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## **Ethnogenesis of the Bafut Ethnic Group: A Frontier Process**

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, of the Western Grassfield of Cameroon, as an analytic case study. The objective of the study is to attain a deeper understanding of ethnogenesis as a frontier process, by applying the Internal Frontier Thesis, developed by Igor Kopytoff. The study investigates how through processes consistent with the Internal Frontier thesis, the Bafut ethnic group characterized by shared, centralized, hierarchical hereditary organization, could have developed from diverse settlement patterns. Ethnographic fieldwork consisting of participant observation, in-depth interviews and various data collection techniques, made it possible for the researcher to access implicit cultural structures from an emic perspective. The fieldwork was conducted as part of the KPAAMCAM (Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism, Cameroon) project, provided qualitative data, for analyzing how distinct lineages with autonomous origins, could come together into a unified ethnic group. The findings suggests that this is the result of incorporation, kinship redefinition and shared political institutions. This paper contributes to the understanding of internal frontiers as crucibles of ethnogenesis and state formation, while also offering insights into the continuity of indigenous socio-political systems in contemporary context. It also challenges the static model of ethnicity, highlighting the role of sociopolitical and ritual processes, in governing identity formation.

**Keywords.** Ethnogenesis, Traditional Socio-political Organization, Pre-colonial Bafut, Frontier Process, Ethnicity

### **1. Introduction**

Sub-Saharan Africa has undergone a lot of transformation from its pre-colonial days to the present date. This has been as a result of wars, colonization, natural disasters, and since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most recently, independence from colonizers and the creation of sovereign states. The history of most of this areas was handed down through oral tradition in the absence of written history before the nineteenth century. Therefore, any written history about the period before the nineteenth century, is a translation and interpretation, handed down from oral tradition. This has made an understanding of the history of the area very complicated. More recently, however, scientific work in the field of archaeology has been helpful in interpreting artefacts and dating findings.

This study seeks to explore some of the characteristics of pre-colonial, Sub-Saharan Africa that can enlighten our understanding of its pre-colonial history. Through exploring the ethnogenesis of Bafut, one of the major ethnic groups of the Grassfields of Cameroon, we hope

we may be able to apply the same concept to other similar ethnic groups in the area. Our objective is to have a possible explanation of the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group as a frontier process. Our interest in exploring the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group in relation to the Internal African Frontier thesis, is as a result of the observation that, despite a claim to autonomous and independent settlement patterns from diverse backgrounds, all the villages in Bafut have the same socio-political organization. Our goal therefore, is an attempt at reconstructing the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group by analyzing the oral histories, existing literature, information on settlement patterns of the different groups, the similarity of their socio-political organization, and finally the formation of the ethnic group.

Our focus is on the pre-colonial history of the Bafut people, whose existing history is the result of oral tradition, as stated above. This also implies that any written history is very recent, as late as the 19th century, for an area where archaeological data demonstrates the existence of settlement more than 600 years before colonization. Oral tradition claims, the existence of the Fondoms for more than 300 years. Our goal therefore, is an attempt to describe the processes that could have resulted in the apparent, homogenous nature of the Bafut ethnic group, from information gathered through interviews during our fieldwork, and the existing literature, based on oral history.

This paper has been motivated from the findings of fieldwork carried out among the Bafut people. During the fieldwork, it was observed firstly, that, the people claim to have homogenous indigenous language use, in a geographic area known to have intense language diversity. Secondly, all the villages are shown to have the same socio-political organization, which is centralized and hierarchical, each village claiming autonomy from the other. How did they attain, and have been able to maintain this similarity in socio-political organization? Finally, some of the villages claim autonomy of descent and settlement patterns. How then do they claim the same ethnic identity? Our objective therefore is to demonstrate how the characteristics observed in Bafut as mentioned above, could have resulted into a homogenous ethnic group, through the African Internal Frontier process, described by Kopytoff in his, African Internal Frontier Thesis.

### **1.1 Background**

A brief description of Bafut in its historical, administrative, and geographical dimensions, will constitute the background of this paper. The name Bafut, given to the subdivision by the administration is also the name of the ethnic group, and language spoken by the people who claim to be 'Bafut'. Bafut is one of the five major Fondoms of the Western Grassfields, historically shown to have a centralized hierarchical sociopolitical organization, the other four being, Bali, Mankon, Kom, and Nso. These fondoms have had some historical interactions with Bafut, in precolonial times, except for Nso. Pat Ritzenthaler (1966) describes how one of the sons of the Fon of Bafut was sent as an emissary by his father to the Kom fondom. She also describes the war between the Germans and Bafut, in which the Germans were supported by the Bali fondom and the Bafut by the Mankon fondom. There are also similarities in their centralized hierarchical political organization, and in other regions of sub-Saharan Africa. One of the objectives of our study is that, this same analysis, could be applied to the other Fondoms, and therefore help in a better understanding of the similarities between these Fondoms, their origins, and their history. This may hopefully also help in the socio-political organization of the society on a national level and sub-Sahara Africa as a whole.

Administratively, Bafut is one of the super Chiefdoms of Cameroon, whose chiefs are considered as Paramount Chiefs, having several chiefs under their jurisdiction. For example,

Fon Abumbi II is the paramount ruler of the villages of Bafut subdivision which is made up 26 villages, each of which has a leader or chief, according to the administrative appellation. These chiefs are ranked as first class, second class and third class, by the administration, depending on the size of the population and the geographic area. All the chiefs work together on administrative, and national issues, however, socioculturally, each village is autonomous and independent of the paramount chief, and those that have allegiance of descent to a chief may defer to him or his representative. In the Western Grassfields, the ‘Chiefs’ preferred to be called, ‘Fons’. Therefore in this paper, the chiefs will be referred to as Fons, as this study is based on focusing on the understanding and presentation of findings from the people’s perspective, which is, an emic approach.

Geographically, Bafut, is about 20 kilometres from Bamenda, the major city in Mezam division, the administrative capital and the economic capital of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Bafut is bounded in the North and North West by Menchum Division, in the Northeast by Boyo Division, in the East by Tubah Sub-division, the Southeast by Bamenda Central sub-division, in the West and Southwest by Momo Division. The estimated surface area of the Bafut subdivision is about 492.3 square km. The population of Bafut was 57,930 inhabitants, 29,178 males and 28,752 females, according to the 2005 census by BUCREP (Bureau Central du Recensement et d’études de la Populations) Kimengsi & Lum (2018).

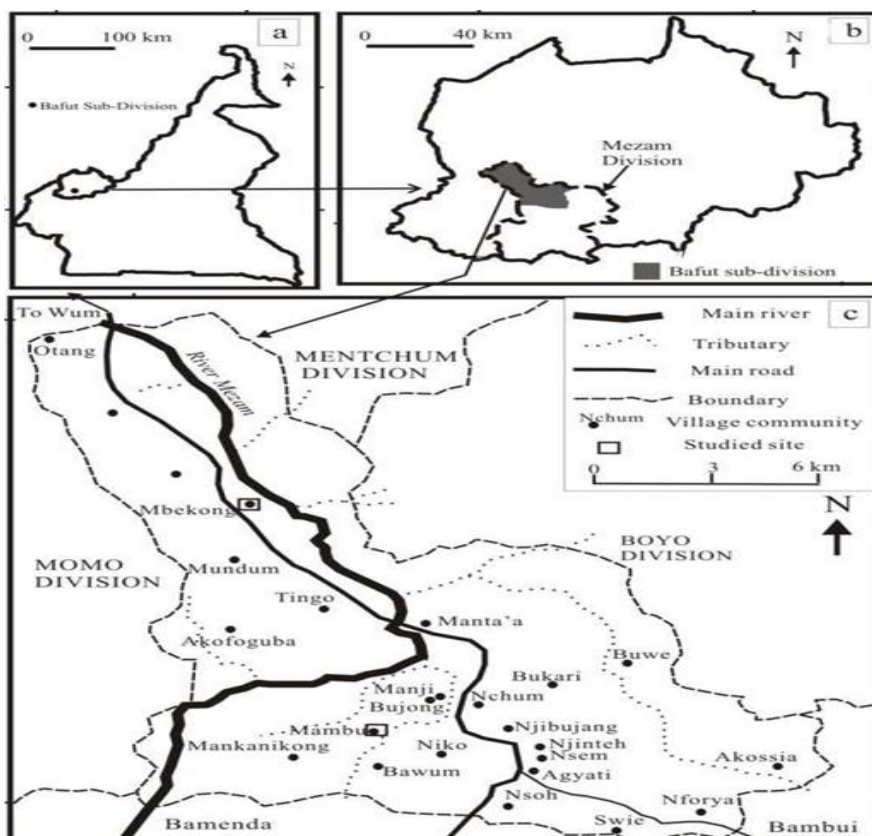


Figure 1. Map of Cameroon showing the location of Bafut sub-Division.

[Source: Adapted from VCP, 1995](#)

### 1.2. Sociocultural distribution of the Bafut Villages.

Bafut was chosen for the original research study due to the fact that it is still very rural and has maintained most of its pre-colonial socio-political organization, cultural and ritual

practices. We were therefore able to deduce some pre-colonial characteristics due to the absence of modification of its cultural and ritual practices that could have resulted from colonization and modernization. Among all the villages of the Bafut ethnic group, there are some which claim autonomy of descent, origin and settlement pattern. These are namely, Bujong, Bawum, Mankanikong, Mambu and Mberbeli. Mberbeli is the original village or the initial area of settlement before the other villages were established as a result of immigration. The Fons of these five villages claim hereditary powers from their fathers. They also claim to have had the position of Fon, handed down for at least five generations. The other 16 villages claim descent and population expansion under the governance of the Fon at Bujong. They were created as an extension of his jurisdiction, by the appointment of one of his brothers, or lineage head to become the quarter head. These would later develop into villages through population growth, resulting from intermarriages, births and resettlement from other parts of the Fondom. This practice of the appointment of quarter heads, usually brothers of the Fon, or children of the brothers of the Fon, is done by all the Fons who claim autonomy from each other. However, it is only the quarters that were created as an extension of the Fondom at Bujong that have developed into villages, with the same hierarchical structure as the other autonomous villages. The other 16 villages under the Fon at Bujong are: Nforya, Mankwi, Manka'a, Mbunjum, Nikou, Mbebali, Agiati, Njibieh, Akosia, Tingoh Njimbijang, Nchum, Njimujah, Nsem and Niweh. All these villages have the same centralized, hierarchical socio-political organization, even those which claim autonomy of descent, origin and settlement pattern.

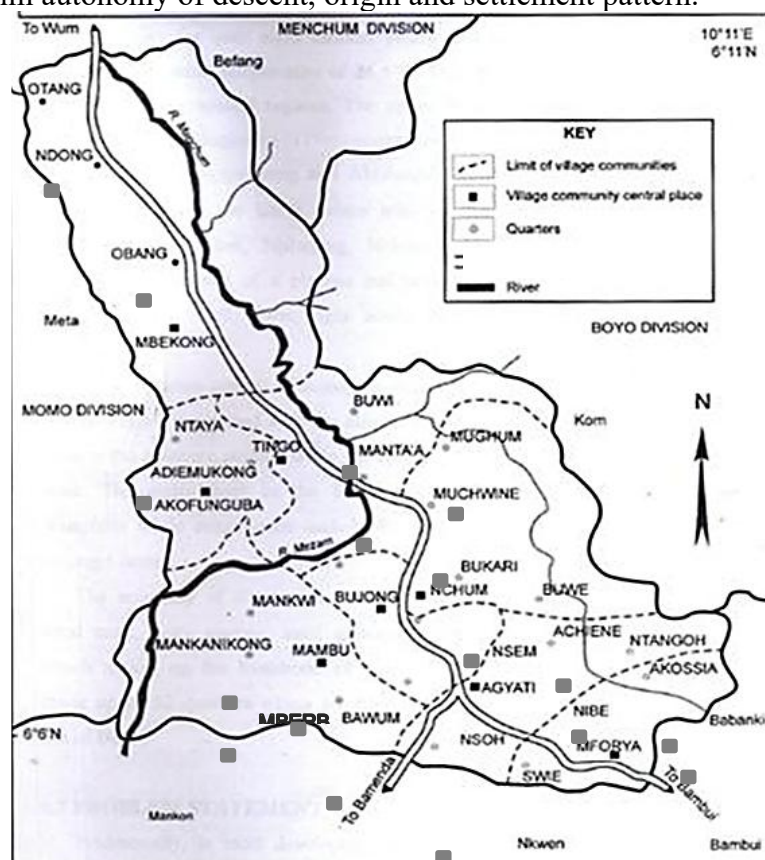


Figure 2. Map of the villages of the Bafut sub- Division.

[Source: Adapted from VCP, 1995](#)

### **I.3. Socio-political Organization of the Bafut Ethnic Group.**

A description of the socio-political organization of Bafut from various authors (Ritzenthalers 1962; Engard 1986; Aletum 1990; Chenemo 2018; Ngwa 2022) and the findings from interviews during our fieldwork, presents Bafut as having a centralized, hierarchical and hereditary, socio-political organization. This structure exists at all levels, from the household or compound, through the quarter to the village, and finally, to the entire ethnic group as a unit.

We would like to describe the centralized, hierarchical, hereditary socio-political organization, as a bottom up process. This is because the power of the Fon rests in his people. The power of the Fon reflects the confidence the people have in him to provide for their needs. The position of a Fon is hereditary, since the mystical powers vested on him are handed down from the previous Fon who is his father. These mystical powers give him the authority as mediator between the people and the ancestors to ensure the production of food, fertility and security. This implies that power is centralized in the person of the Fon. Finally, it is hierarchical, as the Fon is the highest authority with different levels of authority beginning from the family, the household or compound as the basic unit with authority, building up to quarter, the village and then, the ethnic group.

From a bottom up perspective therefore, the basic unit of the socio-political organization in all the villages is the household or compound which usually consists of a husband, one or more wives and their children. During our fieldwork, we observed that most households were multigenerational. That is, there is a mother and father who are the central focus of this house hold; their parents; their young children from babyhood to teenage years; and their adult children who are usually a daughter with her own children or the wife of a son with her own children. Adult sons were rarely present as they have moved to the urban areas to look for jobs to support the family. The observation is that, the wives and children of adult sons live with his parents, instead of a woman and her children living with her parents. This is usually for economic and cultural reasons. We can therefore conclude that the Bafut people are patrilocal. Economically, livelihood is cheaper in the village, and culturally, a support system is created as the grandparents act as caregivers to the grandchildren, while the wives and parents engage in financial lucrative activities, like farming, food processing for marketing, and petty trading. Living with the grandparents also enable the grandchildren to be exposed to cultural practices and values, especially, the possibility of learning and speaking the indigenous language.

The next level is the quarter. Each quarter is made up a number of households. Each family household is headed by a man. The family heads could be brothers who have decided to live next to each other, or independent groups who have decided to live side by side or have welcomed new groups with a leader. A number of these households, form a quarter. One of the family heads in each quarter is chosen by the Fon to be the quarter head. The choice of quarter head is based on different criteria: commonly, it could be the oldest brother, if all the heads of households are brothers, or the first settler in the area, if the people came at different times to settle due to the convenience of an area. For example, the land is level and easy to set up accommodation, or previous farmlands to which the households moved to as a result of population growth in their former settlement. Where the head of households are brothers, they could be considered a lineage. The lineage is composed of everyone descended from a common male ancestor. Each quarter head is responsible for the management of the social concerns of their quarter. For example, the settlement of disputes between households or the resolution of misunderstanding among family members that could not be resolved within the household. They are also responsible for appointing and organizing people from their quarter for

community projects. Celebrations of births, marriages and deaths are also organized at quarter levels. It was explained to us in an interview that marriage in Bafut is exogamous for quarters and lineages, and endogamous between villages. Quarters also establish solidarity groups as support systems for various activities. For example, during the farming season, women's solidarity groups in each quarter rotate in the preparation of each other's farm thus making the farming lighter and faster for each family. Solidarity groups are also established by age groups and for economic and social supports.

A number of quarters make up a village. The identification of quarters as part of a village depends on the settlement patterns of the households. We observed two different settlement patterns in Bafut: the first depended on the arrival of the different households, either as a number of households moving together for new settlements, and could be related or not; and the second is the expansion of kins groups as a result of population growth, resulting in the acquisition of more land area. This also resulted in creating a delimitation with neighbouring villages. These were usually members of the same lineage and therefore, kins, related by blood. In Bafut, the lineage head that is assigned to establish a new quarter is usually related to the Fon. They are mostly brothers of the Fon who can never aspire to be Fon. This appointment is given as a kind of compensation and a position of trust, to ensure loyalty to the Fon. Some quarters have grown into villages as a result of population growth and the arrival of new lineages and household. These new quarters or villages are answerable to the Fon. New quarter heads who are not kins of the Fon, are individuals who have distinguished themselves by performing noble services for their quarter or the entire village. These are selected by the Fon into the Council of Elders and can subsequently be nominated as quarter head.

The Fon is usually the family head of the first household or lineage that settled in the area. The other lineages or households on arrival create an agreement with the first settlers, and so they look up to the leadership of the first settler. The subsequent Fons are therefore all descendants of the first Fon of the area. The quarter heads or lineage heads of each new group are represented in the governing body of the village. They represent their people at the level of the village or Fondom. These are known in Bafut as the Bukums/Tanukuro. They represent their people but cannot become Fon as the Fon is believed to have mystical powers, which are passed down by blood line of the first lineage that occupied the area, from one generation to the next, at the death of a Fon to his son. The Bukum's position used to be hereditary in the past, however, due to abuse of power, the position of Bukum is earned, which means, the individual has demonstrated some leadership qualities or has distinguished themselves by their activities in the community. For every institution/association involved in the governing of the village, the members of the institution have to educate new members about the principles and practices of the group. This includes understanding the various rituals of the association, their cultural significance, and learning the history of the village and their role and responsibilities towards the Fon and the people. The Bukums constitute the Council of Elders. They act as the advisors of the Fon and also represent the interest of the people, as lineage heads and quarter heads. They have more authority than any group in Bafut except the Fon himself. "Thus, there is a checkmate on the activities of royalty in the person of the Bukum" Ritzenthalers (1962 p.111).

There are other governing bodies in the socio-political organization which are extensions of the Fon; these are the brothers and uncles of the Fon. These are known as the Bahantaks. They can never be Fons, but participate in the administration of the village. In the second model of expansion of a village by lineage, these Bahantaks are assigned by the Fon with his lineage and household to establish a new quarter or rule over an existing community.

This gives the Bahantaks complete authority over the communities under their jurisdiction without the mystical powers. So, the Bahantak still looks up to the Fon for the performance of the intercessory rituals to the ancestors.

We have described the bottom- up socio-political structure of the Bafut Fandom. However, at the top, is the Fon who does not come from this bottom- up process, but is assigned through succession. He is assisted in his duties as the spiritual, executive, legislative, political and judicial leader, by a fairly elaborate organization. At this level, the members of the ruling organization are from the ruling lineage. Upon succession to the Fonship, he appoints two of his brothers, who sit next to him at celebrations; one on the right and the other on the left. The title of the ‘right-hand’ man is Muma, and that of the left is Ndifor. They are both members of the Council of Elders. Another important and honoured Councillor, is the Queen Mother or the Mamfor. She also serves as an advisor to the Fon. She is succeeded by her youngest daughter at her death. Her main duty is to listen to complaints and concerns of the women in the village which could not be resolved at the quarter level. All the girls brought to the Fon as wives are under her guidance, social and cultural control. She trains them in all the duties of being a Fon’s wife and other household duties. Another authority figure at this level is the Tabufor, the oldest son of the Fon before he was made Fon. He oversees all the activities of the Bahantaks.

The most important association in the Fon’s political organization is the Kwifon. The Kwifon is the highest level a Bukum can attain. These are a group of senior Bukum who serve as an advisory board for the Fon. They help the Fon in making, religious and judicial decisions and policy-making. One of their most important function is to act as a part of the Fon’s court. Once appointed, they serve for life, and at their death, a successor is selected from the ranks of the Bukum by the Council of Elders with the approval of the Fon. We observe here that, there is a representation of each household in the governing process of a village in Bafut. This is what the Ritzenthalers (1962 p.116) describe as, “...a rather highly organized society with a well-developed political system, which is at this point a benevolent dictatorship.” They explain that the considerable power delegated to a nobility, from among the ordinary people of the community, due to his service, seems very beneficial and useful in controlling nepotism and keeping the governing body distributed among a wider group than the royal family alone. Elsewhere, they describe this system, as “a checkmate on the activities of royalty...”

There are eight powerful associations in Bafut, the first and most powerful is the Kwifon described by Nkwi (1987, 1976) described as the regulatory society of the Fandom. It regulates the powers of the Fon, plays a significant, socio-cultural and political functions in the management of the Fandom and is the supreme unit in most centralised Fandoms in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The second, the Chung, is composed only of the sons of the Fon (Bahantak) with Muma as their leader. It is from this association that the Fon can assign someone to become a leader of a quarter. The third association, also made up of only Bahantaks, is the Kuga. Their only function is to perform at funerals. The fourth association is the Gugwacho, made of only Bahantaks. The difference between the Gugwacho and the Kuga is that the members of the Gugwacho are selected from the Bahantak at birth based on the number of sons a Fon’s wife puts to birth. If she has three or more sons, the first two are members of the Gugwacho. If only two, the eldest of the two is assigned to the Gugwacho. Their only function is to dance at funerals. The fifth is the Takumbeng, also comprised of Bahantaks, however, this group consists of only older Bahantak. They do not perform at funerals. They are responsible for the collection of fines,

and confiscation of property from anyone who is not complying with his community responsibilities. Thus, they could be considered the police of the Fandom. The sixth is the

Afrongwi, also composed of only Bahantak, to which all the Bahantak belong. Muma is also the leader of this group as he is of the Chung. They dance only at the funerals of royalty and at public manifestations.

Two of the eight associations do not consist of royalty. These are, the Manjong and the Mbabo. These are organised at quarter levels. The Majong used to be a powerful military organization. However, the cessation of tribal wars, have limited its prime purpose. The members of Majong are selected at the quarter level on the basis of their bravery and strength. They perform mostly at the Fon's annual dance. They would also represent the Fon at the funeral of the Fon of a neighboring village. They were also authorized to fire guns at funerals. (Presently, there firing of guns has been stopped by the government). The Mbabo also functions mainly at the quarter level and their function is similar to that of the Takumbeng at village level; they do not dance at funerals, and are also the policing arm at quarter level for the collection of fines, and administration of penalties. At the quarter level also is the association of the youth, the Mandwui, which functions as a training ground for the learning and training for dances. Finally, there is the band of jesters, the Bugwe, which cannot be considered as a formal association. They clown and dance at funerals.

This same socio-political organization has been shown to exist elsewhere in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa. There is a uniqueness to this socio-political organization, by which the people look up to their leader, and he leader knows that his authority is vested upon him by the people. This has led the leaders to have the awareness that there is no Fon without the people.

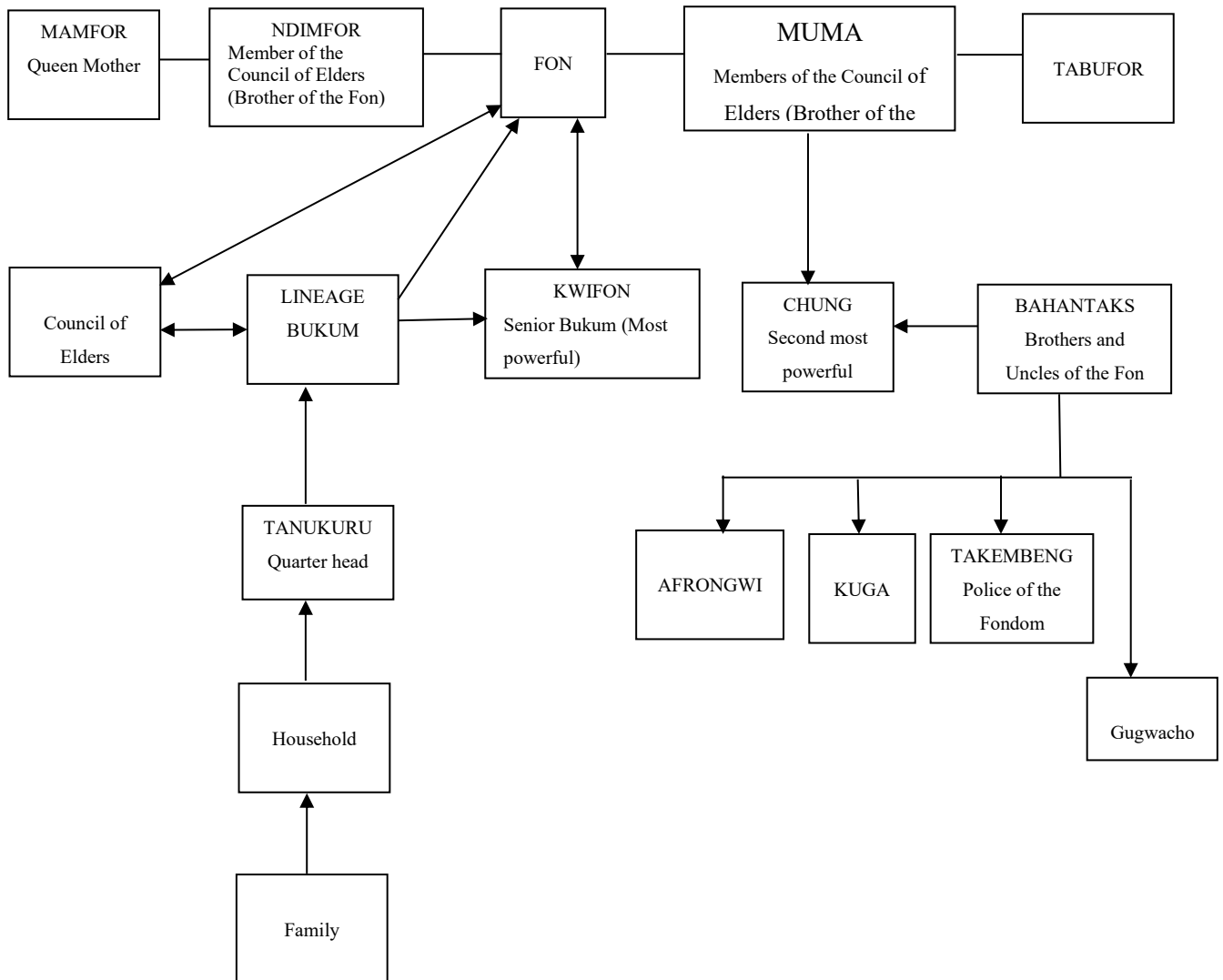


Figure 3. Diagram of the Socio-political Organization of the Bafut Fondoms.  
*Source: Perpetua Ngengwe 2025*

#### 1.4. The Fon of Bafut

We have described the socio-political organization of Bafut with the Fon as the ruler of the Bafut people. The traditional authority governance and power politics revolves around the position of the Fon. He has sacred attributes and is responsible for the performance of important rites in the community. He is the custodian of the traditions, and customs, guardians of the land and the intermediary between the ancestors and the people.

Among his duties, the Fon performs rituals, interceding for fertility, prosperity and security from the deceased Fons. The position of Fon is sacred as he is believed to be endowed with mystical powers, handed down from his ancestors, which enables him to perform all the rituals and intercession for his people. These sacred and mystical powers are only acquired through hereditary.

The Fon is a member and head of all the 'secret societies. These are the associations that assists the Fon in the affairs of the village. They are termed 'secret', as there are specific

guidelines that governs the activities of these associations and also specific criteria for membership. The guidelines, discussions and activities, cannot be shared with non-members.

The Fon is also responsible for the awarding of honours, the appointment and installation of successors at the level of the quarter. It is believed that the Fon takes on immortal attributes; he is never ill, it is the palace that is cold; he never dies, he disappears or is missing or his fire goes out. The Fon means more than just a leader to his people. He is held in awe and respect by the people and can be sanctioned by the people through the Kwifon and the Council of Elders ( Traditional council) The Fon is held responsible for all successes and failures in the Fondom so he does all to satisfy his people and create social harmony.

Since the Kwifon is next in command in the Fondom, his relationship with the Kwifon is rather intricate and at times conflictual, with one avoiding sanctions from the other. In practice, however, it is a relationship of mutual respect and co-operation. Even with its wide-ranging powers, the role of the Kwifon is mainly advisory, and seen as supportive of the Fon. The Fon is quite often referred to as the ‘Son of Kwifon’. Therefore, the Fon is answerable to the kwifon, and the Kwifon respects the authority of the Fon.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is a description of the different concepts under review in our analysis. They will be described in relation to the analysis and discussion of the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group. There are three main concepts in this analysis: Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis and Frontier. The main theoretical framework of this analysis is the African Internal Frontier thesis by Igor Kopytoff. He presents this thesis as an explanation for the emergence of ethnic groups at the frontiers, in sub-Saharan Africa. This thesis will be presented in the part two of this section.

### **2.1. Presentation of Concepts**

**2.1.1. Ethnicity.** Anthropological consideration of ethnicity has its origin in the research of the first generation of urban anthropologists working in Africa. The early works struggled with the conceptual differences between ‘tribes’ and ‘ethnic groups. This resulted in the distinction of three theoretical approaches to the study of ethnicity: The primordial approach; the instrumentalist approach and the situational approach. The primordialist approach, which prevailed until the 1960s, argued that ethnic identity, is the result of deep-rooted attachments to group and culture. Ethnic groups were perceived as bounded entities that have always existed, are biologically self-perpetuating and possess a unique culture, language, religion, territory and history. The instrumentalist approach focuses on ethnicity as a political strategy that is pursued for pragmatic interests. They emphasize the invention of ethnic identity, in which symbols and myths are carefully selected and promoted to build solidarity against rivals. Finally, the situational approach, emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of ethnic identity which is constructed in specific historical and social contexts. This last approach, has remained the dominant paradigm in anthropological theory to this day. (Becker, 2015 p.12) It is this last approach is also relevant to our study as it emphasizes the fluidity of ethnicity, which is also central to the internal African frontier thesis.

Ethnicity is one of those terms that everyone uses but few define successfully. It often appears as an unsettled and ill-defined field of inquiry. However, there is rich scholarly work on the question regarding how ethnicities emerge and what processes are at work. This has taken a constructivist approach which has introduced certain analytic criteria, such as the emergence of ethnicity through institutional framework, meaning making, social classification,

and power relations. The emphasis has also been on the genesis and changes of ethnic framing and multiplicity of ethnic membership. (Tiesler, p.74) This last criterion, the genesis and changes of ethnic framing and multiplicity of ethnic membership, is one of the foci of our study.

Chappell (1993) in referring to Igor Kopytoff's proposal that- in an African context, ethnicities grow out of 'bits and pieces - human and cultural-... that nestle in the interstices' between established societies- describes the process of formation of these ethnicities in Kopytoff's words as "Diasporas of exiles in borderlands coalesce around charismatic entrepreneurs, who gather adherents by using familiar amalgamative metaphors, such as kinship, clientelism, or assimilative slavery, and also spiritual symbolism, such as ancestral aboriginality and other legitimizing events." This innovative replicative model of ethnogenesis, challenges both Eurocentric frontier theories and notions of 'primordial' ethnic solidarity. (ibid p.272)

**2.1.2. Ethnogenesis:** In anthropology, ethnogenesis is the process of the formation and development of an ethnic group. It consists of the processes by which a group of people, through shared culture, ancestry and identity become recognized as a distinct ethnic entity. It is a dynamic process which involves a gradual emergence of a shared sense of belonging and cultural distinctiveness. This implies, common language, tradition, beliefs and practices; a perceived or real common lineage, which may be mythical or historical, resulting in a collective identity, through the development of characteristics which distinguishes them from other groups.

Tiesler, (2021) refers to ethnogenesis as the earliest process category on the genesis and changes of ethnic framing and multiplicity of ethnic membership, in use in international scholarship across disciplines before the 1970s. Tracing the conceptual history of the term, ethnogenesis from the late 19th century up to the present day, in relation to the manifold perspectives on the definition of ethnicity, brings out insights into diverse scholarly traditions. It also illuminates the ways the concept is employed, which is dependent on very specific historic (and political) research contexts. Tiesler (2021p. 74)

The description for ethnogenesis given above, demonstrates that studying the process of the formation and development of the Bafut ethnic group, may improve our understanding of the socio-political organization that exists in Bafut and most of sub-Saharan Africa, its ritual practices and language use.

The concept of ethnogenesis, the formation of new ethnic identities, is closely linked to the Internal African Frontier thesis, proposed by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff. This thesis argues that many African societies didn't evolve from simpler forms, but rather emerged from immigrant groups settling in the "internal frontiers", between established polities. These frontiers, areas of weak or no centralized control, became spaces where new social and political structures, and thus, new ethnic identities, were forged. The goal of this study is therefore to establish a similar link between the ethnogenesis of Bafut and the Internal African Frontier thesis.

**2. 1.3. Frontier:** The term "frontier" is generally taken to mean an area separating two countries, or a territorial limit beyond which lies wilderness. However, it could also be used symbolically to refer to the limit of knowledge and understanding of a particular area, as in "frontiers of science" or in the idea of outer space as the "final frontier." A certain elasticity therefore inheres in the term. Anthropologically, the concepts of the frontier are developed in relation to neighbouring terms such as border, boundary, and line and methodologies for its empirical investigation in relation to other social science disciplines like history, international relations, geography, and gender studies. From a multidisciplinary perspective, ethnographic

research aims to destabilize conventional notions of the frontier as the limit of settlement or as a space of statelessness, anarchy, or disorder in order to attend to the diverse cultural and political institutions that produce distinctive ideas of sovereignty, mobility, commerce, and community in such spaces. (Saraf, A 2020)

Chappelle, (1993, p.270) also expresses the idea that although an ethnocentric worldview may regard frontiers as advances in a blank wilderness, or as in Kopytoff's perspective, as 'interstitial vacuum', any frontier is dual from the perspective of the indigenous people and that of the intruders. He further states that frontier situations can generate new ethnicities either indirectly in response to pressures created by expanding states or directly because of deliberate colonial policy.

In his review Van Arsdale, (1992) states that, "Kopytoff sees the frontier as multi-dimensional and interstitial, in some instances even as a force for cultural and historical conservatism". He presents the question Kopytoff emphasizes at the heart of his research as: what is in fact the model of ethnic formation- ethnogenesis- that applies to Africa? And the evidence he and his fellow authors present is "that processes of ethnogenesis occur at local or internal frontiers, within and among peoples who are not as homogeneous as once thought" These authors present the internal frontier as localized, fluid and open to influxes of people who in many instances have been marginalized (p.113). Our study was motivated by this question whether this same frontier phenomenon can be applied to Bafut.

## **2.2. Theoretical Framework.**

### **2.2.1 The Internal African Frontier Thesis:**

The Internal African Frontier Thesis, is a departure from studies on the origin of chiefdoms and states in Africa that have been attributed to the agency of some hypothetical historical bands roaming over a hypothetical pre-historic landscape (Kopytoff, 1987 p.3). Kopytoff is concerned here with, real historic African societies that have emerged at the fringes or peripheries of already existing societies as his paradigm, by discussing African social formation within the context of the frontier. His thesis examines the genesis and development of new societies that have grown out of established societies and communities, adding a new dimension to the historical research on the processes of social formation in sub-Saharan Africa.

He also challenges the tribal model, which tended to emphasize geographic, ethnic and socio-political constancy, even as societies came into contact; or evolutionary theories of African social formation, presented as a linear progression from simpler to more complex societies. He goes on to reject the application of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier theory to the African social formation within the context of the frontier. Turner's frontier theory of American history postulates that, the frontier radically shaped and transformed the American culture or character. Kopytoff argues that the internal frontier model emphasizes the interplay of socio-political, economic and ecological factors, which have led to ethnogenesis, and actually acts as a force for historical continuity and conservatism. His frontier approach thus provides a better understanding of the profound similarities among the political cultures of far flung African societies, suggesting that, the cultural unity of sub-Saharan Africa, is possibly grounded in population movement from established societies to the frontier.

### **2.2.2. The Frontier Process.**

In what he terms the "Frontier Process", Kopytoff presents a series of themes he has identified from Turner's Frontier theory, as applicable to Africa. It is around these themes that he discusses the Frontier Process. We are going to briefly describe these themes here, and later

apply them in our analysis of the possible ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group as a frontier process.

- **The production of Frontiersmen.** Frontiersmen are socially produced by existing communities or metropole, as a result of the social dynamics of traditional African societies that periodically ejected people out of their kins groups or communities. Cultural and sociological factors like succession, property inheritance, resulted in a tendency to fission and segmentation, giving rise to new social groups as offshoots of old ones. This could also be the effects of natural forces like famines and overgrazed pastures.

- **Movement in groups.** The segmentation and fission in African groups from existing groups has been shown to be almost always by sub-groups, rather than individuals. The individual is socially and ritually embedded in a hierarchy of groups. For example, in a conflict over succession, the losing claimant would withdraw with a group of close kinsmen adherents and retainers.

- **The Institutional Vacuum.** The institutional vacuum is considered void of any organized political system, presented here as an area where the frontiersmen considered themselves free from their metropolitan ties and are not morally bounded by institutional constraints. Therefore, for the African frontiersmen, it was an area in which they could aspire to establish themselves. It is also considered, as a no man's land as presented in the literature, but somehow, it is almost always occupied by some aboriginal societies.

- **Pre-Existing Social Models.** This theme is about the ability to secure a way of life that is culturally legitimate and desirable, but was unattainable at the metropole. This is the main challenge in social construction on the frontier, as presented by this thesis: to replicate metropolitan patterns in terms favorable to the new settlers. Therefore, in a broad culture – historical perspective, the frontier may act, to conserve, reinforce, and revitalize the central values of the regional political culture.

- **Adherents as Kinsmen.** Entrepreneurship is the focus of this theme which purports that, to be a frontiersman, is to be an entrepreneur. On the African Frontier, the immigrant kin group's ways of making a living were similar to its neighbor's. Entrepreneurship on the African frontier was above all, social and political, with the goal of achieving independence or favorable terms of dependence, by acquiring adherents and making alliances.

- **Adherents as Subjects.** Once the autonomous kin group was established on the frontier, they did not need to continue toward political autonomy. They could get attached to a local more powerful kin group or become a segment in an acephalous segmentary system. They are therefore adhering as subjects. However, a kin group may follow the course of independent political growth, thus establishing a local hegemony at the frontier. This may become the core of an emerging anomalous community. The groups' continued growth would lead to a gradual consolidation of customs from the diverse but similar customs of its constituent units. Thus emphasizing the interdependence between rulers and subjects, and one of its languages would become dominant.

- **Firstcomers and Latecomers.** The authority of firstcomers over latecomers, postulates that, the earlier strata of adherents had greater claims than later strata to kin-like relations with the dominant core. These relationships implied, both closeness and potential competition common to the African kin groups. Therefore, the longevity of a kin group in residence influenced the acquisition of local rights and an increased potential, as a rival founding group. There is also the possible potential to have a power base, a network of

connections, and local roots, old enough for making ambiguous claims to great antiquity of residence and even to hint at primacy. Meanwhile, a late arriving kin group posed fewer threats to the rulers.

- **Patrimonialism.** Patrimonialism is presented here as the results of an extension of the ruler's household into a polity or village unit. This is the result of having other lineages depending on the core lineage, usually the initial settler at the frontier. It is in this patrimonialism that the functional origins of African sacred chieftainship, and its outgrowth, African "divine kingship", was founded. It therefore became the basis for the rulers' constitutional ideology. However, in the ideology of the subjects, the ruler was a creation of the subjects. The sacred chieftaincy complex derived its essence from the ruler's perspective, though subscribed to by both the ruler and the subject.

- **Inter-Dependence.** Interdependence is the result of Patrimonialism by which the other lineages depend on the core lineage. The two perspectives of the polity, those of the rulers and the subjects, rooted in the difference of their outlook, may remain separate and be expressed by separate bodies of myth, in those polities that remained in the embryonic states. They may also be formally frozen into institutionalized balance of power between chief and people. However, when the separateness was transcended as the polity matured, it became less a matter of two perspectives and more that of dual perspective. In these circumstances, the line between the rulers and ruled became blurred, given the networks of kinship and marriage alliances that united the rulers with many of the subjects.

- **The Regional Context.** The principal theme in the legitimation of African rulers with respect to their subjects and immediate neighbors on the frontier, is the assertion of being a 'firstcomer', in many aspects. The founding group also needed two other kinds of validating charters: one providing an existential validation of the group to itself, and the other providing validation in the eyes of other regional polities. This is because in traditional Africa, political independence did not provide self-evident validation. Legitimation had to be provided by an established authority. The first validation was dependent upon the ancestors; the validation of oneself to oneself, by tracing one's lineage. The second validation was the need for other validation, as the polity grew and acquired a regional stature.

Due to the contradictory needs embedded in the genesis of the polities as frontier formations, their charters sought to embody both independence and links with other polities, much as they embodied the contradictory perspectives of the ruler and the ruled. African polities sought their legitimacies, in a quasi-genealogical link with an established metropole, past or present. Hence the closest possible emulation of the metropolitan political culture served as a further proof of the reality of the claimed political descent. Such a pattern, obviously, insures a considerable continuity through time of cultural forms.

- **The Frontier as Historical Process.** As a historical process, Kopytoff has attempted to take a shorter approach, starting with the ecology of the frontier, its constraints to the structural setting in which African political culture was perpetuated and finally, to the shaping of certain fundamental and very often contradictory features of that political culture, in that setting. The emphasis here has been on the conservative functions of the African internal frontier; however, the frontier concept can also serve to explicate cultural divergences within the African cultural continuities.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This paper is an attempt at an analytic case study of the Bafut ethnic group, as a frontier process. The objective of the study is an attempt at establishing a better understanding of the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group. The goal is to apply the Internal African Frontier Thesis, by Igor Kopytoff, to our analysis, for a better understanding of the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, as opposed to the Eurocentric frontier theories and the notions of primordial ethnic solidarity.

To achieve this objective, the fieldwork was carried out from an emic approach, which attempts to identify culture-specific aspects of concepts and behaviour, not comparable across cultures. The goal of this approach is to understand cultural practices from the native's point of view. The criteria for evaluating behaviours related to the insider and its structure is discovered by the researcher.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The Data Collection was done through ethnographic fieldwork, which is aimed at finding out how things that are often not seen as important, belong to the implicit structures of people's life. Therefore, the data collected was qualitative data, using participant observation and in-depth interviews as the techniques for data collection. These techniques necessitated getting involved in the daily day to day activities of the community.

The ethnographic fieldwork approach was chosen because ethnography is known to be an inductive science, since it works from empirical evidence towards theory. Therefore, the data collected from our observations and interviews, has been of utmost importance for the findings, leading to the analyses, and conclusions and suggestions presented here. A case study analyses was used here to demonstrate, theory. In this case, the subject of the case study is the Bafut Ethnic group and the theory is the 'Internal African Frontier thesis.

This fieldwork was sponsored by the KPAAMCAM (Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism, Cameroon) project, which started in 2014. It is an international research project aimed at understanding the linguistic and sociocultural dynamics of individual multilingualism in Cameroon. The objective is to explore how they pattern in time and space, with special attention to rural contexts. Our participation in this program is as part of the pluridisciplinary aspect of the project from an anthropological perspective, focusing on rural multilingualism

#### **3.3. Techniques and Methods**

As mentioned above the fieldwork was based mainly on participant observation as fieldwork technique, consisting of engaging in activities with the community, observation, and interviews. Observation was done randomly by engaging in any activity that was carried out by individuals, families or groups in the community. There were also instances where the entire village was involved- like the annual dance, different groups in the village-like the development committee, market days, and solidarity groups. Information was gathered from these groups through informal discussions. In cases where the groups were more structured, the focused group discussion technique was used. The sampling technique was mostly through referrals by the Fons as the goal was to get expert information about the pre-colonial socio-political organization of the villages. All the Fons of the 5 villages which are the focus of this study, were interviewed, along with some of their notables, who were mostly elderly men and women

who could remember the stories they had been told about the pre-colonial times and the history of their migration and settlement patterns.

There were some limitations to the study due to the methodology. Firstly, being an anthropological study, the researcher could not speak nor understand the language. Hence there was need for an interpreter as the participants were mostly elderly persons who did not speak any other language. Secondly, the participants were ear-marked by the Fons since they were referrals by the Fons, and therefore would share only information they could have been prompted to share. Furthermore, where the participants were randomly sampled, these were willing participants, and therefore also biased to some extent. Generally, some people were reluctant to participate at the interviews, discussions or conversations.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1. The Settlement Patterns.**

The different lineages that make up the present Bafut ethnic group migrated to their present site under different leaders and at different times (Awah 2005, Moffor et al 2023). This information was confirmed or attested to during our fieldwork from the interviews with the Fons, Sub- Chiefs and their notables.

A description of the settlement patterns of the five major lineages of the Bafut ethnic group who claim autonomy of origin and migration pattern, will give us some information on how they came together as an ethnic group. It will also inform us on the development and sharing of cultural traits and rituals, the construction, maintenance or shift of social structures, resulting in the formation of collective identities that define the emerging ethnic group. Ritzenthalers (1962 p.12) explain that the ethnic pattern of the highland areas of the Grassfields seem to have been established within the last three hundred to four hundred years. Delancey (2019) in his summary also confirms that the Grassfields witnessed the proliferation of a bewildering number of states beginning perhaps as early as the 16th century. Our goal here is therefore an attempt to explore the process of the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, from these different groups arriving at different times from different established communities' or metropolises.

The five major lineages of the Bafut ethnic group, who claim autonomy of origin and migration patterns are:

**4.1.1 Mberbeli:** The aborigines or initial settlers of the land, are the people of Mberbeli, with Neba-chi as their leader. They do not have any recollection of when they arrived here. It is estimated that there was continuous life in this region since Neolithic times, and therefore the earlier inhabitants could have been a hunting people in numbers that they do not appear in the legendary histories of invaders. (Ritzenthalers, 1962 p.12). This could imply that they did not need or have any highly organized socio-political organization. During our field work, we did not carry out any in-depth observation at Mberbeli as the Fon acknowledged that after being overthrown by the Agha'anjoo, the leader of the Feurleus, the leader of Mberbeli, Neba-chi, surrendered to the former's authority. The successors therefore continue as subordinates or sub-Fons under Bujong, and participate at their rituals as one of the other villages answerable to the Fon at Bujong

**4.1.2. The Bawums.** They claim to have migrated to this area and met the people of Mberbeli who were very welcoming. The narrative goes that, they originally moved from an area near Foumban and settled temporarily in different places before settling for a while, at Alanteh, near the Bamenda, 'upstation'. The story goes that, due to the kindness of their leader, 'Ntoh', his wife was prompted in a dream of some impending disaster so they moved away

towards the present site of Bafut. While still on their way, an earthquake occurred which could be seen from where they were. They moved towards Wum and settled at Nchum. Due to ongoing inter-group wars, they dug a trench where they hid for safety for a period of time. This trench was called, 'Mfuntoh', which means, the 'Ntoh's hole'. It is claimed that the trench is still there. After scouting for safety, they left the trench and found the people of Mberbeli, whose leader was Neba-chi and he allowed them to settle there. They lived in harmony with the people of Mberbeli until the arrival of the Feurleus. It is stated that they settled here for a generation or two before the Feurleus.

After a while they moved to their present site, where they found fig trees, also known as the 'UWUME TREE'. This fig tree symbolized peace and prosperity, as it was very productive. They used it to set the borders of their area. This led to a change of name from BELEFE, to BAWUM. They identify a total of 11 Ntohs from when they left Alanteh to the present. Presently, there are 11 quarters in Bawum, under the leadership of the Ntoh- Bawum, as the Bawum people prefer to address their leader as, 'Ntoh'.

**4.1.3. The Feurleus:** The third settlers are the Feurleus who came from Ndop as a result of a split between two brothers. Engard (1988 p.56) presents, "the myth of the arrival of the Angha anjoo, the 'powerful stranger from the East', said to be the founder of the Bafut (Feurleu) dynasty". This description fits the story of the arrival of the Feurleus, who according to Chenemo (2018) consider themselves the real Bafut. However, during our field work, we observed that all the villages have a different name, and those who claim autonomy, each have a leader who identifies himself as Fon and is recognized by his people as such. They all claim to be Bafut people, speak the same language, and perform their rituals at the same ancestral shrine of the land, despite their claim to the autonomy and sovereignty of their Fon.

When Agha'anjoo, (the leader of the Feurleus) arrived Bafut with his people, they were given permission to settle on the southern ridge from Neba'atsi, the Fon of the Mberbeli, and the alleged first settlers of the area. After a while, a loose confederation was formed between Agha'anjoo, leader of the Feurleus, Ntoh, the leader of the Bawums, and Neba'atsi, the leader of the first settlers. Neba'atsi, is said to have been a very selfish leader who did not entertain his people and cater for their welfare. Meanwhile, Agha'anjoo is said to have been a very generous leader, reaching out to his people and his neighbors with kindness. The narrative continues that, the elders and the people were dissatisfied with Neba'atsi's attitude so the elders hatched a plot by which, in a pre-arranged scuffle during a celebration, Agha'anjoo

stepped on Neba'atsi's foot, a gesture which implied that Neba'atsi has been thereby dethroned as leader of the people. It is also alleged that Neba'atsi, found this unbecomable, and so avenged himself upon the conspirators by committing the most ritually polluting act imaginable: suicide by hanging. Agha'anjoo now, took over as the leader of the people.

**4.1.4. Mankanikong.** The fourth group of settlers are the people of Mankanikong. The information on their migration and settlement is from interviews with the Fon and some of his notables. The ruling family is said to have migrated from Wum. They arrived the area in huge numbers and set up camp within a short time. This is how they earned their name, Mankanikong: they arrived in huge numbers (Ma= big) in huge baskets, (nka = baskets used for transportation of goods.), and thus the place was called, Ma'nka (big baskets). Several different lineages had settled in the area before, arriving at different times and coming from different villages: Metta, Widikum, Wum, Mendankwen. After the ruling lineage settled, they overthrew the other lineages as they had (huge spears = nikong.) Their name got modified to, Ma'nka, nikong (people with big basket and huge spears).

The initial settlers constituting the four main quarters, came together to make up the village of Mankanikong. The first main quarter is Alatichia, led by the notable called, Muniba. He is the son of the Fon of Mambu. They moved from Widikum together and settled for some time at Mankanikong. Due to a conflict of authority, the Fon of Mambu moved to their present site and were welcomed by the Bawums. There is another lineage at Alatichia led by Muchi. They came from Mendakwen. Muchi was overshadowed by Muniba, so he no longer has a voice but his descendants still live at Alatichia. The second main quarter is Alantah, led by Wanzie. Wanzie is the son of Nchotu, who is also the son of the Fon of Mankanikong. Wanzie became very industrious and acquired the status of nobility because of his dynamism, he overshadowed his father. The third main quarter is Niweh, led by the notable, Saacha. They came from Mundum. His descendants are still at Niweh and there is not much more information about their origin. The fourth main quarter is Atumankaa, whose notable is Akeuh Mekong. They came from Bakong, a village on the Wum road. They moved from their initial settlement because of leadership rivalry, and settled at Mankanikong.

The first settlers of Mankanikong are the Mufuhs and the Muwaas, who were in the area before the other settlers mentioned above. These are the real Mankanikong people who have their children still in the community with no ranks. They are just ordinary people in the community, and are not acknowledged as the first settlers, but, 'we know they are the first settlers', in the words of the present Fon of Mankanikong. The Fon's family originated from Weh, in Wum, and settled at Atumanka, where the Akuehs are, presently. Mufuh, one of the aboriginal settlers, gave him a piece of land where he settled.

**4.1.5. The Mambus:** The fifth group are the people of Mambu. They claim to have come from Widikum, settled in Metta for a while; moved with some Metta followers and settled at Mankanikong where a lineage has settled up till the present. The greater part of the population, moved to the present site. The Fon of Mambu explained that they still recognize their kinsmen who are in Mankanikong, but no link with Metta or Widikum. Mambu has 8 quarters, named as follows: Ntielah, Mesah, Basong Atulah, Ntanguru Atsontu Atutu and Beyang. At the time of the interview with the Fon, it seems the village had been experiencing some conflicts amongst the people. Their settlement pattern also indicates a lot a splitting and lack of respect of the authority of the Fon.

Mambu is one of the most modernized Fondoms among the initial settlers. This is because they have accommodated missionary activities in their area, like schools, hospitals and churches, from colonial times and therefore must have experienced some socio-cultural changes as a result of the presence of these institutions. Therefore, we observed a larger number of non-Bafut settlers in this Fondom than in the other Fondoms of initial settler.

#### **4.2. Ritual Practices.**

The people of the Grassfields in general, and Bafut in particular, have demonstrated unique custom of reverence and confidence in the authority of their Fons. This is seen specifically in their intercessory powers for performing rituals, through the deceased Fons, for the welfare of the entire village. The earlier Fons who died after the incorporation of the first five autonomous lineages were buried at a central shrine at Mberberli. All the Fons of the Bafut ethnic group who claim autonomy of descent and are a part of the initial incorporation, start their ritual ceremonies at this shrine, before returning to their specific village shrines or 'Achum'. The Achums are located at a sacred space, accessible only to specific individuals, who have acquired the right by birth or by recognition. Some special rituals are performed every

year by the Fon due to their significance and usefulness for individuals and for the village. These are seasonal rituals: planting and harvesting; rituals for casting out evil and illnesses from the village; and rituals for childbirth and prosperity. The highest rituals of the year are those performed before the annual dance, or the Fon's dance. This is an annual celebration which brings everyone who has a sense of belonging to the Bafut ethnic group back to their village. The final activity during this period is the Fon's dance. This is a dance by the people, for the Fon, during which they acknowledge the present Fon and sing the praises of the past Fons. The greatest significance of this dance is that the Fon joins the people in the dance, and the entire Fondom participates. It is remarkable that all the Fons who claim autonomous descent, organize the Fon's dance in their villages, annually, and invite Fons from the neighboring Fondoms. This is a manifestation and recognition of their traditional authority by the people from that Fondom.

Other rituals which concerns lineages, quarters and households, can be performed by lineage heads, and family heads, or specific individuals in the community who have been identified as having mystical powers or the gift of healing. These would be, rituals for, marriage and childbirth; rituals for unexplainable deaths like accidents and sudden deaths; rituals for favors and rituals for casting away evil and illnesses. There are also rituals for cleansing at the death of a spouse either male or female. This belief in the supernatural through the intercession of the ancestors, is a core belief in the Grassfields, such that before anyone engages in any major endeavor, they have to seek the blessings of their ancestors. Even the elites from the diaspora still perform these ritual practices, despite their affiliation to other religious practices.

In every village that claimed ancestral autonomy and independent migratory pattern, the village head is considered as a Fon by the people. They each have a village shrine (Achum) for their specific village rituals. We also observed during our field trip that two of the villages that claim autonomy, and therefore have declared themselves as Fondoms, perform the Annual dance each year. The annual dance is an annual ceremony where the Fon is honored by his people by dancing, and the Fon honors his people by joining in the dance. It is the highest celebration in Bafut and honor for the Fon and the entire village. It is during this annual ceremony which takes 3 to 5 days that the people in the diaspora who wish to celebrate their Fon, go back for this celebration. This is also when the Fon honors those who have distinguished themselves, with different symbolic cultural awards.

### **4.3. Solidarity Groups.**

Solidarity groups are a kind of communal self-help association. They are the bases of any kind of socialization and certain socio-economic activities amongst people from the Grassfields and Bafut in particular. At the village level, they are established by age groups, gender, and social and economic interests. These groups exist as a support system for any concerns or activities identified by the group. During the Annual Dance of one of the Fondoms, (Mankanikong), where we carried out most of the fieldwork, there were many women's solidarity groups represented both in the village and from the urban towns. From the focused group discussions we had with these womens' groups, the main objectives of the groups in the village were: 1) coming together to cultivate one another's farms. The women explained that they could also cultivate the farms of none members, and get paid. This was seen as a faster way of getting the work done. 2) Putting financial resources together to give to one person, as an interest free loan. 3) Setting up a thrift and loan system. 4) Celebrating with each other in times of joy and consoling with one another in times of sorrow. This system directs the weekly activities of the women in the village such that they are always looking forward to their next meeting which is usually on a 'Country Sunday' when no one is allowed to go to their farms.

These same activities are engaged in at the urban level, except for the absence of farms. The women from the urban areas therefore get their financial resources from other income generating activities which are usually individualistic and cannot be performed on a communal basis. There are no 'Country Sundays' in the urban areas as these are not under the jurisdiction of the Fon. For the Annual Dance activities, the women's solidarity groups organized a singing competition between all the groups present.

We also identified a solidarity group among the youth which was focused mainly on carrying out development projects, with financial support from the development committee of the village. What was remarkable about the youth solidarity group was the absence of any personal material gain from belonging to the solidarity group. The youth were mostly motivated by the idea of completion of the different development projects in the village and how they could participate. For the annual year's celebration, they also had a soccer competition between the youth of various quarters even though they had just one association. We were not able to contact any of the men's solidarity groups as they all seemed to be highly secretive, with very restrictive guidelines. However, it seems most men are associated with some of the "secret societies" of the Fendom, which we could not persuade them to communicate with us. We observed that, the characteristics of the activities of the solidarity groups served an enduring purpose, particularly in the realm of material livelihood. The solidarity groups therefore play an existential role in the life of the people resulting in solid relational bonds.

## **5. Analysis and Discussion**

In this analysis, we are going to apply the 'frontier process' to the Bafut ethnic group, with consideration of the themes described above, in the theoretical framework : The Production of Frontiersmen; movement in groups; the Institutional Vacuum; Pre-existing Social Models; Adherent as Kinsmen; Adherent as subjects; First comers and Latecomers; Patrimonialism and the Frontier; Inter-dependence; Historical Process.

### **5.1. The Production of Frontiersmen**

In the narratives from the interviews with the Fons of the settlement patterns of the different groups that claim autonomy, each group arrived at a different time. They all claim to have come from an existing community. Except for the Aborigines of Mberbeli, the Bawums were the first to arrive and claim to have settled at Mendakwen, where some of their people remained behind. This confirms the existence of a group of people larger than the migratory group. The Feurleus arrived next and are acclaimed to have had, a 'huge following'. Here also, there was a split at Ndop due to disagreement between the lineage heads or brothers. Then came the Mambu's from, Widikum, settled at Metta for a while, moved to Mankanikong and had another split. Finally, we have Mankanikong, who also came with a large following and installed themselves quickly, to the amazement of the previous settlers. This demonstrates that all these groups left behind, some existing sociopolitical organization, and were not just 'bands of wanderers.'" The narratives demonstrate that the main lineages that formed the incorporation, moved to this area in search of areas where they could exist in peaceful collaboration far from the conflict, and rivalry at the metropole.

The arrival of these 'newcomers' resulted in the creation of frontiersmen. According to Kopytoff, once these social relations are established, they tend to acquire a functional autonomy of their own that makes it difficult to break them. The leader of the Feurleus who had a large following and was said to have charisma, generosity and leadership qualities, was chosen by the other existing groups and assigned to be their 'spokesman' according to one of

the notables of Bawum, and confirmed by the other Fons. This seemed to be a peaceful merger, so to speak. However, he usurped the powers of the original leader of the territory, which could have been supported by the other leaders as the story goes. There seems to be a lurking regret over the support that was given to the Feurleu, at the time of the incorporation, as it seems he eventually used it against the other leaders.

### **5.2. Movement in Groups**

In Bafut, the four major migratory groups of the union have a story of how they came in groups: the Bawums, who first settled at Mendakwen, split up into groups, part of which stayed and were destroyed by fire, while, the other part moved south west, as the 'firstcomers' and joined the Mberbelis, the original settlers. These two groups were later joined by the Feurleus who moved from Ndop as a result of a split resulting from chieftaincy disputes. Finally, the Mankanikong, whose narrative is that they came in great numbers well equipped with their necessary supplies, and settled down fast by construction of their homes, quickly. This movement in groups reinforces their solidarity and dependence on one another, and the authority of the leader.

### **5.3 The Institutional Vacuum.**

The institutional vacuum in Bafut, was found around the people of Mberbeli, who would be considered here as the aboriginals of the area. They presented little or no political resistance, because the leader was 'an elderly mean man' to his people, according to the narratives. So the newcomers, arriving from different metropolises at different times, felt safe and free to settle here at their arrivals. However, with time, they came into an agreement to work together so they could be more, supportive of each other and become stronger to face invaders, like the Jihadist horsemen and finally, the Europeans.

The task of re-institutionalizing at this institutional vacuum, due to the tendency to split, could be seen in the group that came from Metta and settled at Mankanikong, and later split, with the father moving on to form the present Mambu. Our observation here is that it was easier for groups with less centralized in-groups, and lesser following to further split up at the frontier than those with centralized organization and a larger following. There was also the tendency for the large following to be centralized and the smaller following to be acephalous or not having greater loyalties to their leader. However, due to the political insecurities of the frontier, the divisive tendencies were apt to be offset by solidarity in the face of common danger. This can be shown in how easy it was for the founding members of the incorporation to agree to come together and form a union. Adapting to the host population which was part of the new environment they had to cope with, was not an issue on the internal African frontier, as immigrants usually encountered a population that was much like them in culture and often in language.

Segmentation-as-replication represents the frontier process at its most conservative, as the process did not lead to radical detachment from the parent group. The new communities created by the Fon were an extension of the Fondom, with the same socio-political structure. They were still attached to the Fondom, as the appointed leader was either a prince, or a notable appointed by the Fon. Therefore, they owed him loyalty because of kinship ties and gratitude for the appointment. The other reason for which these new leaders had to stay loyal to the Fon was the fact that they did not have the mystical powers and authority, which came as a birth right, to intercede to the ancestors for the welfare of the people. Therefore, while representing the Fon among the people, the Fon represented them and their people by his ability to

communicate with the ancestors of the land on whom the people depend, for their well-being. The sub-Fons or notables that we interviewed described a relationship with the Fon through kinship ties. This was more noticeable at the borders and the reasons they gave for establishing a sub-Fondom at the borders, was to extend their territory and ward off intrusion from newcomers or existing neighboring villages. There was no question at Bujong of the possibility of forming a new society, as it seems that the benefit of belonging to the Bujong Fondom, was more than splitting to form a new independent society. Therefore at this institutional vacuum the process of re-institutionalizing was quite successful, due to the authority of the Fon, and the benefits of association with the Fon's mystical powers and the loyalty of being kinsmen.

From the perspective of the socio-political organization, the centralized hierarchical structure which gives the Fon the power over his people, by his birth, makes this position a preordained one, not to be disputed by any loyal member of the community. The segmentation and replication of the political structure, therefore, gives the assigned notables the same authority over their people, as that which the Fon has over the entire Fondom, except that of mediation with the ancestors. This creates some independence of each sub-Fondom from the centre but also ensures the dependence on the Fon, through his ritualistic powers as intermediary with the ancestors for the well-being of his entire Fondom.

The initial incorporation of the Bafut people could have been the result of several factors: firstly, they all have been shown to have disengaged radically from the controls of their parent group. Secondly, as a true geographical frontier, the land was sparsely populated and consequently, it was an objective political vacuum, since the aborigines are said to have had a weak leader who was not liked by his people. Therefore it was easy for them to engage in significant social construction the creation of the incorporation. The appointment of the Feurleu by the other leaders as spokesperson, his charisma and leadership skills and finally his manoeuvring of symbols of power, resulted in the institution of a new social organization and political structure.

#### **5.4. Pre-existing Social Model.**

The main challenge in social construction on the frontier, is usually to replicate metropolitan patterns, in terms favorable to oneself. In the case of Bafut, we may conjecture here that, since the leader of the group from Ndop had a great following and was seen as having charisma and very generous to the people, he may have instituted the present structure that they have, by borrowing from his previous metropole. The Bawum also demonstrating an allegiance to a leader, could readily corporate with the Feurleu to form an incorporation giving rise to a new social order.

In Bafut, the impact of the metropole was very minimal, mostly due to geographical reasons: movement back and forth could be very challenging. The reason for which they left would also be a deterrent. For example, for the Feurleus, there was a clear split, and relocation of both factions and so each group would focus on installing themselves at their new environment. For the Bawums also, the earthquake created a situation of no return. And for Mankanikong, the size of the population that arrived at this new site is indicative of a total move. For the Mambus, coming from Metta, it would have been difficult to cross the river Mezam, thus making it a move of no return, also. However, we would hypothesize that the political structure adopted by the incorporation could be that of the metropole, which the groups came from. Since there is evidence that the Bawums came originally from Bamenyam, we are aware that they also have the hereditary hierarchical organization. The Feurleus coming from Ndop, also demonstrate the existence of similar sociopolitical organization, and a claim to

ancestral ties with the people of Ndop. This would have made it easier for these two groups to come to an agreement for incorporation, giving rise to a new social order. The relative population densities of the various groups also gave an upper hand to the group from the Ndop plains, as it is said that the Feurleu arrived with a large following, which implies that before long, his people would have integrated with the existing population.

Finally, the organization and strength of the aboriginals was not one to compare with the newcomers, as their leader had already been presented as mean and therefore was not popular among his own people. These frontiersmen were therefore given a fair free hand in the establishment of a new socio-political organization, which they did and which has been successful to the present day.

### **5. 5. Adherents as kinsmen.**

All the newcomers who settled at the Bafut internal frontier, arrived with a group of kins-men. From the narratives of the Fons and notables, the Fons maintain power at the frontier, through a kin-group model of integration, by which they assigned notables to occupy fertile grounds in the existing vast lands, and also, by attracting and retaining adherents. These adherents were typically new comers, who were not part of an existing kinship group but wanted to be acknowledged by the Fon as part of his Fondom. Furthermore, we could also argue that becoming part of the hierarchical socio-political organization, with the Fon at the summit, having mystical powers, and the only one who can intercede with the ancestral Fons, could be considered a subtle technique of gaining adherence to this powerful leader who can ensure their wellbeing, whether individually, or as a corporate kin group or lineage.

From our analysis, pre-colonial Bafut could not be considered a complex society, as it is a relatively more recent creation, even though present day Bafut may do so. Therefore, looking back at the period before the incorporation, one can deduce that there was some convincing as the benefits of the incorporation amongst the kin groups who agreed on the incorporation. One of the goals in forming this incorporation was mainly political, with respect to having a stronger force to face intruders, as the founding members of the incorporation maintained their initial autonomy, which was modified by colonization and modern state formation. However, they are still claim autonomy to the present day.

Within the Bafut ethnic group, we would suggest that, the ritual aspect of their incorporation was one of the strongest elements in their unity. Firstly because, despite the need for assertion of autonomy, all the major autonomous villages, still go to the shrine where they once carried out their rituals together. Now, they perform these rituals at separate times but at the same shrine, therefore acknowledging the same ancestors of the land, not because of descent, but because that is the ancestral shrine of the land. This bonding as the result of ritualistic belief in the ancestors of the land and the influence they have in the provision of the needs of the living, we can argue, is a binding force among the Bafut Fondoms; each acknowledging autonomy while respecting the rights of the other villages associated to the original shrine. This recognition of each Fondom's allegiance to the shrine also constitutes their unity as an ethnic group, since their wellbeing is ensured through the same ancestors, the original ancestors of the land.

Finally, in considering adherents as kinsmen in this process, the kinship model is presented as the most useful one to follow in the earliest stage of growth for a new group at the frontier. Among the autonomous Fondoms, it is the Fondom at Bujong that has experienced this, the most, by its expansion. The Bujong Fondom has 16 villages under its Fondom, most of which are led by kinsmen, either brothers of the Fon or sons of brothers of the Fon assigned to

lead the community. In our discussions with the sub-Fons of the villages under the Fon at Bujong, they expressed a sacredness in their respect of the authority of the Fon, as the appointed leader by birth and the mystical connection with the ancestors. Since they are kinsmen and belief in the authority and mystical powers of the Fon, they remain loyal to him. The great expansion of the Fondom at Bujong, could also be due to the fact that the Fon at Bujong has always had many more wives and therefore more sons to situate than the other Fondoms. The other corporate kin groups in the union expanded by embracing newcomers who were willing to adopt their socio-political model and become part of their Fondom. Without the large following and numerous wives, the others could only expand by welcoming, newcomers.

### **5.6. Adherents as Subjects**

Once established on the frontier, the autonomous kin group did not need to continue towards political autonomy. From the narratives on the settlement patterns of the autonomous kin groups, the immigrant groups created a relationship with the indigenes, before they could jointly establish a centralized political structure. Therefore, the people of Mberbeli, Feurleu, and Bawum, were already living amicably as neighbors, before the incorporation. Mambu and Mankanikong who joined the incorporation after its institution would be considered by this model as latecomers per the narratives. Mankanikong could be considered as an autonomous kin group that first established itself and later got attached to the powerful political incorporation. According this frontier process, continuous growth of the group led to consolidation of customs from all the kin groups, with one of its languages becoming the dominant language. Therefore, in Bafut, the indigenous language of the aborigines was the most likely one to be adopted. From this perspective, we may conclude that it was easier for an incorporated system to maintain this language in a sense of adaptability for all as this is the language of the land. Furthermore, due to the mystical powers associated with speaking the language of the land as that is the language the ancestors understand, maintaining this language gave a sense of belonging to this new integrated powerful group.

We also know from the narratives that the leader of the Feurleus, established himself as leader by personal charm, generosity, intrigue and trickery. For the indigenes, this meant a new way of doing things as they now had another higher authority to look up to. However, they still had their kin group structure to depend on, so the basic relationships within a kin group was not affected by the incorporation. According to this thesis, once the newcomers assumed power, it represented the first expansion of their already existing frontier settlement; the beginning of another stage in the process by which an original kin group, grown into a kin-like group, continues on its course toward founding a polity or village. In this polity, an unambiguous distinction existed between the kin-like ruling core and those whom it now ruled. In Bafut, this was and is still being expressed with the awe-like respect given to the Fon and all the members of his lineage from one generation to the next, and also the respect they expect from the other kin-like groups. With the formation of the incorporation, there was a change in the model of integration from a corporate solidarity modelled on kinship to a solidarity of interdependence modelled on political contract. If the emergent polity grew in size, the kin group model for recruiting adherents became increasingly impractical. In this second stage, the polity moved from a corporate kin-group model of integration to one emphasizing the interdependence between rulers and subjects. However, from the ruler's perspective, the founding kin group was still the ruling kin group.

The extensive growth in size has been mainly within Bujong, and this has been mainly based on the kin-group model of integration. The growth maintenance of the kin-group model

of integration was due firstly to the fact that the Fon had many wives and therefore many children. Therefore, for each generation of children, once the succeeding Fon has been appointed, the new Fon would appoint some Princes (who could be his uncles or brothers) to move with a kins-group and establish a new quarter, and they would become, the quarterhead. In this way, the Fon maintained the loyalties of the other Princes and gave them authority and a way of participating in the ruling of the people, as quarterheads have authority over the social and judicial affairs of the quarter, or immediate kins-men. Depending on the size of the group, family heads who would eventually become quarterheads if their population grew, also played the role of the quarterheads in their extended families. The second practice that maintained the connection is the intermarriage between kins- groups, such that most people were related by birth or by marriage. And as such, had loyalties for the maintenance of the group and to the leader, who represents them in the courts of the Fon, who is the mediator for the people with their ancestors. We would also suggest here that, the founding kin group has also been able to maintain the authority as the ruling group, because of the ideology of the leadership of the Fon coming from the founding kin-group.

#### **5.7. First comers and Latecomers**

In the hierarchy of first comers and latecomers, the earlier strata of adherents had greater claims than later strata to kin-like relations with the dominant core. This implied that the longer a kin group had been in residence, the more local rights it acquired and the greater the potential of the group as a rival to the founding group. From the narration on how the incorporation was formed, Bujong and Bawum, could be considered as firstcomers, joining the already existing Mberberli community which did not seem to have been a corporate kin group, as they have been described more like a group of hunter gatherers, who had settled in the area, a long time before the arrival of these two corporate kin groups, whose narratives of movement patterns are different from each other but similar to other common narratives of the region. When we consider them as the firstcomers, we can better understand why in the establishment of the incorporation, the leader of the Bawum had the next most powerful position in the hierarchy of the political organization, that of the enthronement of the Fon, according to the narrative by a notable of Bawum. He describes the creation of this incorporation as one with equal rights, while the leader was appointed by the others as spokesperson, and not as their leader, specifically with the arrival of the Germans, in the 19th century. This was also the reason why they formed an incorporation, so as to have a greater following and bigger force to confront outsiders, like the jihadists or ‘the horsemen from the north’.

Bawum would also be in the position of, “a rival likely to have a power base, a network of connections and local roots old enough for making (ambiguous) claims to a greater antiquity of residence and even hint primacy”. So, it would have made sense for the leader of the Feurleu to cooperate with the Bawum, at the incorporation, as the Bawums could have been a potential threat to the existing politico-social order and to their stability. On the other hand, a late arriving kin group posed fewer threats to the rulers, especially if the newcomer/latecomer group, was small in size; it cost very little to accommodate them. However, they brought higher potential benefits to the existing polity. A good example of this situation is that of the Mambu kin group, who are said to have moved from Metta, first settled around Mankanikong, split and the parent group moved to their present site. “To secure their permanent loyalty, the leaders had to resort to the cementing metaphor of kinship”, in this case their leader was also a member of the ruling group. In the case of Mankanikong, which can also be considered a latecomer, but who had consolidated its own political autonomy, and had kin-groups as adherents before joining the

incorporation, the Fon at Bujong assigned him a title in the central ruling group of the incorporation, after helping in resolving a conflict with one of the adherent groups of Mankanikong. This gave him added authority to that of being a member of the incorporated group, and thus ensured the loyalty of Mankanikong, to the incorporation.

In principle, authority was legitimized by being an aborigine. This was due to the prestige of “firstcomers” that firstcomers carried. The principle had to be adapted to the reality that the polity was in fact dominated by the immigrant latecomers’ group, whom we would consider in our analysis as “firstcomers”. This is because these newcomers (the first arrivals, after the aborigines), were the dominant core group. The aborigines were already there before the arrival of the other groups and therefore had a better mastery of the environment and means of survival. To claim prestige from the fact of being an aborigine, was a quintessentially frontier idea. For the Bafut ethnic group, the prestige of being the aborigine group is very important as this is where the original shrine to the ancestors is located and that is the language adopted by the ethnic group. This recognition of the aborigines gives legitimacy and authority to the new-found political entity. It also gives them the authority of being “the first occupants of the land with special ritual relationship to its ancestors. However, this did not necessarily give them the ruling authority as seen in the case of the Bafut ethnic group.

Kopytoff further explains that to recognize those we have decided to identify as the aborigines, is to identify their authority and special ritual position. Since newcomers to a frontier seldom found it empty of inhabitants, the latter would, according to this principle, automatically lord it over them. This may imply that the aborigines may not have had an organized political structure, or had a weak leader. In our case, the leader has been described as old, wicked and not loved by his people. Therefore, our frontier met the criterion of being an institutional vacuum, an environment devoid of legitimate political authority. However, if more than one group joined them or a bigger group came and settled, that would imply that they were either welcoming, or were overthrown or the environment was very conducive to what newcomers were looking for. This would therefore result in domination by the newcomers. For the Bafut ethnic group, the newcomers may have dominated firstly because of a greater following; secondly, by their organizational skills in bringing the different entities together; and thirdly, by the leadership qualities of the leader of the Feurleus as expressed by some notables and all the Chiefs that were interviewed.

### **5.8. Patrimonialism**

The central tenet of this theme is that, the solidarity of a corporate kinship group gradually gave way to the solidarity of contractual interdependence between the ruler and the ruled. We could also suggest here that this duality also exists as a central tenet of the power structure of the Bafut people, giving rise to its socio-political organization and ethnicity. This was expressed at an interview with the Fon of Mankanikong, who described his relationship with his people through his title: MUMA, which means, child of the people, because he has been accepted by the people to be their Fon, even though he was appointed by his father. He is also answerable to the people as a child is answerable to the parent. However, as the Fon, the people look up to him as their father. In his own words, I AM THE FATHER OF THE PEOPLE AS FON AND SON OF THE PEOPLE AS THEY ACCEPT ME AS THEIR FATHER. He explained that his title is a constant reminder that he is answerable to the people as a child is answerable to their parent.

We could suggest that this duality is more like a check and balance of the power of the Fon. Since he is appointed, not elected, his position is not earned, so his authority has to be

sanctioned by the people through the representation of the notables and leaders who are usually the quarter heads. They are his immediate collaborators in the execution of the affairs of the village, and oversee, the welfare of the members of their quarters, like resolving disputes, and representing the people in the discussions of the affairs of the village with the Fon. This implies that the Fon's authority is dependent on the quarter heads who represent the people, and therefore, there is a dynamic of interdependency.

Since the growing polity was a direct expansion of the founders' frontier hamlet, the patrimonial model of the latter became the basis for the ruler's constitutional ideology. By contrast, in the ideology of the subjects (who could always leave for other frontiers), the ruler was the creation of the subjects. This ideological duality gave a particular stamp to what has been called African "sacred chieftainship" and "divine kingship". Within the Bafut ethnic group, it is only Bujong that has had considerable expansion through which the patrimonial model has been maintained as an extension of the founding hamlet, as a result of their kinship ties, or loyalty. The sacredness of this patrimonial model, also, (as the subjects look up to the ruler for their basic survival) made it difficult for individuals to move away, as their well-being depended on the ruler. However, from the subject's perspective, there is no need of a ruler without subjects. So, the power of the Fon is only as relevant, for as long as he has subjects. It is therefore in the Fon's best interest to ensure the welfare of his people. We dare to quote the Bible here; the conversation between Peter and Jesus, when Jesus asked whether the apostles would leave him, And Peter answered, "To whom Lord can we go? You have the message of eternal life". We hold that from the people's perspective, the Fon has the powers to intercede with the ancestors for all their needs. We are thus led to conclude that, this could be the attracting factor of the relationship between the Fon and his people, and the ideology of power and leadership, for the hereditary, hierarchical centralized system in the Bafut ethnic group.

### **5.9. Inter-Dependence**

The inter-dependence between the ruler and the ruled is usually not recognized by the ruled, since the ruler has more to lose when he has no people to rule. The ruler therefore needs systems in place to ensure the continuous loyalty of the ruled. We may therefore suggest here that the ritual powers of the Fon acts as a balance of authority for the Fon while the sociopolitical organization, serves as representation and checks for the people through the intermediary of the quarter heads and notables who represent the people at the level of the Fondom.

Within the Bafut ethnic group, one of the most significant rituals is that which is carried out at the beginning of the planting season, by the Fon, his notables and quarter heads. During this ritual, the Fon intercedes for protection on the land, fertility of the farms and the general welfare of the people, from the ancestors. This marks the beginning of the planting season and any other activity the people wish to engage in, individually and collectively. Through this process, the people look up to the Chief, and the Chief in his turn ensures the welfare of the village, through his intercession with the ancestors.

In summarizing, Kopytoff presents four stages in the growth of frontier settlements that develop into chieftaincies, Kingdoms, and in the Western Grassfield context, Fondoms: Firstly, is the organizing of its limited expansion, on the model of a corporate kin group of the initial immigrant settlement. In Bafut, we identify four immigrant corporate kin groups: Feurleu, the Bawum, Mambu and Mankanikong. From the narratives of their settlement patterns, they all arrived at different times, joining the aborigines. The narrative of the Feurleu seeking an area that was level land conducive for agriculture, demonstrates the challenges of organizing within difficult topography.

Secondly, the growth of the corporate kin group into a chieftaincy that incorporated new subjects and neighboring settlements into an integrated polity built on the recognition of the separateness and interdependence of rulers and subjects; this was done according to a model of an implicit contract which glossed over the role of force in the making of the polity. From the narratives of three Fon and the notables, in Bafut, an incorporation was done between the initial newcomers of the land with the aborigines, with each head of a corporate kin group, having an assigned duty in the union, while maintaining their autonomy as independent Fondoms.

Thirdly, the maturing of the preceding chieftaincy into a kingdom. While the Fondom at Bujong could be considered as maturing into a kingdom due to their expansion on the kinship model, and recruitment of adherents, it seems that with the onset of colonization, there was a breach in the agreement between the initial corporate kinship groups that formed the incorporation. With colonization, the Fon at Bujong acquired more authority as leader of the group, and no longer just their spokesperson. Meanwhile, the other autonomous groups in the union, consider themselves, independent of him. However, the narrative of a conflict at Mankanikong between two lineage leaders, demonstrates that in the case of a conflict between corporate kinship groups, the Fon at Bujong's influence was needed to solve the problem.

Fourthly, the further expansion of the kingdom through open conquest and frank domination of peripheral areas, created an outer circle of vassal polities and subordinate allies, over whom control was achieved by pragmatic means, including force, rather than by symbolic means. There are no reports of conquest and the use of force within the Bafut ethnic group, except the struggle over interstitial areas between villages wishing to claim the area and this was done by establishing a kin group at the border of these areas. The dispute arose if the area was occupied and which village the occupants had allegiance to. The kin group assigned to these interstitial areas to become a vassal for the Chieftdom were usually princes who were loyal to their Fon. However, in an interview with one of these vassal quarter heads, of Mankanikong, he expressed a desire to separate from the Fon and establish his own Fondom since he was a prince and had equal rights like the Fon. In the precolonial days this would be a situation of a split from the ruling family to look for 'greener pastures', and therefore possibly becoming frontiersmen. In the post-colonial era, this separation can only be vetoed by the administration and the neighboring Fondoms.

Kopytoff explains that the first two stages discussed above are directly conditioned by the frontier dynamic, which are also the stages that produced the building blocks out of which the African political units were constructed, be they states, segmentary states or confederations. In our application of the frontier dynamics to the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, we realized that we could not go further than the second stage which also confirms the model of the frontier dynamics. Thus, for the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, using the African frontier model, our analysis ends at the onset of colonization, as the Germans and British used the existing socio-political structure to their advantage, limiting the authority of the Fons.

### **5.10. The Regional Context**

The principal theme in the legitimation of African rulers with respect to their subjects and immediate neighbors on the frontier, is the assertion of being a 'firstcomer', in many aspects. The founding group also needed two other kinds of validating charters: one providing an existential validation of the group to itself, and the other providing validation in the eyes of other regional polities. This is because in traditional Africa, political independence did not provide self-evident validation. Legitimation had to be provided by an established authority.

The first validation was dependent upon the ancestors; the validation of oneself to oneself, by tracing one's lineage. For example, the Fon is Fon because he is the son of the previous Fon. In the ethnogenesis of the Bafut ethnic group, the leader of the Feurleu had to usurp the power of the Fon of Mberbeli, by taking over his symbols of authority. This simple occurrence, gave him the authority to declare himself as Fon. He has become what the symbols represent and therefore embodies all the rights and authority associated with the symbols. Also, the fact that the Fon of Mberbeli did not contest, shows that he had surrendered his power and authority.

The second validation is that of the regional polities. To have any regional standing, the polity needed a charter that drew upon widespread regional values, themes, and traditions, and upon historical events and memories that carried prestige in the region as a whole. The most acclaimed validation in the Grassfields for a historical foundation is the claim of Tikar origin. Among the Bafut Fondoms, this legitimacy was sought and approved by invitation and participation at various ceremonial rituals of the neighboring villages. Non-acceptance or non-participation at the ceremonial ritual of a village by another Fon was a sign of rejection or disapproval. Furthermore, recognition by emergent polities of links with the established metropole was one of the mechanisms that provided a historical continuity between frontier and mature societies in Africa. To visibly validate the link, the frontier society would strive to reproduce the political forms of the metropolitan 'parent' as on the material plane, it imitated its paraphernalia. The result was, a continuous replication on the frontier areas of sophisticated metropolitan patterns. This perpetuated some of the fundamental features of the regional variant of pan-African political culture. Unlike other frontier societies on other continents, African societies sought their legitimacy in a quasi-genealogical link with an established metropole, past or present. Such a pattern, obviously, insured a considerable continuity through time of cultural forms.

#### **5.11. The Frontier as Historical Process.**

An established community, if stabilized into an integrated society, could enter into another phase of growth, that of expansion at the expense of its neighboring communities. The Fondom at Bujong is the only Fondom of the original founding Fondoms of the Bafut ethnic group that demonstrates considerable expansion. There is a total of 17 villages under the Fon at Bujong with sub-Fons recognized by the state, who have the same autonomy as a Fondom, but are answerable to the Fon at Bujong, traditionally. There are also situations that demonstrate that the Fondom at Bujong has expanded at the expense of neighboring Fondoms, and in one of the cases, it is believed that this was stopped through the intercession of the ancestors. The story goes that a mysterious fire destroyed the 'Achum' of the notable who was assigned by the Fon at Bujong, to become the quarter head on his behalf in that area. There has also been situations which resulted in conflict that needed state intervention. This is an area that was an interstitial vacuum and gradually became occupied by 'late-comers' who were not seeking any allegiance or recognition to the existing traditional rulers. Therefore, the area was not disputed and the settlers were welcomed. However, when the Fon at Bujong decided to make it part of his territory, it was disputed by the neighboring established village or 'metropole'. These clearly demonstrate another phase of growth for the Fon at Bujong, at the frontier as a historical process.

Another village that claims lineage autonomy and can be considered a 'metropole', is Mankanikong. From the time of its initial settlement, it has demonstrated a potential for growth, and has had conflict with 'latecomers'. Most of the the quarters under the Fon of Mankanikong are 'latecomers' not a lineal offspring quarter, of the ruling Fondom, as in the case of the

Feurleus. So, they enjoy the benefit of being part of a Fondom where the Fon can intercede to the ancestors of the land for protection, productivity and progress, powers which they do not have, as the powers of the ancestors, are associated with the land and not the lineage. However, the narrative goes that the arrival of one of the ‘latecomer’ groups who had left his ‘metropole’ as the result of a chieftaincy squabble, was invasive and aggressive. This seems to have been at a time when the incorporation was functioning as a whole and the neighboring villages were supportive of each other. So all the Fons of the Fondoms that started the incorporation met at the Fondom of the Fon of Mankanikong, and he was declared the rightful leader of the area. A concept that could be inferred here is that, latecomers who were looking for an alternative place to settle, usually small in number, were welcomed peacefully, and co-existed peacefully. However, when the leader had leadership authority before moving to a new area, the tendency was to overthrow, through usurping the existing leadership as in the case of the Fon of Feurleus, or engage in conflict as demonstrated in the case of Mankanikong.

We would also want to suggest that with all the above conditions, there is also an ideological mindset that reinforces the continuity of the cultural traits and patterns; one in which the people have deep convictions such that they are not willing to give up these beliefs and practices for any other ideological belief system. An example here is Christianity. Even though the missionaries insisted that practicing Catholics give up their traditional rituals as ‘pagan’ and the work of the devil, more and more, Christians would return to the village to carry out rituals to appease their ancestors when things were not going well with them. And for those who are prosperous and doing well, they also return to the village to celebrate in thanksgiving to the ancestors for the successes of the year. The Annual Dance, or the Fon’s dance is the occasion at which the entire village does these celebrations. However, individual families and villagers could also perform these celebrations to honour their immediate ancestors.

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