession conflicts, some chiefs have lost respect as they turn to be disrespected by their opponents. This has contributed in the deteriorating authority of chiefs. In corroboration to this affirmation Albert Pascal Temgoua writes that;

At a certain time in the past the traditional ruler represented the customs and traditions and kept them jealously at all cost and was supposed to render justice to his subjects. This made him lord over them and could determine their right to live or not. All that the traditional leader said was applauded by his subjects and could not be opposed. Even if they did not approve of the decision, one could only grumble behind that scene, for nobody would dare oppose the chief in public. It was practiced even before the coming of the Europeans.(Temgoua, 1984: pp. 32-33)

In reality, colonial rule and other historical factors mentioned earlier in this study contributed in diminishing the authority of the fons in the Bamenda Grassfields, thus opening the way for further chieftaincy succession disputes.

## **HUMAN AND MATERIAL LOSS**

Chieftaincy succession has led to the loss of lives and property. This was the case in Bambui, where John Aghie, a Bambui prince who had served in the Second World War as a soldier alongside with some nobles wanted political and socio-economic changes in the village. As fon Amuhngwa for II, the Fon of Bambui was in the South West region of Cameroon attending a KNDP meeting, this group of notables lead by John Aghie consulted Dr Vincent Chungong Nchami, an elite and “son of the soil” and the Senior Divisional Officer of the Bamenda province and for that matter the first Senior Divisional Officer who took over from the colonial administrator when West Cameroon became independence in 1961. (Bonu, 2012: p.44)

After consultation they outlined a few changes that included the change to a new site for the palace. The old site was on a slope with springs of water oozing at several points and made movement into the palace difficult especially in the rainy season.

A new site at Mallam Quarter was suggested but the idea was turned down by some traditional notables who were still very much attached to the customs and tradition regulating chieftaincy. Another suggestion was a new layout at Nibah plain which was not inhabited by Bambui villagers. The “conservatives” did not approve the idea. Third was the establishment of a petrol station at four corners Bambui. (Bonu, 2012: p.44) The village was split into two camps; the “conservatives” and the “progressives”. Finally, the “progressives” agreed that the only way was to dethrone Fon Amuhngwa for II who had been enthroned since 1947. The progressives succeeded in enthroning a prince, an uncle to the Fon called Ache Ngwangong with rites performed out of the palace.

Tributes were paid to Prince Ache Ngwangong who mysteriously died in Lebialem in August 2010. (Bonu,

2012: p.44) His death was attributed to his attempt to stage a “coup d’états” against thefon and this was punished by the ancestors. Children delivered that year were given the name “Ala-fi” meaning a new country. The Prime minister of West Cameroon Dr John Ngu Foncha quoted tradition which holds that “unless a Fon is missing (dead) a new one cannot be put on the throne”. The situation was put to an end and Fon Amuhngwafo II continued to reign until his death in July 7<sup>th</sup> 1995. (Bonu, 2012: p.44)John Angie and his associates were termed “black legs” or “sell outs”. Their names were written in traditional “black books” pending their death celebration. Before their death was celebrated, heavy fines were imposed. For example, during the death celebration of Dr Vincent Chungong Nchami on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1996, his family paid a fine of 15 goats, 15 fowls, and 15 jugs of palm wine. (Bonu, 2012: p.44)This was in line with traditional sanctions applied on any villager or subject who acts contrary to the norms of the village.

## **SOCIETAL FRAGMENTATION AND DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY**

Succession disputes also led to fragmentation in the Bamenda Grassfields as people were divided based on whom they supported during the dispute. As a result of succession, many people were enemies especially those successors who were only waiting for their fathers or brothers to die so that they could succeed. In families where there were many of such people, it often led to disunity. (Interview with Angu, 2014)This was because many of them claimed to be the rightful successors and as a result it led to fighting and division amongst the family members.

There were some family homes in the Bamenda Grassfields especially in Kom, Bafmen, Weh, Aghem, Fang, Zhoa, Mankon, Bali, Nso, Ndop and Bafut that were abandoned as a result of succession disputes. At times, because of fighting and killing of family members some people abandoned their compounds. After fighting, some of the successors might discovered that what they thought they would benefit after succession was not forth coming and they abandoned the compounds to collapse because they realized that it was not beneficial to them as they had expected.

### **Greed**

Some greedy successors sale all the properties of the deceased but were not even able to take up their responsibilities as successors as they were expected to pay the late man’s children’s school fees, pay hospital bills, take care of their wives and provide the basic needs of the people they inherited, despite taking everything that belonged to their father. At times, some of the successors used the children and the wives of the late man as labourers as the case of madam Kum who expressed that:

My husband died a long time ago but I have been the one taking care of my children and the successor was only there to enjoy everything that my husband worked for. I cannot even harvest plantain leaves not to even talk of harvesting the plantains. My children and I are only there to work for him like harvesting coffee, washing and drying it and at the end of the day he sells the coffee and owns the money. Even the farms I used to work have been taken by the successor. Things have been very hard even to feed myself and the children are a problem not to even talk of paying their school fees. Some of them have dropped out of school and some of them married at very young ages because they have no body to sponsor them. Some of them moved to the South west to fetch their lives by working in the farms. (Interview with, Kum, 2012)

### **Economic Fallouts**

In most local communities in Cameroon, especially the Bamenda Grassfields, chieftaincy conflicts and particularly succession conflicts has increasingly slowed down the rate of economic development. Once the traditional authorities who are supposed to promote development are in themselves in turmoil, development becomes a dream. No form of development can take place in a situation of tension, disunity and conflict.

In point of fact, chieftaincy and succession conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields have seriously slowed down the rate of development as partners and other professionals are scared away. Development is needed at all times by everyone in order for him/her to live a decent life. In this part of the country however, the level of underdevelopment is very high and needs intervention by not only the government but also from other development partners and professionals. Unfortunately however, it has been found out that the persistence of the conflicts scare away these development partners from villages, especially NGO and some international partners. As such, development assistance granted to communities by these organizations are therefore minimized or stopped altogether and this goes a long way to perpetuate the level of underdevelopment.

Furthermore, chieftaincy and succession conflicts have further compromised ongoing projects in many villages. For instance in Kedjom Keku Fondom, for instance, the project on the construction of a new council hall in the palace came to a standstill because the population was divided into two factions representing the two contestants to the throne. Thus contributing more money, ideas and efforts for the project became virtually impossible. In the same vein a report published by the Cameroon Baptist Convention in Cameroon, revealed that the Bangolan chieftaincy crisis slowed down activities in the hospital facility in the area. This was because movement was restricted given the tension in the Fondom.(Cameroon, 2016, p.15)

The destruction of property is often a serious consequence of inter and intra ethnic conflicts. In the case of Bangolan, several houses were burnt and others were reduced to very bad conditions. Looting and stealing accompanied the destruction of property. Several people have therefore lost a great deal of their property and are left to begin from the scratch with no support from the administration. Research from Bangolan revealed that at least twenty-six houses were burnt or destroyed, at least twenty-two motor-bikes were burnt, two shops set ablaze and one looted. (Labang and Momoh, 2016: p.15) These destructions brought setbacks into the economic development of the Bangolan.

## **POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CHIEFTAINCY AND SUCCESSION DISPUTES**

Most villages in Cameroon are generally under the leadership of traditional authorities. Villages constitute the smallest unit in the territorial and administrative architecture of the nation. Before being a citizen, each person comes from a particular traditional society or village with which he or she can identify with. The chieftaincy institution which is the guarantor of social peace at grassroots level play a major role in regulating behaviors and actions that could cause prejudice to the society. People revere and respect the traditions and customs of their respective communities than national laws. They also respect traditional authorities as they are guardians of the culture and tradition of a particular society. In other words, citizens who cannot respect their customs and traditions will hardly respect national laws. The destabilization of the traditional society by chieftaincy and succession conflicts has had severe security and political consequences. Some of these include; the politicization of chieftaincy, open confrontation and disagreements, and instability causing social unrest.

## **POLITICIZATION OF CHIEFTAINCY SUCCESSION CONFLICTS**

Although chieftaincy conflicts are found throughout the national territory of Cameroon, there is a widespread perception in the country that the Bamenda Grassfields where chieftaincy was very much revered has been prone to such conflicts. This is probably because some chieftaincy conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields have been very violent and protracted, involving several ethnic groups living over a wide geographical area. Most of the conflicts are typically succession disputes, involving two or more Princes laying claim to the chieftaincy position. Such conflicts usually involve the designation of the

rightful heir which traditional rituals constitute the “enskinment” process and whether the individual selected has gone through the appropriate rituals administered by the traditionally designated persons as custom and tradition demands. (Tonah, 2012: pp.3-6) When the contestants are from different lineages, clans or ethnic groups, such conflicts often tend to be expanded to involve members of the entire lineage, clan or ethnic group.

Besides being violent and protracted, a few chieftaincy conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields have also been politicized, with the ruling government and the main opposition party interfering directly and indirectly in the succession conflict and supporting one or the other of the different factions in the conflict. Furthermore, chieftaincy conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields have also been recurrent, often defying numerous attempts at a resolution by the government, traditional authorities and civil society. The violent nature of chieftaincy and other conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields have frequently been explained by the long period of colonial manipulation as well as manipulation from the government institutions that succeeded the colonial era. These manipulations accounted for the prevalence of succession disputes in the Bamenda Grassfields. While some of these conflicts were often quickly resolved, there are still a considerable number of unresolved conflicts in the area. However, only a few of them have been politicized to the extent that local, regional and national leaders have been drawn into the conflict by the factions, their supporters as well as the elite. Chieftaincy succession conflict has so passionately divided the political elite in the Bamenda Grassfields.

## **INSTABILITY AND SOCIAL UNREST**

The institution of chieftaincy, as a traditional leadership system among ethnic groups in Cameroon, is one of the revered customary legacies that survived colonial past and present independent political dispensation. (Lentz, 1993: p.179)

It has survived and retained the essential element of authority and respects among many Cameroonians especially those from the Bamenda Grassfields for several decades. As auxiliaries of the administration, chiefs provide traditional leadership, judicial adjudication, social cohesion and avenues for the economic advancement of their people

The Bangolan chieftaincy crisis is among one of the most furious chieftaincy succession crisis that provoked a lot of social unrest and tension. Apparently, the massive arrest of Bangolan people was an intimidation strategy by the administration and not an attempt to identify those responsible for the civil unrest. This is why following the arbitrary and mass arrests; no attempts were made to interrogate those arrested so that those found innocent could be released. More than 300 people were arrested and jailed in relations to the crises. (Bangolan, 2016) At the time of this research, data from the field indicates that most of the people arrested then are still in custody.

Victimization and scape-goating has also led to the arrest of several people who may not have been part of the supposed attempt to dethrone the fon. Thus, several innocent people who happened to have been found at the scene of the violence without the due process to determine their innocent are languishing in jails. In a system where human dignity and rights are respected, measures are taken as soon as possible to clear the innocent and release them while prime suspects may be held back for further investigation. The State of Cameroon is holding several Bangolan people in police custody without verifiable and justifiable reason other than that they might have been part of the protest. The Sub-Section President of the CPDM, Mr Mendueh Frederick, decries the fact that he and others were detained for over four months without reason; his motor bike and other property was confiscated and he has never received them back. (Bangolan, 2016)

However, the chieftaincy institution in the Bamenda Grassfields has been bedeviled with disputes which

tend to retard developments and in many cases claim lives of women and children. The continuous deteriorating economic conditions in some African countries have been attributed to violent political, ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts, which have destabilized many peaceful countries. Studies have shown that there are structural reasons to express discontent but it is the ability to mobilize resources that determines the extent of conflict. (Ansorg, 2014: p. 298) Also the fact that peace and stability are pre-requisites for human development and progress is an incontrovertible dictum. But it is also recognized that conflicts are inevitable in human societies and that certain kinds of conflicts may even be necessary because they could be the driving force of politics and the economy and assist in social renewal. Nonetheless, conflicts sap human energies and expend scarce resources; if allowed to fester or gestate; simmering conflicts could explode with tragic and disastrous consequences. All societies, therefore, have mechanisms for managing and resolving them.

## **CREDIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT AT STAKE**

The approach and method with which the government has handled chieftaincy conflicts in the past decades has not been sustainable as some of the succession conflicts resolved by the government are still strongly contested and potentially capable of degenerating. The impartial role of government authorities at times in the resolution of chieftaincy succession crisis has not been very fair. The gross marginalization of the historical truth and the invention of administrative veracity have dealt a great blow to the chieftaincy institution. (Group Interview: 2015)

Weak governments through the absence of institutional structures designed to identify, prevent, mitigate, respond to and evaluate chieftaincy crisis is a major issue among the numerous causes of chieftaincy crisis in the Bamenda Grassfields. In Cameroon, the administration's response to most intra-ethnic crisis/wars was the deployment of forces of law and order who in most cases engage in human right abuses in the attempt to subdue the population. This is a major weakness in the government's ability to manage crisis. (Mbama, 2016) The government needs to take measures and create an emergency system that is capable of identifying, mitigating, responding and evaluating such crisis/conflicts. The administration has been criticized severally for the creation of post crisis commissions which make recommendations that are never implemented. Fundamentally, the chieftaincy institution in Cameroon just like many African countries represents the basis of state organization and functioning. When principles that ought to guide and regulate chieftaincy are persistently violated by the administration, the credibility of such an administration could be put at stake. In 1994, upon the death of chief Fongang of Takwai, the administration hastily appointed his son to succeed him in the person of Tarhem Fongang. (Eben, 2017: p.720) The administration failed to consult the two ruling families and instead acted as though it was right. The result was a chieftaincy conflict in the Fondom. The administration later recognized it's wrong and since then has been trying to correct the wrong, given that there is still no chief in the area.

## **OPEN CONFRONTATION AND DISAGREEMENT**

Chieftaincy and succession conflicts at times in the Bamenda Grassfields have in some cases been manifested in the form of physical violence characterized by the use of weapons like machetes, sticks, and locally made guns. In the Kedjom Keku case, the conflict that opposed the followers of the newly enthroned Fon Vubangsi Benjamin to the followers of the dethroned and assassinated chief Vugah Simon II brought about untold misery to the community. Indeed, the population of Kedjom Keku was divided and still continues to contest the choice of the new Fon. Those in opposition claim that the present Fon is not legitimate because in principle the person that was supposed to replace the dethroned Fon was to be his son. Investigation on the field indicated that Chief Vugah Simon had many male children that could potentially replace him as fon in case of his "disappearance"(death).( Kaze, 2012: p.95)

Explaining the reason why the traditional norm of chieftaincy succession in Kedjom Keku was not respected, Abong Gerald holds that the decision to keep aside the sons of late chief Vugah Simon from the succession procedure was because, the people of Kedjom Keku wanted to forget everything about chief Vugah Simon following the numerous evil deeds he committed against the village. (Abong, 2015) The worst of these crimes were misuse of royal prerogatives and disrespect for other chieftaincy institutions like the kwifon and the traditional council. Unfortunately Chief Vugah Simon exaggerated his royal attributes by unilaterally auctioning Kedjom Keku ancestral land to a Fulani cattle merchant. (Interviewed Natang,, 2015)

The Kedjom Keku Fulani problem started in 1991, when Chief Vugah Simon unilaterally sold some Kedjom Keku farmlands to a certain Fulani cattle rearer, Alhadji Yusuf Danpullo. This was protested by the Kwifon, but fonVugah was categorical on his decision. The late fon of Kedjom Keku, had earlier warned against the sale of land in the village to foreigners. ( Kaze, 2012: p.92)

Some village elders confirmed that the cattle rearer had earlier proposed to buy grazing land from late Chief Vubangsi to no avail. As mentioned earlier, the Kedjom Keku people are mostly an agricultural population and their survival depends on their farmlands. Therefore, the sale of this fertile land to Fulani grazers was starving the Kedjom Keku people to death. The worst part of this sale of Kedjom Keku farmland was the fact that the victims were not allowed to harvest their crops. The Kedjom Keku indigenes stood helpless watching Fulani cattle feeding on their farmland and destroying their crops. These farmers who had already got enough of this tragedy became enraged and decided to inspiringly attack the cattle. This act was carried out mostly by Kedjom Keku youths. (Interview Formbui, 2015) The attack on Fulani cattle provoked Fulani retaliation. The result of this was the burning of close to two hundred farm houses and barns of foodstuff in Kedjom Keku. The act was followed by the arrest, detention and torture of some farmers especially the youths. (post, 2004)

In the Bamenda Grassfields, the Kwifon, (Regulatory Society) also known in other traditional societies as Ngwerong and Ngumba play a very important role in the administration of a Fondom. It also plays a vital role in decisions that concerns the Fondom. The fon must always listen to advice from the Kwifon. In Kedjom Keku, just like in other Bamenda Grassfields Fondoms, the role of the Kwifon in traditional administration is very important. The Kwifon exercised executive and judicial functions as instructed by the Fon. It sometimes regulate traditional matters based on sound judgment without consulting the chief. Some informants in KedjomKeku jointly held that Chief Vugah had some elderly people of Kedjom Keku flogged because they condemned his bad rule. (Chiseu, 2015)

### **Mending the Implication of Chieftaincy an Succession in the Bamenda Grassfields**

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 Bamenda Grassfields and in Cameroon in general has been put on the edge of peril especially with the proliferation of chieftaincy succession conflicts that have continue to frail the institution.

In reality the post-colonial state-building in Africa at large have been largely undertaken through the guise of transplanting a European institutional system that has fashioned the African state basically a neo-colonial one. (Abebe,2013: p.429)The fundamental change of the termination of the colonial legacy was in effect the replacement of colonial powers with new local elite leaders. Since the removal of the shackles of colonialism, there has always been a debate on the political, social, and legal framework needed to bring



about change in Africa. Primarily, the new elites of Africa and notably in Cameroon, in a bid to bring about speedy development attempted to forcefully phagocyte the chieftaincy institution already weakened by numerous succession disputes. (Interviewed, Guzang, 2017) Thus, chieftaincy that was supposed to be an instrument and fundamental basis on which Cameroon was supposed to build the basis of statehood and modern governance. This explains the fact that the state formation endeavor in Cameroon was largely a transplantation of the European style governance without any socio-cultural and traditional consideration for the Cameroonian context. Due to the lack of socio-cultural basis in state construction and policy formulation in Cameroon, the state has been faced with several challenges as it has attempt to provide western solutions to African problems.

In light of such inefficiency, there is the need to consider chieftaincy as a relevant institution capable of boasting development and rendering the functioning of the modern state more efficient and effective. This of course warrants a prospective examination of preconditions necessary for the chieftaincy institution to become relevant. Some of them include contextualization of chieftaincy and restricting chiefs from participating in partisan politics, administrative authorities respect for chiefs, rational integration of traditional authorities into the modern governance institutions, and rehabilitation of respect for the chieftaincy institution in Cameroon and finally examine the prospective and relevance of the chieftaincy institution in globalized Cameroon.

## CONSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION

The formal recognition of the institution of traditional authority by the state is likely to transform the position and legitimacy of traditional leaders. On the one hand, it strengthens their position vis-a-vis the government. On the other hand, the possible negative impact of formal recognition is that they may lose their independence and risk being identified with state failure. State influence on the selection of individual candidates affects their independence even more. An additional effect is that the government will become implicated in local struggles for chieftaincy positions, which are rife in many countries and often lead to violent popular uprisings.

One of the most fundamental prerequisites that could give the chieftaincy more relevance in Cameroon and transform it from a crisis institution to a development-prone institution is its enshrinement into the constitution. In some African countries like Ghana the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana of 1992 guarantees the institution of chieftaincy, and states that Parliament has no power to enact a law which 'confers on any person or authority the right to accord or withdraw recognition to or from a chief for any purpose whatsoever' (Article 270). (Ubink, 2008: p.13) This same document defines a chief as 'a person, who, hailing from the appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and installed as a chief or queen mother in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage (Article 277). Furthermore, it prohibits chiefs from taking part in partisan politics.

### Regulations of Chiefs Participation in Partisan Politics.

Chiefs could belong to all political parties, but member of none of these parties. Even though chiefs in Cameroon and specially those of the Bamenda Grassfields have been involve in party politics right from the late period of colonial rule, their implication in party politics since the era of democratic transition characterized by multiparty politics has strongly affected chieftaincy. The participation of chiefs in party politics is anti-democratic and has dealt a serious blow to the chieftaincy institution. (Charles, 2018) To corroborate this assertion, Ibrahim Mouiche notes that;

...partism politics of traditional rulers especially when their choice differs with that of his subjects constituted a hindrance to demcratic governance..., The present democratic process that has led to multipartism has pushed the fons to have different political inclinations. Due to certain factors some fons

have lost their positions while others have become a source for votes. This militantism is caused by the zeal to accumulate both political and traditional power. This political militantism has seen the powers of the traditional rulers reduced in the face of his local subjects especially when he loses his moral obligation toward the same population. (Mouiche, 2005: p.4)

One of the main factors that has greatly discredited the chieftaincy institution and provoked the succession conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields is the important role of the modern state and Fons involvement in party politics especially following the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Cameroon in 1990s. The introduction of multi-party politics in Africa as a whole was an inevitable by-product of globalization. In Cameroon and more precisely in the Bamenda Grassfields, the impetus came with the founding of the Social Democratic Front Party on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 1990. The “wind of change” which started blowing from the Bamenda Grassfields, spread steadily across the rest of the country and on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1991, President Paul Biya was obliged to liberalize multi-party politics in Cameroon. This was following law no. 90/056 of 19<sup>th</sup> December 1990 liberalizing the existence of other political parties in Cameroon. (Samah, 2006: pp.300-301) Within this new political context, the bone of contention was the control of political power and the role and participation of chiefs in party politics became a contested issue.

Newly created opposition parties struggled to seize power through ballot boxes, from the ruling party, Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM). In this tussle, each group sought to rally the people behind their parties. As spokesmen and leader of their people, traditional rulers in Cameroon especially those of the Bamenda Grassfields could not remain indifferent in the face of this new political dispensation that was reigning in the Cameroonian political landscape. Besides, it was a golden opportunity for traditional rulers to bounce back to the national scene after having been eclipsed in the earlier decades by the political regimes of Presidents, Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya. That is why the SDF from its creation received massive support from most chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields. To counter this support given to the SDF by Bamenda Grassfields traditional rulers, the ruling party, CPDM and the government to authorize traditional rulers in partisan politics to their advantage. As such, the government used strategies of influencing the choice of successors to thrones and imposed chiefs who could support the CPDM. In other words, chiefs who did not support or were against the ruling CPDM were dethroned. (Mboui, p.270) On his part Francis Adigwe noted:

Another way or means the government used to control the local population and which is peculiar to Africa was the intervention in succession or chieftaincy disputes by the central government to favor nominees who supported the party in power. The nominee was then expected to use his position to influence elections so as to secure victory for the ruling party and the government. (Adigwe, 1998: pp. 300-301)

However, the introduction of multi-partism sparked a serious debate on the role of traditional rulers in the new political dispensation. The dilemma that confronted traditional rulers in the 1990s was defining a balance between the wishes and aspiration of their subjects and the government. This way, traditional rulers found themselves between the hammer and the anvil. That is between their subjects on the one hand and the state on the other hand. (Kaptué, 1999 : p. 10) The ruling party saw traditional rulers as vote breakers and sure tickets to rural votes and demanded their allegiance and support. However, many subjects supported opposition parties and could not stand to see their chiefs in the ruling parties. (Fokwang, 2003: pp. 90-91) This was a delicate issue, for the relationships between traditional rulers and their subjects were affected by the political choices their chiefs made. This was particularly serious with Fons of the Bamenda Grassfields. Consequently, this sparked off a serious debate over whether chiefs should or not play part in partisan politics in Cameroon.

Politicians, scholars and traditional rulers themselves were divided on the issue. This led to the emergence of two opposing camps. While the first, the conservative camp or traditionalist held that chiefs should steer clear of partisan politics, the second camp, the progressive, advocated that chiefs had the legitimate right to

participate freely in partisan politics. Whatever the views held by the traditionalist or the progressive camps, our main interest is to know how the involvement of traditional rulers in partisan politics, especially of the Bamenda Grassfields contributed to their dethronement. Basing our argument on the traditionalist views, it can be noted that it was largely to prevent chiefs from committing crimes that could warrant their dethronement.

Traditionalists insisted that it was improper for traditional rulers to compete with their subjects in democratic elections because, if the chief loses, he brings dishonor to his elevated status and in some cases be dethroned by his people. (Interview, 2017) Furthermore, the Fons or chiefs especially in most Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies are considered by their people as “The father” of everybody and as such it was unthinkable for a chief to compete for political post with his subjects, regardless of the party to which they might belong. One advocate of the traditionalist camp states:

A traditional chief should avoid entering into a political competition with his subjects for municipal council seat or sub-section president of a political party. The traditional chief should remain that traditional symbol and leader, where subjects refer to for traditional advice. For this to happen he should avoid to belong to the party in power, to avoid collecting taxes in the place of tax agent. They should return to their role of traditional symbol in the cultural aspect of it. (Fopoussi, 1991 : p.60)

## **CONCILIATING ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITIES ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHIEFTAINCY**

Since the advent of the modern state in Cameroon, the relationship between the administrators and chiefs has not been a very good one. This was because territories that were formally under the control of traditional authorities was henceforth controlled by the modern administrators such as Governors, Seniors and Divisional officer administering today in regions, Divisions and Sub-Divisions respectively. These administrators are commonly called the head of the land. This obviously did not sound good in the ears of some Grassfields fons who as Samah Walters described them were, the “*maître de la terre*”, that is the sole dispenser of all lands. This has provoked what some authors have referred to as rival governance.

In Cameroon today and particularly in the Bamenda Grassfields, the attitude that some administrative officers manifest towards chiefs is appalling. Some chiefs have seen their traditional decisions on some important issues like land disputes revoked by some administrative officers. Investigation on the field, notably at Guzang indicated that some administrative officers end up acquiring more land in areas where they have been posted and at times against the will of the traditional authorities.

Furthermore, in instances where individuals were not satisfied with a case judged and verdict rendered by the chief, such people generally took such cases to the administrative authority that at times revoked previous judgments and instituted new ones. The struggle by traditional authorities and administrative officers to control space and population has generated a lot of conflicts. Using himself as an example, Fon Lekunze Neambo Andreas III of the Bamumbu Fondom opines that there is hardly any chief in Cameroon especially in the Bamenda Grassfields who is in very good terms with the administrative authority in his Fondom. He further maintains that, even though there might exist seemingly collaboration between the chief and the administrator, conflict is never too far especially when it comes to management of resources. (Interview Lekunze, 2017)

## **CONCLUSION**

It is the finding of this paper that the ramifications of chieftaincy succession conflict are so many. Most affected being the chieftaincy institution itself that has been reticent though it has not lost its socio-cultural

and mystical attributes despite multiple dynamics. Peace, unity and harmony that characterise most villages in the Bamenda Grassfields have been threatened by succession conflicts as illustrated in the paper.

Despite these challenges, chieftaincy in the Bamenda Grassfields and elsewhere in Cameroon still represents the socio-cultural heritage of the various communities that make up Cameroon. It is still revered by many and its capacity of mobilising the community towards common course is very impressive. Thus chieftaincy if well oriented by the powers that be, could become an efficient instrument of development and sustainable governance. This article has examined a number of prerequisites that could make chieftaincy an effective instrument of development and sustainable governance alongside the state that cannot effectively cover all the territory administratively.

From a more general perspective, the resilience of African chieftaincy and its capacity to adapt to the evolving society is a great opportunity for Africa to reconcile with its history and lay fresh grounds for the emergence of a new African state, though incorporating good practices from the western culture or civilization. In fact chiefs could because of their legitimate nature and efficiency become actors of in the development of their communities. This is because the role of African chiefs in the resolution of major international questions like, violent extremist (terrorism) and gender mainstreaming cannot be underestimated. The chieftaincy is like a mineral resource like uranium, which if carefully exploited could foster development, peace and social cohesion, but if poorly used, it could be a very dangerous destructive weapon for African civilization and the modern state.

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