

# Bamenda Grassland Elites in the Race for Titles within the Multiparty Liberal Space in Cameroon

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.7931>

Received: 10 July 2023; Revised: 30 August 2023; Accepted: 07 August 2023; Published: 23 September 2023

## ABSTRACT

The decade spanning from the 1990s inaugurated the Cameroon Political outfit with trans-mutations and opportunities under the New Deal Regime that commands special attention. Each of these new adjustments warranted alternative positioning by the emerging political elites who had been circumstantially trapped within the threshold of so many opportunities that this liberal landscape was brandishing. One interesting outgrowth in this changing atmosphere was the fact that; traditional titles plus modern credentials turned out to be one of the key elements required for positioning and lobbying by these opportunistic elites. This article combines evidence combed from primary and secondary sources to answer key questions patterning to the tussle for titles by grassland elites in the guise of positioning themselves in the hub of opportunities that the somewhat liberal phase of the Cameroon New Deal era offered as from the 1990s. It particularly seeks to situate (a) The special climate that engineered these paradigmatic shifts by those presumed to be sufficiently savvy of tradition (b) the different categories of titles these elites raced for as well the reasons behind such a mad rush (c) the methods plus *raison d'être* of title conferment as well as (d) the impact of such deals in political positioning. Away from the positions/opportunities that were gained and lost by elites of this niche in this title drama, the paper proffer that the race to own titles and the politics around it played a big role in washing away the authority /command that titled men carried before this time not only within the grasslands but largely everywhere in Cameroon where such gimmicks became part of the game for gaining space in the realm of power. In all, it submits that this game rather polarized the elites against each other since each title holders proofed to be so ready to play or perform any mean deal so as to get appointed or other forms of compensations that mattered in the realm of opportunities. It opines therefore that such moves disgracefully eclipsed other genuine methods of getting the right people into the power trail on the basis of merit thereby, ruining the political space with wrong people from hence and any time after.

**Keywords:** Race, Elites, Cameroon, Grasslands, Traditional, Liberal Space

## INTRODUCTION

This articles examines the dramatic race undertaken by the Elites of the Bamenda Grassland polities to position themselves admits the opportunities that the New Deal (1984-present) offered. It premised this by examining the context and essence of titles prior to the changes and competition following the 1990 liberalization laws[1]. It builds a portrait of why modern elites became obsessed with the acquisition of titles so much that the race for it became fierce. It projects how these titles were conferred as well as the gains and losses these modern elites made in the world of political opportunism ushered in by the New deal changing governance. It has specifically attempted to build a scientific insight into the traditional process of awarding traditional titles and how the established norms of title awards and ownership were collectively disgraced on one hand by the modern elite and the other by traditional rulers who were the officiating masters of these

thought dignified royal and or community entitlements.

### **The Context of Grasslands Elites Obsession for Titles**

Upon ascension to power in 1982 as president, Paul Biya took Cameroonians and other world political pundits by storm when he offered to avail himself and services within an interesting programme which he named the New Deal. The Cameroon New Deal announced was intrinsically new but its popularity within the political chest board was not in doubt given that the modern world still had the treasures of the 1930s American New Deal Successes in mind. Indeed, Biya's New Deal both ignited hope and seemed at its very inception to provide a new era with boundless opportunities for all. As enshrined in its Dictionaries known as Communal Liberalism and best justified by its slogan of Rigour and Moralization, this New Deal package appeared both in form and content to shower expectation of a New Dawn of treasures to Cameroonians across the board. This was particularly so because Ahidjo[2] from 1960 to 1982 had tactfully raised his much trumpeted programme of National Unity, Integration and Cohesion to the heights of a political dogma and fought rigorously to get all Cameroonians to worship it as such.[3] Wrapped up in this philosophy, Ahidjo incidentally destroyed any hope of political competition or landscaping where new people could gain roots and blossom within the ambits of politics. Indeed, Ahidjo compared to his African contemporaries had a dwarf academic profile but was able to employ a joint venture of brute force and skilful leadership to push through his programmes[4].

In all, Ahidjo proofed in his more than two decades of stewardship at the helm of the Cameroon state to be a rare breed of a politician who appeared not only to master political demagogy but also the dynamics of the world around him. With this, he carefully employed an odd combination of force and coercion mixed with intimidation variedly in all spheres to achieve full veneration to the state and which was strangely separated from his personality by a thin membrane. There was a high probability to confuse the two as one and the same thing. Substantially, this odd mixture of strategies brought in some development and rouged form of state dignity but had the demerit in that, so many people became haunted by fear to venture into the power circles where opportunities to serve and be served were bountiful. This volume explains why Biyas' New Deal policy appeared to be so appealing to many especially those disadvantaged by Ahidjos vindictiveness. The New Deal appeared like a sort of joyous daybreak which was emerging from the whirlpool of long nights of brazened dictatorship. This was particularly true in the realm of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) party where most of its members evidently faded up with Ahidjos' style of highhanded stewardship at the helm of the party and the state. In all, most people were overpowered by circumstances and therefore discouraged to cry out or take measures to emerge in this political dispensation.

Going by the opinion of the politically minded class[5] Biya's ascension to power, therefore, represented not simply a change of personalities but largely, a sweet swapping of power from (a) a high-handed old and somehow outmoded person to a young, liberal and fashionable leader(b) change from a tyrant of a class apart of northern Cameroon origin to a moderate, understanding and opened minded stoic administrator from the Grand South[6] of Cameroon and (c), a switch of power and authority from a devoted and less educated Muslim to a well-educated and entrenched communicant of not only the Catholic church but all of what Christianity all over the world represented. This in detail explains why the New deal was greeted with elastic euphoria at its inception in 1984[7]. With exacting opportunities looming in the New Deal package, the concept and angle of understanding elitism and everything linked to title ownership plus leadership and political participation had to be repositioned.

### **Titles and Elite Nexus in the Cameroon Grasslands**

The Cameroon grassland is niche largely identified by its mosaic cultural affinity where there is a rich mixture of people of varying perception of forms of prestige and approach to wellbeing. As a distinct part of the Western Grass fields, its peoples (about 70 percent are Tikars) whose traditional administration and form of government is essentially centralized with traditional leaders known as fons[8] wielding enormous power.

The Bororo Fulani groups occupy about 10 percent of the population within this niche and they are spaced throughout the area. The rest of the ethnic units here that form 20 percent of the entire population are the Ngembas, the Efik, and Chambas.[9] An important element that unites the traditional and modern polities and institution is their regard to titles. This clearly flows in consonance with the pillar of symbolic interactionism which permits us to understand how people interact particularly when this comes to things. It opines that all actions and regard to matters of prestige can vary according to the interest of the person[10]. This gives the way to interpretation by the fact that it permits us to understand that “human action and interaction are understandable only through the exchange of meaningful communication or symbols”. Also, this game with titles and the symbols behind gives more relevance from some levels of analysis where at one it will be interesting for humans to develop an interest towards things and attitudes this can generate, the physical attachment imposed on events and objects by humans[11].

Titles are affixes conferred on an individual or collective personalities that emphasize social status, ownership, or the right to perform some specified functions. This can be tied to the idea of self-fulfilling and even the prophecy’s projection. Titles were created or formed to encourage nobility and hard work, define status and/or attribute responsibilities over clearly defined functions in both African and western systems. In whatever form, titles are intended to confer honour and cherished social esteem/respect if not veneration[12]. In both the traditional and modern communities or institutions, titles (a) might come from birth like those of the royal lineage (b) be conferred on individuals in recognition of certain achievements and stability like “*Sir*” in the British history and “*Ntumfo*” in the Grass fields traditional sense of things[13]. There is a paraphernalia of other titles hosted by traditional and modern hierarchies which are conferred on people upon the performance of some established rituals, training and studies. Any community’s leaders/elites have a rich packet of other titles which they confer on individuals as recommended or as their judgment deem such personality fit for. Apart from academic titles that required rigorous scrutiny and universal acceptability, the rest of the titles conferred on individuals can be bought through offers and rites that entailed elastic extravaganza. In the New Deal dispensation, titles played the role of elevating individuals from the yards of minions to the heights of fame and national visibility. These added qualities acted like a magnet to the new political chest board where charisma of a distinct sort was needed to back home votes in any election. In fact, titled men were needed in their numbers to run the offices and positions created within the emerging political space in the 1990s. There was a deal of opportunities from the political blues and those who wished to gained them needed some distinctions and the most available way of being different was to get decorated in some new affixes like titles from the traditional realm.

This overwhelming desire by mostly the pen elites like Lawyers, Teachers, Pastors, Lecturers and other forms of white-collar professions had the fortune of matching in tune with the expectations of the palace men and/or notables who were in their numbers poor, hungry and envious. Such attitudes of a general lack (poverty) which became conspicuous among the traditional authorities or barons of power in the Grass fields placed these traditional barons at the hub of desecrating traditional seals, rights and entitlement to those who were always ready to pay for. The rising number of people searching for various degrees of titles among the schooled men occasioned a paradigmatic switch in the title award/conferment among the traditional lot in the Grass fields. In all the title affair ran within the orbits of demand and supply which calls for a critical review of what elites and elitism sought to offer within this ecological niche.

### **Elites and Elitism in Contemporary Discourse**

The question of elites and elitism in African Metropolis has been animating scholarship especially in the past two decades. This has been due in part by the rising opportunities that have emerged to be filled by people that suit such appellations especially in governance and in whole by the confusions and contradictions that have encompassed the meaning and dynamics of these two concepts. Bluntly defined, elite is a person with a distinguished social and intellectual baggage or dispositions who can provide a broad and specific compass for societal or environmental progress along with its wellbeing. By natural disposition, co-optation/election or situational grasp of knowledge, an elite in whatever form commands respect and

exudes influence in his community or polity[14]. Current research narratives have used palpable evidence to brush off the piped contention that survived for a very long time in contemporary scholarship which submitted that the definition of elites limits itself to the Western Educated elites or people of the pen.[15] This contention was premised on the fact that western education intellectual baggage was required to contribute to societal growth and transformation but failed to acknowledge the examples of people with esteemed societal contribution who do not major from the pen/book realm. This paper sees an elite simply as any enlightened individual who has a natural or bestowed knowledge about himself and his environment or society. It is therefore plausible to opine that the elites that formed the nucleus of opportunists demonstrated by the fierceness with which they raced for titles in Cameroon at large and Grass fields in particular emerged from multifocal backgrounds but most of them passed for the Pen elites.

At independence, two elite classes emerged that registered significant changes on the traditional leadership of the North West which was part of the Southern/West Cameroons. On the one hand, there were the western educated elites who had studied in the Native Authority (NA) and Mission schools in the North West and even out of the area in places like Nigeria and former East or French Cameroon[16]. Though most of these schooled individuals were conversant with the role of traditional leadership, they most often elected to play active roles in politics and administration which at times kept them at odds with their traditional obligations as dictated to them by the Fons and their administrative prerogatives. Closely related to this group were the ex-service men[17] who were not really literate but were aware of the new roles required for the growth of their society. In the thinking of these classes of people, the traditional elegance of doing things which glorified title owners meant so little and as such the race to own titles did not become fierce before the 1990s. To this realm should be added the third group constituted by Christianized church men – Baptist, Catholic along with Christians of other churches who had soaked themselves with the teachings of Christianity that differed intrinsically with the traditional philosophy of life. In all, enlightened men and women at first were pointedly, unwilling to take and execute orders from the Fon and his decentralized agents or notables and so the question of earning traditional titles was so easily answered, handled or even ignored.

The second main group of elites was the traditional elite class which emerged principally from the orbits of traditional hierarchies and all the niches that royalty sought to protect within the Grasslands geographical milieu. It was among these class of people that traditional titles meant a whole lot of things best understood in the philosophy of traditional religion, diplomacy and power tenure. In this realm of thought, titles helped not only to distribute roles, offices and power but largely as a method of distinction and regimentation. In a way, personified titles were bestowed on individuals either on account of their relationship with royalty (meaning sanguinary) or by some distinction within the societal social, economic or political fabric. In the pre-colonial era traditional titles were graduated on honorary realms and again on the functions that each polity had but this changed diametrically when colonization inched forward. This too had its lasting implications on the definition of elites and elitism. Titles and credentials were originally used in Africa simply to conferred broad distinctions and meritocracy[18]. This rhetoric changed diametrically when it became clear that leading authorities proofed to place more emphasis on titles than the ability of the individuals to deliver the political slogans and policies of the state. This made most individuals to become title conscious. In this realm modern and traditional titles or credentials became much sought accreditations which politically minded or engaged folks raced for.

### **The Equations of Elites and Elitism within the Ambit of Liberal Space**

As indicated shortly, a symbiosis of power sharing, elite's nomenclature and governance had incidentally gained shape within the colonial/alien way of doing things in the Cameroon grasslands traditional polities following the liberal political space that emerged in the 1990s. This was made possible by the fact that; Ahidjos' regime[19] just like the departing colonial governance created room for the voice of traditional authorities and title holders to be heard in matters of substance concerning their different political and socio-cultural Units. In any case, one thing was definitely becoming clear in the minds of those who had

entertained adhesive convictions on the righteousness/might of royalty. There was a growing hard to be dismissed feeling that traditional power was being pushed by the new statist governance to the yards of second fiddles where traditional authorities and African approach to matters could only perform collaborative or auxiliary functions. Without other possible options in this new twist of things, the emerging elites of this season got immersed in the realms of new functional realities. These realities had other implications but the substance of it was that, pure traditionalism as it existed in the Pre-colonial days was fast fading out and that traditional government needed to be reformulated or conceptualized to suit the existing realities. At best, what seemed to matter much in the new governance that the New Deal or liberal space offered was the comportment and fate of the political elites.

With mass opportunities looming to showcase elites for positioning or elevation unto heights of decision making, need arose for them to bag traditional and modern titles. This argument flows well when dealing with Political elites but its worthy to note that within the change structure that came with the New Deal; the notion of elitism and those who suited this appellation was not only limited to this Political class. For some very weird reasons, the Political Elites that emerged in the Bamenda grassland as from the 1990s though conscious of the traditional manner of approach and African philosophical deontology, saw themselves as new holders of power and used this thinking to toy with some established perceptions not only of power but also of the titles that laid within traditional support structure/scheme.

With the many opportunities emerging within the New Deal package, people needed to showcase their prowess and this could not come and go without the erection of a gimmick that painted the elites as glorified and recognized persons by their own societies. One most admirable and easily accepted way of home recognition/recommendation was the kind of titles which the concerned individual carried or could be endowed with. Though titles within these realms did constitute part of the scarce resources, the sudden rise in its demands by the political elites exerted pressure on those who were in their custody thereby placing the question of title accreditation and ownership within the central realm of political placement and scarcity. This clearly confirms what is generally observed in the case of Cameroon grass field zone: people who perform actions attach meanings to objects, and their behaviour is a unique way of reacting to their interpretation of a situation.

This kind of arrangement was intrinsic and placed the Fons who by virtue of their offices owned the affidavit of title conferment in some kind of fixed mixed with excitement. The case was not different with their representatives who held the enviable right to negotiation as intermediaries. By all calculus, this twist was at the detriment of the age long traditional and ritual practices of the North West peoples but the Fons who were the leaders of these traditional sacred embodiments had no option but to compromise with the new elites since royalty and its entire paraphernalia was repeatedly proving to bow in honour of the modern forces of change.[20] All of these systematically occasioned mutations in the way traditional titles were awarded thereby, confusing and even lowering the standards and methods /manner of acquisition.[21] To a very large extent the pattern of prestige ushered by the money economy along with the vents of fame emergence created by the post independent governing structures were at the roots of these dramatic changes and their resultant consonants.

### **Political Orientations/Projections of Elites' Race for Titles**

In pre-colonial Africa, there existed people who were elites in no lesser ways like Chiefs, Kings, Priests, Native doctors, Notables, Clan and Lineage heads, Warriors, Diviners. This list was enriched by influential men who enjoyed esteem, status or prestige within the traditional hierarchy of norms. It was in the shoulders of such venerated individuals that power and authority to govern and control not only people but also mind-sets rested. The chiefs and influential elders were genuinely respected, cherished and utilized in the art of government[22] During the Colonial Era, the Native Authority (NA) which were usually constituted of the traditional elite became the organs through and within which the British colonial administrators ruled the people. The elites in the study locale had their distant formation rooted in such processes of change and politics

These traditional elite were conscious of what change entailed though the odd segments of the principles of native administration helped to protect their conservatism. The result of this was a chained retardation of the political, economic and social advancement of the grassland oligarchies. Indeed, the colonial administration was often criticized by the western educated elites for its failure to grant it an active role in the native administration. The administration was aware of the fact that the new schooled men would have to replace the traditional elite if any meaningful progress was to be made in local development.

In the Bamenda Grassland just like elsewhere in Cameroon and Africa at large, the Western formal process of education produced mostly men and women who were not only in constant conflict with the traditional society but most of the times also at odds with the colonial administrators. For example, it was already observed in 1952 that the northern model of Native Administration was followed 'rather slavishly' and that there was little room in that system for the Christian and educated members of the community to fit themselves comfortably since their world views and perceptions of comfort differed intrinsically. The Christian missions were therefore responsible for the formation of the new breed of western educated elite of Professors, Doctors, Politicians, Lawyers, Business men, Teachers, Nurses who viewed power from the traditional locus as lacking in several ways. Until the early 1960s, almost all schools in the North West were opened, staffed and administered by the missions whose efforts at evangelization sometimes attacked the very basis of the Grassland traditions as well as the beatification of the Fons. This went along with the philosophy of title esteem and accreditation. Again, this did not come and go without a corresponding disregard to traditional titles since they held the relevance of such traditional accreditations to appeal wholly to the African thought and mythology.[23]

Amongst that group of elite who emerged and made meaning to socio-economic and Political life in the Grass fields were great personalities like John Ngu Foncha, Augustine Ngom Jua, Solomon Tandeng Muna, Winston Ndeh Ntumazah, Anna Foncha, Bernard Nsokeka Fonlon, Josepha Mua, Paul Fongu, Joseph Ndong Nkwain, S. Ndi and Joseph Fokum from a very long list[24]. By chance or by design these were those Ahidjo depended on to make the political progress in their respective spheres of influence. Their Christiando-anthropogenic formations fitted them into the different moulds of politics offered by that dispensation. True enough, this class of individuals somehow owed allegiance to the Fons, Chiefs, Lamidos and other constituted traditional authorities more so because they constituted veritable vote banks but few of them raced for titles to gain political visibility. The mutations that gripped the world at large and Cameroon in particular in the 1990s produced a new atmosphere for political competition all hinged in some large measure to title position/ownership.

### **The title Race on Course**

On the 12th of December Paul Biya played one of his New Deal joker by signing a decree which literally opened the space for all forms of political formations and movements to emerge.[25] Apart from other indigenous and national formations that required men and women of wit to lead through democratic elections was the emergence of political parties with varying ideologies of governance and power tenure. The opening of this new space pregnant with broad and specific ideas about liberalism gave a new twist to the indigenous conception about titles and other credentials that had to do with regional or national visibility. The problem here is not just that so many political parties like the SDF[26] UFDC[27] CDU[28], UNDP[29], MDR[30] and others emerged but that, these parties in theory had national orientations but were mostly led and ran on tribal or at best regiono-ethnic basis. To give the newly formed political parties a national character, people were needed to run the different echelons of their party and this needed a level of both visibility and acceptability by the local folks. Strange enough the political minded class of the grassland polities in the 1990 era was constituted mostly by a people of fine scholarship and venerated credentials. A cross section of those who ventured into politics were lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers but all these hallowed modern credentials incidentally failed to pose as a worthy bargain for the anxious elites to secure enough visibility for appointment or positioning within the administrative or political hierarchy.

Democracy relies on voices represented by numbers during elections. It was the norm in almost any position including even local development meetings where fine scholarship alone was not enough to guarantee acceptability. The failure of modern credentials to win over the hearts of the mostly political ignorant Grass fields traditional chiefdoms including the urban areas necessitated need to seek for other forms of societal admiration and connectivity to the masses on the ground.

The main thing that provided the nexus between this fine scholarship or the educated with the illiterate masses was real or fictive ways through and under which traditional titles were conferred on elites with an aim of placing them within the threshold of visibility and influence. Indeed, the race for traditional titles was spiced by the desire to gain space in the new dispensation of opportunism but not all of such ventures were for ulterior motives. There were indeed some genuine book elites who needed to own titles so as to gain access to the traditional hierarchy to enlighten them on best models of coping with the new political developments that the new age was offering. There were others who simply wanted to get these titles for self-fulfilment or in order to pass for accomplished dignified men and women in the midst of the new patterns of prestige that the political dispensation offered. Beyond the symbols of the race of Titles, it was also a strategy because it has to do with instrumentalization[31]. Titles become some of the resources the owners used to achieve their ambitions in their various domains of competition.

With the rebirth of multi-party politics in the 1990s and the challenges that came along in subsequent elections in the North West, the new elites of this era embarked on a serious hunt for votes by all means. The political space in this new dawn was animated by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) which made its way into the political scene of Cameroon in May 1990. The space it covered and hearts the opposition party worn made it extremely difficult for the elite from the CPDM to maintain its grip, especially in the rural suburbs where titles were endearing. With such vacillations tailored to gaining space, coping strategies had to be deployed by those in want of visibility. It was in this realm that most elites found the idea of racing for titles popular. To them, lobbying for traditional titles from their various local Fons and even beyond gave them the needed identity which was upheld as the most fertile avenue where politicians could grab votes in any highly competitive elections.

Amongst the prominent political elite of the Cameroon grasslands of this era were figures who were generally in serious need of titles either to get themselves positioned or visible for positioning were people like Ni John Fru Ndi, Dr Siga Asanga, Prof Clement Ngwa Sirri, Barrister Bernard Acho Muna, Albert Mukong, Hon. Tamfu Joseph, Emmanuel Ngafeesen, Regina Mundi, Hon S.K Nyoh, Fon Forsi Yakun Ntaw II, Fon S. Anye Ndefru Andwafor III, Hon Fon Doh Gahwanyi III, Christopher Nsahlai, Hon. Joseph Mbah Ndam, Zacheus Fonjidam, John B. Ndeh, Prof. Angwafor, Philemon Yang, Amah Tutu Muna, Senator Elma Enoh Lafon, Forbin Simon, Barrister Nico Halle, Nick Ngwanyam, Judith Achidi Achu, Fon Teche Njei II, Fru Jonathan M., Samuel Fonkam Azu'u, Yoyo Emmanuel, Hon. Nji Fidelis Muzia, Hon Joseph Banadzem, Hon. Nji Tumasang, Prof. Elizabeth Tamanjong, Atanga Nji Paul, and Hon. Peter Cho Fonso to give but a shortlist.[32] A good number of the people named above had other social, academic and traditional titles that kept them beyond the ordinary folk but almost all of them still raced for more titles so as to implant themselves squarely within the thresholds of political visibility. This corresponds to what Goffman describe in terms of events in which an individual's situation is fully dependent on the move of one's opponent and in which (...) players know this and have the wit to use this awareness for advantage[33]. And for Grass field actors, the stake is clear: the fight for leadership or visibility and the possibility of an opened conflict in the region. In the same perspective of analysis, one can also emphasize and create a nexus with the concept of elites to understand big-men strategies[34]. In that regard, there is a bridge we can make between Africa and Malaysia. For example, it is said that "the Big Men of sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia appeared to have in common the importance of acquiring followers through efforts rather than birth right and the need to continually feed follower". So what is observed or analysed in Grass field area is not the exclusivity of those people or even the Cameroon country the such practices tend to become universal with some particularities; for examples the race for position and the consequences of their action somehow can create confusion between their way of governance and dictatorship.

The drama of want of titles in the Bamenda grasslands became so interesting in the 1990s so much that academics or Faculties were in their numbers abandoning the amphitheaters to race for titles and offices within their local bases from the Fons and other custodians of tradition. The Fons too found the need to reinforce their power and yards of influence by racing for political offices and titles. This explains why it became so common to see an individual carrying traditional plus modern titles combined. The list of some of the actors in the race for titles is just reliably representative owing to the fact that, by the year 2005, almost all of them had succeeded to back an array of mixed titles and offices. And this goes beyond the grass field geographical area. The same title race can be witnessed in the entire country and this is no new in political realm

This very idea of seeking for visibility moved in consonant with the urge of the time as the church and tradition where power tenure and influence was seen to be operating on a very different paradigm was not left out. Titles conferred on an individual by a single authority like the Fon or society commanded wide prestige but this often failed far short of the splendour that arose when one was offered a title by joint authorities. This brings into discourse the classification of titles along local, regional, national and international pedigrees in both traditional and modern fiefs. The race for titles took some elites to yearn for titles that commanded local, regional, national and international respectabilities. This was the reason for the growing desire exhibited by political; social and economic elites to lobby for titles that were jointly awarded to them by all or majority of the Fons and a joint agency of other authorities of the North West. For example, shining example of such was the Titles of *Ntumfor* [35] which was awarded by the North West Fons under the canopy of their association, NOWEFU then under the leadership of Fon Chaffah XI of Bangolan. This title of joint authorship was awarded to the International lawyer by name Nico Halle in 2001. Coincidence or other parameters might have wrestled to place this lawyer with the purview of power following his appointment by the Head of State as one of the eleven Members of the National Elections Observatory (NEO) in 2002[36].

This appointment incidentally confirmed the popular belief raised and made concrete in the minds of grasslands elites from far and near that visibility begets possibilities for elevation as well as provided the allowance for the appointed individual to market his/her virtues to the power brokers. The manner in which most appointed individuals carried themselves in the execution of the assignments that came with the newly acquired titles became a veritable source of envy and spur especially among the power mongers of the grassland. The appointment made other elites to solicit either the same traditional titles from the North West Fons' Union (NOWEFU) or to seek for their equivalences elsewhere. The Fons of the Bamenda grasslands were overwhelmed with joy and gratitude when their own messenger was elevated to a position where votes could be engineered to suit their taste during elections since almost all of them were dabbling into party politics within the ticket of the ruling party the CPDM[37]. Unfortunately, their *Ntumfor* turned Election observatory boss of the Northwest found himself far above the level of being controlled by the fons in election matters and therefore failed out of the original mission that motivated the Fons to award him the title.

Following this reality, we can borrow the idea of entrepreneurship and therefore reinforce it with elite's abilities in their enterprises of acquiring titles. One can mobilize their agility and even their contextual reputation which are the resources elites at their various domain can mobilize or use as "capital" not in the exclusive economic meaning and Karl Marx perspective[38]. Here, elites as big Men may be able to combine opportunity to obtain titles, in that rocs they should be tactful, then they should be ready to wait and seize the opportunities when time comes. So this can also be an opportunity to assure their legitimacy when interacting with others elites in others spheres.

With rising envy for titles and spur to be recognize fermenting anxiety among the Grass fields elites, the Fons' search for a complacent *Ntumfor* only became a happy coincidence. It was in this spirit that Fru Jonathan a Senior Civil Administrator lobbied and was also conferred the title of a *Ntumfor* in 2011 by the



Northwest Fons. Consonant with the political calculus of that time, Fru Jonathan was also elevated to the post of a Director of General Affairs in the Ministry of Transport and later to the Post of Inspector General No 1 in the newly created Ministry of Public Contracts in 2012.[39]

Away from positioning, the Fons also used titles both to tame and dissuade political competitors. This was the gimmick employed by Fon Tehji Mbah II of NOWEFU to award Dr Nick Ngunyam; Proprietor of St. Louis Institute of Health[40] and Bio-medical Sciences the traditional title of *Mbangfon*[41] in 2011. It was widely held that such a scheme was to dissuade him from nursing senatorial intentions following calculations that the senate was to go operational in 2012. This seemingly turned out to be a walk on the wrong road because Fons and ordinary people were not evaluated the same in the logic of the New Deal. Fon Teche Njei II of Ngemuwah village, instead used his position as NOWEFU president to Lobby his way to be appointed Senator where he was elected as one of the eight secretaries of the Senate in 2013 when the Senate was created.[42]

At the level of the individual tribes and traditional polities, Christopher Nshahlai used the spirit of the age to fill his profile with countless titles and positions. He seemed to have found exceptional favours in appointments as he mutated dramatically from Deputy Secretary General at the Presidency of The Republic, Minister Plenipotentiary and Cameroon's Ambassador to the Central African Republic and Cameroon's Minister of Transport in 2004 and Board Chairman of the National Ports Authority, Douala. It is difficult to say whether he attracted himself to titles or titles raced for him for he got the traditional title of *Mfoome Bah* [43] conferred on him by the paramount Fon of Nso, Sem Mbinglo I. This title created new bonds of love between him with his people and certainly encouraged him to lobby for the erection of Jakiri to be carved out as a special constituency. His lobbying paid off well as a presidential decree of 2007 granted his wish by creating Jakiri as a special constituency. Unfortunately, the crowned Nfomee did live long to see his political dreams materialize but his dream became a reality in full when his party the CPDM succeeded to win the parliamentary seat in the 22 July, 2007 Legislative elections.

In social interaction and in the history of cities and states, the boundaries between citizens and the state through patronage is thus characteristic of what has come to be known as 'bigman politics' – which is characterised by a highly personalized exercise of political power, as opposed to impersonalized power within idealized Weberian bureaucracies. As such, Elites closely resembles the particularism societies described by collective action theorists[44] wherein access to government resources is frequently contingent on one's connections. Yet, it is important to note that the nature of these relationships have evolved.

The race for titles, accreditations and positions in the Grass fields was indeed rough and thorny owing to the fact that each actor profited from the confused circumstances to bag titles and positions for himself. In the realm of lobbying for appointments or to gain popularity from the grassroots folks against elections by direct universal suffrage, the North West politicians benefited greatly from the fact that grass fielders in their numbers attached some intimate love for their traditions and thus tried by all means to get hold of them through their Fons who were and still are the custodians of such traditions. The Fons on their part awarded the traditional titles to elites for motives that were for the most part not based on the sacred and secrecy that traditional norms, values or mores entailed.[45] From all dimensions of scholarship the motive, traditional title award, its ownership and execution of the offices or functions linked to them have gravitated away from the yards of pre-colonial pristine elegance. The elites' race for titles was inordinate but found worthy accomplices in the humour of the Fons and other notables who for want of money and other forms repeatedly toyed with the process and manner of the titles award. At best, traditional titles that were once glorified within the traditional polities of the North West region have incidentally gravitated to heights/yards of marketable commodities squarely placed at the mercy of demand and supply thereby making the elites to seek more to have money than remain loyal to traditional dictates. The desecration of titles by Fons and their notables under the liberal era in Cameroon was indeed a veritable source of assault to the North West Traditional-minded lot who were expecting to see happy win-win cohabitation between African tradition and modernism in the context of change. From the above, it can be

clearly deduced that politics has greatly adulterated the hitherto highly sacred traditional values of the North West.

### **Economic Dimension of the Race for Titles**

As indicated above the desecration of titles as well as their misuse by grasslands traditional and modern elites began during the colonial era and grew with supersonic speed following the liberalization of the political space in 1990. The political motivation for the race for titles was both reinforced and spiced by economic motives. The economic recession that affected Cameroon in the late 1980s, had a glaring impact on the traditional economy, especially on the buoyancy of paramountcy. The economic meltdown led not only to the scale down of salaries of elites who sponsored various projects in palaces but was also accompanied by the devaluation of the CFA in 1994 which all combined to make life unbearable to local folks. The situation was further accentuated by the fact that most people who were employed in some parts of the public service and some para-public institutions lost their jobs. This was gravely accentuated by the fact that the private sector became for the most part insolvent. Faced with this, Fons and other palace notables whose livelihood hung on the logic of charity of various forms from elites needed to negotiate alternative ways of survival. Hard times implanted a sort of sordid decay in moral decency among royal folks thereby causing the need to protect the dignity and palace paraphernalia simply for the sake of it, to become a far far-fetched possibility. It was in this context that the need to own titles shifted away from the mere desire of being titled men to the yards of economic gains.

Regarding this state of affairs, elites as a Big Man represents the quintessential form of “achieved” leadership. Rather than inheriting his position as might a Polynesian chief, he achieved it, though it would be more accurate to say that he created it: it is the “product of his own personal manufacture[46]”. What motivated the Big Man to create his position was “status,” a desire to become “some sort of hero,” a “prince among men”. Indeed, life is governed much more by individual interests even right to the level of the family which is the basic unit of the society. This is the underlying concepts for capitalism which is contrasted by the Communist school of thought. The mad rush by elites to own titles did not just come with an empty immaterial fascination of the honour, prestige or elegance that conferring and ownership of such titles entailed amongst traditionally minded folks. The race was rooted far more in the economic gains that came with such transactions. When the elites solicited for titles, the need for such credential went beyond the red feather and porcupine spines spurs that were pecked on their caps, the cam wood rubbed on their bodies or even the prefixes added to their names were in the context of the dangling fortunes of traditional sacredness, mere decorations. In all of the Cameroon grasslands titles like *Faay*, *Sheey*, *Bobe*, *Bochong*, *Nformi*, *Fuangwe*, *Bahtum*, *Bah* and any others were solicited by elites to have control over a wide range of things like the expanse of land as was the case with traditional rulers, quarter heads and even compound heads of large families. These interests at times ran across ethnic boundaries to national and even international purviews thereby, enlarging the coastline for a bountiful harvest or gains to the elites.

With growing anticipation of gain/interest in securing titles, Fons and those involved the title conferment in the grasslands saw the high demand for titles as an opportunity too to enrich themselves. This was the case with titles in Kom like *Bochong* and *Iyuou* where extravaganza was displayed in all in colours.[47] By raising the standards of acquiring such titles to lodge essentially within the reach of rich or wealthy individuals, those in charge of such codification consciously sacrificed the established traditional norms that defined such accreditation in the place of the gains that were to be made in the process. With the exception of hereditary titles whose membership followed a simple logic, most titles were bought and sold like any other commodities. The anticipation of gain and influenced became so common so much that even kingmakers and other traditional office beholders followed their gains and interest and twisted traditional wills and successions to suit those who could pay for.

In all, titles became a transactional issue where elites were prepared to spend fabulous sums of money in the acquisition process. Apart from sum undisclosed sums spend in the lobbying process some elites

painlessly paid from 500 thousands to 5,000,000 francs CFA accompanied by gifts such as cars, motor-bikes, cattle, goats, sheep, jugs of oil, bags of salt, bags of rice, or drinks to acquire traditional titles and offices.[48] In turn, the Fons were always very ready to honor or decorate them with a title in which automatically to mingle freely and to get soaked in their community daily chores.[49]

Still within the realm of fulfilling economic interests, social relevance and political acceptability/visibility elites like John Fru Ndi, Hon. Yoyo Mohbanka Emmanuel, Fai Yengo Francis and Elhadj Baba Ahmadou Danpulo amongst others sought and acquired traditional titles beyond their villages or tribes of origin. Some of these titles acquired helped them to negotiate a number of opportunities out of their villages or tribes of origins. Among these opportunities could be identified arable land for the rearing of livestock as well farms to cultivate their crops from which they made huge financial gains. Elhadj Baba Danpulo for instance used his accumulated titles from the fons to acquire a vast piece of land that cuts across the Ngoketunjia and Boyo Divisions. This piece of land primarily served as a cattle Ranch (Elba Ranch). With time he included a tea estate (Ndawara Tea Estate) which is posting to be the largest Tea Estate in central Africa. This can easily be understood through Max Weber's notion of the patrimonial state, which describes pre-industrial states in which the ruler owns all the wealth such that power operates on a private basis, to explain the notion of neo-patrimonialism. While under patrimonialism, power depends on personal relations determined by the ruler and there is no difference between the private and the public, under neo-patrimonialism, power operates in both private and public domains. Neo-patrimonial rule thus combines aspects of patrimonialism and the modern demands of democratic rule. The challenge, however, is that the private and public domains under neo-patrimonialism permeate each other in ways that are mostly anti-democratic as has been the case in many modern African countries[50]

As if the gains from these giant projects were not enough to this business guru who were already suffocating under an array of traditional titles he continued to woo the Fon to align with him in the seizure of private lands which constituted a source of livelihood to many a people of the Grass fields polities. The accumulation of titles combined with the riches of this business guru and placed him technically out of the orbits of traditional laws and enactments. To this should be added his purported closeness to center of power (presidency) where appointment and all sorts of positioning was mounted and made concrete. Even with the disorder that was caused by the stray cows from this man and cries of underpayment by folks employed in his agencies his endearment to the Fons raged on unperturbed.

This mixed and confusing support to the Ndawara man regardless of his flaws, continue to rise and stare rancour among local folks in the polities of the Grass fields. The peak of this was manifest on 4 October, 2008 during a visit paid by over 200 Fons of the North West under the leadership of then NOWEFU president, Fon Chaffah XI to his residence in Ndawara. After winning and dinning plus possible exchange of bank notes the Fons in attendance encircled Elhadj Baba Danpulo and bestowed on him the title of "Prince of Honour" of the entire North West. Amidst the Fons present were Fon Sem Mbinglo of Nso, Fon Yuh Nih of Kom, Fon Ibrahim Nfor of Nkambe, Fon Ndofoa Zofoa III of Babungo, Fon Fuekemshi Melo of Baba I, Fon Muntong Fung Richard of Bamessing, Fon Abohmbi II of Bafut and Fon Teche Njei II of Ngemuwah to give but just a short list. The libations were poured on behalf of the Fons by Fon Sem Mbinglo I. To indicate their determination and unconditional love and support to their prince of honour the Fons unequivocally opened a new era of royal decadence when they said'

On behalf of our ancestors and the over 200 Fons present here together with those who are not here, we swear before God and man to protect you at all times and in whatever circumstances against evil forces. Let it be clear to everyone who seeks to destroy you that we would prefer to let him destroy us first. We stand solidly behind you.[51]"

Danpulos' meteoric rise through decoration by the fons to the heights of the prince of honour did not come from the blues. It emerged from the aegis of want of money, materialism and protection which had

incidentally risen to be considered common practice by North West Fons in the New Deal Era. Being a financial giant with few or no contemporaries in the Bamenda Grass fields, the Fons wished to have Aladji Dampulos' recognition and protection whenever the opportunity availed itself. Being a political investor and socio-economic entrepreneur like many other citizens in grassland, he is an Elite. So, naturally Elites as Big Men are not thieves, not violent and their governance is predictable; however the pressure under which they operate in Africa in general and in grassland particularly tend to question their integrity based on their increasing appetite for local title. Therefore the idea of predictable governance and all others can then be questioned when this has to do with power and its connections. The race can be understood in the sense that the policies and the practices through which they obtain their titles is a product of calculated entrepreneurship.

Aside from the immediate and long term economic benefits expected to accrue from such declaration of intent as the one above, could also be situated the expectation that Danpullo had the magic wand of turning tides/great influence in the higher circles of national power.[52] Creating friendship with this kind of person virtually means the signing of a pact of visibility and upgrading the Fons must have anticipated. In the thinking of the Fons, such lavished decorations will no doubt place them in positions to use Danpullo to lobby for a wide range of opportunities and offices within the Political realm. It is difficult to substantiate how these wishes were carefully matched but it should be noted that the Fons' blind attribution of power to this business guru sew many seeds of discords among so many northwest indigenes especially those who had been assaulted by this man through farm plot seizure or crop destruction by his animals. These are some of the tap roots of the erosion of royal elegance within the grassland's ecological niche.

A graphic view of the joy that accompanied this decoration/attribution of titles and power from a cross section of north West Fons is visible on the plate below.

**Plate.1 Ahaldji Baba Dampoulo of Ndawara in white Regalia Surrounded by A Cross Section of North West Fons during his Initiation as the Prince of Honour ,**



**Source: Culled from Emmanuel Tryself Zofas Dissertation on Northwest Elites and Titles. DIPES II, University of Maroua**

A similar title of *Bahtum*[53] was awarded to Ni Johnn Fru Ndi, the National Chairman of the SDF and a native of Baba II Santa by the Fons of Aghem in Wum where his largest cattle ranch and farm are found. These titles often came with heavy wining and dining with the local people. Several masquerades display to welcome the new member of the community the title holder in question shows appreciation by throwing money on the performing masquerades. During such gatherings, the Fons defied all odds considering the weight of the envelopes from the people or persons involved. The lust for money and other gifts that came with the distribution of titles to the Fons sometimes pushed them to make elastic offers in terms of land parcels to the title beholders which only helped to alienate the rich from the poor though this seemed different when it came to elections.[54]

Similarly Hon. Yoyo Mohbanka Emmanuel former Member of parliament and Questor at the National Assembly, business magnet and a native of Baba I- Ndop like H.E Fai Yengo Francis, Former governor, former Board chairman of the National Ports Authority Douala and a native of Ibal-Oku both sought and acquired the title of *Fuangwe* in Babungo-Ndop in 2002 and 2006 respectively.[55] This titles gave them the right to acquire vast expanses of land in the quarters of Toh Finkwi and Mbe'eleh –Babungo respectively. They both used this land to rear their cattle which they could not have enough space for it in their villages of origin. The economic consonant for the race for titles was therefore as strong as the political as both of them had to do with some form of influence or gain from the emerging fissures. This was however complimented by the social consonant.

### **Social Consonants of the Race for Titles**

Socially, North Westerners have elastic connections to titles which are an integral part of their material culture. The award and acquisition of traditional titles became a norm because some elites were still willing to keep this important part of culture alive. They are therefore several social consonants for the request and award of traditional titles in the North West both to indigenes and beyond.

Environmental and forest Laws in the current dispensation in Africa and beyond are replete with Laws prohibiting the killing of certain species of animals like lions, buffalos, leopards, tigers cheaters to name but just a few. Coincidentally, these animals represent a battery of things in the cultural psyche of most Bamenda grasslands polities.

The traditional perception of these animal broad-based strands of dignity amongst the local folks. In pre-colonial Africa, those who killed such animals during hunting expeditions were gratified with boundless titles. With laws of the environment and nature placing restrictions on the killing of such animals, modern traditional rulers have remodelled the concept and manner of traditional title awards to suit this new social context. Any elite whose developmental strides were outstanding for the development of the village was considered to have “killed a lion or any of these culturally dignifying animals for their different communities” and was thus decorated with a traditional title commensurate to his bravery regardless of his family background or lineage.[56]

A case in point was Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon of Nso who distinguished himself amongst his people by his academic and humanitarian achievements. These achievements and humanitarian works included his academic qualifications and intellectual communications which became a source of honour to the Nso Folks. Apart from home honour, Fonlon's dedication to service and boundless know-how enticed President Ahidjo to appoint him to various ministerial positions. As a state man and an academic guru, Fonlon is remembered to have inaugurated the Cameroon Airlines, enforced the policy of bilingualism in education, re-arranged and translated the National anthem from French to English and more importantly expanded and extended the Kumbo pipe-borne water system[57].

Those extra-ordinary act of his earned him the title of *Faay* and later *Shuufaay Ntoondzev*[58]

**Plate 02: Portrait of Bernard Nsokika Fonlon cladded in a typical grassfield traditional Outfit**

**Source: Adapted from [www.fonlon.org](http://www.fonlon.org). Consulted on 13 June, 2018.**

Another social consonant that moved the modern elite to the acquisition of traditional titles was the desire to preserve and promote the culture of the North West traditional polities. A good number of elites believed that the culture has to be taught to the children and to teach them, it had to be practiced by the parents.[59] There is a case of an interviewee, Bantah Elvis Ndi, twenty nine years old who was born and lived out of the North West for all his years but he is an active member of the Wimbun *Nfuh* of Douala and hoped to achieve a title too someday which will be validated in the village.[60] This is evident that many North Westerners admire their culture and always love to project it at any given circumstance. The traditional dress of the North West which is colorfully embroidered is admired by many even across the national boundaries due to the value the users give to it. This permits to see the race for titles beyond Elites and a certain category of citizens. This also has to do with belonging as it is seen in various elites activities and implication.

Furthermore, social consonant that engineered the quest for traditional titles by North west Elites was the need to carry out research. Educated elites were in their numbers eager to carry out research through participatory observation. Anthropologists like Professor Ian Fowler (a British Anthropologist) have solicited and acquired traditional titles in Babungo –Ndop and in Nso for reasons of facilitating research. As an initiated member of the regulatory society, he gained easy access to information that he could not get “out of the house.” Plate 15 shows Ian Fowler Participating in the Babungo *Nikai*[61] alongside notables of the village and dressed like them in their traditional attire.

**Plate 03. Professor Ian Fowler and the leader of the *Nikai* at the Babungo Annual Festival.**

**Source: Borrowed from Zofoa N.E. Tryself album prince of Babungo, 18 March, 2014.**

For prestigious reasons, the modern elite of the grass fields also acquired traditional titles to place

themselves within the catchy threshold of opportunities that come and went with cultural identification. Cultural imperatives required some form of initiation and graduation into rungs of cultural hierarchies with the affidavits not only to clearly identify with their kith and kin within the local fiefdoms but also to set new standards of cultural valorisation that gained new momentum in the global patterns and galleries that were growing in demand from the elites. This could only function or be accompanied by lobbying plus ownership of titles including their corresponding traditional attires. With a growing interest to own identity tags, Grass fields elites in their numbers sought titles and could dress in particular attire. The traditional outfit was composed not only of clothes but also included caps, bangles necklaces and particular designs of the whisk which were widely held as privileges. By virtue of that honour, some elites acquired traditional titles from their local chiefdoms or across examples are Honourable Wallang Richard Ebua of Wum, Professor Ufei Chinje Melo, and Judith Achidi Achu amongst others.

The rush and fury with which titles were sought by political elites coincided so fittingly with the willingness of traditional authorities and their various representatives to market such hitherto glorified traditional entitlements. This negotiated a new twist to the local folks who for lack of knowledge and fear of the unknown had been attaching great values to titles and the men that carried them. By no small measure it , combined with the zeal with which Fons sought for political titles to disgrace traditions and the veneration locals attached to it. The pain with which this disgraced tradition was enormous and can be vividly read in the writings of Khebila Fokum who wasted no time in renaming the Fons of the Northwest and those who stood behind them to disgrace tradition as *royal beggars*. The rancour raging from the emasculation of royal and its essence in time and space became so rampant that he declared unapologetically that:

The integrity, nobility and dignity that were the hallmarks of traditional rulers of yore have been thrown overboard by a new breed of rulers who speak and understand only one language: money. The insatiable quest for money by traditional rulers has given birth to royal killers, royal dealers, royal drug barons, royal thieves and royal beggars. Traditional rulers can be seen palling around with armed robbers; they confer title of notability on celebrated embezzlers, and professional crooks. Most Fons in the Northwest have sold their soul to the devil. They need deliverance. [62]

The author of the quote above is acerbic and forthright in his condemnation of traditional rulers and their corollaries but like much of the scholarship has failed to consider the tempting nature of the offers that change brought along the traditional societal interface. However, his submissions are relevant to the comportment of chiefs in Cameroon where the same language of money is gradually becoming the golden rule of the new generation of Fons or traditional authorities who are virtually passing for entrepreneurs or Businessmen.

## CONCLUSION

The arguments raised and sustained by this paper helps us to understand the intercourse that tradition had with modernity. In the context of elites and elitism, this shows how this joint venture tilted the balance of power and pattern of prestige in socio-political and economic matrix of the Cameroon grasslands, notably in North west region. It submits that the usefulness of titles increased meteorically as so many political elites raced for it and that this found a happy coincidence in the traditional authorities growing interest in running both political and traditional offices concomitantly. From this stand point it becomes easy to understand why most of this elites earned their positions in political offices as well as why their tenure of such offices was not graduated or tested on their ability to deliver the expected political promises. Title men and women who bought their titles conspired with the Fons to engineer votes from the willing and expectant indigenous folks and were bound by no moral or local clause to render an account of their responsibilities to their communities. This only helped to disrupt social harmony between the traditional rulers and the people in their custody nursing seeds of distrust to the states and most of its institutions in the Grass fields. This trend

and transformation of things continues to grow with supersonic velocity as the centralized administrative machinery and the nonchalance that came with combined with an opaque electoral system to provide no alternative of hope to the enraged masses. The rise in voter's apathy among grassland folks, the lack of trust of government institutions and its agents as well as the opened disgrace of Fons and other traditional authorities that is current in this part of the country had its roots in the title drama or race and weaken the democracy in Cameroon liberal space.

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