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## POPULATIONS' RESPONSE TO THE MODERNIZATION OF THE CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION AMONG THE BAFOW IN THE KUMBA-MUNICIPALITY (SOUTH-WEST CAMEROON)

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### Abstract

The study aims to examine the feedback of Modernization of the Chieftaincy Institution among the Bafow and to present the interactions between traditional Rulers and their populations in Kumba Municipality in South- West Cameroon. This study also expects to raise the awareness of the Government and Chiefs on the consequences of the evolution of the Chieftaincy among Bafow people in Kumba Municipality, for them to reassess their attitudes toward the population. The research is qualitative and Data collection was both primary and Secondary. Primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews, and direct Observations. Secondary data come from Documentary research. The Content analysis consisted of comment, explanations and comparison of informations. Modernization and Cultural dynamism theories were considered to understand facts. The Modernization Theory was used, because it looks at the internal factors of change in a society. So, less Industrialized countries can be brought to evolution in the same manner more "Developed" Countries have been. According to the theory of cultural dynamism, no culture is static. Every culture changes. The change can derive from inside or from outside the Society. The speed of evolution depends on each society. It may be harmful or peaceful, favourable or not favourable. Main findings of the research reveal that, in the pre-colonial era, Chiefs exercised a lot of powers which were focused toward improving on the livelihood of their populations. The traditional Leaders were reduced to government auxiliaries during the Colonization and even after the Independence of the Southern Cameroon, as the result of Indirect Rule. According to this study, the Bafow People contest the Traditional Authority because Chiefs belong to the Ruling Political Party, the Cameroon's Peoples Democratic Movement. Chiefs, according to the populations, are supposed to be apolitical and neutral, since some members of the Communities belong to other political parties. Also, there are some "fake" villages and illegitimate Chiefs which the government through the Senior Division Officer and Governor are trying to protect. Some Chiefs monopolize the Bafow ancestral Land and sell it off for their own profit. According to this research, populations do not want their Chiefs to be Paid by the Government, it makes them to be deprived, partial and less answerable to their Communities than to the State which pays them; the population also want the Authority to be given back to the traditional Custodians who should be looking for the Revival of their Cultural Heritage. They should also be implicated into the Social Control; for they did it successfully before the Colonization without any sophisticated Army, Police nor Gendarme by the fact that they carried spiritual power which can be used to prevent insecurity better than "modern" Weapons.

### Keywords:

Populations' Response-Democratization- Chieftaincy Institution - Bafow- Culturally inappropriate



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## INTRODUCTION

The traditional leadership has been the basis of local government in Africa through history. Political Authority in Africa is not a recent creation. Chieftaincy is one of the oldest Institutions of local Governance in Africa. According to Historians, long before contact with Europeans, some African societies developed sophisticated communities and kingdoms which molded the political destinies of their peoples. The contact of Western Cultures, made African Chieftaincy to change, (Awingsong, 1995). Among the Bafow in Kumba for example, colonialists set about creating the new systems of political administration, the office of chief transformed in many ways. Foreign hierarchical titles were introduced into traditional leadership system in order to give the Governor-General ruling power over Africans and later over State President. The hierarchy and the Indirect Rule was imposed to Chiefs, (Mizuno, 2014), (Afigho, 1979). Till today, Being Chief is a precarious occupation torn between keeping alive traditional structures or Surviving the culturally inconsiderate Regime. Chieftaincy is adapted to the needs of the Modern State. Traditional Rulers gradually lost much Authority and Legitimacy at both level of the Modern State and within their respective Communities. This paper examines on the Bafow Peoples' response to the modernization of Chieftaincy Institution. The study will accentuate on the Chieftaincy Institution among the Bafow during Precolonial Era, it will present the situation of the Chieftaincy institution among the Bafow from the Colonization to Today and also discuss about Populations response and grievance to the Modernization of the Chieftaincy Institution among the Bafow in Kumba Municipality.

### I/The Chieftaincy Institution among the Bafow during Precolonial Era

Africa was not an empty, disorganized geographical place before the contact with Europeans. Traditional was inherited through kinship ties. So, for someone to assume the leadership position, one had to be related by a tie of kinship or based on their common ancestry thus traditional leaders qualify for office by their ancestry alone and therefore required no special training. Chiefs dispensed Justice without favor or fear in their role as representatives of ancestors, (Awingsong, 1995). During Precolonial era, *"Traditional leaders served as political, military, spiritual and were considered as custodians of the values of the society. They could provide for the poor and orphans, resolved disputes with the emphasis on reconciliation and thus ensure harmony neighbors, hence they were highly respected by their subjects. Chiefs were chosen by the council of elders according to the native and customs. Chiefs were neither Islamic nor Christians, they were completely neutral"*, (Interview, in May 2023, in Kumba). Their skills were based on the local experiences of traditional political organization. The Chieftaincy Institution during pre-colonization was culturally fit, (Geschier, P. 1993). They knew to keep social cohesion and welfare. *"At that time everything the chief had, came from the community. Our chiefdom's economic system was at the same time distributive and redistributive. Chiefs were not in need that could be a big disgrace for people who want to be honor and respected by the neighboring communities. The society was organized such a way that, everybody in the community was supposed to take care of the chief by providing food, wealth and other items to him. Even the palace was built by the effort of the community. That is why they also were answerable to their community"* (Interview, in May 2023, in Kumba).

Traditional Rulers in Pre-colonial time were respected, their populations were loyal to them, because they were legitimate, and their spiritual power could work efficiently since chiefs at that time were respectful to traditions and cultural norms. That is why through the power investing on them they could pour libation and call for the ancestral intervention. *"Chiefs in those days were fathers of Orphans, and defenders of Widows. They were not working for themselves; their populations' wellbeing and peace were their first preoccupation"* (Interview April 2024, in Kumba).

Before colonization, traditional power was not autocratic. Chiefs were answerable to their populations through King Makers who had the duty to enthrone them and they could be dethrone in case of misbehavior, (Palagashvili, L.,2018). *“Chiefs were not selling patrimonies like lands, they were living and working for their people, respectful of traditions and cultural norms; they were in control of social affairs, the local police, the indigenous judiciary, community development projects, land affairs in their respective community. They were legitimate, not cupid, impartial and had the authority over their community’s affaires, that is why people were loyal to them”* (Interview in May 2024, in Kumba).

## **II/The situation of the Chieftaincy institution among the Bafow from the Colonization to Today**

The Chieftaincy in Cameroon particularly as in Africa in general, is an old politico-administration of governance that predated the colonial invasion. The Advent of colonialism and post- colonialism brought changes in Traditional leadership among Bafow people. For the past four decades’ chieftaincy has been affected by modernity. Consequently, this has eroded and polarized the institution rendering it less effective. The German-Duala treaty and agreement signed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1884 by Kings Ndumbe Lobe Bell and Akwa Dika Mpondo, alongside two German representatives, Edward Smidt and Johannes Voss; Germany made a point to make traditional chiefs auxiliaries to the colonial administration whether by drawing up a treaty or by force, (Ocheni, 2012). Traditional Rulers were the pillars of German Colonial administration, (Neupert-Wentz, C. and Muller-Grepon, C. 2021).

After the German era, the indirect rule policy introduced by the British favored the devotion of competence to local authorities; It was called Native Authorities guided by the indirect rule policy. The British believed that through the chiefs, the local administration could be developed into an efficient organ of modern government, (Palagashvili, 2018; Danso, E.2020). The native authorities were to be the rudiments or embryo of local government and through this a post-colonial system would eventually emerge (Mizuno, N. 2014; Chakunda, V.2014). The “Shepstone system” changed the nature of the chieftaincies as it created a system of dependency on colonial government. The where chiefs became vassals of the colonial bureaucracy. The colonial office of the Governor-general granted the title of “Supreme Chief of Indigenous People” to the office holder, and the “Shepstone system gave the Governor-General powers to appoint and fire traditional leaders, (Awingsong, 1995). The appellation “King” was changed to chief by the colonial master as to denigrate the chieftaincy institution. Modernization came with Christianity that preaches against traditional and cultural beliefs. Modernization theory maintains that traditional Societies will develop as they adopt modern practices, (Ocheni, S. 2012).

In Cameroon today, according to the decree no 77/245 of July 1977 organizing the chieftaincy, traditional authority is supposed to exercise at the grassroots level as stipulated by the British colonial policy; But Since the Reunification of Cameroon, the French master created “warrant chiefs” by order no 224 of February 1933 defining the status of indigenous chiefs. Though the earlier cited 1977 post-colonial decree is said to mark” gradual bureaucratization of the institution of chieftaincy” and it is significant today all traditional authority in Cameroon is subject to uniform, legislation”, (Chaka 2008).Cameroon has been undergoing institutional reform since law no 96/06 of January 1996 introducing the new institution. In its section 55, the later constitution ushered in decentralization whereby the decentralization authorities will be regions and Councils; which are mainly charged with the task of local development under section (4) of Law no 2004/17 of 22 July 2004 on the orientation of the decentralization.

Till date, the constitutional provision is silent on any consideration of traditional authorities (organized by law) as decentralized bodies. Also traditional authorities do not formally constitute part of the deconcentrated institutions of the republican administrative machine at the local level. They are simply “traditional authorities” albeit stakeholders in governance, (Chaka 2008). Only During electoral processes Chiefs are called to intervene for the success of Elections in their various villages and to call for the mobilization of their populations. Chiefs in their majority, are members of the ruling party when some people among their populations are in the opposition. Today, first, second and third degree of Chiefs are remunerated monthly by the Government and are considered under the Ministry of territory administration and the Decentralization. They also are called to cooperate with Mayors, Dos and SDos. All those facts among others are the causes of the Anger from their populations.

Modernization takes hold Traditional beliefs and other Cultural facts, according to the theory, usually become less important as modernization. Chiefs no more respect traditions, they sell ancestral lands, and most of chiefdoms are fake.

The native Language which is Bafow is disappearing. “*The English and pigging language is the medium of communication among the Bafow. Rarely can you hear the Bafow language, in an area that is predominantly Bafow natives. The Bafow language is getting extinct, since it is regarded as “primitive or inferior” to English. Some of chiefs cannot even speak the Bafow language; so they don’t know many things in Bafow culture.* (Interview, in May 2023, in kumba).

### **III/Populations' grievances and response to the Modernization of the Chieftaincy Institution among the Bafow?**

The Interest here is to examine the relationship between the chiefs and their population also their reactions to the modernization of chieftaincy institution among Bafow in Kumba. The first remarks are that Modernization has done a lot of harm to Bafow Chiefs as most of their population is at loggerheads with their Traditions’ Custodians concerning politics and sale lands. Among factors contributing to the conflicts between Bafow Chiefs and their populations are the following Reproaches:

#### **Land mismanagement and the Cupidity of many Chiefs**

The larger number of chiefs is not happy because they are not paid by the government. And most of them face litigations in the courts for matters relating to land mismanagement. “*Some Chiefs are now interested more in economic benefit instead of the welfare of their peoples. The hereditary tradition of enthroning a chief does not exist anymore in some villages among the Bafow. Because, once an elite is economically fit, he can buy the post of chief with the support of the administration, that is why, the Bafow traditions and cultural practices are being eroded*” gradually. Some chiefs are happy of surrender of land, elderly chiefs who have nothing are not happy. Most of young chiefs drive in jeeps unlike the old one in the suburbs, (Interview, May, 2023, in Kumba).

#### **Interference of government in Chieftaincy institution**

The most famous statement by Nkrumah concerning chieftaincy describes the relationship between chiefs and politics as;” those of our chiefs who are with us (...), we do honours; those (...) who join forces with the imperialists (...), there shall be come a time when they will run and leave their sandals behind them; chiefs in league with imperialists who obstruct our path will one day run away and leave their stools, (...), (Kwame Nkrumah, Accra Evening News, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1950).

*“The government has interfered with the chieftaincy since this administrative structures were put in place, like the governor, Senior Divisional Officer, the Divisional Officer, Mayors. In those days, the chiefs had positions like district heads, but now they have no powers because of the administrative the ones carrying out these functions. Even our subjects take us to the legal department because they have money and wealth”, (Interview, in April 2024 in Kumba). Population want the situation to stop because the relationship with the Divisional Officer( Do), is poor, they can be transferred to another place, at any moment and leave the mess behind.*

### **Creation of fake villages and chiefdoms**

*“We have seen the creation of villages which did not exist. In spite of instructions from the Minister of Territorial Administration or the Presidency restricting the creation of villages. I have a copy, I would show you letters from Presidency and Minister of Territorial Administration forbidding the creation of new villages. But, Through the Divisional Officers “, New villages have increased, we have now small villages; Some Chiefs are surprised to see their villages being divided into upper and lower. This questions have embarrassed many chiefs because Divisional Officers go on creating new villages against territorial administration Minister and the Presidential laws, another weakness of chiefs we witness is Land depravation by the Chief, (Interview, in April 2024 in Kumba). Some of the chiefs are doing double or triple selling land. Many people are against the creation of new villages. According to them, that situation creates anarchy. So new villages come along with new chiefs who are illegitimate, (Makahamadze, and al. 2009).Populations accuse Chiefs of selling Land to non-indigenes and buying fancy car. While many natives cannot afford land in their own ancestral Village.*

### **Connivance with Elites**

The relationship with Elites is barely tolerable, because of disrespect of customs and cultural values. Elites now do not like chiefs especially since the surrender of land to villages. Elites who are top government workers, when it come home, the chiefs are there to welcome them; at time, when they visit elites, they are given envelop to motivate chiefs. *That attitude corrupts the chief's mind. He can no more be impartial in case of conflict. Some Elites have bought the title for honour and prestige they don't deserve. For example, in the past strangers never used to sell land, but now there is high rate of it. The social integration has brought a lot of damages whereby strangers have infiltrated into the culture of Bafow people, to dilute or to destroy it (...)(Interview in May 2024 in Kumba). That closeness between Chiefs and their Elites makes them to be partial and corruptible. They always favour and satisfy Elites' needs, (Mizuno, 2014).*

### **“Politization” of the chieftaincy**

Population do not tolerate the implication their chief in government and in politics. Chiefs have become politicians. *“During precolonial period chiefs were custodians of their populations. But with the new development of the post-colonial era, wherein chiefs have found themselves integrated into government and politics, they consider themselves now as masters. So, this has caused a break down in the relationship between the chiefs and their subjects in the village. Most of chiefs are not focused now to ensure about the development and wellbeing of their people. Especially now that they are paid by the government, no chief can be answerable to his populations; The money they receive from the administration land they surrender and corruption. They work with the administration to graze land that was meant for their communities. They connive with the Divisional officer. So, people are so disgruntled. Corruption has led to the grabbing of MeMe lands in alliance with chiefs (Interview in May 2024 in Kumba).*



## Contempt and Disgrace of traditional Legitimacy and Authority

The Legitimacy is the confidence of people in the existing political system. It makes a population to accept willingly, without questioning the organization to which it belongs, and people to be loyal and accept somebody as their Leader, (Makahamadze, T. 2009). It is also a lawfulness affecting the royal succession and that make a kind to be acknowledge by people he rules. The Authority is the power to enforce rules or to give order or to be in command. Population want the social control to be given back to Traditional authorities. *“Money or military of western law alone, cannot solve all Social challenges. Some need to be overcome through cultural mechanisms. The power of the chiefs has been greatly reduced by the coming of exogenous believe systems. The church from many centuries started preaching against village practices and other cultural activities. Nobody needed any Police or Gendarmes; because only the omnipresence and omniscience in people’s Mind and Awareness of the Spiritual Power the chiefs incarnated, made people to respect social norms and traditions. The sagacity or the Chiefs’ level of spirituality and sacredness inspired and imposed the feelings of awe, respect, or reverence to him. Chiefs knew everything spiritually, about his people before it realized in the physical real. The omnipresence and omniscience of the spiritual power carried by the Chief could be benevolent or malevolent, according to situations. Everybody in the community was monitored by Spiritual beings and forces everywhere and every time. Any cultural norms violator was penalized and harmed by those Spirits. “For example, a stubborn individual could be harmed in the dream or physically or he could be somewhere alone and a gigantesque snake or any other dangerous animal just appeared in front of him; and he will conform to social norms. Chiefs in those time knew how to compel people to respect cultural norms”*(Interview, in May 2023, in Kumba).

The most famous statement by Nkrumah concerning chieftaincy describes the relationship between chiefs and politics as; *“those of our chiefs who are with us (...), we do honours; those (...) who join forces with the imperialists (...), there shall be come a time when they will run and leave their sandals behind them; chiefs in league with imperialists who obstruct our path will one day run away and leave their stools, (...),* (Kwame Nkrumah, Accra Evening News, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1950, in Boating and Afranie 2002).

Both the stool and sandals are part of the chief’s regalia. To appear bare footed in public is taboo for chiefs and normally results in the destoolment, in other words the dethronement of chief. In Ghana enstoolment means enthronement while “destoolment” means dethronement.

Today in Kumba, Chiefs have sold and lost their authority and legitimacy, because of their misconducts and disrespect of Bafow traditions. Their dishonesty and implication in politics and connivance with Secessionists because of the cupidity, make their power to vanish from them. Nobody respect them anymore. The Bafow traditions and cultural practices are being eroded. *“And everything turned back to Chiefs themselves. During the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon, the majority of Bafow Chiefs and their people have run away from their villages for the safety of their Life. There are guilty in their conscience, they have been put to shame. There is Chief in Bafow land no more; Vandals and other Armed Rubbers are the one ruling Kumba now. Chiefs have been driven away from their Fathers’ land”*, (Interview, in May 2024, in Kumba).

## IV/ Bafow- people's Willingness about their traditional authority

According to Informants, “Chiefs should work for the government nor for the Elections, but for their populations and work together for their general well-being and the preservation of their cultural heritage. The modernization of the Chieftaincy Institution as it is now, is not culturally appropriate.

Chiefs authority and legitimacy should not be affected. No Chief should be designated nor village created by the Government. Populations don't appreciate the fact that their Chiefs are paid monthly by the State, they are more answerable to the State that pays them than to populations. Chiefs should be a politic and impartial. They should stop selling Land and cupidity and other malpractices which erode their relationship with the people they should be working for and that fragilizes their authority within the populations. According to Informants, Traditional Rulers should be implicated in social control. Their Spiritual power, they carry can compel people to conform to social norms and values. Government should not bypass that fact. The implications of population through their Leader in social control and in development project can overcome the challenges we face today.

## **Conclusion**

Following the changing of chieftaincy institution in Kumba Municipality due to the modernization of process brought by colonial masters, chieftaincy institution will keep losing its values until all the notables, elites, populations and chiefs come to the understanding that it's their collective efforts to work together for the preservation of their cultural heritage. Democratization has come, therefore chiefs, their population and the government should work in synergy to bring about the necessary development in Kumba Municipality. The contemporary chiefs should borrow a leaf from their counterparts of the precolonial era, whose priority was to promote the well-being and culture of their populations and stop the sale of land. More so, the administration should always concert with the newly created House of chiefs before approving the creation and designation of new villages and chiefs. For an effective decentralization to take place, in Cameroon and in Kumba in particular, chiefs should be given a pivotal role in its implementation, since throughout history, chiefs in Cameroon have been at the central of the political, Socio-economic and cultural life of their respective societies. Chiefs should come from the royal lineage and not designated par the administration. From this study, more suggestions should be carried out on Decentralization process at the rural or community level to understand its operationalization, weaknesses and strengths. More research should be done again on community-based development in communities, community participation in development projects within the Kumba municipality.

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