



Traditional Rulers' Representation in local government legislatures, 1952-1974: Exertions of the colonial and west Cameroon governments

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Abstract

The paper examines efforts made by the governments of Southern (West) Cameroon in resisting attempts at disbanding the privileges enjoyed by traditional rulers as local government legislators. It holds that though efforts were made by the colonial administration at democratising the local government system, traditional rulers did not lose the preponderant role accorded them in these institutions. The surge in nationalism and quest for their departure from the political scene after World War II was not heeded to as they were maintained as ex-officio members. Upon independence and reunification of Cameroon, they continued enjoying this role and attempts at disbanding this special status by the federal government met with stiff resistance from the State government of West Cameroon government. However, this status was lost with the enactment of a new law on local government and centralisation of power after unification.

Keywords: traditional rulers, local government, west Cameroon and Legislature

Introduction

Traditional rulers have remained instrumental in the administration of local communities in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular. Their role in governance is not a new development as it has been part and parcel of the peoples' existence. Prior to European colonisation, ethnic nationalities or groups in Africa had well established traditional political institutions that took care of the social, economic and political needs of their peoples. These were manned by traditional rulers who were well noted for the preservation of peace in their communities, customary legal adjudication and also as custodians and preservers of ancestral lands. Their roles also extended to religious functions as they were in charge of ancestral offerings.

However, the colonisation of Kamerun by the Germans in 1884 saw the dwindling authority of traditional rulers as they became auxiliaries of the colonial administration. They acted as tax collectors, recruiters of labour for the German plantation, provided porters to the colonial administrators, kept peace and order and dispensed justice^[1] Though given authority in the management of local affairs, traditional rulers were answerable to colonial administrators and their decisions could be rejected or adjusted to fit colonial policies^[2]. Their departure (Germans) from Cameroon after World War I and the inception of British rule saw the introduction of the Indirect Rule System where chiefs became local authorities. They deliberated over local affairs in local assemblies and were responsible for the

development of their communities. However, the creation of administrative divisions in Southern Cameroons^[3] and their subsequent upgrading to local governments (councils) brought changes in the entire British administrative system. The educated elements were encouraged to take up seats in local government legislatures and for the first time, traditional rulers had to share power with them^[4].

This new breed of legislators which were looked upon as new agents of change frowned at the presence of traditional rulers in local government legislatures. With the support of some colonial administrators, they did everything possible to eject them from these assemblies. They, thus, challenged the authority of traditional rulers who had to struggle to survive in the system from 1952. Upon the independence of British Southern Cameroons and reunification with *La République du Cameroun* (former French) and subsequent institution of a federation in 1961, federal government policies never favoured the presence of traditional rulers in these dispensations as federal authorities did everything possible to discourage their memberships. However, resilience from traditional rulers and Government of West Cameroon would not make them bulge. The reunification of Cameroon in 1972 did more harm than good to the privilege positions enjoyed by traditional rulers in these structures as in 1974; a new law governing the local government sector was enacted^[5]. This worked against the privileges accorded traditional rulers in West Cameroon who now had to

¹ V. J. Ngoh, History of Cameroon Since 1800 (Limbe: Pressbook, 1996), 143; Ad(1922)4, No. 227/27, An Assessment Report on the Bum (National Archives Buea (NAB): 1922), 11; H. R. Rudins, Germans in Cameroon, 1884 – 1914, A Case Study of Imperialism (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 213 – 214; Ad(1933)5, No. 668, Bum Intelligence Report (NAB: 1933), 41; Ad(1927)4, No. 227/27, An Assessment Report on the Bum Area in the Bamenda Divisions, Cameroons Province (NAB: 1927), 41 and P. N. Nkwi, and J. P. Warnier, Element for a History of the Western Grassfields (Yaounde: SOPECAM, 1982), 214.

² Ad(1922)4, No. 227/27, An Assessment Report on the Bum, 1922, 11.

³ The area named Southern Cameroons was rebaptised West Cameroon when this former British colony reunited with East Cameroon (former French colony) to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961.

⁴ See P. M. Tem, Flaws in the Native Authority System in Southern Cameroons: A factor for the 1949 Creation of Local Government Units, Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. III, No 1 Quarter 1(2016), 1-24, for the British colonial policy of Indirect and the use of chiefs in administration in Southern Cameroons and changes instituted between 1916 and 1949.

⁵ See Law No. 74 – 23 of December 1974, Organising Councils in Cameroon for details on the harmonised laws governing the local government system in Cameroon after reunification.

compete with other political forces for representation in the country's local government legislatures.

West Cameroon is part of German Kamerun which was ceded to the British after the First World War. Meanwhile the other section of the territory was taken over by the French. These two colonial powers (Britain and France) had ejected the Germans from Cameroon in 1916. Finding it difficult to jointly administer the territory, they split it into two with the British taking one-fifth of the territory and the French four-fifths. The British decided to administer their territory as part of the Nigerian Protectorate. Due to the disjointed nature of the territory which led to communication difficulties, the British divided it into two parts; Northern and Southern Cameroons. The Northern part of the territory was administered as part of the Northern Region of Nigeria and the Southern section as an integral part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. It was in 1954 that Southern Cameroons was granted semi-autonomy and cut off from the administration of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. In 1961 Northern and Southern Cameroons obtained independence from the British through United Nations' sponsored plebiscites and voted to join the independent Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Cameroon (formerly French Cameroun) respectively ^[6]. With the reunification of the former German colonial territory, a federation of two States was born with the former British territory taking the appellation West Cameroon and the French colony, East Cameroun.

The colonial administration and Anti-Propaganda on Representation

Traditional rulers as aforementioned have remained veritable means of governing local communities and the institution is as old as the history of the people they lord over. Before the coming of Europeans to the continent, governance was associated to traditional rulers who were considered the fountain or source of religious, legislative and judicial functions ^[7]. They thus performed administrative functions and provided services to their people in their areas of jurisdictions ^[8]. The authority of traditional rulers is sourced to the beliefs and values of communities or societies and this cannot be underestimated or challenged. This is because they are intricately linked to or cannot be separated from the spiritual and cultural lives of their people. Hence, the identity and common belongings of communities are embedded in traditional rulers.

These attributes seemed to have been recognised by the British colonial authorities when they colonised Southern Cameroons. Their Indirect Rule Policy saw the vesting of traditional rulers with local authority as they ruled under the guidance of the British colonial administration. Hence, the

dual rule instituted by the colonial authorities used chiefs for their benefits as they supervised the production of raw materials, provided labour and collected revenue ^[9]. However, after World War II, constitutional reviews saw the alienation of traditional rulers in representative politics.

The British colonial administration immediately set out to democratise local government councils by proposing natural rulers, untitled literate men, women and unrepresented ethnic groups to be part of these units. The existence of literate men was very important as this was to gradually reduce the preponderant role played by the traditional rulers ^[10]. The membership to these assemblies before 1949 came from the various clans in the territory. These clans had councils where membership remained undefined as there was neither a legal instrument nor constitution that guided the selection of its members or any formal statute. Vaguely, it came or appeared only in intelligent reports concerning recommendations made to that effect to the commissioners by district officers. Only the Commissioner's approval was needed to sanction the inclusion of any traditional authority as council member. Such reports mostly talked of extended family heads, elders or better still traditional rulers ^[11]. These clan councils that were manned by traditional rulers were veritable instruments in the development process especially in galvanising community development.

With preference given to traditional rulers, it was difficult for all sections of society to be taken care of. It therefore means that the focus on traditional set ups worked to the disadvantage of other influential forces that equally played important roles in the socio-economic lives of their communities. There was the need to bring in women in greater numbers as representation accorded them by the authorities was insignificant when compared to their numerical strength and contributions to their input in the development of their societies. Other important groups like the Fulani and the educated elite which were also of immense importance with regard to development were not represented. With this state of affairs, most local government assemblies were deficient in terms of universal representation; especially the element of literacy and progress which could hardly be achieved at its maximum.

With such a composition made up of traditional rulers who were mostly illiterates, communication in some of the local government assemblies was very difficult as in extreme cases none of the members could even speak Pidgin English. Many dialects were used in the different local government areas of the territory and this became a source of weakness. For instance, in the North Western Federation Council, there were about twenty dialects spoken in the area and though many could understand the Aghem, one of the dialects of Wum Division, they could hardly speak it. As a temporary measure to this communication problem, three interpreters interpreted deliberations into some seven

⁶ For details on the political changes witnessed in Cameroon from 1916 and 1961 under colonial rule and between 1961 and 1972, See E. T. Mbuagbaw, R. Brian and R., Palmer, *A History of the Cameroon* (New Edition: Essex Longman, 1987); V. G. Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges, Vol.2, The Colonial and Post Colonial Periods* (Limbe: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1989) and V. J. Ngoh, *Southern Cameroons, 1922 – 1961: A Constitutional History* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001).

⁷ G. C. Sokoh, *An Historical Appraisal of the Changing Role of Traditional Rulers in Governance in Nigeria*, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 23, Issue 1 (January, 2018), 51.

⁸ P.W.K., Yankson, 'The Problem of Building up Planning Capacity for Decentralised Planning at the District Assemblies in Ghana', in Thomi *et al.* (eds). *A Decade of Decentralisation in Ghana: Retrospect and Prospects* (Accra: EPAD/MLG&RD), 160.

⁹ James Wunsch, *Foundations of Centralisation: the Colonial Experience and the African Context* in James Wunsch and Dele Oluwu (EDs), *Failure of the Centralised State: Institutions and Self Governance in Africa* (San Francisco: ICS Press, USA), 1.

¹⁰ Ja/g(1949)1, *Bamenda North Western Federation Embodying Kom, Aghem, Bum, Fungom, Esimbi, Beba Befang Native Authority* (NAB: 1949), 66.

¹¹ Ma/a(1949)2, No.4405 Vol. 1, *Local Government Reform* (NAB: 1949), 335.

dialects of the Division ^[12]. Besides, members of the council were irresponsible and incapable in the management of council affairs. Things were made worse as they had neither knowledge nor understanding of money and figures. However, many of them were learning and acquiring knowledge faster as well as experience in the techniques of modern local government and a number of them distinguished themselves in the process ^[13].

The undesirable nature of local government assemblies, necessitated change in their compositions from illiterate to literate members as councillors hardly worked for the wishes and aspirations or interests of the people they represented. Such representation (traditional rulers) was by virtue of their hereditary positions. Though undisputed that traditional authorities were necessary in governance, it was equally important to bring in other groups that were not represented in the councils. Cognisance was given to the fact that popular people's participation in government was necessary. The authority of traditional rulers had witnessed some decline along the years and it was clear that development could only be accelerated through the acquisition of education. This was not only a necessity for the survival of local governments but also for the progress of the territory ^[14].

To make this dream come true, educated men had to be encouraged to take up seats in local government legislatures. Elections were therefore to be the bases for selecting councillors. In this way, the leading and influential positions of traditional rulers would reduce. Representation of special interest groups like the Fulani and other pressure groups had to be taken care of as all sections of society were encouraged to actively participate in local government councils and foster development. However, such a move was to be gradual as this problem could not be handled directly by the existing local government legislatures.

Some of the divisional administrators were against the preference given to traditional rulers and were critical of their presence in these institutions. An excellent example is the District Officer for Wum Division, W. F. Griffith, who in a letter to the Secretary for Local Government in 1951 gave reasons why traditional rulers should not be continuously kept in the administration. He postulated that though illiteracy and irresponsibility were the greatest hindrances to the smooth functioning of Wum Divisional Council, indifference and conservatism were other cankerworms ^[15]. He presented a very bleak scenario and posited that the members or representatives of clan councils were not only illiterates, but also uninterested in their duties, grasping, irresponsible, idle and presented the situation as generally unsatisfactory. The case of Wum Divisional Council was not isolated from other experiences in the territory as he argued that such problems would not be eliminated by the divisional councils directly but through the diversification of membership.

A change in the composition of local government legislatures was necessary. Though traditional rulers wielded so much power and prestige among their people, their powers were no longer the same as in the precolonial

period and early years of British colonial experience in Africa. Many changes had set in and their authority had been reduced to mostly spiritual rather than temporal. Before this time, many Africans believed that their existence depended on traditional rulers that wielded society together and their security and socio economic wellbeing was tied to them. The extermination of tribal wars and changes that set in during colonialism made this a myth as they were no longer indispensable. There was therefore the need to co-opt other groups in the governing structures of communities in order to facilitate development.

Resistance from the Colonial Administration

The arguments for the termination of the pre-eminent advantage conferred on traditional rulers as the principal or sole members of local government legislatures was resisted by the Resident for Southern Cameroons. He disagreed with detractors, especially Griffith, when he argued that things had not degenerated to a situation where the entire system had to be overhauled. He viewed things from a different perspective and opined that success could not be measured in the individual councillors but on the corporate acts of legislatures recorded in their resolutions. He viewed Griffith's claims as gross embellishment of the situation on the ground and contrarily argued that there was marked improvement in their performance. He saw them as individuals that were always ready and able to assume greater responsibilities. Though a majority of them were illiterates, the insignificant numbers that were acquiring education and becoming literates were of great help to the administration, he insinuated. He felt that with time, efficiency in local government assemblies would be achieved ^[16].

As such, he denounced the sudden departure of traditional rulers from the political scene. He held that it was unrealistic to exclude them from local government legislatures entirely because some of them were intelligent and still respected and cherished by their subjects. Many of them calmly enjoyed the prestige that goes along with their positions, he continued. It was therefore necessary to keep some of them in the council to provide "... stability ... which is best given by the presence of the senior men ... whose position in the social hierarchy gives them respect and procedure over others even if by the consideration of character alone they do not deserve it" ^[17]. The Resident favoured local government legislatures where traditional rulers would be retained and believed that mixing them with elected educated elements or officials would have a positive effect on their performance.

It was on this premise that some local government legislatures were reorganised and sanctioned by the Governor of the Eastern Region of the Nigeria Protectorate. Membership was to be constituted by elected and nonelected officials. The elected officials were mostly educated elites and unelected, traditional rulers. By 1952, this reform was instituted as some educated men were elected into local government assemblies and their presence livened by some traditional rulers. Worthy to note is the fact that in most local government areas where these elections were held, none of the traditional rulers competed nor put forward their candidatures but encouraged their educated

¹² Ja/g(1949)1, Bamenda North Western Federation Embodying Kom, 65 and see also CI(1950)1, No. 106, Annual Report (Report of 1952) Enclosed also 1950, 1951, 1953 and 1954, (NAB: 1950), 54.

¹³ Ja/g(1949)1, Bamenda North Western Federation Embodying Kom, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵ E(1952)2, Annual Report, 1952 - Bamenda Province (NAB: 1952), 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

subjects. This therefore indicates that most of those elected were mostly nominees of traditional rulers. Conversely, traditional rulers only occupied seats allotted to them by the administration^[18].

With these changes in the composition of local government assemblies, it was hoped that progress would be rapid^[19]. This view is supported by the fact that most of the elected members were educated. They could speak and understand Pidgin English and communicate freely among themselves. Hence, the two greatest problems faced by local government legislatures, that of communication and illiteracy, were addressed. There was optimism among colonial administrators that the newly constituted legislatures would do better than the old ones. They hoped that a sense of corporate responsibility would develop and traditional rulers easily educated with time, thanks to the element of education that was present in these units^[20].

The terms of office of local government legislatures was terminated in 1954 when the Cameroons Province was reorganised and upgraded to or granted a quasi-regional status. With this new development, the region had to form its own house of assembly as it was cut off from the Nigerian Eastern House of Assembly in Enugu. This change on the status of the territory affected local governments as their legislatures had to provide one representation each to this new body^[21]. It is in line with these arrangements that elections were programmed for the 7th of March 1954 and results endorsed by the Resident of Sothern Cameroons on the 2nd of August that same year^[22]. The composition of these legislatures was made up of mostly councillors formerly members of the 1952 local government assemblies as little changes in terms of membership was witnessed. Traditional rulers thus continued dominating these assemblies.

However, their continuous presence in these units was greeted with hostility by some colonial authorities in the territory. The case of Preston Potts (one of the colonial administrators) is worth illustrating as he was critical of the presence of traditional rulers in these institutions. To him, their presence in local government legislatures was suspicious as evident in the following excerpt;

... there is no embracing traditional structure upon which pattern of hegemony can be based. The representation of traditional rulers has therefore been determined rather upon the express and somewhat arbitrary wishes of the present council and must therefore be a reflection of present personalities rather than a supposed hierarchy of chiefs^[23].

He, thus, called for a fair representation in local government legislatures to the disadvantage of traditional rulers and proposed the broadening of membership based on the taxable population or tax payers. However, his aspirations were trampled upon by the Resident who disagreed and

argued that representation determined by taxation was to work in favour of tax payers and disadvantageous to traditional rulers. He argued that though traditional rulers were undesirable, they would not be excluded from local government legislatures. He advanced the following reason for his verdict; they knew the history and methods that could be helpful in the enhancement of progress in their communities without any difficulty. In the Bamenda Conference of District Officers of 1956, the Resident reiterated that the presence of traditional rulers in local government legislatures could not be over emphasized. They were still important in the political set up and no reform would ignore them. However, they were to be ex-officio members. With these, they became ex-officio members until 1961 when the territory became independent and the West Cameroon Government had to grapple with the federal government in the former's attempt to disband traditional rulers' representation in local government assemblies.

West Cameroon Government Resisting the Federal Authorities

The independence of British Southern and French Cameroun saw the emergence of a federal system of administration and much was done by the federal authorities (dominated by French Cameroonians) to terminate traditional rulers' membership in local government legislatures. Between 1961 and 1967, the ex-officio membership role enjoyed by traditional rulers in local government legislatures was inherited by the post-colonial government of West Cameroon. Little or no amendments were made with regard to the place of traditional rulers in the set up. The West Cameroon Government worked so hard to maintain them in the governing divisional councils. The unification of all political parties in Cameroon in 1966 signalled the beginning of problems for traditional rulers. In order to reorganise the country politically, all local governments assemblies were dissolved and caretaker councils instituted all over West Cameroon^[24].

Though, traditional rulers were not forgotten as they were also appointed into these institutions by the Secretary of State for Local Government in West Cameroon, the complete reorganisation of the various branches and cells of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) Party by March 1967 did not favour them^[25]. The successful political reorganisation of the territory and dissolution of caretaker councils and institution of reforms with regard to membership in local governments ignored them. On the 2nd of March 1968, the law appointing caretaker councils was revoked and the harmonisation of the electoral laws of West and East Cameroon took effect. Direct universal suffrage and the list system were introduced into West Cameroon. As aforementioned, the West Cameroon Government worked hard to make sure that natural rulers were maintained in the specifications of compositions for councils. Though was not favoured by the federal government, this was an established policy of the West Cameroon Government that all groups be represented in the management of local affairs. Even when the CNU government instituted changes in 1966, the fons of

¹⁸ Ja/g(1952)1, WD 1 Vol. II, Wum Native Authority – Bamenda North Western Federation of Bikom, Aghem, Bum, Fungom, Essimbi – Befang Native Authority Area (NAB:1952), 103 – 111.

¹⁹ Ci(1950)1, No. 106, Annual Reports (Report of 1952), 54.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

²² Ja/g(1952)1, WD 1 Vol. II, Wum Native Authority – Bamenda North Western Federation, 155.

²³ Ja/g(1956)6, Wum Divisional Native Authority: Fungom Clan Council Reorganisation, 1957, to Subordinate Native Authority (NAB: 1956), 7.

²⁴ Ja/g(1962)2, Ci143, Fungom Clan Council Minutes of Meetings, Wum Division (NAB: 1962), 100.

²⁵ H. K. Kam, "Local Government and Nation Building in Wum Division, 1949–1972" (M.A. Dissertation in History, University of Buea, 1998), 89.

Bafut, Kom, Nso, Fontem and Bali were made natural rulers or leaders of their local government areas.

However, in the 1968 elections, the traditional rulers were not taken care of and the Prime Minister (PM) of West Cameroon never took this lightly. He put up strong arguments for their continuous presence and postulated that these natural rulers had and remained very important in local development as they played useful roles in the administration of their areas. They actively participated in community development, collected taxes, handled issues of land and were the arbiters of customs and conciliation of civil disputes. They thus remained a link between their people and the government and the PM made it clear that their presence was needed in these institutions^[26]. To him, their presence provided local democratic balance at the local government level. Maintaining this social setting was necessary so that peoples' known and recognised tradition that has survived the test of time for generations grows in democracy^[27].

It is because of this plea from the PM of West Cameroon to the federal authorities that traditional rulers were co-opted into the political local governing structures of West Cameroon^[28]. The mode of selection was through appointment by the Secretary of State for Local Government and elections by universal suffrage. This can be exemplified with the case of the Kom Bum local government where traditional rulers elected their members and Wum Central Council, they were appointed by the Secretary of State^[29]. The presence of traditional rulers in local governments' structures remained in force until 1972 when the Cameroon Federation was dismantled in favour of reunification. The reunification of the territory, thus, favoured the harmonisation of the two administrative systems inherited from the British and the French colonial experiences and this greatly worked against the privileged positions enjoyed by traditional rulers in West Cameroon. In this direction, the 1974 law on Councils in Cameroon disbanded the special status enjoyed by traditional rulers in the former British colony (West Cameroon) and traditional rulers had to seek representation in local government assemblies by competing with their subjects through elections^[30].

Conclusion

The paper examined the efforts made by the British colonial authorities and West Cameroon Government in safeguarding the position of traditional rulers in local government assemblies. It argued that the Indirect Rule policy instituted by the British reignited the preponderant role played by traditional rulers in the administration of local communities. They became local government legislators and legislated for their areas of jurisdiction and in this way animated local development. However, after World War II, sceptics set in and did everything possible to challenge the continuous presence of traditional rulers in local government legislatures. They favoured the democratisation of these institutions and the inclusion of

literate and untitled men as well as women and other groups in the territory. This was to make these institutions more representative. Besides they argued tax payers needed to be represented and unlettered traditional rulers relegated to the background if development had to be facilitated.

In spite of these arguments, resistance came from some colonial administrators who contended that the presence of traditional rulers was still needed and their role in the development of the territory could not be over emphasized. As such their departure from the political scene was not to be immediate. Upon independence, the West Cameroon Government did all it could to resist attempts by the federal authorities in disbanding the special status granted traditional rulers but the unification of the territory in 1972 worked against this move. This saw the harmonisation of the administrative systems inherited from the British and French colonial masters. In line with the 1974 law on Councils in Cameroon, the special status accorded traditional rulers in West Cameroon became a thing of the past as chiefs had to seek representation through elections.

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²⁷ Ja/a(1968)2, CI 1125, Council Elections Regulations and Correspondences Concerning, 1968, 30.

²⁸ Ja/g(1968)3, No. CI 1130/W, Specification of Composition, Wum Central Council, 20 – 5 – 1968, 5.

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