



# Colonial and Post Colonial Migrations and *le vivre ensemble* in the Cameroon Grassfields

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## Abstract

This study attempts an analyses of the movement of peoples and communities between the Anglophone (Bamenda) and Francophone (Bamileke) parts of the Cameroon Grassfields following the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon in 1916. The objective is to identify the reasons for these within the Grassfields movements, identify the changing patterns of the movements and the impact on Grassfields solidarity and *le vivre ensemble*. Drawing largely from primary and secondary sources and using a chronological cum thematic approach in the presentation of the data, the article concludes that political and economic exigencies provoked the movement of populations and that these Grassfields people maintained their solidarity and cultural uniformity despite the linguistic and colonial boundary imposed by the Europeans between the North West and West Regions of Cameroon that constitute the Grassfields. This study therefore sustains the argument that the North West and West Regions of Cameroon are more united historically and culturally than is the South West and North West Regions that constitute Anglophone Cameroon as the extremists of the "Anglophone Problem" may claim.

**Keywords:** Grassfields; Migration; Identity; Anglophones; Francophones; *le vivre ensemble*.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Grassfields Unity

The Cameroon Grassfields is a geographical as well as cultural entity which occupies the Western quadrant of Cameroon. It is a woodland type Savannah which has been greatly degraded in most parts today because of pressure from its teeming population. Topographically, it covers the plateau of the Bamboutous Mountain range and its climate has hardly had extremes. The soils are rich and good for farming and grazing. The various peoples who inhabited the sub-region are enterprising in both economic and state building cultures.

The roots of the cultural identity of the Grassfields people were cultivated during pre-colonial times. The first factor in the formation of their common cultural identity was the belief in a common descent that could be summarized in a legend or myth of origin, either with fictive or real apical ancestor, or in an idealized point of origin. This was the case with the Nso, Bamum, Bafoussam, Mbouda, Dschang, Baleng, Bagam, Bangu, Bafut, Kom, Bum, Oku, Noni, Nkwen, Bambui, Bambili, Ndop chiefdoms and many other ethnic groups in the Grassfields that claimed Tikar descent (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982). Apart from Kom, Nso and Bamum that traced their origins from the precise site of Ndobo or Mbankim in the Adamawa region, 'Tikari' was to many of these groups an imaginary place in the upper Mbam country in the North of Cameroon. The other major groups such as the Bali Chamba (This include the chiefdoms of Bali-Nyonga, Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gham) also claimed to have migrated from the steppes and semiarid sections of North Cameroon precisely from Gashaka and Koncha-Tignere (Nyamndi, 1988). The Bamileke chiefdoms were founded by Tikar who have migrated from the north of Cameroon in the 17th century and are linked to the Bamum because Nchare the founder of Bamum was the younger brother of the founder of Bafoussam. The Bamileke from the north also founded Dschang, Bafang, Mbouda and Bagangte. Thus the bulk of the people who settled the Grassfields claimed to have migrated from the North. Their solidarity and believe in one culture and destiny is traced from this common area of origin.

This fact, coupled with the one that they settled in a mountainous country with an equable climate with soils that were not fertile but could easily be tilled, made them sturdy, healthy, and industrious (Epale, 1985). Besides, the people developed similar social and political institutions that knitted the various ethnic groups in to tight units. Cultural homogeneity was also reinforced by the conquest and subjugation of smaller groups by the Bali-Nyonga, Nso, Bafut, Kom and Bali-Kumbat, Bafoussam, Baleng, Bangangte and Bamum Chiefdoms. Physical similarities also developed from continuous inbreeding and high restrictions on exogamy (Yenshu, 2003). It was therefore possible to talk of a common Grassfields culture on the eve of German annexation.

The Grassfields ethnic groups also developed a cultural uniformity of their own thanks to their geography. Their land was characterised by important geographical barriers: The Equatorial Rain Forest to the South, the Adamawa Plateau to the North and Northwest. These natural barriers protected the people against invasions from Fulani jihadists and other conquerors from Kanem-Bornu. The people were not devastated by the Fulani wars that ravaged northern Cameroon even if Islam from the north gradually penetrated some of these chiefdoms <sup>1</sup>. With these

<sup>1</sup> The Bamum Kingdom was Islamised after the Jihads. However Fulani raids are known to have reached the Ndop Chiefdoms without significant devastation of the socio-political set up of the chiefdoms.

barriers the various chiefdoms and communities of the zone intensified inter-chiefdom socio-cultural intercourse, inter- chiefdom trade and the exchange of goods and services. They also developed a better understanding of their ecology and focused on farming and hunting. For one thing, the length and breadth of the territory largely situated within the lush savannah with an active volcanic range of mountains was endowed with some of the richest variety of soils, climates and vegetations and produced an assortment of food and cash crops (Ndi, 2005). This equally explained the relative absence of hunger and starvation and the existence of a comparatively robust and virile population

Another commonality of the Grassfields was their respect for constituted traditional authority. It should be recalled that when the Bamileke Tikar and Chamba arrived in the Grassfields, they settled in centralised and hierarchically administered chiefdoms. These chiefdoms developed similar institutions with the chiefs at the head of chiefdom politics. The Chiefs were assisted by Councils of Notables, (typically nine ministers) whose number varied from chiefdom to chiefdom but whose functions were basically the same. The chiefs' authority was checked and regulated by the Regulatory Societies (*Nwerong* in Nso, *Ngumba* in Bali and *Kwifon* in Kom). In each chiefdom, there existed a military unit for the expansion of the state and for defense. These structures, succession and inheritance customs, their semi-Bantu languages and the other traditional values survived German, British and French colonial rule.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars interested in the humanities in Cameroon have paid little attention to within the Grassland migrations in Cameroon probably because of the cultural, geographical and historical uniformity that characterised the people and their region. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2001), (Nkwi, 2017) all focused on immigrant population phenomenon along the coast. Their works examines the dynamics of labour movements from the interior grassland to the coast where the plantation and factories were located since the German annexation of Cameroon and the identity problem of the immigrant population along the coast. This study is therefore relevant because it is an attempt to historicise population movements within the grassland of Cameroon with a relatively homogenous population in order to evaluate *le vivre ensemble* in the Grassland since the partition of Cameroon<sup>2</sup>.

### 2.1. The Anglo-French Partition of the Cameroon Grassfields

The Grassfields that the Germans discovered after annexing Cameroon in 1884 was in fact culturally and geopolitically continuous as presented above. German explorers especially Dr Eugen Zintgraff appreciated the cultural uniformity of the people, the highlands and tall grass that covered the landscape. This attracted German explorers, anthropologists and scientists. The natural and cultural unity of the territory was therefore preserved between 1884 and 1916 when the Germans administered the colony.

However in 1916 the cultural and geopolitical unity of the Grassfields preserved by the Germans was dislocated when the Anglo-French forces partitioned Cameroon after the defeat of Germany in Cameroon following the outbreak of the First World War in Europe. It should be recalled that when the First World War broke out in Europe in August 1914, British, French and Belgian troops invaded German Cameroon and by February 1916, the Germans surrendered at the battle of Mora. In February 1916, Lancelot Oliphant and George Picot a British and a French diplomat respectively meeting in London 1916, proposed the partition of Cameroon by drawing a line on the map of Cameroon and identifying the British and French portions. In March 1916 the commander of British troops General Charles Macpherson Dobell and the commander of French troops General Joseph Aymerich initiated the effective partition of Cameroon in an accord that was finalised by the Milner-Simon Agreement of July 10, 1919.

In the partition, France was given four-fifths and Britain one-fifth the territory of German Cameroon. The Grassfields harboring the Tikar, and Bali Chamba ethnic groups known to have migrated from the barren North and settled on the plateau was divided into two. The Bamenda Plateau hosting the Tikar and Chamba chiefdoms of Nso, Kom Bafut, Bambalang, Baba, Bangolan, Babessi Bali Kumbat and Bali Nyonga were placed under British administration. The Bamileke Plateau hosting the Bamum Sultanate and the Bamileke chiefdoms of Bana, Bawaju, Bandjoun, Baham Bafoussam, Dschang, Bangangte and Baleng were placed under French administration. In fact the Bamileke did not, until the colonial period, identify themselves as Bamileke and did not claim to speak Bamileke. Rather, they identified themselves as members of this or that chiefdom. It was therefore the colonial separation and geographical location that led them to claim to be and be identified by others as Bamileke and not Tikar (Fanso, 1989). Bamileke was a deformation of *M'beleke* used by the Germans to mean the country of "maize and groundnut producers" and oppose to Bangwa the "producers of palm oil" (Weladji, 1982).

The partition line in the Grassfields divided many ethnic groups, chiefdoms and villages. The Dschang were separated from the Bangwa, and Mundani. The Bali Nyonga Empire that extended to parts of Mbouda and Dschang in the Bamileke Grassfields was divided. The Bamum were separated from the fraternal chiefdoms of Nso, Bambalang and Babungo. The Bawaju were separated from their grazing land (Santa) in the Bamenda Grassfields while the Nso also lost some farmlands which the partition placed under the Bamum Sultanate in the Bamileke Grassfields (Fanso, 1982).

Apart from the division of villages and ethnic groups, the partition disrupted traditional distance trade within the Grassfields. The Bamileke in the French administered Grassfields who traditionally exchanged their meat and skins

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2016 when the Anglophone struggle for separation from the state of Cameroon became, *le vivre ensemble* or the peaceful co-existence of the various linguistic and ethnic communities that make up Cameroon became a common political slogan. Many politicians against the secessionists called for *le vivre ensemble* and unity in diversity.

from animals they raised on the eastern slopes of the Bamboutous Mountain for the palm products from the Bangwa and Widikum chiefdoms were separated. The Mbouda were separated from the Babungo Iron industries where they got their hoes and cutlasses (Nuwa, 2014). Community life was also disrupted because the boundary interrupted social intercourse as many people were refused jurisdiction in matters concerning them on either side of the frontier. This was the case with the Papiah-Kum or Baba 1 people who were separated from their ancestral land Papiah in Bamoun in the Bamileke Grassfields. This new boundary was therefore a great challenge to Grassfields unity and *le vivre ensemble* that characterized the people before. It was for this reason that many petitioned the boundary as early as 1916. The most popular resistance to the partition of the Grassfields came from Njoya king of the Bamum people who in a letter to the English monarch opposed the dislocation of Grassfields unity.

Grassfields unity suffered more from the various and varying colonial policies of the new occupants of Cameroon. As early as 1919, Britain and France imposed customs and trade barriers along the borders preventing the traditional free movements of labour and goods. On the other hand, while the British preserved the chieftaincy institution through the policy of Indirect Rule, France abused the institution through its policy of assimilation and the appointment of artificial chiefs. Also harsh colonial policies in the French administered Grassfields like land expropriation, forced labour and *indigénat* were either minimal or absent in the British controlled Cameroon Grassfields (Kaptue, 1979). The Anglophone or Bamenda Grassfields therefore evolved differently from the Francophone or Bamileke Grassfields until at independence in 1961 when Cameroon was reunified. However despite the presence of custom barriers and frontier police officers the colonial era witness population movements across this artificial borders. This within the Grassfields migrations continued after reunification in 1961.

## 2.2. Migrations Across the Cameroon Grassfields

Following the defeat of Germany in Cameroon and the Anglo-French partition of the territory in 1916, the international community recognised the right of the two powers to administer their respective portions as mandate B territories of the League of Nations. After the Second World War, the British and French Cameroons became Trust Territories of the United Nations when the UN was created in 1945 to replace the League of Nations. In 1960 French Cameroon became independent as *La République du Cameroun* and in October 1961 British Cameroon gained independence by joining *La République du Cameroun*. The reunified Cameroon or the Federal Republic of Cameroon remained united and stable until recently when some Anglophone pressure groups and professional associations called for secession claiming a different cultural and political identity for the former territory of British Cameroons. While these protests were ongoing, the trends of colonial and postcolonial migrations between the Bamenda Grassfields or North West Region and the Bamileke Grassfields or West Region remained largely unaltered.

The first wave of migrations from the Bamileke Grassfields to the Bamenda Grassfields during the mandate period was caused by the dethronement of legitimate chiefs and the appointment of artificial chiefs by the French. This policy injured the cultural pride of the Bamileke and Bamum forcing the crowned princes and princesses and their followers to escape to the Anglophone Grassfields. This was the case in 1924 when the French dethroned and exiled the charismatic Sultan Ibrahim Njoya of Bamum and he died in Yaounde in 1933. This resulted in a rebellion and the migration of more than 2000 Bamum notables and their subjects under the leadership of Prince Musa Njoya to Bambalang and Bagam in the Anglophone Grassfields (Fanso)<sup>3</sup>. The revolt rapidly spread to the Bamileke chiefdoms causing such apprehension that large number of people from Dschang entered Bamenda. Since these migrants settled in the Ndop chiefdoms of Bambalang, Bamessing, Bamukumbit, Babungo and Babessi they integrated the communities fully because of cultural and languages similarities and can only be traced through their names such as Sidiki, Sobseh, Njigum, Salifou, Njoya, Musa, Seidou etc and their Islamic conservatism.

Population pressure in the Bamileke Grassfields was higher than in the Bamenda Grassfields. The Chiefdoms in the Bafoussam sub-division in particular attained figures of over 800 persons per square mile. Annual increase in population was due to polygamous marriages, early marriages and high fertility of the Bamileke women.. Many Bamileke moved to the Bamenda Grassfields with similar traditions and customs but with low population density. In fact the case of the Bawock was glaring. Although provoked by succession disputes within the Bangangte royal family, the Bawock led by Prince Nana migrated and settled in Bali Nyonga in 1905 because of succession laws and population pressure over available resources. Given the solidarity within the Grassfields and the matrimonial relationship with the Bali, Nana and his followers were welcomed in Bali and permitted to create a new dynasty. They have so far lived in peace with their host despite the 2007 boundary skirmish (Sobseh, 2011).

Forced labour or *corvée* and *prestation* were other French policies that provoked mass exodus to the Anglophone Grassfields. Again in 1924 the French administrator for the Dschang District, Ripert, reported a mass exodus of people from the borders to join their relations on the British side. He blamed this on *corvée* and he almost reduced to zero the quota of workers to be supplied by ethnic groups on the borders with the British Grassfields (Nfi, 2014a). Those who escaped to Piyin, Santa, Widikum and Batibo in the Bamenda Grassland c settled without resistance. In 1940 it was also noticed that many young men escaped Bamum for Bafanji, Bangolang and Bamessing because of forced labour. All these people created new homes in these villages and gradually integrated the communities.

Another cause of migrations from the Bamileke to the Bamenda Grassfields was the *indigénat* and police repression. The *indigénat* permitted the French colonial authorities to arrest and detain "natives" without judicial trial. The collection of taxes was also characterised by police repression and restriction of liberties. The *laissez-passer* and work permit were also instituted to regulate movements in French Cameroon. It was for these reasons that

<sup>3</sup> Fanso, Trans-frontier Relations, p44

many Bamileke and Bamum youths moved to the Bamenda Grassfields. Many of them settled as petty traders in Abakpwa Bamenda and eventually become business tycoon. This was the case with Ngoula Jean who started from petty trade to transportation and today is the proprietor of "Amour Mezam" the leading interurban transport company in the Bamenda area. It was also the case with Jean Tatsa who invested in real estate, cargo transportation and fuel distribution in Bamenda (Nfi, 2014b).

If the above factors were instrumental in the movements of people from the Bamileke Grassfields to the Bamenda Grassfields during the mandate period, the trusteeship period (1945-1960) witnessed the rebellion of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC). Created in 1948, the UPC distinguished itself as a radical nationalist party and in 1955 the party started a rebellion in French Cameroon that attracted French repressive measures. On July 13, 1955, the UPC was banned in French Cameroon. Since the Bamileke Grassfields was the principal fief of the party, many of its leaders and militants escaped to Santa, Akum, Batibo and Bamenda out of fear that they could be persecuted. In fact Santa in the Bamenda Grassfields became the second headquarters of the UPC after Kumba following the ban on the party in 1955. Amongst the UPC refugees, Jonas Powu settled in Nkwen Bamenda and was the UPC treasurer for Bamenda. He later became a business tycoon and popular founder of Guarantee Express travel Agency, International Hotel in down town Bamenda, International Soap factory in Nkwen Bamenda and several other businesses

Elsewhere, Santa was another settlement.. This was a cosmopolitan town that developed on gazing land formerly used by the chiefdom of Bawaju in the Bamileke Grassfields, French Cameroon. The founder of Santa, Boma is said to have bought this land from the chief of Babajou and this was followed by the settlement o Bamileke refugees in Santa<sup>4</sup>. The Santa Coffee Estate officially opened in December 1951 made Santa a destination for many Bamileke who stepped across the border to free themselves from the obnoxious French colonial policies and pick up jobs in the estate. After the UPC rebellion of 1955, many Bamileke people at the borders escaped to Santa. The continuous persecution of UPC militants in the Bamileke land and the "war of liberation" in French Cameroon pushed many Bamileke to cross the borders and settle in Santa, For example Sam Mofor who was a frontline militant of the Kamerun National Democratic Party and an advocate of reunification in the 1950s migrated from Dschang. The ease with which these settlers integrated the indigenous communities was unquestionable due to the similarities in the languages, customs and histories of migrations of the Piyin, Awing and Akum people of the Bamenda Grassfields and the Dschang, Bawaju and Mbouda people of the Bamileke Grassfields.

The most significant wave of economic migrants arrived in the 1960s and 1970s. They came to occupied the space left by the Igbo petty traders and business class who returned to Nigeria following the 1961 reunification between the British and French Cameroon.. Reunification ended the politico-administrative connection between the British Cameroon and Nigeria and the Igbo who had dominated the economy of the Bamenda Grassfields and who had anti campaigned reunification left the territory out of fear that their businesses were not safe in the new Cameroon. Many from Mbouda, Bafoussam and Dschang districts of the Bamileke Grassfields migrated and occupied market stalls in Bamenda town. New neighbourhoods emerged in Bamenda town settled by these "strangers" famous for land grabbing and the effective occupation of marginal lands. These Bamileke settlements included, Bamileke quarter Old Town, Abangoh and Siesia quarters<sup>5</sup>.

The economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s brought in more Bamileke people who were determined to survive through hawking and other activities of the informal sector. The Bamileke dominate activities like bread baking, hotels, roasting of pork, breakfast restaurants, transportation, petty trading, poultry, pig rearing hardware shops and drugs.. Since 1919 when the first Bamileke man called Paul Ntontu is known to have settled in Bamenda, the town has never experienced any anti Bamileke riot or disturbances as these settlers effectively integrated the Bamenda community. Not even the ethnic based violence of the 1990s provoked by the reintroduction of multiparty politics that resulted in hate speeches and anti-Grassfields declarations in the South West and Littoral regions affected the solidarity and *le vivre ensemble* in the Grassfields

Unlike the movements from the Bamileke Grassfields, movements from the Bamenda Grassfields were timid and less perceptible. This can be attributed to the British colonial policies that were more tolerant to indigenous cultural practices and institutions as opposed to the *corvée*, *indigénat*, *prestation*, *Laissez-passer* and the appointment of artificial chiefs practiced by the French. The most noticeable migrations were from the Nso Fondom to the Bamum Sultanate precisely in Foumban and Foumbot where the immigrants were involved in commercial farming. These movements were motivated by the fraternal relations between the Nso and Bamum peoples and the fertile soils of the Noun valley. The Nso people who started arriving in the Bamum Sultanate in the 1980s came principally as commercial farmers who farmed tomatoes and other perishables for the major towns in the south of Cameroon.

Apart from Nso settlers in the Bamum Sultanate, the towns of Bafoussam and Dschang also received significant number of migrants from the Bamenda Grassfields since 1990. Those who moved to Bafoussam were involved in the automobile business, urban transportation and general mechanics while the University of Dschang attracted the youths or high school graduates in search of university education<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> NAB, file, Ib/1936/7, Chia Boma and others, p.7

<sup>5</sup> Abangoh and Siesia settlements are on the slopes of the Bamendankwe escarpment and were not authorised by the Bamenda Municipal authorities

<sup>6</sup> Discussions with the President of the Bafut Community in Bafoussam John Neba, 72years

### 3. Conclusion

The 1916 partition of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon resulted in the introduction of artificial barriers between communities that were united by their ancestral origins, traditional values, customs, institutional similarities, language similarities and a common destiny. Before the partition, the states or chiefdoms created by these migrants from the North of Cameroon tolerated each other and were linked by marital and diplomatic alliances. The colonial and postcolonial boundary did not end these relations instead cross border migrations increased as people challenged the artificial border and the colonial and postcolonial policies of the new masters. The 1916 partition of Cameroon should not therefore be seen as the beginning of Cameroon history as is the case with some "Anglophone Activists". They claim that the Anglo Saxon culture introduced by the British in the South West and North West (Bamenda Grassfields) Regions of Cameroon united the two regions more than the ancestral, historic and cultural ties that existed between the peoples of the Western Grassfields. *Le vivre ensemble* survived in the Western Grassfields as members of the various communities of the area moved and settled freely across the 1916 borderline. Today, many Bamileke people who had picked up residences in Bamenda are more at home in Bamenda than in their birth places or ancestral villages in the Bamileke part of the Western Grassfields.

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