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**Engaging Traditional Authorities in the Political Process: Traditional
Rulers and Decentralisation in Cameroon**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of traditional authorities in the political process with focus on decentralisation in Cameroon. Over the years, the role and place of traditional chieftaincy has constantly evolved. As custodian of customs and traditions, traditional authorities also known as chiefs, traditional rulers, *Fons* or *Fos* have been involved in several different ways in the political process. With colonisation, they played a collaborative role which, serving as relay between the local population and the foreign administration and in the modern state they still engage in the political process as auxiliaries of the central administration.

Material and Methods: The methodology consists of document analysis and observation. I identify the legal framework of decentralisation, implemented by Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996, and show how the status of traditional authorities has

been enhanced with an increase visibility in the decentralised local authority setting combined with their role as auxiliary to the administration.

Findings: Findings reveal that bringing in traditional rulers in the decentralisation process does not only enhance their power but also brings them in conflict with other local authorities and their 'subjects' particularly when they engage in partisan politics.

Implication to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends a genuine collaboration and understanding between traditional authorities and other local stakeholders if the local development goal through decentralisation must be achieved.

Keywords: *Traditional Authorities, Colonisation, Decentralisation, Local Authority, Auxiliary*

INTRODUCTION

In Cameroon, just as in Africa, traditional authorities used to enjoy a certain prestige because of their autonomy. As custodians of customs and traditions, they were both spiritual and temporal leaders and had all the powers: executive, legislative and judicial. Yet, with the advent of colonisation, followed a process of 'emasculatation' of traditional leaders that reduced them to mere servants. This undermining status was renewed by the post-colonial State, which in turn maintained them as auxiliaries to the administration, thereby taking away most of their powers. A close examination of the established traditional institutions and their rulers during the precolonial era reveals that in the task of governance, the traditional rulers had to shape appropriate policies, order priorities and generate revenue to meet the needs of their communities in the exercise of these functions. However, under the postcolonial state central executive dominance minimised this role. Although decentralisation became an imperative involving traditional rulers, the politicisation of the process and the partisan engagement of traditional rulers have brought them in conflict with their 'subjects' and this represents a critical challenge to effective local development in Cameroon.

Within the context of the on-going decentralisation process, and given the important role played by the latter among the populations, who remain very closely knit after all, the State has chosen to restore 'a certain power' and thus give a certain exposure to traditional authorities.

This article sets out to analyse and describe the decline in power, credit and prestige of traditional authorities over the years (I) in order to understand and better appreciate the role and status reserved to them within the context of decentralisation, as well as drawbacks of their politicisation (II). To achieve this, we shall examine the status and role of traditional authorities before decentralisation, i.e. in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, and then look at the status reserved to them in the context of decentralisation, while highlighting its benefits and drawbacks.

Role and Attributes of Traditional Rulers Prior to Modern Decentralisation

Although the history of decentralisation in Cameroon dates back before independence, it is obvious that for a long time before colonisation, the organisation of indigenous communities depended on the authority of traditional leaders. They were inevitable and not only did they welcome colonisers on their arrival, but also helped them to establish their power. From then on, the role and status of traditional authorities have evolved.

Traditional Rulers in the Pre-Colonial Era

In the pre-colonial era, traditional rulers were very powerful. As absolute leaders, they played a double role in most communities. Thus, as both spiritual and temporal chiefs, they were custodians of ancestral customs that they had to protect and perpetuate in order to ensure their continuity on the one hand, and to ensure the guidance of their populations on the other. It was at this point that their authority was substantial, especially as they represented their communities, defended their territory, took decisions and settled disputes. Yet, it should be mentioned that traditional authorities did not rule alone. The Chief was certainly at the head of the hierarchy, and below him were princes, princesses and assistants who formed the Chief's court, and then notables who took part in the decision-making process. Power was exercised by a panel of elders. Traditional authorities had broad powers and above all attributions

concerning different measures to be taken by the chief within the context of his administrative, social and economic powers after his enthronement and in accordance with custom.

Traditional Rulers in the Colonial Era

Talking about this period, a distinction should be made between the German era (1884-1916) and the French/British one (1916-1960). In any case, the first consequence of the establishment of colonial power was the loss of sovereignty of local chiefs, whether they transferred it voluntarily or were forced by the military power of the coloniser. Submission to colonial power at the same time took away their ability to decide on their own matters (J. Gomsu, 1982: p.136). They were henceforth in a situation of dependence, despite some advantageous aspects that gave them a certain prestige.

Changes in the German Era (1884-1916)

Under the German coloniser, the power and prestige of traditional authorities were seriously affected. The new system of chieftaincy established a political, economic and cultural dependence of the colonised people. The various chiefs acted more as agents of the new power than representatives and defenders of their people. This ambiguous and contradictory role marked the loss of sovereignty of traditional authorities.

Yet, this emasculation of chiefs through the role of auxiliary to the administration granted them a certain prestige, but also brought problems. Indeed, after the signing of the German-Douala treaty on 12 July 1884, Germans had to take control of the new territory, i.e. conquer, pacify and administer it. To achieve this, it was necessary to rely on a local administration, something that Chancellor Bismarck did not envisage at the outset. He feared the cost of the colonial venture as well as the opposition from Social Democrats in the Reichstag and within the majority itself (J. Gomsu, 1982: p.137)¹. For Bismarck, the colonial venture had to be entrusted to the traders without whom the Reich would not be engaged in colonisation². Moreover, he did not initially define a clear concept of administration and only made his colonial programme known in a speech in the Reichstag on 26 June 1884. According to him, the colonial venture was to be entrusted to the trade sector, which somehow was at its origin. However, given the reluctance of traders and after the uprising of a part of the Douala people in December 1884, Berlin decided to set up an administration in Cameroon with its entire bureaucratic structure. Max Buchner, the acting Reich Commissioner in Cameroon, was then replaced by Baron Von Soden, as first governor. However, it was agreed that colonies themselves had to contribute to the financing of the administration and that they had to operate with a small number of colonisers. To achieve this, Germany, just as other colonial masters, could not do without local chiefs.

In 1910, chiefs of six constituencies unanimously emphasised the fact that they were indispensable to the administration. It is obvious that before that period, chiefs were already serving the administration. The concern of colonisers was the systematic and more rational use of the organisation of the indigenous populations. Therefore, Germany decided to involve traditional authorities in the colonial administration. Thus, chiefs became 'intermediaries'

¹ Projects requiring financial commitment from the government were not always successful.

² In the 19th century, German authorities did not seem interested in colonisation. The late commitment of the Reich to the colonial venture in the late 19th century was the result of pressure from business circles, especially traders from Hamburg and Bremen.

between the colonial power and the colonised people, as colonisers could no longer make their voices heard at a lower level of decision-making.

Willy-nilly, chiefs had become agents of colonial imperialism. Their position as intermediaries between the colonial power and the population brought a fundamental and a privileged change in their duties. If until the arrival of the coloniser they only represented their communities, this was no longer the case. They were now answerable to the new masters of the country. This was a delicate situation, as they had a duty of loyalty to the coloniser to whom they were henceforth subjected and could no longer rely on the community which they claimed to be legitimate representatives. This was not a very comfortable situation, but a determining and quite privileged one.

The use of chiefs as intermediaries was necessary and was considered the quickest and most efficient way to contact the colonised populations (Lombard, 1967:128). Despite their loss of sovereignty, the prestige of the traditional authority function resided in roles entrusted to them: tax collection, the issue of some documents for legal purposes, the wearing of attributes and/or insignia (canes, caps, flags, safe-conducts, uniforms), the chief's booklet³, the power and legitimacy to receive and transmit government instructions and enforce them through the police power bestowed on them, and the power to render justice (in a limited way). These reforms indeed affected lives of populations. The latter no longer perceived the chief as one of theirs, a true defender and protector, but sometimes as a traitor, the one by whom their torment increased, despite their attachment to the institution he incarnates. This was an ambiguous and embarrassing situation for the chief, who out of his will nevertheless played the role of collaborator while trying to keep a hint of credit from his people (Nach Mback, 2000: 93). Would these changes in the German era differ from the arrival of the French?

Realities of the French Era (1916-1960)

In Cameroon, the French era began with the Franco-British Agreement of 4 March 1916. This was ratified by the Peace Treaty of 28 June 1919 and reinforced by the Declaration of 10 July of the same year. It was then that France received a mandate from the League of Nations to manage part of the Cameroonian territory. Between 1916 and 1960, the date of independence, the French colonial power pursued the policy of emasculation of traditional chiefs. The sovereignty of the latter, lost under the German coloniser, was never restored. On the contrary, chiefs were to suffer an almost identical fate.

Prestige of Traditional Rulers under French Colonisation

Talking about the prestige of traditional authorities consists in showing the brilliance and magnificence of their function. Features of this magnificence were, indeed, the prestige resulting from the collaboration and the stability of traditional power.

After the departure of Germans from Cameroon, the French, the new colonial masters, understood that in order to establish their authority with an extremely small staff in the colony, they needed complicities, whether or not desired by the population (Gomsu, 1992: 9). As the historian Raymond Ebale points it out, collaboration between French colonial authorities and local chiefs took place at the political-administrative, socio-economic and cultural levels

³ It contained important information for the coloniser such as the name of the chief, the distance of his village from the nearest administrative post, and official food prices.

(Ebale, 2011: 201). France benefited from the use of local chiefs as auxiliaries to the administration.

It made significant financial savings. The use of such a personnel was cheap as compared to a French elite that was difficult to pay, especially if they were coming from the metropolis (Etoa, 1998:6). France knew that by using 'indigenous chiefs' it was possible to control them tightly to avoid any challenge to the supremacy at the head of the central command (Abwa, 1994: 1034). It then devised a strategy to push its desires through well-chosen and well-educated political allies. This was known as indigenous policy, with the task to select submissive chiefs who could bring about a change of mentality (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1985, p.115).

Traditional authorities derived a certain privilege from this collaboration with the coloniser. This proximity fostered contacts and interactions in which chiefs were given a certain amount of recognition, unlike other sons of the village. Yet, it should be mentioned that the magnificence of chiefs was not only due to this. The function of traditional leader also enabled them to collect taxes⁴. Taxes, and forced labour, were instituted by Germans with a clear objective to force colonised people to invest their strength in work of public or private interest (Temgoua, 2011, 171). Its general implementation throughout the country was a decision by German authorities in 1908 (Emog, 1987-1988: 126)⁵.

Just as its German predecessors, France found the tax a significant source of revenue. Thus, in line with its policy of exploiting occupied territories, the colonial administration preferred to collect from local resources, a tax for the economy of the metropolis that was generally also used for the functioning needs of the administration of the colony. So, to achieve their goals, the colonial administration, with the collaboration of traditional authorities, used any necessary approach that could be beneficial to them. However, the prestige here lies in the fact that acting as an intermediary for the 'white man' to collect taxes was exceptional. It was a trust that was not placed on any indigenous person (Etoa, 1998): 8).

Besides the honour of collecting taxes, there was a pride of receiving a commission equal to the amount collected from populations. It was thus a significant source of income for chiefs despite efforts that the task required. The chief was also given a dress code to differentiate them from the rest of the population.

This policy of financial and social promotion was aimed at raising the living standard and the status of chiefs to preserve the prestige that had to go with their position. And it is here that comes in another aspect of magnificence. That is stability and longevity in power. Indeed, loyalty to the coloniser brought some advantages such as the sympathy of the colonial administration, which was assured on the one hand of the frank collaboration, and chiefs could in turn benefit from trust and some material and security favours to keep them in office (Etoa, 1998): 8). This was the case of Charles Atangana, who strongly supported Commissioner Paul Marchand, despite many complaints against the latter by the populations of Yaounde and its surroundings (Abwa, 1994: 1042). Also, in case of any threat or revolt, the loyal chief could count on the material and unconditional support of the administration. This can be illustrated by privileges granted to Chief Machia in Bafia in the Mbam, following the strong support he

⁴ In the French Empire, taxation had been instituted by General Gallieni, namely the personal or capitation tax. ⁵ See Decree of 20 October 1908. This tax was originally introduced only in the city of Douala by decree of 1 July 1903.

gave to the French to quell various resistances to French penetration. For this, he received substantial support from France, which not only allowed him to remain on the throne, but above all to engage in many abuses⁵ (Emog, 1988, 228). It is thus obvious that collaboration was not only beneficial. It allowed loyal chiefs to commit certain abuses because of their protection, which went against the nationalist spirit of some Cameroonians who castigated the imperial policy led by France. Yet, it should be mentioned that the reinforcement of the influence of this function followed the adoption of the decree of 4 February 1933 fixing the status of 'indigenous chiefs', which in essence, prescribed some respect for traditional authorities in Cameroon⁶.

In short, despite changes brought about by the French coloniser, it should be mentioned, as Robert Kpwang points it out, that traditional authorities remain 'mere auxiliaries to the administration'. Despite the prestige of the function, it is important to note that its holders were not always fulfilled under French colonisation and thus faced some difficulties.

Challenges of Traditional Rulers under French Colonisation

After settling down in Cameroon, France found a somewhat peculiar local organisation. In fact, Germany had established a mixed mode of administration⁷. Since they could not exercise direct authority over the population, as their German predecessors, the French had integrated traditional authorities into their mission of administering and exploiting the wealth of the vast territory, but changed their appellations⁸. *Oberhautplingen* (paramount chiefs) and *hautplingen* (village heads) of yesterday became indigenous chiefs. The aim was to wipe out traces of the German heritage, to change the way people thought, acted and felt.

Thus, from 1918, a process of reforming 'indigenous commands' was set up with a clear objective to 'ease the administration'. This reform reorganised the functioning of traditional power in a hierarchical manner, but also reduced the powers of chiefs. This innovation characterised by the institution of a council of notables⁹, new intermediaries in the decisionmaking body between subdivisions and the French colonial administrator. However, it should be noted that reforms carried out by France were aimed at improving the monitoring and efficient control of territories. Yet, these reforms impacted the work of some of these chiefs, former German supporters or trained by them. They had already been victims of 'degermanisation'¹⁰ (Abwa, 1998, 95-100). This was done through dismissals and replacements depending on French interests in Cameroon, with the idea of avoiding excesses and betrayals from chiefs. Chiefs who were maintained, just as the newly appointed ones, served more as

⁵ Besides quelling any form of claim or protest threatening the interests of France, Machia had to impose Chief Mouté in Dol in the important village of Kiki, a village to which he was not connected. In addition, as Paul Valentin Emog points it out, the Paramount Chief Machia, could afford to have his protégés appointed through him, given that he had control over villages.

⁶ The French Commissioner BonneCarrère ordered French administrators on the field not to publicly rebuke chiefs, nor to impose disciplinary sanctions on them (Abwa, 1998, 196).

⁷ Indeed, it was a combination of the French system of direct rule and the British system of indirect rule.

⁸ Traditional chieftaincies would henceforth become indigenous ones.

⁹ The council of notables was put in place by the decree of 9 October 1925 (National Archives Yaounde (ANY), Political and Administrative Affairs (APA) 11326).

¹⁰ Daniel Abwa sees in degermanisation, a strategy consisting in making people forget the German era and imposing the French system. In practical terms, it was a matter of breaking with perceptions, actions and beliefs by creating schools to teach French, and to popularise the use of the French language with the aim of shaping populations for submission.

auxiliaries to the colonial administration and hardly played their role as chiefs. Almost everywhere, France had reliable men, its puppets so to speak, and occasionally divided the group into several chieftaincies to effectively rule (Abwa, 1998, 314). Since then, the authority of the traditional ruler was reduced and dwindled. This is the consequence of the centralisation of power, to quote Daniel Abwa. Power remained the exclusive possession of French authorities, who could, as they wished, delegate part of it to indigenous chiefs.

In addition, contacts with the French administration were narrow as compared to the German era. As they felt monitored, these chiefs were often forced to obey colonial decision-makers for fear of sanctions. The proximity work and the control of the actions of indigenous chiefs were intensified by tours instituted by the colonial authority. For Daniel Abwa, one of the other important reasons for these tours was the marginalisation and monitoring of indigenous chiefs. France's concern was to replace the indigenous power in order to establish permanent and direct contact with local populations in order to make itself known, appreciated and enjoy the economic and financial resources of the territory.

As a matter-of-fact, traditional authorities lost enough of their power and authority under both the German and French colonisation. Even though they have more or less maintained their former titles and duties, it is worth noting they were simply non-civil servants of the colonial administration, deprived of any status and thus holders of revocable rights, subject to sanctions applicable to other indigenous subjects (Surêt-Canale, 1966, 1960). Was the situation going to change with independence in 1960?

Traditional Rulers after Independence

Since independence of East Cameroon on 1 January 1960, the status of traditional authorities has not changed so much. The principle of administrative continuity prompted the post-colonial State to implicitly renew the organisation of the chieftaincy. In fact, indigenous chieftaincies in Cameroon are organised by an order of 4 February 1933. This order was supplemented by a second one on 1 March 1933 which reviewed the distribution of administrative subdivisions¹¹. So, just as in the colonial era, the chief remains a simple auxiliary to the administration. This can be noticed in the organisation of chieftaincies, whose main aim was territorial and administrative control, because titles distributed did not reflect relationships between authorities and populations, but rather what linked the latter to the former. To this effect, obedient chiefs were always rewarded by being maintained in office and disobedient ones were discharged of their duties.

From a legal point of view, one can say that the traditional authority is a decentralised auxiliary agent (Nach Mback, 2000, 88) who is directly answerable to the representative of the State in his constituency. From this perspective, the indigenous chief is only an instrument, an auxiliary of transmission (Lombard, 1967, 128). This tradition started with colonisation and went on after independence.

The legal status of traditional authority thus conferred on its administrative status. In as much as it enabled colonial masters that succeeded one another in Cameroon to establish their power, it also allowed President Ahmadou Ahidjo to maintain control over the national territory by ensuring their loyalty through a patronage system. Traditional leaders were ex officio members

¹¹ This distribution was as follows: paramount chieftaincies, lamidats or sultanates (1st class chieftaincies), groupings or cantons (2nd class chieftaincies), villages or districts (3rd class chieftaincies).

of the local office of the presidential party¹². Moreover, before the adoption of the communal reform (Law No. 74/23 of 5 December 1974), there was a practice that consisted in booking seats for traditional authorities in municipal councils. However, in 1977, a new status was adopted. In fact, Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977 organising chieftaincies was signed. This decree is the first regulatory framework of the post-colonial legislator as regards traditional chieftaincies. Better than the 1933 order, which was limited to organise a sort of hierarchy of traditional chiefs according to the importance of their community in the eyes of the coloniser (JOC 1950), this text has the merit not only of framing the function of traditional authority for territorial and administrative control, but also of rationalising attributions of traditional authorities by reinforcing their function of 'auxiliary to the administration' (Nach Mback, 2000, 92)

According to this text, chiefs are responsible for: transmitting instructions from administrative authorities to populations and ensuring that they are carried out; contributing, under the supervision of competent administrative authorities, to the maintenance of law and order and to the economic, social and cultural development of their command unit; and collecting taxes from the State and other administrative units in accordance with the regulation in force. Besides all these tasks, traditional leaders are required to carry out any other mission entrusted to them by the administrative authority responsible for appointing them. Although there are advantages attached to this function, namely the remuneration system, there are also and more importantly, sanctions that range from a call to order to dismissal, including warnings and blames, sometimes accompanied by a total suspension of allowances for a period of three months (decree of 1977, chapter 3).

However, it should be noted that the attributions thus defined only take into account interests of the administration. The post-colonial State did not deem it necessary to codify traditional duties of chiefs, rightly known as custodians of tradition. In the same vein, chiefs are deprived of their religious powers which, through the chief, are supposed to ensure the continuity of life after death. Yet, continuity cannot be envisaged without a mystical dimension. From this perspective, he appears deprived of his sacred halo. Just as the coloniser, the post-colonial legislator did not grasp his contribution to the building of the new State (Nach Mback, 2000, 92). The chief is only good in his punishable condition. In other words, the chief has no autonomy in the execution of his duties. He is only a true auxiliary to the administration. He performs his tasks under the control of the administrative authority of the constituency, which has a range of measures to sanction his shortcomings.

Thus, traditional authorities have for years, been sufficiently emasculated first by colonisers and then by post-colonial leaders. The key position and prestige that characterised them in the pre-colonial era have been altered to confine them today to subordinate aspects of auxiliaries to the administration. But, with the on-going decentralisation in Cameroon, will the traditional authority function regain some significance?

Role and Status of Traditional Rulers in the Decentralisation Process

The key position once occupied by traditional authorities in their communities as absolute masters was snatched away by the colonial master and replaced by that of auxiliaries to the administration. The post-colonial State has maintained this 'emasculatation regime', thus

¹² <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/chefferie-traditionnelle-> au Cameroun consulté le 10/07/2020 à 16h12.

depriving them of their sovereignty of yesteryear. In either case, they have lost much of their credibility with populations, who, however, remain much attached to them after all. Will the on-going decentralisation process in Cameroon give them the opportunity to regain their autonomy or at least to restore their reputation? What is their real role in this process and what is the impact?

Traditional Rulers and Decentralisation

Traditional authorities are personalities chosen to exercise traditional leadership within a given human community. Once spiritual and temporal leaders, they have lost most of their power to the benefit of the State to remain mere custodians of traditions. Aware of their importance and eager to ensure good cooperation, the State has nevertheless provided them with a framework for expression in local governance: this is decentralisation.

Known as a process of transferring power from the State to legal persons of public law distinct from it, decentralisation was actually instituted in Cameroon in 1941 with the creation of the municipalities of Douala and Yaounde¹³. Since then, the policy of decentralisation has not ceased to evolve through the creation and establishment of other municipalities. Yet, it must be acknowledged that this is enshrined in the 2 June 1972 constitution which provides the municipalities with a legal framework by making them legal persons of public law enjoying financial, legal and administrative autonomy. But, it is more importantly Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the constitution of 2 June 1972 which gave a new impetus to decentralisation to improve and boost the political, social and economic development of Cameroon.

As it is the case, the regulatory framework and institutional bodies for decentralisation have been in place since 1972¹⁴¹⁵. Despite its meticulous progress¹⁶, this regulatory framework has provided a key status to traditional authorities in local governance. One can therefore question benefits of such a politicisation

Advantages of Politicising Traditional Chieftaincy

The participation of traditional authorities in local governance is an old practice that dates back to the colonial era and certainly did not survive with independence. The main advantage of this practice is that it allows the representative of the traditional leadership to participate in the management of affairs of his community. As such, he is better placed to represent and defend interests of his people. This practice was successful up to a certain moment, because there was

¹³ www.osidimbea.cm, « la décentralisation au Cameroun », consulté le 15 août 2020 à 23h10

¹⁴ In this regard, we can quote, for example, besides the constitution of 1972 and its amendment of 1996, law n°

¹⁵ /23 of 5 December 1974 on communal organisation and its subsequent amendments, law n° 87/015 of 15 July 1987 on the creation of urban communities, Law No.2019/024 of 24 December 2019 bill to institute the general code of regional and local authorities, the creation of the special fund for equipment and inter-communal intervention (FEICOM) in 1974, the creation of the training centre for municipal administration (CEFAM) in 1977, the creation of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation in 2005, the creation of the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development in 2018...

¹⁶ We are talking about unsteady progress because from 1954 to 1974, seats were reserved for traditional authorities in the municipal councils. The 1974 communal reform put an end to this practice. After a long period of inactivity, it was the 1996 constitution that once again granted traditional authorities seats in the regional council.

a clear desire to make the administrative constituency, the local community and the traditional one coincide (Nach Mback, 2000: 98).

After the departure of Germans from Cameroon at the end of the First World War, the French and the English who succeeded them made this politicisation of chiefs a mode of operation, albeit with differences. Initially, this politicisation took place through municipalisation, then through political parties and finally through one of the management organs of decentralisation, the regional council.

In Cameroon under the British rule, it was grounded on *Native Court Ordinance (NCO)* of 1914 and the *Native Authority Ordinance (NAO)* of 1916. The aim was to give local populations, through their representatives, autonomy in the management of local affairs. And in the absence of universal suffrage, those who were best able to speak on behalf of populations were traditional authorities.

In French Cameroon, the politicisation of chiefs began in 1954, particularly in the West. It was through the order of 29 March 1954 that mixed rural councils (CMR) were instituted in the Bamileke region. By this order, chiefs became members of municipal councils created in their territories of command. They then have one third of seats, the rest being elected. In the reduced-capacity councils (CME), the municipal council also included representatives of traditional authorities, even if they were appointed by the colonial administration, in particular the High Commissioner (Nach Mback, 2000: 101). However, it should be noted that this system was not generally applicable, because it was not in force throughout the territory.

During independence, this system of politicising chiefs was maintained until 1974. Indeed, Law No. 74/23 of 5 December 1974 organising councils put an end to the policy of integrating traditional authorities into municipal councils. But before this suppression, the administration had provided chiefs with another means of political existence. Indeed, since the advent of the single party in 1967, traditional authorities were ex officio members of the section bureaux of their area of command.

After municipalisation, despite the break in 1974, decentralisation, through the constitutional amendment of 18 January 1996, once again made room for traditional authorities. It provides in Article 1, the 'recognition and protection of traditional values in accordance with democratic principles, human rights and the law'. According to Article 57, they are admitted as members of the regional council (elected by their peers) just as delegates from divisions are elected by indirect universal suffrage. Article 276 of Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 bill to institute the general code of regional and local authorities provides that all these members of the regional council must reflect the different sociological components of the region. According to Decree 2020/526 of 02 September 2020 to fix the number of regional councillors, the number of representatives of the traditional command is 20 out of the 90 in the region. Although legal, this new provision has helped to restore the reputation of chiefs whose choice and political commitment were sometimes subject to harsh criticism.

Another advantage of politicising chiefs is that the administration is able to ensure good collaboration with them, and thereby with populations who are often very close to them. Clearly, politicisation is thus a patronage system that limits opposition and/or protest. Chiefs themselves find in this system another opportunity to enhance their standing with populations,

whose control, they have lost to the benefit of the State, which organises¹⁷, appoints¹⁸, pays¹⁹ and sanctions²⁰ them as it wishes. Yet, it should be noted that politicising chiefs is not just beneficial.

Disadvantages of Politicising Traditional Chieftaincy

Beyond its advantages, the main disadvantage of politicising traditional authorities is the dishonour that the political activism of the chief sometimes causes among the population. In the past, under the single party, chiefs enjoyed a full prestige, as they sometimes exercised a sort of monopoly on local politics and managed to control municipal councils of their communities. But, with the advent of multiparty democracy, it is no longer easy to envisage the unflinching loyalty from chiefs and even population to the ruling party. Some chiefs have seen their legitimacy undermined by their people. This is the case of Chiefs Ngnié Kamga (Bandjoun), Tatang Robert (Batcham), Chief Angwafor III (Fon of Mankon), very loyal to the CPDM, the ruling party in Cameroon. Given the extent to which the population was rejecting him, the late Chief Kana Paul (Bafou) officially resigned from the CPDM and promised to be politically neutral the future (Nach Mback, 2000: 103). The stubbornness of Sultan Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya (Foumban) led to his severe loss in municipal elections by his cousin and rival at the head of the CDU, an opposition party. As for the Lamido of Rey Bouba, he had to resort to brutal repression under the complacent gaze of the government in order to cleanse his community of any protest (Maloune, 1996: 103). Since 1990, this rejection of traditional authorities has also been manifested in acts of desecration of symbols of traditional power in various parts of the country²¹.

Moreover, with the integration of traditional authorities into the new decentralisation, it is likely that this issue of rejection will arise again, as this cannot be appreciated by all for obvious reasons. Not only are they exempted from electoral competition unlike other delegates, but also they are in the forefront although their number is 20 out of 90²² and honours due to their rank. Coupled with the notion of autochthony introduced by the 1996 constitution, the politicisation of traditional authorities, or rather the position of the regional chief-councillor seems to hide a risk of rejection of the chief and his institution by the population on the one hand and on the other hand a hindrance to local democracy.

CONCLUSION

Traditional rulers in the modern state no longer form the nucleus of governance as they used to be in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. However, with the imperative of decentralisation under the modern state, they were brought back in as direct agents of local governance but that has not always been without conflict with other stakeholders in local governance. For example, the

¹⁷ Chieftaincies have three hierarchical levels. See Article 2 of Law No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977.

¹⁸ See Article 15 of Law No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977.

¹⁹ Traditional chiefs receive monthly allowances set as follows: 1st class chiefs: XAF 200,000 francs, 2nd class: XAF 100,000 francs, 3rd class chief: XAF 50,000 francs. See decree n°2013/332 of 13 September 2013 to amend and supplement certain provisions of Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977 organising traditional chieftaincies.

²⁰ Article 29 sees Law No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Decree No. 2020/526 of 2 September 2020 to fix the number of Regional Councillors per Division and per category.

function of regional councillor implies political calculations and exposes chiefs to conflict with populations they are supposed to protect and defend. In any case, decentralisation is causing traditional rulers to reassert firm control over local councils but the fear is that they may tend to be despotic and authoritarian in the exercise of local governance functions.

Although its practice is not new, it was in 1996 that decentralisation was officially instituted in Cameroon. Despite its slow implementation, it opts to give some exposure to traditional authorities already emptied of most of their power by colonial and post-colonial masters. However, despite their emasculation, the latter play an ambiguous and contradictory role. On the one hand, they represent the most traditional aspects of society as custodians of traditions, and on the other hand, they are auxiliaries to the administration and thus servants of the State, which henceforth appoints, pays and sanctions them. This justifies the uncomfortable situation wherein they often find themselves. To regain credibility with their populations, chiefs need a certain balance or neutrality not found in politics, and a genuine collaboration and understanding with other stakeholders in local governance. Paradoxically, excluding traditional rulers from partisan electoral competition is also viewed as an obstacle to local democracy.

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Laws and Decrees

Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977 organising traditional chieftaincies

Decree No. 2013/332 of 13 September 2013 to amend and supplement certain provisions of Decree No. 77245 of 15 July 1977 organising traditional chieftaincies

Decree No. 2020/526 of 2 September 2020 to fix the number of Regional Councillors per Division and per category

Law No. 74/23 of 5 December 1974 organising councils

Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June, 1972

Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 bill to institute the general code of regional and local authorities

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