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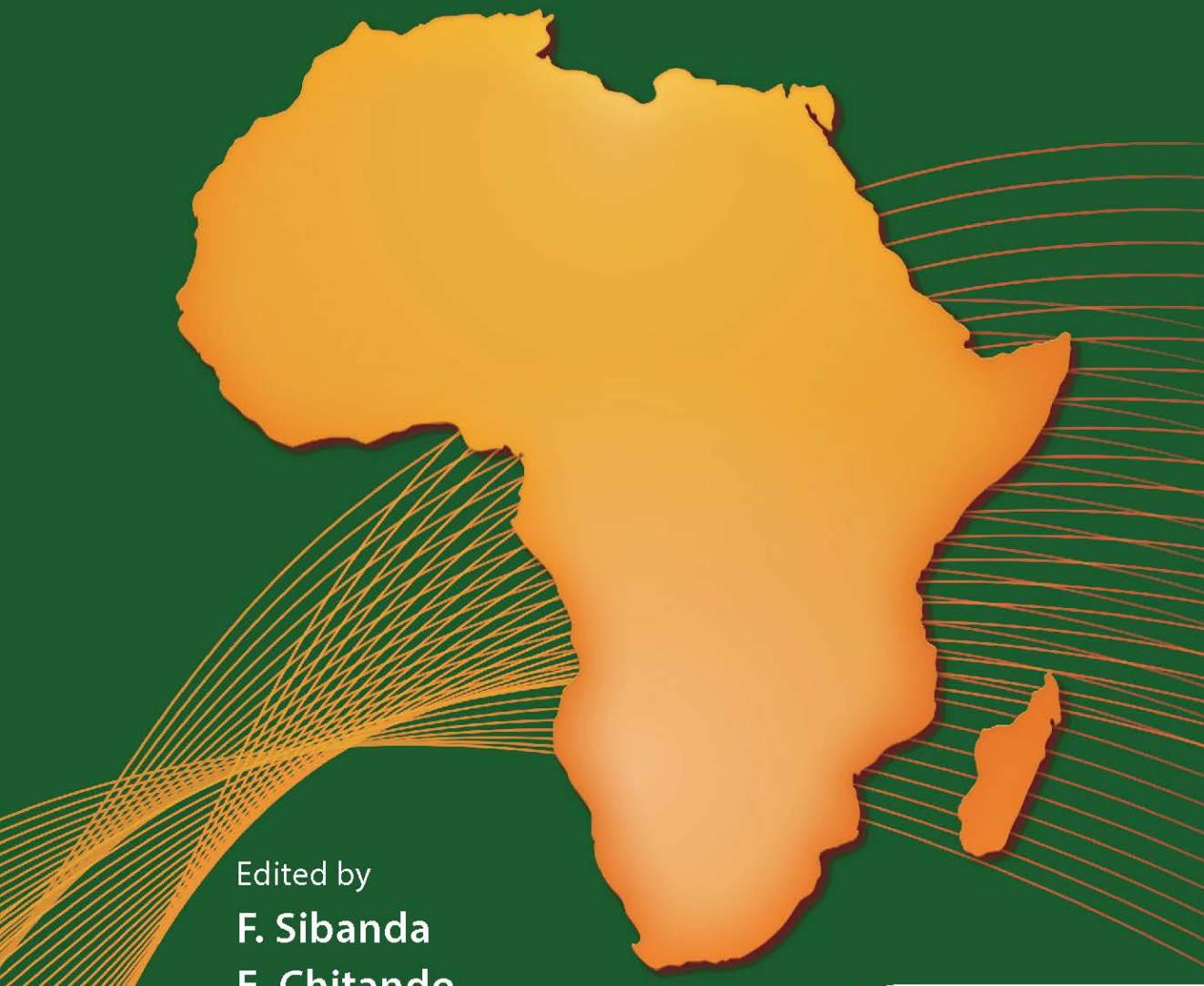

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https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

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AFRICAN CONSORTIUM FOR LAW AND RELIGION STUDIES

19 Traditional leaders, spiritual powers and the separatist conflict in North West Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

Rites and rituals are key features of governance in traditional African societies. There is a belief in a close affinity and a symbiotic relationship between the living and the ancestral realm. The rite of passage from birth, maturity and death is often celebrated in song, dance, rituals, storytelling and proverbs. These narratives play a role in conflict transformation and the maintenance of cohesion within most African local communities. There is a tendency for Africans to revere customs and traditional beliefs. Practices such as ancestral worship, divination, sorcery, secret societies, liturgy and rites of passage are still deeply revered within traditional African societies. Peace and conflict scholar Martha Mutisi documents, "In traditional Rwanda, when a dispute had been resolved, a ritual or ceremony would be held to reflect the symbolic and practical importance of the process." [2] These customs are not merely imaginary, archaic and uncivilised superstitions, as they are sometimes presented by Western epistemologies,[3] but rather religious beliefs and the essence of being and a way of life that defines most African rural communities. Given this premise, opposition to such traditions, especially in rural areas in much of Africa, is often considered offensive and even blasphemous. These Afrocentric traditions transcend positivistic approaches, which seek rational explanations for phenomena, and rather underscore spiritualism in healing and divination processes across Africa. This reinforces perceptions that the African is egregiously supernatural, as expressed by Senegalese scholar and former president, Leopold Senghor, when he opined that "emotion is black . . . reason is Greek". [4]

A key institution that generally sets African societies apart from Western ones is traditional leadership, which is ordinarily represented and headed by the chieftaincy. The chieftaincy is perhaps the most dynamic and resilient of all African indigenous institutions. While colonialism had different influences on traditional institutions in Africa, it by no means succeeded in dismantling the pre-colonial

1 Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Fort Hare, South Africa.

2 Mutisi M. 2009. "*Gacaca* Courts in Rwanda: An Endogenous Approach to Postconflict Justice and Reconciliation", *African Peace and Conflict Journal* 2(1):17-26.

3 Briggs J 2005. "The Use of Indigenous Knowledge in Development: Problems and Challenges", *Progress in Development Studies* 5(2):99–114.

4 Senghor L. 1964. *On African Socialism*. New York: Praeger.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

power relationships.[5] This is despite the fact that Eurocentric paradigms such as the modernisation theory have often been insensitive "to the cultural structures of African societies, and to the domesticated agency of Africans", condemning their indigenous institutions such as the chieftaincy as "primitive, repressive and unchanging in character".[6] The arrogance of this Western rationale has often attributed the shortcomings of chiefs as individuals to the failure of the chieftaincy as an institution. Such criticisms are often oblivious to the institution's resilience and continued existence. The institution has stood the test of time throughout Africa's history and contemporary politics. Even at the state level, there is still the existence of kingdoms across the continent in countries such as Morocco, Lesotho and Eswatini, albeit with varying degrees of political and administrative power.

In line with this, several nations across the continent have had powerful chiefs and chieftaincies, even in contemporary times. These include the Paramount Chief Chikowi of the Yao people of Malawi, King Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II of the Ashanti in Ghana, Chitimukulu Ackson Mwamba of the Bemba people of Zambia and King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulu people in South Africa. Most of these kingdoms are recognised and legislated by the state. In South Africa, for instance, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003 empowers traditional councils to participate "in the development of policy and legislation at local level".[7] Article 18(1)(a) of the Act states: "Any parliamentary Bill pertaining to customary law or customs of traditional communities must, before it is passed by the house of Parliament where it was introduced, be referred by the Secretary to Parliament to the National House of Traditional Leaders for its comments."[8] Somali communities such as the Issa and the Gurgura are organised in a hierarchical structure that maintains social cohesion and is headed by the Ugaz, or king, who is the administration head of the clan. As conflict resolution scholars Bamlaku Tadesse and colleagues argue, "The Ugaz has ultimate power over all aspects. He is the peacemaker and mediator between the society and their 'god'. If there is a problem such as drought, disease or famine, he appeals to the 'god' and comes with a solution."[9]

Traditional leaders thus play a central role in the daily functioning of most local communities across Africa. Highlighting their importance in the continent, traditional leadership scholar Christiaan Keulder maintains as follows:

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5 Cheka C. 2008. "Traditional authority at the crossroads of governance in republican Cameroon", *Africa Development* 33(2):67-89.

6 Nyamnjoh, F. 2014. "'Our Traditions Are Modern, Our Modernities Traditional". Chieftaincy and Democracy in Contemporary Cameroon and Botswana", *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 2:13-62.

7 Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act [No. 41 of 2003], ch 2 s 4(1)(f).

8 Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, art 18(1)(a).

9 Tadesse B, Tesfaye Y and Beyene F. 2010. "Women in conflict and indigenous conflict resolution among the Issa and Gurgura clans of Somali in Eastern Ethiopia", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 10(1):85-110.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

> The institution of traditional leaders and its procedures of governance is not only a simpler form of government, but also a more accessible, better understood, and a more participatory one. It is more accessible because it is closer to the subjects than any other system of government; subjects have more direct access to their leaders because they live in the same village and because any individual can approach the leader and ask him or her to call a meeting . . .; decision-making is based on consensus, which creates greater harmony and unity; it is transparent and participatory because most people may attend tribal meetings and express their views, directly not through representatives; and lastly, harmony and unity prevail because the interests of the tribal unit, rather than an individual or group of individuals, are pursued and expressed.[10]

Across West Africa, for instance, there is a growing commitment by the new elites to maintain strong linkages with their home village and even adopt neo-traditional titles. Whether out of genuine recognition or out of sheer politics, there is an apparent renewed commitment by state bureaucrats to tap into the influence of the chieftaincy in enhancing governance, especially at the grassroots. The institution itself is adapting to the changing dynamics of global politics even as Africans themselves are engaged in the process of negotiating their multiple identities.[11]

All of these dynamics have manifested themselves in Cameroon. There is an abundance of literature that documents the important role of traditional leadership in governance throughout Cameroon even in contemporary times. For instance, Fred Hansen, a scholar of Cameroonian history, documents the role played by the Lamido, a Muslim traditional chief in Northern Cameroon in the politics and religious education in his kingdom.[12] In the North West Region (NWR) of Cameroon, the people of Bafut have retained a powerful chiefdom also known as Fondom, headed by the Fon and his council of elders known as the Kwifor. Still, in the same region, there is an indigenous secret society known as the Takumbeng, made up exclusively of post-menopausal women from about sixteen different Fondoms. Through nocturnal naked marches of protest, this group draws the government's attention to critical issues facing local communities and "is noted for its function of social peace and the settlement of disputes among women involving quarrels, gossips, theft, land disputes, married partners and even between men and women".[13]

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10 Keulder C. 1998. *Traditional Leaders and Local Government in Africa: Lessons for South Africa.* Pretoria: HSRC Press.

11 Nyamnjoh, F. 2014. "'Our Traditions Are Modern, Our Modernities Traditional". Chieftaincy and Democracy in Contemporary Cameroon and Botswana", *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 2:13-62.

12 Hansen F. 2003. "The Politics of Personal Relations: Beyond Neopatrimonial Practices in Northern Cameroon", *Africa* 73(2):202-225.

13 Tanga P. 2006. "The Role of Women's Secret Societies in Cameroon's Contemporary Politics: The Case of Takumbeng", *African Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology and Sport Facilitation* 8(1):1-17.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

While the North West Region of Cameroon still maintains powerful traditional leaders who are highly revered, the institution remains shrouded in secrecy. This secrecy has aroused a lot of speculation from outsiders, perpetuating conspiracy theories, exaggerations and even myths about traditional leadership. An enormous amount of mystic power is habitually attributed to these traditional leaders as custodians of culture. This challenges Eurocentric notions that with the advent of modernisation, African traditional systems which are considered irrational, will whither away.[14] Ethnographic data reveals that these local chiefs often go around in traditional regalia, endowed with a multitude of amulets and relics that are claimed to wield supernatural powers, which are readily available to invoke and use at the behest of the leader. Beliefs in such mystical powers wielded by local chiefs, which render them untouchable, have been dominant and pervasive across the NWR of Cameroon, until recently causing traditional leaders to be revered and worshipped by their subjects.[15] However, the advent of a violent separatist conflict in the English-speaking regions of the country since 2017 has been a litmus test for the potency and efficacy of the spiritual powers of its traditional leaders. The conflict has seen traditional leaders abducted, killed and forced to flee their villages from the wrath of separatist militias.

This paper unpacks common narratives on the potency of the supernatural powers of local chiefs from the NWR of Cameroon and interrogates the veracity of these narratives within the context of the separatist conflict in the country. The underlying study employed a combination of primary and secondary data in analysing narratives on the potency of the spiritual powers of traditional leaders in the NWR of Cameroon, including phenomenological data obtained through key informant interviews and a review of academic literature and social media commentaries on the topic. Discussions and debates about the powers of traditional leaders feature prominently on social media sites. These sources of data were all subjected to a thorough discourse analysis while paying specific attention to ethical principles such as anonymity of respondents, confidentiality and due acknowledgment of sources. In sections below, I examine the nature of the narratives of supernatural powers of traditional leaders in Cameroon and how the recent separatist conflict has served as a litmus test for their potency.

14 Chabal P and Daloz. J 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument.* London: Villiers Publications.

15 Kroesbergen H. 2020. "African leadership and the kind reality of the spirit world". *HTS Theological Studies* 76(2):1-9.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

NARRATIVES ON THE SUPERNATURAL POWERS OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

As discussed above, Africans generally believe in supernatural forces, Cameroonians being no exception. A belief in the supernatural is not exclusive to African traditional religions. Research shows that literally, all cultures have a history of metaphysics, a belief often not rooted in logic or science. These beliefs and practices vary widely from sorcery, exorcism, psychic, divination, religion and ancestors.[16] Literally, everything can be attributed to supernatural forces, and as Dennis Lembani, a scholar of development studies, notes, Africans use metaphysics "as a mode of explanation, of perception and interpretation of their problems, events, nature and reality even when reason and common sense suggest otherwise. They believe witches can cause poverty, diseases, accidents, business failures, famine, earthquake, infertility and childbirth difficulties." [17]

Phenomenological data reveal that virtually every societal misfortune and even events that may have plausible rational explanations are often understood, explained and narrated through the lens of principalities and powers. In his article on witchcraft in Cameroon, Peter Geschiere, an anthropologist focused on Africa, reiterates this view, arguing "my informants in East Cameroon, just like several people quoted in the Ralushai report, rather seem to see it as an integral part of the social order: it may be an extremely evil force, yet it can bring also—more or less directly—riches, luck, and power".[18] As advanced by cultural institutional theorists, customary practices and belief structures are hardwired in the human psyche through a lifetime of political socialisation. Individuals thus act in line with these internalised cultural belief systems without subjecting them to any form of rationality or critical interrogation.[19]

Akin to ancient Christianity's doctrine of the divine right of kings, it is widely believed across the North West Region of Cameroon that chiefs derive their powers from their ancestors, and are thus guided by supernatural forces. These chiefs have traditionally been considered deities, as they are repositories of ancestral spirits, which makes their authority uncontested.[20] Documenting the historical powers

16 Mbogo R. 2017. "The Effects of Witchcraft on the Well-Being of High School Students in Nairobi, Kenya and Their Implications for Educational Leadership", *Journal of Culture, Society and Development* 32:1-10

17 Lembani D. 2021. "The Effect of Witchcraft and Magic & Mystical Powers in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Societies; A Critical Review", *International Journal for Research in Social Science and Humanities* 7(1):1-21.

18 Geschiere P. 2008. "Witchcraft and the State: Cameroon and South Africa: Ambiguities of 'Reality' and 'Superstition'", *Past & Present* 199(supp 3):313–335.

19 Pennington M. 2009. "Theory, Institutions and Comparative Politics", Bara J and Pennington M (eds). *Comparative Politics. Explaining Democratic Systems*. London: SAGE.

20 Awasom F. 2003. "The Vicissitudes of Twentieth-Century Mankon *Fons* in Cameroon's Changing Social Order", in Van Binsbergen W and Pelgrim R (eds) *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law: Essays on Africa and Beyond*. The Netherlands: LIT Verlag/African Studies Centre.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

of chiefs in Bafut, a town in North West Cameroon, Divine Ngwa, a researcher on Cameroon, states that "all justice was in his name and he was the final court of appeal and had the power of life and death over his subjects. As chief priest of the Fondom he offered sacrifices to his ancestors and interceded with them for the welfare of the people".[21] This gives a spiritual dimension to the chief's exercise of authority.

Succession is traditionally hereditary and is handed down from the father to the first male child in a patrilineal manner. Being the head of the village, the chief traditionally stands at the head of the power hierarchy often established through a series of rituals and secret societies. As Cyprian Fisiy, a scholar of social development, articulates, "The mythic construction of power has the further advantage that rulers could dispense with any socio-political negotiation of meaning. What in other circumstances would appear as ordinary discourse, open to negotiation, is simply abstracted from the arena of daily interaction and endowed with a transcendence that emanates from the primordial past. Endowed with such mythic qualities, the authority of the Fon is not contested."[22] These supernatural forces which cloak the realm of the chieftaincy are unquestionable and uncontested. For instance, as Ngwa observes, "Bafut princes upon succession to the throne arrogated or adopted names such as Abumbi, meaning he who rules the world, Achirimbi, meaning he who ends the world. All these names articulated power and projected the Bafut king as a demi-god in front of his people. Just like the lion (king of the jungle) the Fon of Bafut was indeed the king of his kingdom void of any rival."[23]

North West chiefs commonly dress in traditional attire which is adorned with a multitude of beads, feathers, amulets and other traditional artefacts. As Ngwa maintains, "the Fon, royal gadgets and the Fon's clothing were fabricated or made with parts of animals that were reserved as symbols of the Fon's power and authority".[24] It is believed that these sacred heirlooms are interwoven with supernatural powers and are an embodiment of the heritage of the people passed down from one generation to another. As Fon Ngum IV, the supreme ruler of Oku narrated on his Facebook page in 2022

> The white feathered cap known as "feneunembong" worn by the Fon of Oku on this solemn occasion is very unique in its origin. It is believed the Fon of Oku once emerged from lake Oku wearing that cap in a settlement of who owns the lake between the people of Oku and the Kejem people. The people of Oku and the Kejem people were arguing on the ownership of the lake, the lake goddess known as "maa" invited the two villages to the lake to settle the dispute. It was agreed that the two Fons will go into the

21 Ngwa D. 2022. "Power, Symbolism and Conflict in Bafut, Cameroon", *Advances in Historical Studies* 11(3):141-168.

22 Fisiy C. 1995. "Chieftaincy in the Modern State: An Institution at the Crossroads of Democratic Change". *Paideuma* 41:49–62.

23 See Ngwa, "Power, Symbolism and Conflict in Bafut, Cameroon", 146.

24 See Ngwa, "Power, Symbolism and Conflict in Bafut, Cameroon", 146.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

> lake and the Fon that survives will become the owner of the lake. The Fon of Oku emerged victoriously wearing the white feathered cap. The other Fon did not come out of the lake and his people got disgruntled and left. This is the myth surrounding the origin of the cap worn by the Fon on the occasion of his public presentation.[25]

It is thus believed that the regalia of traditional rulers are sacred and contain supernatural powers. It is given the sacredness of the regalia that the Nso cultural association issued a warning to a Cameroonian artist, Shey Lontum, to stop wearing traditionally symbolic accessories reserved for royalty and special Nso people. The warning stated that "Failure to do so, he shall face the consequences from the Ngweron Nso."[26]

Fons in the North Region are also often associated with animals such as the leopard, lion, scorpion, crocodile and elephant. The Fon often uses items that are culled from these animals such as their hide and teeth. It is believed that this symbiotic relationship between the Fon and these animals gives him the ability to not only possess their powers but also to transform into them as the need arises.[27] Data gathered from ethnographic research shows it is widely believed that the multitude of amulets and relics that adorn the regalia of the Fon wield supernatural powers that are readily available to invoke and use at the Fon's behest. Depending on the desired outcome, the Fon is believed to be able to use incantations and other magical spells, along with nonverbal gesticulations, to achieve the desired effect. Such effects may be to appease aggrieved spirits, ferry the dead to the land beyond, and exact revenge and instant death on opponents.

Geschiere argues that though chiefs in the western highlands of Cameroon are associated with occultic powers, they are often separated from their usage for evil purposes.[28] He, however, admits that it is difficult to make such a distinction as these chiefs are deeply intertwined with such dark forces. It is through their proximity to such dark forces that it is widely believed that chiefs can exercise agency and affliction over human lives. This reinforces the belief that there is a multiverse of dimensions and alternative ways of knowing that transcend the positivistic view of Western science. Articulating this view, sociologist Wilson Akpan argues that social reality does not exist in bivalence but in multivalence and that "'bifurcated' theorising distorts rather than illuminates social reality".[29]

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25 "The Fon of Oku's Anniversary Facebook post", *Facebook,* 18 December 2022. [Accessed 10 February 2024].

26 Nginyu C. 2024. "Nso Traditional Authorities Issue Artist Warning for Tempering with Royalty Attires", *Cameroon News Agency*, 26 March. [Accessed 20 February 2024].

27 Moffor E. 2022. "The Making of Fons Kings: An Insight into the Regalia of a Newly Crowned Cameroon Grassfields Fon", *International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering & Multidisciplinary Physical Sciences* 10:1-26.

28 Moffor, "The Making of Fons Kings".

29 Akpan W. 2011. "'Local' Knowledge, 'Global' Knowledge, 'Development' Knowledge: Finding a New Balance in the Knowledge Power Play", *South African Review of Sociology* 42(3):116-127.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

A belief in mystical powers is endemic in African traditional religions.[30] As observed by Lembani, "the belief in mystical powers is still deeply rooted in many African societies, regardless of education, religion and social class of the people involved".[31] However, in contemporary times, the powers of local chiefs have been diluted by elected and appointed state administrators, who have reduced traditional leaders in Cameroon largely to subservient auxiliaries of the state administration.[32] As discussed in the section below, the recent separatist conflict in Cameroon has been a litmus test for the potency of these powers and of the mysticism often attributed to traditional leaders in contemporary times.

SEPARATIST CONFLICT AS A LITMUS TEST OF THE SPIRITUAL POWERS OF LOCAL CHIEFS

What is commonly referred to as the Ambazonian separatist crisis in Cameroon today is not a new phenomenon in the country's political landscape. It is a decades-old problem whose origins can be traced to as far back as 1961, following the (re) union of two entities, then referred to as French Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. The over six decades of union has undergone turbulent times as various segments of the minority English-speaking population have persistently articulated a wide array of grievances with regard to the functioning, or lack thereof, of the Cameroonian nation-state.[33] This prompted the establishment of a secessionist movement calling for the independence of the two English-speaking regions and the formation of a new state dubbed Ambazonia.

Ambazonia is the name given by Anglophone separatists, to the current North West and South West Regions of Cameroon which are former British trust territories. A plebiscite organised by the United Nations in 1961 reunited the territory with the former French Cameroons as both territories had been a German colony until the end of the First World War.[34] Following a unilateral declaration of independence by Ambazonian separatist leaders in 2017, a multiplicity of militia groups were formed in the North West and South West Regions of the country and violence erupted due to frequent clashes with the Cameroon army.[35] These saw the crisis metamorphose in

30 Nyabwari B and Kagema D. 2014. "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities", *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* 1(5):9-18.

31 Lembani, "The Effect of Witchcraft and Magic & Mystical Powers".

32 See Decree No. 2013/332 of 13 September 2013.

33 Konings P and Nyamnjoh F. 2004. *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon.* Afrika-Studiecentrum Series, No 1. Leiden & Boston: Brill; Pommerolle M and Heungoup H. 2017. "The 'Anglophone crisis': A tale of the Cameroonian Postcolony". *African Affairs* 116(464):526-538.

34 Nohlen D, Thibaut B and Krennerich M (eds). 1999. *Elections in Africa: A data handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

35 Nwati MT. 2020. "The Anglophone Crisis: The birth of warlords, the impact of warlords activity on the people of North West and South West Region of Cameroon", *Advances in*

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

2016 from a benign civil society movement to an array of radical secessionist groups and armed militias, commonly referred to as Amba Boys, which have been branded by the government of the day as terrorist cells.[36] Though the Anglophone problem is commonly expressed as a crisis of identity, its prolongation has been sustained by a combination of real or perceived historical injustices, constitutional blasphemy, marginalisation, a crisis of leadership and a web-based army of Cameroonians in the diaspora. Information gathered from ethnographic research shows that the asymmetric conflict generally takes the form of guerrilla warfare through sporadic attacks on government establishments, state officials and even civilians based in the English-speaking regions of the country, commonly referred to as "Ground Zero". At the same time, there is online support for the movement championed by self-appointed governments in exile and Anglophone Cameroonian sympathisers based in countries such as Belgium, Norway, South Africa and the United States.

Typical of the saying that a hungry sow will feed on her piglets, narratives abound of abductions, demands for ransom, highway robbery and attacks on police stations by the Amba Boys. Operating mostly from forests and remote villages, where there is little government presence, local chiefs, as auxiliaries of the state, have often been targeted by these militias and accused of being in cahoots with the government which the Amba Boys are fighting against. A number of these chiefs have thus been kidnapped and killed, prompting them to flee their villages to urban areas of the country.[37] Reporting for the Voice of America News, renowned Cameroonian journalist, Moki Edwin Kindzeka, notes that "Traditional rulers started fleeing English-speaking regions when they were accused by separatists of supporting the military and disclosing their hideouts to troops. At least nine were killed and dozens abducted and freed only after ransom was paid. Two dozen palaces were partially or totally torched."[38] Over the past eight years, numerous attempts, both violent and non-violent, by different stakeholders to resolve the conflict have been unsuccessful, prompting some of these chiefs to remain perpetually in self-imposed exile from their villages. This literal abdication from their thrones due to the separatist violence puts into question the veracity of claims of their supernatural powers.

Before the outbreak of the separatist conflict, the powers and influence of traditional leaders had been slowly eroded by state legislation that made local chiefs as auxiliaries of the state administration. For instance, Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977, which governs traditional authorities in Cameroon, grants powers to the Divisional Officer to appoint third-class chiefs, while second-class chiefs are appointed by the

Applied Sociology 10(5):157-185.

36 Chothia F. 2018. "Cameroon's Anglophone crisis: Red Dragons and Tigers - the rebels fighting for independence", BBC News, 3 October.

37 Bang H and Balgah R. 2022. "The Ramification of Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: Conceptual Analysis of a Looming 'Complex Disaster Emergency'", *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 7(art 6):1.

38 Kindzeka M. 2020. "Traditional Cameroon Rulers Refuse to Return to Crisis Zone", *Voice of America News*, 8 May.

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minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation.[39] Data obtained from ethnographic research showed that the sanctity and reputation of the chiefdom in the region were also eroded, as chiefs have increasingly been conferring titles and adorning traditional attires on state administrators and influential businessmen in exchange for money and political influence. This commodification of erstwhile traditional titles and symbols, which were revered for their sacred significance, has contributed to undermining the secrecy of the chieftaincy. For instance, the current Cameroonian head of state, President Paul Biya, was crowned "Fon of Fons" by North West chiefs in 1985, establishing what an editorial by the *Guardian Post* newspaper in Cameroon referred to as "a political ethnography that mixes royalty with partisan politics".[40] The chieftaincy itself has become increasingly contested, as it is at the centre of access to political power. Commenting on the succession battles of the chieftaincy institution in the North West Region of Cameroon, Cameroonian historian Young Chantal, for full name Young Chantal Nkeneh Nkeneh states, "When the rules of succession become unclear; with the political parties in power supporting one group against the other in a bid to serve their own parochial political interest, succession conflicts with far reaching consequences can be witnessed."[41] In the contemporary era of globalisation, which in effect is synonymous with Westernisation,

> long-standing customary practices were subjected to strict scrutiny and eventually modified. However, the dual requirements of maintaining "tradition" and, at the same time, adapting customary rules to the changing social environment, have sent conflicting messages to the local community. The contemporary Janus-faced ruler has to satisfy the cultural aspirations of his people while charting a new socio-political path for himself and his community.[42]

In the neighbouring South West Region of the country, my research colleague, Hassan Kaya and I have recorded how the unscrupulous sale of tribal land by local chiefs to the highest bidder, has tremendously undermined the sanctity of local chiefs. This slowly eroded and demystified the powers of traditional authority in Cameroon.[43]

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39 Republic of Cameroon. 1977. Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July to organize traditional chieftains.

40 "Editorial: 2025 Presidentials; Why Biya Should Visit Bamenda", *The Guardian Post*, 12 November 2024.

41 Nkeneh YC. 2023. "Problematizing Chieftaincy Succession Squabbles in the Cameroon Grassfields Studies, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science"* 7(6):1127-1139.

42 See Fisiy, "Chieftaincy in the Modern State", 53.

43 Ferim V and Kaya H. 2018. "The Relevance of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Conflict Transformation: The Case of the *Bakweri* Chieftaincy in Cameroon", *Africa Insight* 47(4):59-71.

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

In the wake of the crisis, numerous traditional leaders have been killed while others have been hijacked in exchange for ransom.[44] This has resulted in traditional leaders in North West Cameroon fleeing their villages to major cities, where the conflict has largely been contained by state security forces. Information obtained from ethnographic data reveals that some chiefs have stopped wearing their traditional regalia for fear of being easily identified. The attacks on traditional leadership in the region have not only been perpetuated by separatist militias. Human Rights Watch reported that government soldiers from the Rapid Intervention Battalion raided the royal palace of the Bafut chiefdom on suspicion that it was harbouring separatist militias.[45] In the process, the chief's brother was shot, and the palace was looted of precious artefacts. This desecration did not elicit the ire and vengeance of the Bafut spiritual forces as common narratives often claimed. Instead, the Bafut chief called on the government to initiate an investigation and to rein in its soldiers. A reporter for the *Guardian Post*, Bertrand Doh reported that security forces rescued the President of the North West House of Chiefs, HRH Fon Yakum Kevin Teuvih Shumitang II from separatist militias after spending eighteen months in captivity.[46] A sceptical respondent in the interviews that were conducted questioned why the supreme ruler could not invoke his mystical powers to either prevent the abduction or escape it. Cynthia Wanchia, another reporter for the *Guardian Post* noted that at the eighth session of the North West regional assembly, North West Fons declared a spiritual war against Ambazonian militias and committed to invoking ancestors and unleashing them on the fighters.[47]

A review of random online commentaries on this declaration shows scepticism and disbelief concerning its feasibility. One sceptical observer commented, "They had spiritual attacks and, they couldn't attack the people marginalising them. I now feel that they are part of the problem."[48] Ridiculing chiefs who had fled their villages due to the ongoing crisis, another critic on the same post argues, "So, they actually have spiritual powers and could not remain in their villages and protect their people?"[49] "Once a custodian of tradition engages in politics, he loses his sacredness, the powers bestowed and connection with his ancestors," another lamented.[50] "The elites of Manyu did the same. Now we know it was empty boasting because the gods are not with them. It will be no different for the so-called North West elites,"

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44 "Cameroon Condemns Separatists for Abducting Village Chiefs", *Voice of America News*, 15 December 2020.

45 Allegrozzi I. 2019. "World Heritage Site Attacked in Cameroon", Human Rights Watch, 11 October.

46 Doh BN. 2023. "NW House of Chiefs President Rescued after 18 Months in Amba Captivity!", *The Guardian Post*, 1 June.

47 Wanchia C. 2022. "North West Fons Declared Spiritual War against Amba Fighters", *The Guardian Post*, September 15.

48 "Commentary on Guardian Post article on Declaration by North West Fons", *Facebook*, 15 September 2022. [Accessed 12 February 2024].

49 "Commentary on Guardian Post article on Declaration by North West Fons".

50 "Commentary on Guardian Post article on Declaration by North West Fons".

https://doi.org/10.52779/9781991260888

chimed another.[51] "How did they manage to arrest the president of the North West chiefs with all his spiritual powers?", another chipped in.[52] "Sad that the people chosen to defend the traditions and the land have sold it, become refugees and hope to use ancestral powers from shrines they have not visited or serviced for years. Who do they think the ancestors will hear? The cry of the people abandoned by the fons for money or the refugee fons? "Oh, for the days when Fons and Chiefs in the Southern Cameroons were almost deities!!!" a critic concluded.[53]

Although the nature and scope of the spiritual powers of traditional leaders have been extensively documented, contemporary narratives exhibit scepticism and distrust with regard to the potency of these powers. These critics do not entirely dispel the existence of such powers. Rather, they mostly argue that such powers have been diminished because the chiefs themselves have abrogated the spiritual contract entered into with the ancestors by serving as puppets of the administration and undermining long-standing traditional values for pecuniary gains, especially in the contemporary era of globalisation. This appears to strengthen claims made by modernisation theory scholars who argue that as post-colonial Africa becomes modern, science and logic will replace its traditional values and institutions.[54] However, Cameroonian anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh argues that even though African traditions have become modern, their modernities still remain traditional, stating, "Chiefdoms and chiefs have become active agents in the quest by the new elites for ethnic, cultural symbols as a way of maximising opportunities at the centre of bureaucratic and state power, and at the home village where control over land and labour often require both financial and symbolic capital".[55] Interviews with some key informants also reveal that the conflict has taken a spiritual dimension as the Ambazonian separatist fighters equally employ supernatural powers that counteract those of the chiefs. Some videos that have been circulating on social media sites show how some of the generals of the separatist militias adorn themselves with a multiplicity of amulets that allegedly give them supernatural powers such as the ability to be bulletproof.

As an interviewee maintained during the collection of primary data, "Amba Boys often enter into covenants with supernatural forces going as far as importing powers from neighbouring Nigeria. This gives them the ability to neutralise the powers of local chiefs who themselves have had their powers diminished and diluted by their neglect of traditional practices and their affiliation with other religions like Christianity." Some of these Ambazonian self-declared generals go by the names of General Satan, General Shadow, General Armoured Car, General Cross and Die, and General Witch Bird. Even though most of these militia leaders have been

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54 Chazan N, Lewis P, Mortimer R, Rothchild D and Stedman S. 1999. *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa.* Third Edition. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

55 Nyamnjoh, "'Our Traditions Are Modern, Our Modernities Traditional'".

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killed by the country's army, a key informant strongly believed that even the state's security forces latter also utilize supernatural powers to counteract those of the separatist fighters. It appears in a clash of principalities and powers, the natural always prevails. In this case, it turns out to be the barrel of the gun and the deadly power of the bullet.

CONCLUSION

A plethora of literature shows that traditional leadership is a mainstay in most parts of rural Africa. The symbiotic relationship between local chiefs and local communities is often manifested in song, dance and rituals. As a head of the village, local chiefs exercise power and authority conferred on them by tradition, often passed down from one generation to another. As custodians of village heirlooms and embodiments of customs, it is commonly believed that traditional leaders wield mystical powers handed down to them from one generation to another. These powers which are often showcased through a multitude of amulets, charms and totem animals, are considered necessary and instrumental both for the protection of the chief and of the village. While some narratives on mystical powers in Africa are cloaked in falsehood, prejudice, exaggerations and ignorance, other narratives acknowledge that such powers are "known and practically experienced by nearly all Africans who have grown in a traditional environment".[56] It seems the veracity of narratives about the spiritual powers of traditional leaders in the North West Region of Cameroon can be likened to the allegory of the blind men and the elephant. Rooted in ontological inquiry, the limited and subjective experiences of narratives that believe in the potency of the spiritual powers of traditional leaders, are equally as true as those that vilify them. It is perhaps an epistemic injustice to advocate the belief in angels while denouncing the powers of traditional leaders as superstitious. As Geschiere concludes, to "understand the power of such beliefs, one has at least to take them seriously".[57]

56 See Lembani, "The Effect of Witchcraft and Magic & Mystical Powers".

57 Geschiere, "Witchcraft and the State".

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