

Review Article

Colonial and Post-Colonial Administrations and Fulani Rights in the Bamenda Grass fields of Cameroon, 1916-2020

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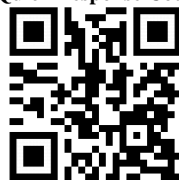
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Abstract: The British colonial administration in implementing various Fulani cattle herder schemes in the Bamenda Grass fields of Cameroon created a cleavage between the Fulani and the indigenous communities. This cleavage made it impossible for the new people to acquire local citizenship anywhere. This eventually was used by the unscrupulous and exploitative post-colonial administrators to deprive the herdsmen of their financial and judicial rights in the Bamenda Grass fields. Oftentimes, the same was used as a wedge by the administrators against inter-ethnic solidarity between the Fulani and the indigenous communities during anti-government political developments in the region. In either case, the rights of the Fulani people were abused by the administrators. That is, without ethnic citizenship, the Fulani were easily frightened by these administrators and forced to pay in kind or in cash for their land disputes with the locals to be annulled, shelved or abandoned. The same was used to obtain Fulani support during political upheavals in the region. The rights of Fulani can only be rendered less susceptible to abuse by bridging the differences created by the British colonial administrators between the indigenous peoples and the herdsmen in the Bamenda Grass fields.

Keywords: British colonial administration, Fulani schemes, post-colonial administrators, inter-ethnic solidarity, rights, ethnic citizenship, land disputes, political upheavals, and indigenous communities.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fulani were a migrant people that came to the Bamenda Grass fields of Cameroon from northern Nigeria. Long before they came to settle, they had raided the region for slaves from their bases in the Adamawa plateau during the pre-colonial period. They were attracted to the Bamenda Grass fields by the rich pasture and other favorable conditions for the grazing of cattle [1]. They entered the region as migrants in small parties from 1916 to 1953 and even later [2]. This was when the region was already under British colonial rule. The British took over from the Germans who were in

the region from 1891 to 1916. British colonial rule lasted from 1916 to 1961 [3]. Before European occupation, there were already states and kingdoms in the region with various institutions and structures for the peaceful incorporation of immigrant groups and possibilities for the acquisition of ethnic citizenship or identity. These indigenous models were not taken into consideration by the British in their acceptance and settlement of the Fulani immigrants in the region [4].

Our study starts from 1916 and ends in 2020. The year 1916 marks the beginning of the Fulani settlement in the Bamenda Grass fields, precisely in

¹J. Boutrais, *Hautes Terres D'Elevage au Cameroun, Institut Francais de Recherche Scientifique pour le Developpement en Cooperation*, Paris, First Edition, 1995, p.25.

² E.M.Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields*, Buea, Cameroon, Government Printers, 1966, p.30.

³ See V.G.Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges: From Prehistoric Times to the Twenty-First Century*, Team Work Press, Bamkika'ay-Kumbo, 2017.

⁴ See Provincial Archives Bamenda(Henceforth, PAB),N.W./Qg/a.1946, File No.B.3152, Vol.Bororo Grazing Rights, 1946.

Sabga [⁵]. The year 2020 that ends the study is significant because of the Ngabuh Massacre or bloodbath committed by a Fulani vigilante group and Cameroon soldiers on an indigenous community in the region on the 14th of February 2020 [⁶]. It was this incidence that spurred us to investigate a historical relationship between the Fulani, and indigenous communities on the one hand and the administrative officials on the other hand in the Bamenda Grass fields. In carrying out the study, we came out with two inferences, firstly that lack of local ethnicity created a fragile relationship between the indigenous people and the Fulani and, secondly, that the ethnic cleavage between the indigenous people and the Fulani rendered the later vulnerable to post-colonial administrative manipulations and abuse. To substantiate these premises, we begin with the indigenous immigration in the Bamenda Grass fields prior to the colonial and Fulani eras.

Indigenous Population and Immigrants

The Bamenda Grass fields were inhabited by a diverse ancient sedentary population, which was welcoming to immigrants. This population established lineage based societies that evolved to states and kingdoms, such as Aghem, Kom, Bafut, Nsó, Bum and so on. This development was accompanied by fairly efficient political institutions and structures such as *ɲweroŋ*, *ngomba* and *kwifon* [⁷]. This evolution was due to unions that were forged between the aborigines and the migrant groups. These institutions together with religious conceptions that characterized the Bamenda Grass fields rendered the region a great receptacle to fugitive groups [⁸].

In other words, the Bamenda Grass fields religious world view compelled the population to be hospitable to strangers. They believed in a deity that was formless and genderless that usually visited

households and communities to test the degree of their hospitality. Its blessing or curse depended on their degree of hospitality in the community [⁹]. This belief was the central theme recorded in the myth of Mawes [¹⁰]. The desire for divine blessing developed a welcoming attitude in the population toward strangers.

The spirit of hospitality of the communities to immigrants was equally due to exigencies at the time. External military threats from the Bali Chambas and the Fulbe made the desire for large communities an existential necessity. This was because the Bamenda Grass fields' method of warfare was based on direct combat. Victory in this method of warfare was a function of numbers [¹¹]. It was for this reason that there was the desire for a sizeable population that was generally acquired through the incorporation of foreigners. The frequent military incursions by the Fulbe and the Bali Chamba groups were another challenge that necessitated the need for large populations. That is, the Fulbe and the Bali Chamba slave raiders were cavalry warriors [¹²]. This method of warfare forced the Bamenda states and Kingdoms to innovate their defenses. This innovation was chiefly characterized by the digging of trenches round the capital settlements and palaces of some kingdoms or in the direction of expected invaders [¹³]. To realize this laborious task, there was need for a big population which could easily be realized through the incorporation of migrant groups.

Besides being a source of strength, a sizeable population also brought social prestige and influence to

⁵ Chilver and Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, p.30.

⁶ Retrieved 30/05/2022 from <https://www.hrw.org-news-2020/02/25/Cameroon:CiviliansMassacredinSeparatistsArea-HumanRightWash>

⁷ These were deliberative and executive organs in the kingdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields. For details on these institutions see BPA, NW/Si.1934/1, Kwifon, Ngomba and Ngwurong Societies. Correspondence Regarding. For states and kingdoms in the Bamenda Grassfields, see P. N. Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A Case Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields of North West Province of Cameroon*, Department of Sociology, University of Yaounde, 1988., Also See Chiver and Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*:

⁸ Nso Kingdom for example, developed from a union formed between the Visale; the aboriginal inhabitants and Ngonso and her descents; a band of migrants. This created a precedent which was followed by other refugee clans.

⁹ W.M. Bridges, Bansa Re-assessment Report , 22.2(TS). 1934, p. 58.; E.M.Chilver, "Thaumaturgy in Contemporary Traditional Religion: The Case of Nso in Mid Century", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XX(3) 1990, p.10.

¹⁰ This was the foundation myth of Oku Kingdom. For the myth of Mawes, see A.B.Bartelt, "Healers and Witches in Oku: An Occult System of Knowledge in North West Cameroon," Ph.D. Thesis in Philosophy, University of Southern California, 2006.

¹¹ V.G. Fanso and B. Chem-Langhee, "Nso Military Organisation and Warfare in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in I. Fowler and D. Zeitlyn, (eds.), *African Crossroads: Intersection between History and Anthropology in Cameroon*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 1996.

¹² M. D. W. Jeffreys, "The Death of Dialect," in *African Studies*, Vol.3-4, Witwatersrand University Press, pp.36-37., L.J.Banadzem, "Le Royaume Nso: De L'Installation a Kimbo Jusqu a Ngga Bifon I, Fonctionnement Politique et Aspect Ideologiques 1780-1947" These de Doctorat de Troisième Cycle en Histoire, Université de PARIS I, Pantheon Sorbonne, 1986, pp. 47-49.

¹³ Interview with Wan Ngacho Tatah, about 70 years, Farmer, Kikaikelaki, 30th Jan.2007.

a lineage, a clan and subsequently a kingdom. In other words, the prestige of a lineage or clan head depended on the number of persons under his influence. This had political implications as the size of the family was one of the determining factors that qualified its head for promotion to higher state functions [14]. For this reason, fugitive groups were incorporated into lineages as a way of augmenting their sizes.

It was on the bases of these factors that cautious and humane systems were elaborated to ensure the peaceful reception and integration of migrant groups. Taking the case of Nsó paramountcy for illustration, there were frontiersmen along the borders of the kingdom and clans. Their functions amongst others were to observe the movement of immigrants and fugitives into the paramountcy. There were equally Masters of the road (ataadzèe) whose responsibility was to receive migrant groups upon their arrival in the kingdom. They provided feeding and informed the paramount authority about them. The paramount ruler in turn requested the security leaders (ataamanjoŋ) to conduct inquiries and provide information on the migrants. It was after the findings that the paramount ruler requested any landlord to settle and grant them the right to usufruct in his domain [15].

But before the migrant group was settled, their leader had to pay homage and surrender all their symbols and insignia of kingship to the Nsó paramount authority. It was through this that they were acknowledged as Nsó ethnic citizens. As citizens, their right to land was guaranteed. It was for this reason that a hoe was usually given to the newcomers to signify their acceptance as Nsó. It also symbolized the Nsó paramount authority's responsibility for the welfare of all his people [16].

In the case of a migrant group that was not in Nsó proper, the paramount ruler might request the king of the sub- kingdom or any clan head to provide land for the immigrants. He in turn consulted a landlord in his territory to grant the right to usufruct to the group. It was therefore through mutual consultation that people of foreign origin were granted the right to usufruct in the paramountcy [17]. What was happening in Nsó was a microcosm of what obtained in the rest of the Bamenda Grass fields.

Colonial Administration and Fulani Rights

The procedure for the settlement of the Fulani was based on laws formulated by the British colonial administrators [18]. The opinion of the local population

was ignored when granting permits of grazing rights to Fulani in fallow arable lands. By so doing, the British planted a seed of discord between the indigenous and the Fulani populations [19]. This seed of discord made it difficult for the Fulani to integrate in the traditional society. In other words, the method used by the British to grant access to land to the Fulani made it difficult for the grazing people to acquire the ethnicity of any group in the region. As an accepted ethnic group, their access to land would have been based on the right to usufruct, which was enjoyed by all the ethnic groups in the region [20]. The lack of local ethnicity motivated the opposition to their access to land. Even at the official level, the situation was not different. The British had granted them access to land but not access to indigenous rights [21]. In this respect, following the 1947 Grazing Rules, the Fulani's access to land was his renewable grazing permit. Without the permit the Fulani could be expelled from any Native Authority Area in the region as a whole. The renewal of the grazing permit by the Native Authority was determined by their respect of the Grazing Rules [22]. The British – Fulani policy in either way thus left them in a precarious situation that rendered them vulnerable to rights violations.

The vulnerability and insecurity of Fulani people rights was further exacerbated by their exclusive tendencies. The Fulani exercised isolationist tendencies derived from Islam and their code of conduct [23]. The British policy unwittingly supported these exclusive tendencies to develop roots in the region. To begin with, the Fulani derived their sanctified truth [24] from Islam, unlike the indigenous people whom they considered as "infidels" [25]. As concerns their economic life, they were pastoral nomads unlike the indigenous people that were chiefly settled

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Banadzem, "le Royaume Nso"

¹⁶ E.M.Chilver Nso Working Notes, Vol.5, p.74.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp.68-71.

¹⁸ PAB, NW/Fa.1937, File No.B.1440A, Inspection Notes by his Honour, the Chief Commissioner, p.9.

¹⁹ Ibid.p.12.

²⁰ W. Rowling, A Study of Land Tenure in the Cameroons Province, p.11.

²¹ For the notion of ethnic citizenship and political integration, see Lenshie Nsemba Edward et al., "Ethnicity and Citizenship Crisis in Nigeria: Interrogating Inter-Ethnic Relations in Sardauna Local Government Area, Taraba State", in *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol. 6(3), March 2012, pp.48-61.

²² PAB, NW/Qg/a.1938/1, Annual and Quarterly Reports, p. 30.

²³ PAB., NW/QF/g., 1933/1, File No.575, Petition by Fulani Residing in Bamenda Division, pp.2-3.

²⁴ For the Concept of sanctified truth, see R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

²⁵ PAB., NW/QF/g., 1933/1, File No.575, Petition by Fulani Residing in Bamenda Division, pp.2-3.

agriculturalists [²⁶]. At the social level, the Fulani practiced endogamous marriages and were literate in Fulfulde. They equally had their own system of law and medication. These factors rendered the Fulani as an ethnocentric community that held the indigenous population in contempt as “infidels” and “uncivilized”. The ethnocentric tradition of the Fulani constituted a formidable barrier between them and the indigenous people. The exterritorial perception of the Fulani was brought to the fore in 1933 in a petition by Ardo Sabga and others in the Bamenda Division [²⁷]. Although they had been settled in Sabga for about 25 years, they did not trust or believe in the Native Authority Courts, trusted only the Alkali Court and wanted their taxes paid only through Ardo Sabga. This was because the Mohamadan Law considered it impure for a Muslim to appear in a court with a non-Muslim.

Kept apart by socio-religious cleavages, economic factors could have pulled the Fulani to become closer to the local inhabitants. This would have been possible if their access to land was defined by indigenous norms that were formulated to favor the integration of foreigners into the society. Unfortunately, the indigenous laws and customs were overshadowed by various British Fulani schemes that tended to become a major obstacle in the relation between the two populations. Such was the case of the land demarcation scheme carried out by Dr. Jeffreys from 1941 to 1946 and the Fulani Welfare Scheme [²⁸]. These schemes did not encourage the Fulani population to regard themselves as traditional members of the region. The schemes overlooked the rights of the locals and generated the fear that demarcation entailed permanent alienation of their land, with all the bad feelings that this dread caused [²⁹]. The British did not persuade both parties to trust each other and to derive the benefits from the presence of each other. Their policies thus widened the inherent cleavage between the Fulani and the indigenous communities. In 1961, the British withdrew from the territory, leaving the Fulani on the fringes of the society.

The Post-Colonial State and Fulani Rights

The vulnerability of the rights of Fulani continued to degenerate under the post-colonial state. The British had bequeathed the Fulani to the independent administrations without providing them ethnic and national rights of belonging. Their right to land, as we have already seen, was based on grazing permit. This came under the control of unscrupulous post-colonial administrative officials when the British

left the territory in 1961. These officials took advantage of the fact of not belonging to exploit the Fulani in order to enrich themselves and also to coerce them to support the ruling party [³⁰].

The exploitation was compounded by the high illiteracy rate in the official and local languages amongst the cattle Fulani population in the region. The Fulani were literate in Fulfulde- (their ethnic language) not English or French language; that were the post-colonial languages of administration in the Bamenda Grass fields or any other language of the land. This was due to the fact that no attempt was made to provide accessible schools to their children or to integrate them into the ethnic communities. Their dwellings were located in grazing areas, far off from educational institutions and indigenous people [³¹]. No effort was made after the departure of the British to bring schools closer to the Fulani dwellings by the West Cameroon and the post-federal administration especially from 1972 to the eve of the on-going socio-political conflict in the Bamenda Grass fields.

The neglect of Fulani right to education predisposed them to exploitation and manipulation by the post-colonial administrations. This was particularly evident during land conflicts with farmers and other pastoralists. The resolution of these disputes was entrusted into the hands of the divisional officers. Instead of finding a durable solution to the quarrels, these officers found the opportunity to prey on the financial resources of the parties in dispute. They were thus acting as official predators [³²]. Their predecessors in the region were cattle control officers during the time of British administration. They took advantage of the authority bestowed on them to perpetuate injustice in the grazing community. They often induced intra-pastoral conflicts in order to reap profit through corruption and extortion. For example, Ardo Eggi testified before the Nsó Native Court of First Instance in 1954 that:

The Cattle Control Assistant (CCA) demanded three cows from me. I denied to give him and he kept me in mind. I saw Jai giving 5 pounds to Mr. Benedict that he should drive me from the place in dispute. It was about two months ago when I was going to Tamnyam that Ngoran (M) of Mbiame, who is the committee member, asked me to give him 10 pounds to give Benedict in order to settle the matter in dispute. I denied that I would not give such an amount since I did not kill a person. ... I know really that a cattle owner going to a

²⁶ PAB, NW/Qg/a.1964/2, Farmer Grazier Issues in the NWP., PP. 410-411.

²⁷ PAB, NW/QF/g., 1933/1, File No.575, Petition by Fulani Residing in Bamenda Division, p.3.

²⁸ PAB., NW/Qg/a. 1946, File No.B.3152, Vol.II, Bororo Grazing Rights, 5th February 1946, p.322.

²⁹ Ibid. p.322.

³⁰ Interview with Ardo Jury, 81 years, Ibrahim Sale 72 years, Fulbe Grazers, Kishong, 14th February 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

³² As elaborated elsewhere, this was the general feature of the post-colonial administration in Africa. See R. Dumont, *L'Afrique Noire est Mal Partie*, Busseiere, Saint-Amand, 1973; C. Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Heinemann, Essex, 1988.

new site must report to the C.C.A. ... In my own case I have not gone to a new site [³³].

Their post-colonial officials in the same fashion took advantage of the rift between the generally feeble Fulani and the locals to lure and coerce them. The end result was either the surrender of some calves or money to the unscrupulous administrators and the dispute abandoned. In this way, neither of the parties in dispute was usually rendered justice. The outcome of this lack of justice was two folds. Firstly, the animosity between the pastoralists and agriculturalists grew wider. Secondly, the stock of Fulani cattle waned to the benefit of administrative officers [³⁴]. In fact, it was common knowledge that any administrative officer that worked in the cattle grazing zones of the region usually left with a herd of cattle. Thus rather than using their office to protect the Fulani right to justice, they dispossessed them of their cattle thereby violating their right to property [³⁵].

Disenchanted in the one party state due to its inadequacies, the Bamenda Grass fields became the political hotbed for the struggle for the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in Cameroon during the 1990s [³⁶]. The Fulani people shared in the general excitement, which was generated by the hope for the better in this new political dispensation [³⁷]. It was believed that under this aspired and promising dispensation, corruption, discrimination, injustice and abuse of power by public officials would be brought to an end. The clamor for this new era attracted the Fulani people, in spite of the fact that they were at the fringes of the society. They thus took part in some political rallies either as sympathizers or militants.

Desperate for supporters, the ruling party through the administrative officers turned to the Fulani population for support. They persuaded and coerced the Fulani population through their chiefs by reactivating the rift between them and the locals over access to land [³⁸]. That is, access to land was used to persuade the Fulani chiefs that the success of the opposition would lead to their expulsion from land by the indigenous people. Frightened by this deception, the Fulani chiefs

summoned and coerced their people to take part in the 1992 opposition boycotted legislative and municipal elections in support of the ruling party. To ensure their participation in the subsequent elections on the side of the ruling party, secret illegal polling stations were erected in the palaces of Fulani chiefs where their people voted under their watchful eyes [³⁹]. By so doing, the dishonest administrative officials robbed the Fulani of their political rights and renewed the distrust that existed between them and the indigenous people. In this way, the action of the administration further support our argument that the lack of acknowledged ethnic status in the Grass fields inherited from British land policies, rendered the Fulani vulnerable to various violations in the region.

Fulani and the Violent Conflict

The proposition that Fulani rights were susceptible to violation was equally justified by the attitude of the post-colonial administration during the violent conflict that started in the Bamenda Grass fields in 2016. The Fulani and the general population remained aloof to the strike action by lawyers, which was followed by that of teachers in October [⁴⁰]. It was during the government negotiation with the consortium of trade unions of teachers and lawyers that the two populations in the region realized that the issues at stake included their interests. It was for this reason that they accepted the consortium as representing the population of the entire region [⁴¹]. This explains the disillusionment that characterized the region when the government decided to crackdown on the leadership of the consortium. It was this violent crackdown that transformed the peaceful protest into a violent resistance [⁴²].

When the peaceful protest was transformed into a violent resistance by the government, the Fulani largely remained indifferent from taking sides. This was due to their belonging to the fringes of the society as a result of their lack of recognized ethnic base. Their neutrality did not last for long because the parties to the

³³ PAB,NW/JF/a.1941, File No. B.3049, Complaint, Bansa N.A. Area, p.449.

³⁴ Idi Idressou, 58 years, Grazer, Wum, 25 May 2012, Wan Ngacho, 70 years, Farmer, Nso, 12 April 2012.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For the struggle for the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in Cameroon during the 1990s see J. Takougang and M. Krieger, *African States and Society in the 1990s: Cameroon's Political Crossroads*, Westview Press, Colorado, 1998.

³⁷ Interview with Amadou Moustapha, 71 years, Islamic Cleric, Ndu, 24th October 2014.

³⁸ Interview with Idi Idressou, 58 years, Grazer, Wum, 25th May 2012.

³⁹ This was designed to make it impossible for voters to vote according to their consciences. This was widely criticized by the real opposition political parties.

⁴⁰ Retrieved 31/05/2022, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/International/Crisis-Group/Report-250/Africa>, 2 August 2017, Cameroon Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads.

⁴¹ With due consideration to the demands of our informants, pseudonyms are used for all the interviews conducted in 2022. Interview with Thadious Mbah, 50 years, Driver, Bamenda, 5th May 2022, Interview with Christopher Njoya, 46 years, Trader, Bamenda, 5th May 2022.

⁴² Retrieved 31/05/2022 from <https://www.acaps.org/Cameroon-Anglophone-Crisis/ACAPS>

conflict did not respect their noninvolvement [⁴³]. This was the case of the government officials who took advantage of land policies from colonial times to secure Fulani support as informants to fight the resistant forces. It was for this reason that the Fulani chiefs and their people were trapped, cajoled and even forced physically in some instances in order to secure their support [⁴⁴]. Pressure by state officials was brought to bear when vigilante groups constituted of Fulani youths started emerging in some localities such as Nwa, Wum, Esu, Fonfoka, Ngabuh and so on [⁴⁵]. These vigilante groups acted not only as informants but were also involved in some atrocities committed in indigenous localities. The worst case scenario was in Ngabuh where they assisted the national army to commit a massacre [⁴⁶].

The relationship between the Fulani and the violent resistance forces that was initially friendly because of the latter respect for their neutrality and an effort to settle farmer-grazer disputes soon changed when the resistant forces also began forcing them to financially support their struggle. This development degenerated to hostilities when the Fulani began to form vigilante groups in localities such as Nwa, Esu, Wum, Fonfoka and so on. Thus the unscrupulous state officials had drawn the Fulani into a conflict that initially did not concern them. This could have been avoided if their right to neutrality was respected. Unfortunately, that neutrality was vulnerable to administrative infiltration due to their lack of ethnic rights. It was another indication that lack of such rights exposed the Fulani to administrative exploitation in the Bamenda Grassfields.

CONCLUSION

The lack of ethnic and national rights by the Fulani group in the Bamenda Grass fields from the time of British administration rendered them permanently vulnerable to exploitation. What was and is still needed is the necessity to encourage the development of a cordial relationship between the indigenous communities and the Fulani. Fulani vigilante groups should be disbanded not only because they were constituted under duress, but equally because they are

an obstacle to any attempt to build trust between them and the indigenous people. This trust can permit them to acquire the basic ethnic rights and make them less vulnerable to violation by unprincipled state officials.

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⁴⁴ Ibid., interview with Adamu Eliasu, 27 years, Grazer, Wum, 10th May 2022.

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