



TRADITIONAL *COUP D'ÉTATS* IN THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

One of the most noticeable features of the social-cultural heritage of the Cameroon Grassfields is the chieftaincy institution. Chiefs are a permanent feature of the Cameroonian Grassfields society. Throughout history, Grassfields chiefs have been at the center of the political, social-economic and cultural life of their respective societies. This paper reveals that the violent dethronement of chiefs in the Grassfields region of Cameroon is not necessarily a new dimension in the institution. From the structure and organization of chieftaincy in the Grassfields, removing chiefs from office was usually done using traditionally prescribed methods which by and large excluded forceful dethronement. Exploring the numerous existent cases on the violent destitution of some Bamenda Grassfields traditional rulers from office, the study concludes that the traditional mechanisms for the exercise of chiefly power and authority have not changed. The apparent changes in the methods used for the dethronement of chiefs are the response by the community to reclaim and re-establish communal rights, privileges and mechanisms which are increasingly confiscated by disrespectful chiefs. The study suggests that the desire by the population to use republican principles to exercise power and authority endangers the survival of traditional authority in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon and further undermines the chieftaincy institution.

Key words: Chieftaincy, Chiefs, *Fons*, *Fondom*, Dethronement.

INTRODUCTION

In the Grassfields of Cameroon, traditional rulers were and are still known to occupy a very important position in their respective societies. Also, methods of accessing the position of chiefs were so well-defined and known that any disregard for such procedures was the exception rather than the rule. Individuals who became chiefs came to power and left through traditionally accepted mechanisms. Violence as a method for exiting chiefly office remained a very distant and hardly used method. Traditional rulers in the Grassfields came to power through well-defined and customarily accepted procedures which were handed down for several generations. Although some variations exist, there is general agreement around certain considerations. These include; hereditary succession, the respect of leopard skin principle, and the involvement of kingmakers amongst others.

Though chiefs come to power through well-designated procedures, there exist avenues by which they can be destooled and removed from office. It is a truism that the removal from office of a traditional ruler is not a regular or frequent occurrence in the Bamenda Grassfields. Yet that possibility exists as way of instituting checks on the excesses that a reigning chief could commit, so too is one way of ridding the community of a ruler whose actions in private or public lives are inconsistent and contradictory with the office held. In short, tradition in the Bamenda Grassfields had in-built mechanisms for the proper management of the chiefly position.

The removal of chiefs from power through violent means has become increasingly frequent of late. Several examples exist in the Bamenda Grassfields. These include the cases of *Kedjom Keku*, *Bande*, *Ashong*, *Bamali*, *Balikumbatand* *Oshie* chiefdoms all in the Bamenda Grassfields known today as the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. This paper seeks to answer one fundamental question: what are the historical factors responsible for the increasing use of non-traditional mechanisms to dethrone traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon? And what have been the implications of this change on the sociocultural and traditional heritage of Cameroon?

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With reference to the above, the rest of the paper is structured in four sections; the first examines features and rules regulating access to power in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon; section two dwells on the typology of dethronement in the Bamenda Grassfields traditions; section three analyses the factors responsible for the increase non-traditional means of destooling chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields and section four deals with the consequences of the violent dethronement of traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.

Features and Rules Regulating Access to Power in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

In many African states today, the legitimately accepted means by which political leaders come to power is through democratic elections, an exercise by which the people sovereignly choose their leaders through vote casting. The selection is always presented as a competition among several candidates and in which the people have the sovereign right to decide who to become their leader. These elected leaders in turn have the obligation to respect the promise made to the people and work for their well-being. This falls within the social contract propounded by Jean Jacques Rousseau, whereby a people willingly chose who to rule them and the ruler in turn protects their rights and goods.¹

This very act makes the elected person to wield some degree of legitimacy and legality. The respect of the constitution and good governance ensures stability and development. The contrary of this generally provokes conflicts, underdevelopment and gives way for leadership squabbles either between the governed and the ones who are governing, or at times among the governing themselves. One of the major outcome of this balance of power struggle generally ends with coup diktats. From a general perspective, some leaders in the modern state who wield power find it difficult to leave power after the expiration of their mandate. Some even resort to the modification of constitutions just to stay in power. Such situation consciously or not gives way to contestation over succession, thus conflicts between factions to takeover power by all means.

Out of the republican arrangement, the traditional dispensation harbors the existence of the institution of chieftaincy in which traditional leadership, even though they exist strict norms that are not coded, guiding the access to chieftaincy position and also regulating the behavior of the latter. Given that the underlying principle of political power is characterized by good

¹ J J Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social ou : Principe du Droit Politique* (Amsterdam, Marc Michel Rey, 1762)

governance and respect for the constitution, anything short of this could possibly lead to contestations.

In the Bamenda Grassfields traditions, succession to the position of traditional authority locally called *fon*², *nfor*, *fo*, depending on the community was sacred, based on strong and meaningful principles including incantations emanating from the performances of specific rituals. In fact the chieftaincy institution was considered to embody magi-co-mystical elements associated with the components that made up the socio-political institution of chieftaincy.

In the modern state, there exist a number of signs and symbols that stand for authority. Without these signs and symbols, a leader's authority or legitimacy to a particular position cannot be accepted or recognized by the subjects. Indeed, in every well-established organization, the leader of a nation or state is not only identified by name, but also by an embodiment of signs, ornaments and emblems that distinguishes him as the leader of a people. In the entire Bamenda Grassfields traditional society, each traditional ruler is recognized by his people by traditional emblems that identify him as a chief and gives him the authority to rule. Furthermore, the removal of these emblems from a ruler or leader simply means taking away authority from him. This is not different from dethronement. Some of these noticeable signs of traditional authority include the royal stool, staff, cap and name.

The Symbol of the Royal Stool

This is usually a well carved wooden stool with special signs representing some royal images such as chiefs, royal animals like, lions, tigers, elephant, pythons or some influential ancestor of the traditional society in question. These decorations have special meaning especially in most Bamenda Grassfields polities. (See Plate 1)

Typical Portrait of a Royal Traditional Stool in the Bamenda Grassfields (Kedjom Keku)



Source: Kaze Tindo N. photographic collection, May 2011.

² For the purpose of uniformity this study shall adopt the appellation “fon” to designate sovereigns of the Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms even though each entity has its local own appellation traditional ruler.



In most cases, these decorations on the throne symbolize both the office and power of a chief. This suggests that removing the *fon* from the royal stool means taking away power or authority away from him (Dethronement). The royal stool in most Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms was believed to have all the blessings of the Fons who have ever sat on the same stool and ruled. The stool according to some oral tradition of some Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms helps to empower the chief to rule with wisdom and to pass sound judgement.³ Commenting on the importance of the royal stool Aletum remarks:

When a ruler assumes office, he is given the chieftaincy stool which is a symbol of office and a sacred emblem. The stool represented the community, their solidarity, permanence and continuity. The ruler is the link between the living and the dead and his highest role is when he officiates public and religious rites which are an expression of the community values. To act against the people's wishes means going against the royal stool and can be sanctioned by dethronement in case of persistent violation of the wishes of the people and of the throne.⁴

Therefore when a chief goes against the wishes and aspiration of the royal stool, it can lead to his dethronement. It was not only the royal stool that symbolized the authority of chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields; the royal Staff was also of great significance.

Significance of the Royal Staff in Grassfields Traditional Societies

In the Grassfields, most chiefs move along with their royal staffs or walking stick. The Staff symbolizes a very important instrument in traditional authority. In the Kom traditional society, the royal staff is known as the "*Iwong hi ntoh*" and in Nso; "*Kitoome*".(See Plate 4)

Pfon NgaBi'fon II of Nso Holding a Royal Staff and Wearing a Royal Cap.

³ N C Chia, 'Kom Leadership in its Regional Subsetting Ca 1865-2005: A Study in Power Diplomacy within a Grassfields Traditional State in Cameroon' (PhD Thesis in History, the University of Bamenda)

⁴M.T.Aletum, 'African Politics Yesterday And Tomorrow' (1985) Vol III, 3-4, Science and Technology Review



Source: Kaze Tindo N, adapted from Ngoran Peter's photographic collection, May 2011.

Wherever the royal stalk of the chief was found, it was a direct indication that either the *Fon* or his representatives were around. The royal staff can be alluded to the national flag as an emblem of the modern state today because wherever someone finds a flag flying somewhere it signifies the presence of the state or state service.

The royal staff of the chief was not carried by common personalities.⁵ It was mostly used by some powerful traditional institution, like the *kwifon* in negotiating kingdom, chiefdom and *fondom* affairs. It was also used during important announcements or declaration in the chiefdom or *fondom*. The royal staff commanded the respect of everybody and they were expected to give it due respect. This was because the royal staff was an emblem of force and authority that was given to the chief to use to direct his people towards goodness and happiness. The staff was usually handed to a chief at his enthronement.

Failure to do what was required of the royal staff by the chief could call for sanction. The people through their representation in the traditional institutions could take away the staff from the chief who have refused to use the staff towards happiness.⁶ Another emblem that represented traditional authority in the Bamenda Grassfields were the royal cap and the names of the chief or *Fon*.

The Cap and Name of a Chief in the Bamenda Grassfields

Everything about traditional rulers of the Bamenda Grassfields was not ordinary. In this part of the study, we are going to examine the significance of the royal cap and the name of the chief vis-a-vis traditional authority. In the *Nso Fondom*, the cap is referred to as "*Tàn*". Once a prince was crowned as chief in *Nso* society, he was never supposed to be seen in public uncapped.

⁵Chia, "Kom Leadership in its Regional SubsettingCa 1865-2005' 189

⁶Interview with Fonjo Cyprian, age 62years, Local politician old, (Banso, 20th December 2010)



The royal cap represented a strong symbol of power in some Bamenda Grassfields chiefdoms.

For example in Bafut, the transfer of authority from a late *fon* to a new *fon* could only be done by removing (dethroning) the royal cap from the late *fon*'s head and putting (enthroning) it on the new chief. The new chief was equally expected to go down into the grave to receive the corpse of the late chief.⁷ Also, in the *Nso fondom*, at the death of a sub-chief or *faày*, the royal cap was very important in the burial ceremony. Before the burial of a *faày* took place, the hiding cap ceremony took place "*kokighevketatar*" This in other word means the *faày* was dethroned before burial as his cap would be handed to his successor.⁸

Apart from the royal cap, the name of the chief was also an important symbol of authority in some Grassfields traditional societies. It was a serious taboo and sacrilege to call a chief by his name in the Grassfields tradition. The punishment for such a crime was very serious. In fact, calling a chief by his name was a mark of disrespect and disloyalty and literally understood in some traditional societies as dethronement.⁹

Generally, in the Grassfields tradition, when a prince was made chief, he was given a new name. It could either be the name of a late and famous chief who have rule in that chiefdom or whose reign had marked the history of the polity. So, *fons* in the Bamenda Grassfields were only called with praising names such as "*Cha-mfor*" (the kicker of things), "*Lum-nyam*" (king of all animals), "*Nyambo*" (leopard), and *Nungubu* (python).¹⁰

In *Bafut* and *Nso* societies for instance, calling a *Fon* by his name was a sign of dethronement. The calling of the *fon*'s name is only done during the burial rite. During this rite, the body of the dead chief is placed beside an excavated grave. After this, the corpse was seated on a wooden chair in the grave and his real names were called three times. This was considered as a sign of withdrawal of the chieftainship from the late *Fon* who never dies but is now addressed as an ordinary prince by his given names.¹¹ For authority to be transferred to another *fon* or chief in the Bamenda Grassfields fondoms, the former must be dethroned.

⁷N D Fuhnwi., 'The 1968-1969 Succession Conflict in the Bafut kingdom' (MA Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde1, 1999) 29

⁸Fàay Woo Lii Won, *An Introduction To Nso Culture* (2001) Vol.1, Bamenda, Copy Printing Technology 13

⁹ TTW Sama., 'Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) In Anglophone Cameroon and Modern Government 1961-2000', (PhD Thesis in History, University Of Yaoundé 1, 2006) 76

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹Faày, *An Introduction to Nso Culture*, 39

TYOLOGY OF TRADITIONAL POWER TRANSFER IN THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON

Dethronement of chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields traditional society varied from peaceful to brutal deposition of chiefs. By peaceful dethronement we are referring to a situation where a chief has been dethroned according to traditional norms. This only happens when he is dead or is not ruling again, then he is dethroned and his authority handed to another Chief. This is because another chief cannot be enthroned without the dethronement of the former. This usually characterized by the removal of symbols or traditional emblems from the late Fon which are in turn handed to a new chief. On the other hand, we equally have instances where chiefs are dethroned without following the normal traditional mechanism and usually alive. This phenomenon is very recent. This was because in the past such acts were very rare. We are therefore going to examine the various types of dethronement.

Legitimate Dethronement of Chiefs

Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies are well organized societies with norms regulating each society. Every traditional rite such as marriage, pouring libation, enthronement and dethronement are always carried using well established traditional rules. Any traditional ritual that took place without following the rules of tradition was considered as illegitimate.

Dethronement which is our concern is one of the ritual acts that are performed at the death of a chief in the Bamenda Grassfields societies. Same as a chief is enthroned at his entry to the office of chieftainship; he is also dethroned at his dead. This procedure is normal and legitimate according to some traditional societies like the Nso and Bafut. Commenting on the legitimate dethronement of a Fon in Nso society FaàyWoLii Won remarks:

As soon as the Duiy family (royal family) hear that “the sun of Nso land has set”, each man comes out with a bamboo sticks and some thatching grass for the building of the hurt over the grave site. After the digging of the grave of about six feet, a terrace of about three feet wide is made. It is called “Maàndzèngàg”, that is the country. A chamber of alcove is hew into the grave-wall, the Fon inner chambers. It is lined inside with a specially woven bamboo mat. When the grave is ready to receive the remains of the late chief, the “vibayvekpu” carry the corpse to the grave site. At their arrival at the grave site, the corpse and the



people carrying is blessed by important traditional officiants like the “Yiwon” and “Tarwon” in collaboration with shuufaàyNdzendzev saying farewell prayers. When the corpse is seated in the grave, the name of the late Fon is called thrice withdrawing the title of fonship from him.¹²

Following a personal discussion with a member of the *Ngwerong* traditional institution, the researcher was told that the old *Ngwerong* cap that is usually handed to the chief at his enthronement is also removed as a sign of the withdrawal of power or authority.¹³ Similarly, in the Bafut traditional society, at the burial of a chief, the cap of the late *fon* is removed and placed on the head of the successor. This was a sign of dethronement and which was acceptable by tradition.¹⁴ All these rites explained above simply show that dethronement as such was not absent in some Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies. This was considered to be normal according to tradition, as a late chief could not die with chieftainship. That is why a dead chief had to be dethroned so that another could be enthroned. Apart from the legitimate method of dethronement, some chiefs were and are still being dethroned without following the traditional mechanism. On the other hand, the notion illegitimate dethronement in Grassfields traditional societies is important in the understanding of the types of chiefly destitution.

Illegitimate Dethronement of Chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields

Until recently, some traditional rulers, especially those of the Bamenda Grassfields do no longer behave as custodians of their people’s custom and tradition. Most of them have become too money-minded and some rule and treat their subjects with extreme brutality and hostility. For example, some of these chiefs sell community land arbitrarily as well as palace artefacts. Some chiefs put injunctions on people’s land, plots and buildings demanding huge sums of money before the injunction could be removed. More so, some chiefs think all the beautiful women in the village belong to them. They go about chasing very young girls and at times people’s wives despite their

¹²Faày, *An Introduction to Nso Culture* 34,39

¹³Personal Discussion with Fonjo Cyprian, 62 years old.

¹⁴Interview with Che Gideon, 62 years old.

sacred nature.¹⁵ Some get involved in party politics and receive all the abuses and humiliations in party politics.

As a result, the subjects of such chiefs feel alienated and humiliated. The only option they have is to chase away the chief that most of the time is backed up by the administration. Given that there can be no evolution without a revolution the people then take the laws into their hands to seize the authority of the chief who have become a tyrant. However this method of removing a chief from office is not legitimate because, first he is still living and the various traditional rites have not yet been carried out.

Historical Determinants Responsible For the Violent Transfer of Power within the Bamenda Grassfields Chieftaincy Institutions

Several and varied historical factors such as colonialism, party politics in post-independent Cameroon, the auxilliarization of chieftaincy and the nontraditional behavior of some Grassfields chiefs. Colonialism was aimed at legitimizing European political, economic and social-cultural domination on Africans. When colonial rule was established in Africa by powerful European states, it destroyed the indigenous traditional institutions and imposed theirs on African societies.¹⁶ European colonial masters foisted Africa on the brand of civilization that tended to uproot and alienate African people and their rulers from their customs and tradition. Europeans regarded African traditional institutions with contempt and as such treated Africans as socially inferior being incapable of governing themselves. The colonial domination of Africa varied from the most subtle Divide and Rule of the Germans, Indirect Rule (British) and the controversial Assimilation policy of the French respectively.¹⁷

According to Walter Rodney, colonialism had only one hand---it was a one-armed bandit which was out to steal from the Africans,¹⁸ that is, through its rituals of Christianity, and civilization, the Europeans crippled every aspect of African economic, political and sociocultural life style, notably the enstooling and destooling of chiefs. To all colonial rulers (the French, Germans, and the British) it became a matter of policy for them to rule their new African subjects through cooperative indigenous African chiefs.

In societies where such chiefs were hard to find, the British as well as the French were quick to create new *chef coutumier*. However, the effort to use the chiefs followed different scenarios, depending on the local patterns of

¹⁵Interview with Suiven Esther, aged 44 years, Nurse and victim of sexual harassment, (Bamenda, 16th February 2010)

¹⁶ G Ngwane., *Way Forward for Africa* (Cameroon, Design House Limbe, 2004) 30

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ Walter Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972)





organization and the idiosyncrasies of colonial policy.¹⁹In this perspective, African traditional rulers, who cooperated with local institutions to hold their traditional societies together, now decided to choose to cooperate with the colonial administration or rejected colonial domination. Traditional rulers who dared resist colonial domination and exploitation were either coerced to wars or dethroned ruthlessly.²⁰ One of such areas in the African society was the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.

In Cameroon and particularly in the Bamenda Grassfields, the Germans were the first to set foot in 1889, followed by the British colonial masters. As the saying goes “There can never be two captains in a ship or two crocodile in the same territory.” At the arrival of the Germans in the Bamenda Grassfields, they discovered that traditional rulers or Fons had a stronghold on their people. In this respect, the Germans who were out to extend their hegemony had to use either diplomatic or harsh methods to impose their authority in the region.

It was therefore clear that traditional rulers who constituted an obstacle to the Germans, meaning that so long as chiefs of the Bamenda Grassfields had control over their people the Germans would never find it easy to impose their hegemony. The Germans were not willing to share power these *fon* whom they considered too mean.²¹The Germans thus settled for the policy of “Divide and Rule” so as to bring the Bamenda Grassfields Chiefs and their people under control. Following this strategy the Germans connived with cooperative chiefs to depose rival chiefs considered as enemies.²²

One of such remarkable cooperation was the famous treaty of friendship signed between Eugene Zintgraff and FonGalega of Bali in 1891.²³This treaty materialized itself when the Bali-Nyonga who had been for long at loggerheads with the Bafut people used their friendship with the Germans to attack and destroy the kingdom Bafut in 1901.The immediate result of the

¹⁹ See for example P Geschiere, ‘Chiefs and Colonial rule in Cameroon : Inventing Chieftaincy, French and British Style “ (1993) Vol. 63, No. 2, *African journal of the International African Institute*, p.159.

²⁰G Ngwane, *Way Forward For Africa. Cameroon* (Design House Limbe 2004) 31

²¹ L Kaptue, ‘Roi Et (Chefs) Dans Les Etats Africains De La Veille Des Indépendances A La Fin Du Xx Siècle; Pris Entre Le Marteau Et Enclume, Le Pouvoir Traditionnel Choisit-Il De Se Prostituer Au Cameroun. Endoscopie De La Situation 1884 A 1922’ (*Colloque International* Paris: Sorbonne, 8, 9,10 Novembre 1995) 7

²² It should be noted that not all chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields resisted German penetration. Usually chiefdoms that were constantly at war with their neighbors sought for German protection as a means to defeat their rivals. Meanwhile the Germans benefitted from such situation to impose themselves among the people of the Bamenda Grassfields.

²³ For a detail account on the Bali-German Treaty of 1891, see N B Nyamdi, *The Bali Chamba of Cameroon. A Political History* (Paris, Cape, 1988) 99,101.

war was dethronement of Fon Abumbi I of Bafut.²⁴ The Germans were very rude to traditional rulers who resisted the imposition of their hegemony.

The Germans colonial masters killed, dethroned or deported chiefs who rejected their rule, especially the case with the dethronement and deportation of chief *Mo* of Wei to Foumban. In 1913 Chief *Mo* of Wei was accused of administering sass wood poison to some of his *Chindas* (notables) who subsequently died from it. The Germans then used this opportunity to dethrone chief *Mo*. When the Germans retired from the area, (Wei) Chief *Mo* returned from exile to claim his throne. But unfortunately for him, his people rejected him and when he refused to leave the village, he was stabbed to death by *Ndju* and *Jebe* who had replaced him after his dethronement and deportation to Foumban.²⁵

Consequently, Bamenda Grassfields chiefs who still had plans of resisting the Germans accepted to cooperate with the Germans for fear of being killed or dethroned. Any signs of disloyalty to the Germans and their lopsided treaties were met with very serious military force.²⁶ The decision of some Bamenda Grassfields chiefs to rely on the German colonial administration was a practical one for both parties since the Germans lacked the personnel to affect political control. However, the bias for powerful chiefs meant that the Germans upheld contested boundaries altered the local relation of power between various chiefdoms thereby undermining the efficiency of local administration in the Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies. As a result, some chiefs could use their friendship with the Germans to have their enemies punished.²⁷

After the end of the First World War in Cameroon in 1916, which ended with the defeat and ousting of the Germans from Cameroon, the British replaced them in the Bamenda Grassfields. The British like their predecessor (Germans) decided to adopt a policy which to rule the Bamenda Grassfields people. To that effect, the British settled for the “Indirect Rule Policy» This policy was conceived by Frederick Lugard. It was defined as the British colonial policy which sought to rule the colonial people through their traditional rulers and institutions.²⁸ The idea behind this policy was to bring about an arrangement which was to be conducted by indigenous rulers who traditionally controlled power and authority. So, even more than the

²⁴ Ibid 106-107.

²⁵ Divisional Office Bamenda, Njie ‘Appointment of, as Chief of Wei’ (IF1919, file no 186/1919. NAB)

²⁶ M M Ndobegang, ‘Grassfields Chiefs and Political Change in Cameroon ca. 1884-1996’ (PhD Thesis in History, Boston University 1985) 79

²⁷ Ibid, 80

²⁸ Ibid, 86.





Germans the British recognized the importance of traditional rulers and made them the corner stone of their administration. Following the British Administrative arrangement, traditional rulers who ruled under large chiefdoms like the (*Nso, Kom, Bafut, Bali-Nyonga, and Mankon*) had their powers and jurisdiction extended. What could have been the consequence of this arrangement? That is why Awasom noted that: “European colonization tended to reinforce the authority of traditional rulers particularly those of centralized ones like those of the Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies and by so doing adding a nontraditional dimension to traditional authority”²⁹.

It should however be noted that even though the British colonial administrators gave a lot of powers to some traditional rulers, those who misbehaved or disregarded British colonial authorities were deposed and replaced with those who were very loyal to the British. Following this rule the British Resident of the Cameroon province received an ordinance from the lieutenant governor in Enugu (Nigeria) on the appointment and deposition of chiefs in the Cameroon province.³⁰ Following this ordinance, the lieutenant Governor directed the resident that the practice of government to appoint head chiefs as such but to appoint head chiefs when necessary to be the native authority for the areas under their control and no chief was to be recognized by government except appointed.

In view of this policy the necessity for recourse had to be the Appointment and Deposition of chief Ordinance.³¹ These in other words suggest that the British like the Germans were not exempted from the dethronement of traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields. Furthermore in another circular issued on the 13th October 1927, the British lieutenant governor instructed that if any chief was deposed and ordered to leave his area and he resisted to do so with immediate effect, such a chief was liable to imprisonment.³² The administrative officials applied this ordinance when they dethroned and hanged FonFomekong of the *Bande*.³³

Chief Fomekong was charged by the District Officer of Bamenda for presiding at a trial by ordeal resulting in the death of a woman. As a result, chief Fomekong was arrested, dethroned and hanged in Bamenda. Prior to his

²⁹ N F Awasom, ‘The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon Chiefs in Cameroon’s Changing Social Order’ in Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, E A B, (eds), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of law: Essays on Africa and Beyond* (African Studies Centre, Leiden 2003) 35

³⁰ NAB, File no 45/1929/1d, Appointment and Deposition of Chiefs-Plurality of Wives, Fon of Fontem Succession –Cameroon province.

³¹Ibid.

³² NAB; File no C33/1929, Deposition of Subordinate Chiefs, and 3

³³ NAB , File No 57/1928/65, The Bande Chieftainship, 13

dethronement, chief Fomekong had appointed and nominated his son, Ndesso, then a minor to succeed him. This nomination was assented by the *Nkwifon* society. Contrary to the established native laws, Lebel alias Ndefuru (Ndesso's uncle) was at his request made the chief of Bande by the then British D O of Bamenda. This simply shows that Ndefuru with the complicity of British officers plotted against Ndesso who was supposed to be the rightful successor to the throne. Faced with this situation, the elders and members of *Nkwifon* upon learning that powers had been encroached upon by the British and Ndefuru, the traditional institutions refused to acknowledge Ndefuru as their chief. When Ndefuru appealed to the D O of Bamenda, he was sent back to Bande accompanied by soldiers who coerced the elders of the traditional council and members of the *Nkwifon* society to acquiesce to Ndefuru's appointment as chief of *Bande*.³⁴

Ndesso the rightful successor to the Bande throne, fearing foul play on the part of Ndefuru fled to Calabar where he stayed until his return in 1928. At his return steps were taken to restore the throne to its rightful owner. However, the appointment of Ndefuru as chief of *Bande* not legitimate, in other words, Ndefuru corrupted the British officials to appoint him as the chief of Bande. Despite all the reasons advanced by Ndesso, elders and the *Nkwifon* society to prove the illegitimacy of Ndefuru as their chief, he was still maintained as the Fon of Bande by the D. O. of Bamenda.³⁵

Many scholars have contended that the British administration by identifying and supporting only one person as chief, at the expense of other traditional institutions and personalities, the democratic aspect and delicate balance inherent in traditional leadership was distorted, thereby installing a kind of dictatorship which could possibly lead to the dethronement of chiefs.³⁶ Another untraditional aspect of the British that could provoke the dethronement of traditional rulers was the fact the British introduce in the chieftaincy institution of the Bamenda Grassfields formal education as a priority and criterion in the selection of princes for royal offices of traditional rulers.

The British held that it was for the progress of the territory that they recommended that "All chiefs should have been educated at the government or native administrative school."³⁷ In this regard, the British colonial government made serious attempts to induce chiefs' sons who were likely to

³⁴NAB, File No 57/1928/65, 'The Bande Chieftainship' 13,14

³⁵NAB, File No 57/1928/65, 'The Bande Chieftainship' 13

³⁶ See for example, E Y Vubo, G A Ngwa, 'Changing Inter-community Relations and the Politics of Identity in the Northern Mezam Area, Cameroon (2001) 161 XLI-F (Cahier d' Etude Africaines) 163,190

³⁷ Ibid





succeed to the throne to attend school. Hence, princes were encouraged to go to school if they aspired to become chiefs and consequently many of the princes that were crowned chiefs in the 1950s and 1960s were products of this scheme.

Party Politics and the Dethronement of Traditional Rulers

One of the main factors that has greatly discredited the chieftaincy institution and provoked the dethronement of traditional rulers 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 reintroduction 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 was given with the founding of the Social Democratic Front party on the 26th of May 1990.

The “wind of change” which started blowing from the Bamenda Grassfields, began spreading steadily across the rest of the country and on the 19th December 1991, President Paul Biya was obliged to liberalize multi-party politics in Cameroon. This was following law Bo 90/056 of 19th December 1990 liberalizing the existence of other political parties in Cameroon.³⁸ Within this new political context, the bone of contention was the control of political power. 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 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 influencing the choice of successors to thrones and imposing chiefs who will support the CPDM. In other words, chiefs who did not support or

³⁸Samah, ‘Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon’ 300,301

were against the ruling CPDM were dethroned.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

However, the reintroduction of multi-party system 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.⁴¹ The ruling party saw traditional rulers as vote breakers and sure tickets to rural votes and demanded their allegiance and support.

But instead, many subjects supported opposition parties and could not stand to see their chiefs in the ruling parties.⁴² 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

³⁹Interview with, Professor Joseph Mboui, cited in Samah, p.270.

⁴⁰F Adigwe, *Essentials of Government for West Africa*, Ibadan, (University Press Limited, 1984) 22,23

⁴¹ Kaptué, 'Pris entre le marteau et enclume' 10

⁴² J Fokwang, 'Chieftaincy in The Era Democratic Transition In Africa. A Comparative Study in the Chiefdoms of Tshivhase and Bali' (MA Dissertation in History, University of Pretoria, 2003) 90,91





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 losses, he brings dishonor to his elevated status and in some cases be dethroned by his people. Bali drew a clear distinction between politics in the traditional society and modern politics when he warns that:

Chiefs should not participate in party politics because it is a dirty game. Tradition demands that Fons should be respected, but in politics there is no respect for a person, status or title, so it is not fair for a commoner to address the chief in a similar way they will do with an ordinary subject. I have seen ordinary people insulting Fons in their faces because of party politics.⁴³

Traditional rulers' participation in party politics was a serious blunder that was sure to under mind the legitimacy and credibility of chiefs in the eyes of their people. That was why Lantum noted:

When a Chief participates and losses in elections as it happened in the *fondoms* of Nkar and Oku ... it is tantamount to virtual dethronement, or whenever he won and became a council member; he has to answer to his personal names in public affairs, which is a serious contradiction to tradition, by which a living Fon is never called by his real names⁴⁴

The “Auxilliarization” of Traditional Authorities

Following Decree No 17/245 of 15th July 1977, traditional rulers in Cameroon were empowered as auxiliaries of the modern government or

⁴³ Fokwang, 'Chieftaincy in the Era Democratic Transition' 120

⁴⁴ Samah, 'Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon' 336

administration.⁴⁵This was because, until that year (1977), the only legal document concerning chieftaincy in Cameroon especially in British Cameroon was the colonial law No 244 of February 1933. Apart from that there was the need for a new law that would harmonize the chieftaincy policies of the former states of East and West Cameroon. The laws of 15th February 1977 in Cameroon recognized traditional rulers as auxiliaries of the administration. This law equally provided disciplinary sanctions for traditional rulers who did not cooperate with the state. These sanctions vary from deposition of chiefs to the suspension of their remunerations⁴⁶.

The arrogation by the state of such rights as sanctioning and deposing of chiefs were the prerogative rights of the customary institutions like the *Kwifon* of most Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies, created a lot of problems within the traditional institutions and the traditional government. The article on disciplinary sanctions clearly demonstrated the states intention to capture and subjugate traditional rulers Dethronement featured prominently among the disciplinary sanctions that the state could inflict on traditional rulers. It was very unrealistic for the government that should have rather protected chiefs from dethronement to rather propose as sanction; depose chiefs whose position had been legitimized by tradition on account of inefficiency or inertia.⁴⁷ Such an action especially in the Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies with strong trapping traditional government could only lead to confusion and social unrest.

Sanctions and the threat to sanction were used by the state to compel chiefs into compliance. In the process, *fons* who played their role as custodians and protectors of their people's tradition became victims of government sanctions. For instance in 1977, the Fon of Fungom in the Menchum division of the Bamenda Grassfields was arbitrarily dethroned, arrested and jailed for siding with his people in the confrontation with Fulani grazers who had allowed cattle to destroy people's farmland.⁴⁸

The state has also been covertly intervening in instances of succession to chieftainship. So many cases have been reported where the administration, through the intervention of governors and D.Os tried to influence the successor. Some of these state administrators went as far as totally ignoring the chieftaincy decree and went ahead to dethroning some Fons as charges for insubordination and unjustified and prolonged absence from the fendom.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ For more detail on this decree, see Cameroon Tribune, No 79 of 17th February 1977

⁴⁶ See Samah 'Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon' 267

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Borrowed from Fokwang, 'Chieftaincy in the Era Democratic Transition in Africa' 88

⁴⁹ Samah, 'Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon' 268





The poor management and corrupt practice of some state administrators were partly responsible for the numerous chieftaincy disputes and dethronement plaguing the Bamenda Grassfields traditional societies.

Impacts of Traditional Coup D' Etats within Bamenda Grassfields Chieftaincy Institution

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 succession disputes is a visible challenge to the resiliency of the chieftaincy institution even though it has been able to adjust to this situation. The adaptation of chieftaincy has been up to task simply 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 and Cameroon at large. Just like any other conflict, chieftaincy succession conflicts are as dangerous as modern armed conflicts experienced today with an important capacity of nuisance to both the institution and the modern state. As such, this section presents the socio-cultural, economic, developmental and political cost of chieftaincy succession conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, the struggle to become a Fon generally transformed to violent contestations when the tradition and customs guiding access to chieftaincy were infringed. These occurred 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 administrative political parties 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.⁵⁰ Most chieftaincy succession disputes examined in this study have had serious socio-economic impacts on both the institution and the state itself. Some of these impacts include the, demystification of the cultural symbol of chieftaincy, changing perspective on the chieftaincy institution, loss of lives and property.

Disrespect and Demystification of the Chieftaincy Institution

It is belief 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

⁵⁰ Collective Interview in Menka Palace, (Menka September 2017)

between the ancestors (spirits) and the living and were considered as chiefs. As a chief priest, the chief was the spiritual symbol of his people and the representatives of the ancestor. Bamenda Grassfields Fons propitiated the spirits of the land by offering sacrifices to the gods and ancestors. The sacrifice he offered and the rituals he performed were believed to nourish the people's relation with the gods and assured continuity. Owing to his divine function, the chief was looked upon with reverence and respected as such. 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* (thorny tree).⁵¹

Elucidating with the attributes of the Fon of Nso, Aletum and Fisiy holds that the *Nso* people praise-singers call their *fon* "The sun shrine of Nso" "Father of the land" "The lion". This grandiose way of thinking led most Grassfields societies to claim that the "Fon never dies."⁵² As a result of all these, everything about the Fon is special, his life 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 and his person was sacrosanct. This sort of spiritualisation of the chief's office enforced his powers. Tradition did not permit the disrespect of chiefs in whatsoever way. Traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields resided in their palaces. The palace remains a symbol of unity cum uniting force of the land. Jean Pierre Warnier used a metaphor to aptly capture the role of the chief in the Bamenda Grassfields⁵³. 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 Fon meant to dedicate oneself totally to the service of the people.

All of these mystical features commanded reverence and gave chieftaincy a deific dimension. Anschaire Aveved argues that the transformation of chiefs from human forms to animal forms can be explained by most artefacts found on palace walls and decorations (royal's animals) that incarnate the powerful nature of the chief.⁵⁴ All of these helped to maintain social harmony in the

⁵¹Samah, 'Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon' 76

⁵²MT Aletum, and CY Fisiy. *Socio-Political Integration and the Nso Institutions* (Yaoundé, Sopecam 1989) 35

⁵³J.P. Warnier., 'The King as a container in the Cameroon Grassfields *Paideuma*, (Bd 39, 1993) 303, 319

⁵⁴ A Aveved, 'Uncanny Autochthons: The Bamileke Facing Ethnic Territorialization in Cameroon' (Ph.D. Thesis in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University, 2015) 61





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 increase dethronement through non-traditional mechanisms, the legitimacy and authority of some traditional rulers is being 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 a kind of folklore. More so, the fact that the resolution of some of these succession conflicts that crop up after the violent dethronement of traditional rulers in the Bamenda Grassfields are being resolved in courts and even by the administrative authority has ridded chieftaincy of its mystical dimension⁵⁵. Chiefs have been seen insulted in public by common persons, what in the past was 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 the authority of chiefs.

In reality, colonial rule and other historical factors mentioned earlier in this study contributed in diminishing the authority of the chief, thus opening the way for chieftaincy succession struggle.

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. Meanwhile Fon Amuhngwafor II, the Fon of Bambui was in the south west 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 independent in 1961.⁵⁶ After consultation they outlined a few changes which were developmental initiatives. The first change was a new site for the palace. The old site was on a slope with springs of water oozing at several points. Movement into the palace was 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

⁵⁵ S N T Kaze, ‘The Dynamics of Chieftaincy Succession Conflicts in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, CA. 1800-2013. A Historical Exploration’ (PhD Thesis in History, The University of Yaounde 1-Cameroon 2013) 346

⁵⁶B C.Bonu, *A Short History and Traditions of Bambui 1700-2012*, (Bristol, Reignite Action for Development, 2012) 44

“conservatives” did not approve the idea. Third was the establishment of a petrol station at four corners Bambui.⁵⁷ Again this idea received no positive answer. The village was split into two camps; the “conservatives” and the “progressives”. Finally, the “progressives” agreed that the only way was to dethrone Fon Amuhngwafor II who had been enthroned since 1947. The progressives succeeded in enthroning a prince, an uncle to the Fon called Ache Ngwangong. Enthronement was done outside the palace.

Tributes were paid to prince Ache Ngwangong who mysteriously died in Lebialem in August 2010.⁵⁸ His death was assimilated to his attempt to stage a “coup d’états” against the palace and 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 7th 1995.⁵⁹ 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 7th December 1996, his family paid a fine of 15 goats, 15 fowls, and 15 jugs of palm wine.⁶⁰ Tradition is applied to any villager or subject who acts contradictorily to the norms of the village.

In the same vein the boiling over of a traditional order in Kedjom Keku chieftaincy crisis that provoked the death of the dethroned chief Vugah Simon II is one of the most recent examples. In reality, as a result of several crimes committed in the Kedjom Keku Fondom, with the worst been the abuse of royal authority. This refers to the royal attributes that the chief of Kedjom Keku enjoyed. But unfortunately Chief Vugah Simon exaggerated his royal attributes by unilaterally auctioning Kedjom Keku ancestral land to a Fulani cattle merchant. The Kedjom Keku Fulani problem started in 1991⁶¹, when Chief Vugah Simon unilaterally sold some Kedjom Keku farmlands to a certain Fulani cow lord, Alhadji Yusuf Danpullo. This was protested by the *kwifon*, but chief Vugah was categorical on his decision.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸Bonu, *A Short History and Traditions of Bambui 1700-2012*, 44

⁵⁹Bonu, *A Short History and Traditions of Bambui 1700-2012*, 44

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ NST Kaze, *The Dethronement of Traditional Chiefs in the Cameroon Grassfields: Historical Study of the Chieftaincy Crisis in KedjomKeku 1984-2008* (MA Dissertation in History, University of Yaoundé 1, 2012) 89

⁶² Ibid





The late father, Chief of Kedjom Keku, had earlier warned against the sale of land in the village to foreigners. Some village elders confirmed that the cattle lord had earlier proposed to buy grazing land from late Chief Vubangsi to no avail. Given that the Kedjom Keku people are mostly an agricultural population; their survival depends on their farmlands. The sale of this fertile land to Fulani grazers was starving the Kedjom Keku people to death.⁶³ 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 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. 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.⁶⁴ As such, Chief Vugah Simon II was dethroned and exiled by the traditional council of Kedjom Keku and replaced by his brother. Some subjects in the *fondom* claim he was not the legitimate successor in this *fondom*. Chief Vugah Simon while on exile, still claimed he was the legitimate chief of Kedjom Keku and attempted via several occasions to gain back the throne.

However, on the 19th of January 2006, Chief Vugah Simon returned to Kedjom Keku. At about 2.am, chief Vugah stealthily entered the palace. He was dressed in jeans and wearing a red skullcap.⁶⁵ As he entered the palace, an alert was sounded by palace guards and the village gathered in the palace. Chief Vugah was arrested and savaged by his people. It is reported that some smart members of the Kedjom Keku Fondom deceived chief Vugah into returning to the village under the pretext that he would be re-enthroned. No sooner he got into the palace, some members of the *Kwifon* rounded him up. He was dragged into the sacred shrine where the paraphernalia of chieftaincy was removed from him. The chief celebrant of this rite called his names three times. The *Kwifon* then asked the then chief to leave the palace. This means for the time being, Kedjom Keku had two chiefs. This is because once again chief Vugah was dethroned as he entered the palace in the night of 19th December 2006.⁶⁶

When chief Vugah was dethroned for the second time, he was asked to leave the palace. As he went out, he met his own warriors singing war songs and stirringly angrily at him. The angry crowd rounded him up and started

⁶³Kaze., 'The Dethronement of Traditional Chiefs in the Cameroon Grassfields' 90

⁶⁴The Post Newspaper of 11 June 2004

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

dragging him on the tarred road. Immediately, a number of Kedjom Keku elite called the D.O on phone to inform him about the prevailing situation in Kedjom Keku.⁶⁷ The D.O came and pleaded with the crowd to spare Vugah's life. Rather, the irritated mob promised to escort chief Vugah to the boundary of Kedjom Keku and Bambui before releasing him to the D.O. Chief Vugah was accompanied by songs of farewell. At the same moment, a group of angry villagers rushed to chief Vugah's private residence that was situated at the roadside leading to Bambui and ramshackle his house.

Plate 1: Destroyed Residence of Chief Vugah Simon



Source: Kaze Tindo Photographic collection, February 2011.

When the Kedjom Keku villagers accompanying chief Vugah arrived the boundary, their anger flared and they lynched him to death.

Plate 2: Corps of Chief Vugah Simon and wife

He was later tortured, killed and burnt by the angry Kedjom Keku villager. On the other hand, this act equally goes a long to justify the degree of atrocities the late chief had committed against his people because nothing could explain the act posed by the people apart from the spirit of revenge. This was the same situation in Bamali that left many killed and others injured due to military and police brutality on the population who were bent on chasing out their *fon*.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

In sum the study has concluded that in the Bamenda Grassfields, though chiefs come to power through well designated procedures, there exist avenues by which they can be destooled and removed from office. It is a truism that

⁶⁷Kaze., 'The Dethronement of Traditional Chiefs in the Cameroon Grassfields' 90

⁶⁸ O C A Labang and D Momoh 'Bangolan Chieftaincy Crisis: A Comprehensive Report' (St Lawrence University, 2016) 14



the removal from office of a traditional ruler is not a regular or frequent occurrence in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon . Yet that possibility exists as way of instituting checks on the excesses that a reigning chief could commit, so too is one way of ridding the community of a ruler whose actions, private or public lives are inconsistent and contradictory with the office held. Nowadays, the removal of chiefs from power through violent means has become increasingly frequent of late.

The dethronement of chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields is not a new phenomenon. In the past, chiefs have always been dethroned in the Bamenda Grassfields societies. This was usually noticed when a chief passed away. According to some Grassfields tradition, notably that of the Nso and Kedjom Keku fondoms, a chief does not die with the chieftaincy title. Chieftaincy is a continuous process whereby the reign of a chief can come to an end but not that of the chieftaincy institution. As such chiefs are usually dethroned before their burial. However, what is new in the dethronement of chiefs nowadays is the non-traditional manner by which they are been dethroned. Some are being dethrone alive and during their reign in the chieftaincy office and at times using very violent methods that are in opposition to tradition. In fact the question we need to ask ourselves is why reigning chiefs are been dethroned and using very violent means nowadays. The answer to this question can be said to be the response by the community to claim and re-established communal rights and privileges which are increasingly confiscated by chiefs. This paper contends that the desire by the population to use republican principles to exercise power and authority endangers the survival of traditional authority in the Grassfields and further undermines the chieftaincy institution