

THE PARADOX OF PARAMOUNTCY IN BAMENDA GRASSLANDS: CASE OF MBUM IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The Mbum constitute one of the largest Tikar ethnic groups in Bamenda Grasslands but remain separated and divided into autonomous fondoms with comparable socio-political organisation. Most Tikar groups that migrated alongside Mbum maintained their political status-quo and established paramountcy in the different vicinities where they settled. Unlike their Tikar compatriots of Kom, Bum, Bafut and Nso that evolved a centralised system of administration and instituted paramountcy in their regional sub-settings, the Mbum remained disintegrated with independent fondoms ruled by Fons although they were in Kimi under a single political leader. The disintegration of Mbum into political units began as they migrated in different waves to the Nkambe plateau. From the topography of Mbum land and pattern of closed settlement, it is difficult to understand why the Mbum remained in autonomous polities without a centralised traditional authority. The Warr clan leader with a paramount status was unable to institute paramountcy though he had supremacy to subjugate incoming groups in Mbum land as Warr had established settlements in the region before the arrival of the Tang and Ya groups. However, the Ya clan heads, attempted to dominate political rule during the Fulani-Chamba raids in Mbumland, but they were not equally successful. The colonial-era witnessed the creation of administrative units by German and British governments that gave clan heads the privileges to dictate policies in their respective political jurisdictions but they failed on several attempts to institute paramountcy. Through the prism of idealism and the chronological approach, this paper argues that the dogma, which defined the settlement patterns and coexistence in the region, accounted for the failure of paramountcy in Mbum land.

Keywords: *Mbum, Paramountcy, Nkambe Plateau, Fon, Fonship, Bamenda Grasslands*

INTRODUCTION

The Mbum occupy the Nkambe plateau¹ in the North West Region of Cameroon. The group is made up of three clans; the Warr, Tang and Ya which are divided into thirty-four fondoms ruled by *Fons*. The Warr clan consists of the fondoms of Binshua, Bongom, Chup, Nkambe, Kungi, Njap, Njirong, Bihnjeng, Ntumbaw, Nwangri, Mbaah, Mbot, Saah, Sop and Wat respectively. Its headquarters is at Mbot; the first place where they settled under leader Bomsa.² The Tang clan with its headquarters at Talla comprises the fondoms of Bih, Binka, Kup, Ngarum, Ntundip, Sinna, Taku, Tabenken and Talla. The Ya clan on her part consists of Konchep, Luh, Mbipgo, Ndu, Ngvulu, Njilah, Njimnkang, Nseh-Makop, Sehn, and Wowo fondoms. Its headquarters is in Ndu and the *Fon* of Ndu is the clan head. These fondoms occupy the Ndu and Nkambe sub-divisions.

The Mbum migrated from Kimi in the present-day Adamawa Region of Cameroon. Their migration history reveals that they first settled at Ntem and later moved to the Nkambe plateau in three different directions in about

¹The term Nkambe plateau has been used by many writers to refer to the Mbum, Mfumte, Mbembe, Misaje groups, and the whole of the Donga Mantung Division today. This paper limits its scope to the Nkambe Plateau proper where the Mbum land is found. Most writers especially the Germans and the British administrators referred to the Mbum ethnic group as Wimum and Nsungli. These are appellations which were used by the people of Nso in their language Lamso to describe the Mbum and most of the documents on Mbum maintained either one of the name. The Ya clan was equally called Wiya and it has been used by many writers to refer to the Ya.

² National Archives Buea, File AC 15, Intelligence Report on Nsungli Area, Bamenda Division, 1934, p.17.

the second half of the seventeenth century.³ Coincidentally these groups settled in the same geographical region. While on the plateau, they developed the same cultural, social, and political institutions. The Mbum speak and understand a common language, Limbum. However, linguistic distinctions are clear in tone, syntax, and phonology, although there may be a high degree of intelligibility in terms of lexicon among them.

The Mbum had a centralised system of administration. Each fondom had a government with power, authority, and prestige vested on the *Fon*⁴ (*Nkfu*, *Nkwi* in Limbum). He was not elected but was chosen by his father or the kingmakers and enthroned if the deceased *Fon* did not choose a successor. He had the exclusive rights on certain symbols epitomized by concrete representations such as the royal cap and stool, the ancestral cup, the hides and skins of the lion, tiger, leopard and python.⁵ He was the political and spiritual head of the fondom, chairperson of the fondom Council of State (*Btalla Chigorgor*) and took the final decisions to be implemented in the fondom.⁶ That had to do with the declaration of war, the negotiation for peace, as he was the holder of the highest authority and decision making in the Council of State.⁷

As a spiritual head, the *Fon* supervised all the important rituals that were made to the ancestors to request their blessings especially when there was an impending disaster in the land. After his enthronement, he was perceived as an extraordinary human being who was infallible in all his undertakings and was guided by the gods and ancestors of the land.⁸ The *Fon* was to be venerated by all irrespective of their background. Although the clan head was considered as the overseer of the clan, he did not interfere directly in the government of any fondom. The attributes and privileges of *Fonship* were factors that could warrant any *Fon* to waged war against others and subjugate them in order to enjoy these power rights alone. However, no *Fon* wanted to relinquish his powers to another and to assume the position of a sub chief or lesser *Fon*.

All Mbum fondoms shared the same administrative organisation but did not have a central government like in Nso, Bafut and Kom but had clan leaders. The clan leaders did not have a direct influence over the fondoms under their jurisdiction. Their Fons ruled the fondoms independently. The issue of paramountcy was absent among the Mbum from the time of their early settlement in Nkambe. This is probably because they moved separately into the plateau and no ruler was interested in imposing his authority over the others be it for power tussle as no potential economic and natural resource was found in the plateau which could trigger the struggle for paramountcy among them. Furthermore, the Warr leader being the first to settle on the plateau did not equally impose his leadership on the groups that followed them.

Bomsa the first Warr ruler merely gave land to the incoming Tang and Ya groups and allowed them to organised themselves alongside Warr fondoms.⁹ He equally permitted them to evolved independent fondoms and royal institutions. It was for these reasons that none of them was willing to surrender their power to any central authority since they wielded power and control over their citizens. The subsequent *Fons* who succeeded him were very liberal and permitted their brothers who disputed their enthronement to establish different autonomous fondoms. It was the tendency among fondoms of Bamenda Grasslands that the *Fons* consolidated their positions by imposing their authority over groups that came to settle beside them. This was not the case with Mbombo and

³ The real date that the Mbum settled on the Nkambe plateau is not known. The people came in three different groups. Many writers claimed that by 1600, they were already in the Nkambe plateau. What is certain is that by the time the first Chamba raid was directed towards them in c.1780, the last group of the Mbum had already settled on the Nkambe plateau.

⁴S. A. K. Ngwanyi, "The Wimum Elites and the Nfuh Traditional Institution," Maitrise Dissertation in Sociology, The University of Yaounde, 1987. p.14. The term *fon* refers to a traditional ruler who governs a defined polity. In the Bamenda Grasslands, the traditional rulers are variously known as fon, chief, or king.

⁵ Samuel Ngeh Tamfu, Politician, interviewed, Nkambe, 2011; Fon Mbunwe II, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Mbot, 2011.

⁶S. T. Ngege, "Kinship, Royal Burial and Tombs in Wimum Land of Cameroon" in Les Cahiers d'Histoire et Archeologie De l'Universite Omar Bongo, Faculte des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, No. 3, juin 2001-juin 2002, p.78. Fondom is a term which is used to describe the political and administrative unit or jurisdiction that is governed by the Fon. This area can also be referred to as chieftain, village, or chiefdom as they are commonly known in the Bamenda Grasslands.

⁷ W. T. T. Samah, "Chiefs (Traditional Rulers) in Anglophone Cameroon and Modern Governance 1961-2000," PhD Thesis in History, The University of Yaounde I, 2006, p.75.

⁸ S. T. Ngege, "Kinship, Royal Burial and Tombs in Wimum Land of Cameroon" in Les Cahiers d'Histoire et Archeologie De l'Universite Omar Bongo, Faculte des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, No. 3, juin 2001-juin 2002, p.78.

⁹ Fon Mbunwe II, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Mbot, 2011.

Yewoh who succeeded their predecessors. They did not impose their authority over any group not to establish their fondoms.¹⁰ They instead permitted them to create their royalties and fondoms. Consequently, it made it difficult for subsequent clan heads to impose their authority and supremacy over them though some attempts were made by the Ya.

THE QUEST FOR PARAMOUNTCY BEFORE 1900

During the pre-colonial period, the Ya clan heads made attempts to establish paramountcy in Mbum land. This was evident during the periods of Chamba and Fulani raids on the Mbum from c.1780 to 1890. *Fon* Nonebit of Ndu had succeeded in wielding power and control over Wowo, Mbipgo, and all Ya fondoms. Amid the Chamba attacks, the Warr and their collaborators Tang resisted Chamba aggression for decades without assistance from the Ya clan.¹¹ The Ya were also attacked by the Chamba but they did not want to collaborate with the Warr and the Tang to fight against the invaders. The Ya leader from the beginning of their settlement on Nkambe plateau had wanted to control and dominated the Warr and Tang, clans. When the Ya migrated into the Nkambe plateau, the waged a war against the Warr to obtained land and imposed their authority over them as they did not want to respect Warr customs of obtaining land.¹² Nevertheless, they were defeated in this war. The Ya saw the Chamba attacks as an opportunity to collaborate with them to achieve their ambitions. Taking cognisance of this, the Warr and Tang allied and launched counter-attacks on Chamba raiders. The ambition of Ya clan was to collaborate and support the Chamba raiders in destabilising the Warr and Tang groups so that in return they could impose their supremacy over them.¹³ This manifested itself when the Fulani attacked the territory in the nineteenth century following their raids of the plateau.

The Chamba raids were proceeded by Fulanis raids. The terror caused by Fulani raiders in Ntem, Rom, and Nsop led to the migration of some Mbum people to Bamum and Nso communities.¹⁴ This created panic among the people of Ndu who were afraid to be treated in the same manner as those of Nsop, Ntem, and Mbaw. The captives who resisted the Fulani raiders had their hands amputated with their ears and noses cut off.¹⁵ In Ndu, *Fon* Mforambo decided to prevent the Fulani raiders from attacking his people by negotiating a peace agreement with them. He convinced his people and those of neighbouring fondoms like Njilah that the Fulani were his friends and would not harass them if they collaborated and supplied them with captives.¹⁶ According to this agreement, Fulani raiders were to supply the Ya with war weapons and they were not to be taken into slavery, but in return, they were to supply enough slaves to the raiders. The slaves were to be captives from the Warr and Tang fondoms who were to be raided and not from the Ya clan. *Fon* Mforambo negotiated the agreement with Fulani raiders because he wanted to impose his authority over all the people in the area and not only to protect them from the inhuman treatment administered by Fulani raiders on captured groups.¹⁷

Following the agreement, the Ya sought the assistance of Ntem and started raiding the region. They further targeted Nsop, Sinna, Ntumbaw and Njirong fondoms that were located between Ntem and the Ya capital at Mbandfung. The Ya together with Fulani raiders gained enormous victory in ransacking these fondoms and several women and children were carried to Yola as slaves.¹⁸ The prime motive of *Fon* Mforambo was to subjugate all the fondoms and imposed his authority over them. However, when Nsop, Sinna, and Ntumbaw fondoms were ransacked, nothing was done to consolidate his authority over them even as most of the people migrated to Bamum and Nso. If *Fon* Mforambo had imposed his authority in that area, he might have established paramountcy in the Ya region as the *Fons* of Bafut and Kom did with their defeated groups.¹⁹ The Warr and Tang warriors rallied to fight against their enemy under Nkwi Namour of Bihnjeng, the commander of the *nful* composed of fighting warriors

¹⁰ Robert Weyeh, Trader, interviewed, Binka, 2010.

¹¹ Fon Mbunwe II, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Mbot, 2011.

¹² M.D.W. Jeffreys, *The Wiya Tribe*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1963, pp.20-21.

¹³ Fai Ngahkubu Yingang, Sub-chief, interviewed, Sop, 2012.

¹⁴ M.D.W. Jeffreys, *The Wiya Tribe*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1963, p. 28.

¹⁵ National Archives Buea, File AC 13, Assessment Report on Nsungli clans, 1924, p. 6.

¹⁶ M.D.W. Jeffreys, *The Wiya Tribe*, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1963, p. 28.

¹⁷ Stephen Njong Tafon. Teacher, interviewed, Nkambe, 2012.

¹⁸ *Fon* Nformi Nfor I, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Ndu, 2012.

¹⁹ P. N. Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy A Study of the Inter- Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields North West Province of Cameroon*, Yaounde, Publication of the Department of Sociology, 1986, p. 25; see M. L. Niba, "The Bafut and the Germans, 1889-1907," in B. Chem-Langhëë and V. G. Fanso (eds.), *Nso and its Neighbours : Readings in Social History*, Amherst, Massachussets, 1996, p. 87.

from Warr and Tang clan fondoms.²⁰ The common military strategy and united forces of the two clans prevented *Fon* Mforambo from extending his authority over the area, which hindered his ambition of establishing paramountcy over them.

The surrendering of Wowo, Mbipgo, Njilah, Sehn, and not their royalty under *Fon* Mforambo for protect and harassment at the hands of the Fulani made Mforambo to enjoy a form of hegemony over the people. This allowed his successor Mfu to continue imposing his authority over them during his reign from ca.1890 to 1925. He claimed that these *Fons* had surrendered their political power and leadership to his predecessor during the period of Fulani raids in exchange for protection. This situation was complimented by the fact that these *Fons* channelled their tributaries to the Fulani through the *Fon* of Ndu. The *Fon* took advantage of this privilege to impose his authority on them. The *Fons* resisted this position throughout the German and British colonial periods that prevented the ambitions of *Fon* Mfu from instituting paramountcy in the region.

The situation among Warr and Tang clans during the Fulani and Chamba periods presented an atmosphere whereby Nkwi Namour of Bihnjeng, the war leader could have also attempted to institute paramountcy in Mbum land. The defeat of Ya-Fulani alliance created an opportunity for him to have used his position as the victor to impose his authority over the defeated groups, as it was the case among fondoms of Bamenda Grasslands. The interest of Nkwi Namour at the time was to protect Warr and Tang clans and to fight against foreign invasion. During the colonial period, the administrative structures and composition of Native Authorities gave opportunities to some traditional rulers in Mbum land to establish a paramount rule.

THE PARADIGMS OF PARAMOUNTCY DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

In 1902, the Germans forced *Fon* Tohnji of Mbot to negotiate an agreement with them to facilitate their administration in Mbum land. According to the terms of this agreement, he was to collect taxes from the people, supply human labour for the German plantations in the south, the construction of the German station, and the digging of public roads.²¹ The agreement was reached only with Tohnji, because he was considered by the Germans as the supreme *Fon* of Mbum. He was regarded as the paramount *Fon* because the *Fon* of Chup took the Germans to Mbot when they came in contact with him from Bum. The *Fon* of Chup considered that of Mbot as his senior because he was the clan head and had to take the Germans to him. The agreement between the Germans and *Fon* Tohnji gave the Germans sovereignty in the northern part of Mbum land for the administration of the region.²²

When the Germans succeeded in getting a grip of the Mbum, they implemented the policy of Divide and Rule to rule them successfully. The Germans also collaborated with *Fon* Mfu to rule the southern part of Mbum which was the Ndu area that made up all the fondoms of the present day Ndu sub-division apart from Ngarum, Ntundip and Taku.²³ *Fon* Tohnji, on his part, was to rule the northern part of Mbum which composed most of the fondoms in the present Nkambe sub-division. *Fons* Mfu and Tohnji were chosen and made the central authorities to rule the different fondoms in Mbum land. No criteria were used by the Germans in appointing these *Fons* as their administrative assistants, apart from the fact that *Fon* Tohnji was recognised as the clan head and taking into consideration the peace agreement he had negotiated with the Germans in 1902.²⁴ *Fon* Mfu, on his part, was appointed simply because he was the clan head and had claimed to wield power over Ya fondoms during the Fulani raids.

The Germans recognised the *Fons* of Mbot and Ndu as the supreme rulers of the Mbum, while the *Fons* of Nsop, Tabenken, and Ngarum were appointed to assist them. This was an endeavour to create paramount *Fons* in Mbum land as all the fondoms of the administrative units were placed under their control. The support of the local police made the appointed *Fons* to assumed supreme rule over the other fondoms that were under their control.²⁵ The new arrangement by the Germans caused strained relations between the fondoms throughout German rule in Mbum land as there was no paramount *Fon* in terms of governing powers. Although the clan heads were regarded as paramount leaders, they did not influence the *Fons* of their clans. They were simply ceremonial leaders as they

²⁰ J. T. K. Mangoh, "The Wimbun of the North West Province of Cameroon c. 1700-1961," B.A Dissertation in History, University of Ilorin, 1986 p. 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²² *Fon* Mbunwe II, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Mbot, 2011.

²³ W. N. Ali, "The Wimbun of the North Western Grassfields of Cameroon : A Case Study of the Impact of Colonial Rule 1902-1961," Maitrise Dissertation in History, The University of Yaounde, 1991, p.18.

²⁴ Robert Weyeih, Trader, interviewed, Binka, 2010.

²⁵ National Archives Buea, File AC 13, Assessment Report on Nsungli clans, 1924, pp.10-13.

could not veto the decisions of any *Fon* in Mbum land. Following the new German arrangement, ironically the *Fon* of Talla who was the Tang clan head was not chosen by the Germans as one of their protégé. The fact that the Germans did not chose the Tang clan head but the *Fons* of Tabenken, Ngarum, and Nsop who were not clan heads themselves was the root cause of conflict amongst the *Fons* which contributed to the failure of any attempt by the Germans to institute paramountcy in Mbum land.²⁶ This was the exclusive reason why the *Fons* who were placed under the German central authorities resisted their rule over them.

In Ndu area, the fondoms of Mbipgo, Njimnkang, Sehn, Wowo, and Njilah resisted the authority of *Fons* Mfu and Nformi over them. The problem of leadership which started at the end of Fulani raids persisted during the German rule. The fondoms of Njimnkang, Sehn, and Njilah settled on land that was allocated by Ndu to them, while those of Mbipgo and Wowo were of the Tang group that decided to be under the leadership of Ndu for protection during the Fulani raids.²⁷ Their *Fons* by tradition were paying tributes to that of Ndu as the tradition demanded and when the Ya group were defeated by Fulani, they had to continue with the payment of compulsory tributes especially in slaves through the *Fon* of Ndu to the Fulanis in Banyo. *Fon* Mforambo was chosen as the person to be collecting the tributes because he was the leader of the Ya that the Fulani had allied with them.²⁸ Since they were paying tributes to him, he considered that those *Fons* who were performing these duties as sub-chiefs under his control.

The status quos attributed to the contesting *Fons* was not accepted by them as they claimed autonomy from the *Fon* of Ndu. Before the coming of the Germans, *Fon* Mfu had been struggling to create a supremacy over the fondoms that were under his clan.²⁹ When the Germans appointed him as their central authority in the area, he used this position in an attempt to achieve his ambitions. *Fon* Mfu faced a lot of opposition and resistance from the *Fons* of Mbipgo, Wowo, Sehn, Njimnkang, and Njilah who never accepted that they were his subordinates. Paramountcy could not be successively implemented in Ya clan due to these resistances although the Germans had made *Fon* Mfu their supreme ruler. The situation in Ndu was very prominent as compared to other areas where fondoms were placed under the authority of other *Fons*.

The *Fon* of Tabenken ruled the fondoms of Bih, Konchep, Taku, and Kup, while that of Ngarum ruled those of Ntundip and Talla, and the *Fon* of Sop was given charge of Sehn, Ngvulu and, Sinna.³⁰ Other fondoms such as Wat, Mbaah, Njap, Binshua, Nkambe, Kungi, and Saah were ruled directly from Mbot by *Fon* Tohnji. The situation that prevailed in Warr clan changed in April 1906 when Tokob was appointed by German administration to replaced Tohnji as a paramount ruler.³¹ When *Fon* Tohnji died, the Germans did not think of choosing another ruler from a different fondom to rule that part of the region. Instead, they decided to maintain the *Fon* of Mbot as their central authority in the area.

The Germans through their administrative organisation attempted to institute paramountcy in Mbum that lasted during their rule. The German protégés enjoyed privileges associated with paramountcy as they imposed their authority over their compatriots in the collection of taxes. The contested traditional rulers were not satisfied with these arrangements and constantly opposed the German protégés. They opposed the supreme status ascribed to protégés which made it difficult for the British to maintain all of them when they took over from the Germans in 1916. The disfavoured *Fons* clamoured for the restoration of their usurped political powers. E.G. Hawkesworth, the first Assessing British Officer in Mbum land described the situation as:

*During the interval between the departure of the Germans and the formation of an English civil administration, Nsungli [Mbum] lapsed into a state amounting almost to anarchy. The hamlet heads who had suffered at the hands of the Germans appointed chiefs [Fons], hastened to assert their independence, heads of quarters seized the opportunity to break away from their village [fondom] and travelling became a very dangerous venture.*³²

Cognizance of the state of affairs among the Mbum, the British attempted to resolve the situation in the whole of Bamenda Grasslands, as not only the Mbum were affected. In 1916, G. S. Podevin, the British District Officer invited all the traditional rulers of the Grasslands to Bamenda to get clarifications about their traditional status. Not all the traditional rulers attended the meeting but he succeeded in obtaining information about the principal *Fons* of

²⁶ Samuel Ngeh Tamfu, Politician, interviewed, Nkambe, 2011.

²⁷ *Fon* Nformi Nfor I, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Ndu, 2012.

²⁸ *Fon* Alfred Nfor, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Sehn, 2012.

²⁹ Fai Ngahkubu Yingang, Sub-Chief, interviewed, Sop, 2012.

³⁰ National Archives Buea, File AC 13, Assessment Report on Nsungli Clans, 1924, pp. 9-10.

³¹ *Fon* Mbunwe II, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Mbot, 2011.

³² National Archives Buea, File AC 13, Assessment Report on Nsungli Clans, 1924, p.11.

the region with the support of some influential and powerful *Fons* of Bamenda Grasslands.³³ Many Mbum *Fons* were recognised by the British as autonomous traditional rulers with none having the status of a paramount ruler. This recognition was done pending the classification of the *Fons*. By 1924, the British classified *Fon* and chiefs of Southern Cameroons into different categories and were ascribed to the titles of Native Authorities. The criteria for this classification were based on studies that were carried out and information on the different ethnic groups, their political structures, distribution, customary laws, and land tenure provided by the District Officers and their assistants who came up with their categorisation of *Fons*.

*In the centralised societies of the Bamenda Grasslands, the first category comprised paramount Fons who ruled over large areas and this included the Fons of Nso, Kom, Bali Nyonga, Bafut, and Bum. The second category was made up of those who obtained their position through colonial government recognition. These were mostly chiefs of the forest region who gained respect from colonial administrators because of their educational attainments and the third category was comprised of the numerous sub-chiefs or lesser Fons and prominent village heads especially of the Grasslands.*³⁴

Those acknowledged as paramount rulers were *Fons* who wielded authority over a large territory with a considerable population. This did not necessarily mean that they were popular though they ruled over a large territory. The question of paramountcy became more complicated as in certain areas; there were no paramount rulers but ethnic groups of different sizes which comprised several fondoms with hereditary rulers.³⁵ The rulers who ruled over a vast territory but were not popular did not fall under the category of first-class rulers; which made the British classification to be bias.³⁶ This was the case in Mbum land where the *Fons* of Mbot and Ndu were qualified to be classified as paramount rulers. More still, some of the rulers that were not recognised by the Germans were neglected by the British as traditional rulers and were not classified. The issue of colonial recognition and education further complicated the classification of traditional rulers. Those rulers who fell under the first category were not necessarily educated, while a majority of those in the second were either educated or had been recognised by the German administration as paramount rulers. Judging from the British criteria, some Mbum *Fons* could have been classified as paramount. The non-recognition of any Mbum *Fon* by the British was probably a strategy to resolve the political strife that reigned among them.

The British graded the *Fons* and gazetted their colonial appointment. In Mbum land, there was no paramountcy according to the British government like in Nso, Kom, and Bum. It was due to the absence of a single *Fon* that ruled the Mbum despite their unique culture and customs.³⁷ To resolve this, the British appointed heads of the three clans as their paramount *Fons* with the belief that they had considerable influence over the fondoms under their clans. The British needed a traditional ruler in the area to act as a paramount to wield power and authority over the people. Nevertheless, this became difficult as no single ruler could successfully rule the Mbum as they were made up of three clans. When the Mbum Native Authority Area Court was created in 1924, the clan heads acted as co-presidents of the structure.³⁸ However, the British further made them sole presidents of the Native Authority Courts when the Mbum Native Authority was reorganised in 1935 to reflect the three clans. *Fons* Nformi of Ndu, Tokob and Mbunwe of Mbot used these positions as Native Authorities and clan heads in attempts to imposed paramountcy in their clans as they enjoyed the privileges of power. However, they were not successful as their authorities were always challenged by their compatriots in different fondoms who had equal status as *Fons*. This made the institution of paramountcy in Mbum to be difficult as the government of Cameroon took measures to resolve such disputes arising from the positions held by the clan heads.

GOVERNMENT STRATEGY TO RESOLVE THE QUEST FOR PARAMOUNTCY

In 1977, the government decided to reclassify all traditional rulers in Cameroon according to Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July. This was a direct follow up of the British classifications with modifications. Article 2 of the Decree set out

³³ P. Bungfang, "Inter-Chiefdom Conflicts in the North West Province of Cameroon from 1889-1999: Colonial and Postcolonial influences," Master Dissertation in History, The University of Yaounde I, 2000, p. 29.

³⁴ E. M. Chiabi, "Chieftaincy: Traditional Rulers in Politics" in *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences*, Vol. VI, N° 1 and 2, 1990, University of Yaounde, p.29.

³⁵ B. Chem-Langhee, "The Origin of The Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs" in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 ,1983, p. 653.

³⁶ *Fon* Nformi Nfor I, Traditional Ruler, interviewed, Ndu, 2012.

³⁷ *Fon* Benchep Nfor Adamu, Traditional ruler, interviewed, Binka, 2012.

³⁸ National Archives Buea, File cb1922/1, Annual Report Bamenda Division, 1922, p. 26.

a threefold classification of chiefs. First Degree Chiefs were to be those with two Second Degree Chiefs under their jurisdiction and within the territorial limits of a divisional unit.³⁹ Second Degree Chiefs had to have the allegiance of two Third Degree Chiefs and their jurisdiction could not be larger than a sub-division. The jurisdiction of Third Degree Chiefs was limited to a village or a 'quarter' in a rural or urban area. Furthermore, Article 4 gave discretionary powers to the civil administrative authority in the division. He was to recommend any *Fon* for classification as first, second, or third degree based on the concepts of demographic and economic importance. Article 20 stipulated that recognized traditional rulers were to act as auxiliaries of government administration. In this role, they had to serve as intermediaries between the administration and the people, help administrative authorities in the execution of government directives and recover state taxes within their domains.⁴⁰ This decree did not create a first-class or paramount *Fon* in Mbum land as all the *Fons* were classified as either second or third class. Even *Fons* that were educated and wielded power over a large population like the *Fons* of Mbot, Ndu, and Tabenken were recognised as second class. This was a resounding victory to the less educated and populated fondoms as their *Fons* had equal status with the more populated ones.

CONCLUSION

The issue of paramountcy in Mbum land has dominated political affairs among traditional rulers. It was difficult for a single ruler to rule Mbum since they migrated and settled in the Nkambe plateau in three different groups with their respective leaders. No single ruler emerged amongst them who could wield power and authority over the three clans. The attempts made by *Fons* Mforambo and Mfu of Ndu during the era of Fulani raids were not successful. The different *Fons* enjoyed the privileges ascribed to fonship and none of them was willing to surrender these privileges to another who was of equal status. Nevertheless, the German and British governments attempted to institute paramountcy in Mbum land. They recognised the *Fons* of Mbot, Ndu, and later that of Talla paramount in their exclusive rights as clan heads. The unrecognised and unclassified *Fons* resisted every attempt made by the clan heads in imposing their authority on them throughout the colonial period. This hindered the institution of paramountcy in Mbum land. During the post-independence period, the issue of a paramount *Fon* was not the pre-occupation of the government. The 1977 Decree on traditional rulers in Cameroon did not classify any Mbum *Fon* as a first-class (paramount) ruler. This marks an end to the quest by any Mbum *Fon* clamouring for a paramount status as the level of education or population size is not respected.

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