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Diversity, Identity and Le Vivre Ensemble in the Northwest Region of Cameroon since Precolonial Times

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Abstract:

Le vivre ensemble recently dominated political discourse in Cameroon due to the difficult cohabitation between the more than 250 ethnic groups that make up the Cameroon 'nation'. The outcome has been inter-ethnic conflicts and the resurgence of identity crisis. If Cameroon is African in miniature because of its ethnic diversities, then the North West Region is Cameroon in miniature because its populations came from almost all the cultural spheres of Cameroon. This paper attempts an investigation into the attractiveness of the destination for settlers, the identity crisis that emerged from the settlement of strangers and the symbiosis and apparent calm that characterise autochthon-settler relationship in the Northwest Region since Precolonial Times. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources and the qualitative method used to analyse it. The findings suggest that the region's economic potentials, the hospitality of its indigenes and the inter-dependence between the various ethnic groups made for the *le vivre ensemble* that characterised the peoples. Unlike the economically advanced Southern part of Cameroon where *le vivre ensemble* was problematic, the Northwest region has experienced some level of integration amongst different communities probably because of the non-politicisation of identity. The Northwest Region can therefore serve as a veritable laboratory for Cameroon at this time that national unity and national integration are threatened by ethnic and other forms of sub nationalisms.

Keywords: Cameroon, diversity, *le vivre ensemble*, identity, northwest region, unity

1. Introduction

The literature on diversity and identity is abundant and varied especially in Europe and America. Many scholars have demonstrated that the cultural and ethnic diversity of America has contributed significantly to its greatness. The USA has continued to diversify its population through the Diversity Lottery that opens the doors of America to migrants from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, in Africa and Cameroon in particular, identity was politicised by the colonial and post-colonial administrators leading to many conflicts. Political instability in Cote D'Ivoire since the 1990s was provoked by the upsurge in *ivoirite* or the identification of true and authentic Ivoirians as against the others treated as 'settlers' or 'strangers'. Chad, Central African Republic, Burundi and Rwanda all suffered political crisis due to ethnic politics and identity issues.

In Cameroon, the colonial authorities and the regimes of Ahidjo and Biya relied on particular or favoured ethnic groups to govern. During the colonial period, ethnic groups that collaborated with the colonial officials were projected and efforts made to extinct the groups that opposed. The Bamileke and Bassa groups opposed French exploitation of Cameroon and were persecuted. The postcolonial governments of Ahidjo and Biya also politicised ethnic and identity differences in Cameroon. In fact, under Biya, the concepts of *autochthones* and *allogenes* became popular as even the 1996 constitution protected the autochthones from the domination of settlers. The words 'settlers', 'strangers' and 'Come no Go' were used in Cameroons socio-political discourse to describe and exclude from some rights and privileges, Cameroonians who were living and working out of their birthplaces or ethnic bases (La Nouvelle Expression 1996, Awasum 1998, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998, Yenshu, 1998). This doctrine of exclusion and the politicisation of identity were used in the economically advanced Southern part of Cameroon and especially in the municipal and legislative elections of cosmopolitan constituencies like Kumba, Limbe, Buea, Douala, Kribi, Yaounde, Mbanga and Nkongsamba (Yenshu, 1998).

This paper is a contribution to the studies on diversity, identity and *le vivre ensemble* which are dominating socio-political discourse in Cameroon today. The objective is to demonstrate that the Northwest Regions which is mistakenly believed by many to be homogenous, is in fact very heterogeneous but has managed its diversity and identity issues differently and without politicisation. The Region is therefore relatively free from the indigenes-settler conflicts at national level or from the 'Come-no-Go' saga and discriminatory politics that shattered the foundation of *le vivre ensemble* in the Littoral, Centre and Southwest Regions of Cameroon (Monga, 2000; Nkwi, 2017).

Three concepts underscore the discussion in this study. Diversity, Identity and *Le vivre Ensemble*. We argue that the Northwest Region was inhabited by ethnic groups from diverse origins with different migration histories. The first occupants, the Tikar were followed by the Bali-Chamba, Widikum, Tiv and Mambila ethnic groups during the precolonial period. They were followed during the colonial period by the Igbo, Bamileke, Bamoun, Fulani and Hausa people amongst

other groups. Then the post-colonial period witnessed the arrival of more Bamileke and peoples from other ethnic backgrounds. The identity of these groups survived through their languages, dress culture, institutions, food habits and economic activities. However unlike in the economically advanced Southern part of Cameroon where migrant settlers could be easily distinguished, there was some integration, assimilation and acceptance of new communities in the Northwest Region that resulted in some semblance of homogeneity. As a result, many observers referred to all the people from the Northwest as *les Bamenda* or Bamenda people. Le vivre ensemble has not therefore been a major issue here.

2. Methodology

The realisation of this study required the adoption and use of the historical method of data collection and interpretation. We made appeal of primary sources from the National Archives in Buea and the Regional Archives in Bamenda. These were sources collected in 2012 when one of the authors was finalising his thesis on French Cameroonians in the politics of the British Southern Cameroons. To compliment these sources, interviews were conducted in Bamenda town from 5th to 16th July 2021 with some of the descendants of Bamileke and Bamum settlers and those who worked with these figures. Books, book chapters and articles on identity, migrations and interethnic relations by authors like Yenshu, Nkwi, Nyamnjoh, Awasum, and others were diligently exploited. The article also drew from personal observations since we have worked and lived in the region for more than 4 and close to 3 decades respectively.

3. Diversity and Identity in the Northwest Region

The Northwest Region (also: Bamenda Grassfields, Western Grassfields, Bamenda Highlands, Western Highlands, North West Province or simply Bamenda) covers 17,910 Square kilometres and is located in north-western Cameroon. The territory had 429,100 people in 1953 and 1.2 million people in 1987 (Bartelt, 2006:61). The region had a distinctive vegetation that was dominated by the tall savannah grass after which it acquired the name Grassfields (Grasslands). The grassy scenery was punctuated by forest galleries and montane forest in some areas. It was also Highlands essentially because it is a high plateau that contains mountainous peaks, volcanic lakes, undulating hills, lower plains, deep valleys and steep slopes (Fanso, 2010). The Bamenda region was linked by the old pre-colonial trade routes to the coastal commercial centres of Calabar and Douala long before the founding of Victoria in 1858 in the south by the London Baptist Missionary Society. Bamenda was also connected with the numerous townships of old Adamawa in the north and north-west that connected and depended on the Benue-Niger river systems or the Lake Chad basin, and the trade routes across the Sahara Desert for some very distant trade (Fanso, 1982:34). These precolonial connections exposed the people to various types of peoples and indigenous knowledge systems. The indigenous population of the area immigrated from various directions and broadly speaking, these groups can be placed under five major headings: Tikar, Widikum, Chamba, Tiv and Mambila.

3.1. Major Ethnic Groups and Related Polities in the Northwest

Ethnic Groups	Chiefdoms or Peoples
Tikar	Nso, Kom, Bafut, Oku, Mbiame, Wimbun, Noni, Ndop Chiefdoms, Kedjom-Keku, Bambui, Bambili, Fungom
Widikum	Esimbi, Beba-Befang, Mankon, Ngemba, Ngie, Ngwo, Moghamo chiefdoms, Meta
Chamba	Bali-Nyonga, Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gangsin, Bali-Gashu, Bali-Gham
Tiv	Aghem Federation
Mambila	Mbembe, Mesaje, Mfunte chiefdoms

Table 1: Major Ethnic Groups and Related Polities in the Northwest

Source: P.N Nkwi (1987), *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Interchiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon*, Yaounde, Department of Sociology, University of Yaounde, p.15

The Tikar were the first to settle in the area the Germans called the Bamenda Grassfields. They settled in polities like Nso, Bafut, Kom, Bum, Oku, Noni, Nkwen, Bambui, Bambili, Ndop Plain chiefdoms and many other groups. Apart from the Nso and Kom that trace their origins from the precise site of Ndobu or Mbankim in the Adamawa, Tikar was for too many of these groups an imaginary place in the North of Cameroon. Fanso indicates that the Tikar movements into this region was likely in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Records of Widikum migration are conflicting but they seemingly arrived the southern fringes of the Northwest Region in the 17th century. They migrated from the Congo like the Duala, Bakweri and Bayang and settled in Mamfe. From Mamfe they moved northwards to a mythic centred called Tadkon (Komo, 2018:62). They climbed the escarpment and entered the Bamenda region from the South Western area creating Ngemba, Ngie, Ngwo, Moghamo, Meta, Essimbi, Beba and Befang chiefdoms.

The present Menchum Division was occupied by the Tiv who migrated from the Benue lands and Munchi country in Nigeria. Others claim that they came from Bornu following the disintegration of the empire to found the Aghem Confederacy with 12 chiefdoms. Tiv chiefdoms include Esu, Kung, Fang, Bum and Kuk. The Mambila group found in the Nkambe Plateau also migrated from Nigeria, precisely from Takum and founded Mbembe, Mfunte and Misaje. This was certainly before the great Chamba migration in the 19th century, the last indigenous group that raided the Northwest

Region. This Chamba group came from Northern Nigeria where due to famine and draught, they moved to Kontcha and Banyo, defeated a Bamileke group at the battle of Kolm at Bafu-Fondong in 1835 before reaching the Bamenda Grassfields. These relatively new comers conquered vital space creating polities like Bali-Nyonga, Bali-Gashu, Bali-Gham and Bali-Kumbat and significantly influencing the history of the region.

3.2. Newcomers and Settlers in the Bamenda Grassfields

In the 20th century, newcomers and some settlers added colour to the diversity scenario in the Northwest Region. The first 'strangers' were the Hausa and the Fulani who came in from Northern Nigeria and Northern Cameroon. In 1903, the first Hausa settled in Bamenda. They were German guides and carriers recruited in the Adamawa Plateau. Before this date, Hausa traders were already familiar with Bamenda but could not settle here due to insecurity. It is reported that in 1905, fifty Hausa people under the leadership of SarikinBelarbe joined the first set of Hausa settlers and by 1918, the Hausa population in Bamenda already attracted the attention of the colonial authorities. By 1922 when the British introduced the policy of Indirect Rule in the region, more Hausa people settled here to serve as Court Clerks, *Dongaris*, Messengers and advisers to some of the Native Authorities (Nfi, 2014). The Fulani in the early 20th century raided the northern part of the region and by 1916, Sabga migrated from Banyo to settle in the chiefdom of Babanki in a place today called Sabga. He came with about thirty followers and 2000 herds of cattle. From Sabga, the Fulani followed the rich pasture to settle in parts of Wum, Kom, Jakiri, Ngie and Kimbo. By 1945, the British had set up Alkali Courts and other institutions to cater for the increasing number of Hausa and Fulani Muslims in the area.

When Britain and France partitioned Cameroon in 1916 dividing the Western Grassfields into two, Bamileke people who resisted the partition and who were frustrated by French colonial policies such as forced labour, *Indigénat*, *prestation*, police repression, *laissez-passer*, conscription and the appointment of artificial chiefs escaped to Santa, Akum, Batibo, Ndop, Bali and Bamenda in the Northwest Region. The first Bamileke in Abapkwa (Bamenda Town), Paul Ntongto was identified in 1919 (Soh). In the 1920s and 1930s many others followed and after the ban on the Union des Populations du Cameroun in French Cameroun in 1955, many Bamileke found refuge in the Bamenda Grassfields with a similar culture. Since then, young men from the Bamileke country found the Northwest as a suitable destination for trade, agriculture and petty jobs. In Bamenda town, they created identifiable Bamileke quarters such as Abanguh, Siesia and Bamileke Old Town.

From the West Region also came the Bamoun from 1916 when Sultan Njoya petitioned the partition of Cameroon and suffered French persecutions. From 1924, when the French deposed and exiled Sultan Njoya to Yaounde where he later died, nearly 2000 Bamoun people under the leadership of Prince Musa Njoya, heir to the Bamoun throne and 15 elderly notables escaped to Bangolang, Bambalang, Bamali and Babessi in the Northwest Region (Nfi, 2014). The British attempted and failed to settle them in Wum far away from the Anglo-French borders at the request of France. These Bamoun settlers in the neighbouring villages of Bangolang, Bambalang, Bamali and Babessi continued to influence more immigrants and by 1961, there were more than 4000 Bamoun settlers in these villages and in the Bamoun Old Town quarters in Bamenda. In addition, the abrogation of the federal system in 1972 with the espousal of the unitary system saw the influx of many 'strangers' from the other parts of Cameroon especially from the French speaking areas who were mostly civil servants transferred to work in the different towns and villages of the North West province (region) (Lang and Astadji, 2018: 4-5). They incorporated their host communities and added to the diversity of the region due to the fact that they were from different ethnic backgrounds.

A much more influential 'stranger' community were the Igbo who like the Hausa took advantage of the British decision to administer Southern Cameroons as an appendage of Nigeria to invade and occupy the territory. Consequently, Igbo people settled in Bamenda as Civil Servants, traders, lorry drivers, medicine vendors, drug pedlars, restaurant operators, motor spare part dealers and administrators. They added to the diversity and were easily identified because of their feeling of superiority and contempt for the indigenes.

What constituted the Northwest Region was therefore a heterogeneous community with significant differences. For example, while the Tikar, Chamba and Mambila who migrated from the North privileged cereals especially maize as their food, the Widikum from the South consumed cocoyams and plantains like the Igbo. Economic activities were also different. While the Widikum at the periphery specialised in Palm Oil production, the Tikar and Chamba were involved in cereal and agricultural production associated with entrepreneurial trading. In the Ndop area, Oku and Babanki Tikar chiefdoms did carving, pottery, decorated raffia-work, iron ware and smelting. Institutions and political systems also had some variations. While the Widikum chiefdoms were less centralised, the Tikar and Chamba chiefdom were headed by very influential chiefs assisted by notables and regulatory societies. Most of the polities were patrilineal with male domination established. However, there were matrilineal polities like Kom, Weh and some villages of the Aghem confederation. The polities included some very small village chiefdoms and some very large expansive composite conquest states, such as Bafut, Bali Nyonga, Kom and Nso' (See: Chilver and Kaberry, 1968).

Yet, all the Bamenda Grass fields fondoms are linked together by many commonly shared aspects such as the belief in a common descent, the centrality and sacredness of Fonship institution, palace and men's secret societies, military associations, various ways of everyday life, love of culture, opposition to unfair governance and the general pride of being *Bamenda* (Nfi, 2014). The Northwest was also the respect for constituted authority. The people settled in hierarchically administered chiefdoms. These chiefdoms developed similar institutions with the chiefs at the head of the chiefdom's politics and religion. He was the chief priest and the link between the living and the ancestors. He was responsible for all chiefdom appointments and disappointments. He was assisted by a council of notables, village heads and quarter heads while regulatory societies were there to check excesses.

This fact, coupled with the one that they settled in a mountainous country with an equable climate with soils that were not fertile but could easily be tilled, made them sturdy, healthy, and industrious. (Epale,1985:15). Their industrious character took them out of home in search of fertile land, jobs, education and better living conditions in the other cultural/ecological zones of Cameroon where they distinguished themselves as cheap labour. Besides, the people developed similar social and political institutions that knitted the various ethnic groups in to tight units. Cultural homogeneity was also reinforced by the conquest and subjugation of smaller groups by the Bali-Nyonga, Nso, Bafut, Kom and Bali-Kumbat, Chiefdoms. Physical similarities also developed from continuous inbreeding and high restrictions on exogamy (Yenshu, 2003:592). It was therefore possible to talk of a common Grassfields or Bamenda culture or Bamenda identity. This has been the error made by political and social activists in Cameroon and even the North westerners themselves who are simply referred to as *les Bamenda* or Bamenda people.

3.3. Peaceful Co-existence in the Northwest Region

The Northwest Region of Cameroon like the other nine regions, has its own history of conflicts of identity, interethnic discord and even intertribal wars. In fact, specialists in conflict studies agree that conflicts are part of human nature and wherever two or more are gathered, a conflict is obvious. The indigenous ethnic groups, the newcomers and the settlers who came during the colonial and postcolonial eras confronted each other over land, borders, instruments of power and authority. The migration and settlement histories of the Tikar, Chamba and Fulani were all characterised by wars, raids, conquest and subjugation of weaker communities in the Bamenda Grassfields. The most documented are the Bawock-Bali war, Balikumbat-Bafanji war, Oku-Mbessa war, Nso-Noni war, Bali-Bafut war, Bali-Meta war. Unlike in the Centre, Littoral and Southwest regions where the indigenes-settler conflicts resulted in the exclusion of settlers from particular political and social positions, the Northwest remained unaffected by such identity crisis or uneasy cohabitation of communities and individuals.

The first explanation for the *le vivre ensemble* in the Northwest despite the diverse origins, histories and cultures could be the high degree of assimilation of the settlers. Even the Bali-Chamba who penetrated the Grassfields in the 19th century creating permanent settlements were assimilated by the Tikar and Widikum. Bali-Nyonga, the largest of the Chamba polities was highly composite, including non-Chamba from the Widikum, Tikar and Bamileke. This polity even abandoned the Chamba-Leko language (mubako) for Mungakka, a Grassfields language. The smaller, less powerful Chamba States such as Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gashu and Bali- Gangsin retained their Chamba-Leko language but borrowed many institutions from the Tikar.

The assimilation of Bamileke and Bamoun settlers who arrived the region during the colonial and postcolonial eras was facilitated by the similarities in their cultures, traditional values and languages. The Bamileke who settled in Akum, Santa, Awing, Bamenda or Batibo in the first half of the 20th century easily integrated the indigenous communities because they had similar names, common food habits and a similar work spirit. However, despite having settled and integrated in these host communities, the Bamileke's held tight to their respective village origins, cultural identities and affiliations. They manifested and exhibited their cultural stock and added colour to the vast array of ethnic and cultural diversity in the region which depicted the co-existence that started since the colonial and steadily increased and enhanced in the post-colonial period. This is explained by the plethora of cultural centres or village meeting houses in the Old Town area or Old Town Bamileke Quarter, Siesia, Abangu that acted as meeting venues wherein they freely socialised in a more intimate cultural level. Some of the cultural centres included the Badbadjou cultural centre, the Baham cultural centre, Bahouan cultural centre, Babete cultural centre. The Bamileke's in the Ndop area regrouped themselves in the constitute of their traditional niche with traditional leaders. By 2016, Tandinda Dieudonne was the chief of the Bamileke settlers in Ndop (Komo, 2020: 60). This therefore meant that the immigrant settlers felt more or less at home though being away from their ancestral homes or villages. This was therefore a symbol of *le vivre ensemble* with their host communities who also had their respective cultural centres. The different names of the cultural centres were a representation of their ethnic origins, an aspect of identity and diversity of the different ethnic groups from the western region into the North West region.

Religion and Christianity also played as catalyst for the integration and co-existence amongst the indigenes and the settler ethnic groups/immigrants in the region. Churches in the region like the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), the Cameroon Baptist Church (CBC) and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) were places that accelerated integration of settlers thanks to the warmth welcome they displayed towards new members. In fact, it has been argued that religion plays a central role in easing the adaptation and incorporation of immigrant populations in host communities (Adogame, 2013; Ludwig and Asamoah-Gyadu, 2011: 146). This was the case with the Igbos (Nigerians), Bamileke, Bamoun, Bassa, Ewondo, Beti, Sawa, Fulbe, Bafia, Baya amongst a slew of the multitude of ethnic groups in Cameroon. Co-existence was exhibited by the vast inclusion of settler populations into church groups and associations irrespective of their geographic and ethnic backgrounds (Lang and Astadji, 2018: 5-7). The immigrants were absorbed in assorted manners together with the indigenes into Christian groups and choirs such as the Christian Men Fellowship, Baptist Men Association, Baptist Women Association, Christian Women Fellowship, Christian Youth Fellowship, Catholic Women Association, Catholic Men Association including other religious associations in the RCM, CBC and PCC (Ngwoh, 2019: 289). The PCC even instituted hospitable manners such as the welcoming of visitors and new members during church services. The CBC on her part established a simultaneous conduction of church services in English and French as means to tackle the language problem that the settler populations from the French speaking regions of Cameroon faced (Lang and Astadji, 2018: 6-7). The Catholics encouraged the creation of small Christian communities in quarters that regrouped all without considerations to ethnic origins. All these were glaring examples of synergy and *le vivre ensemble*.

With time, the settler populations in these churches became symbolic members and rose to occupy key positions. For instance, a priest in the person Reverend Father Mbomda Patrick of Bimileke origin was educated in the Anglo-Saxon schools in the region and trained in the Saint Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary in Bambui. Simon-Pierre Mbida a Beti native was made an Elder in the PCC Congregation in Bambili, Nemaballi Louise a native of the Ngumba clan in Loludof in the South region of Cameroon arrived Mbengwi in 1995 and just a year later in 1996 she was made Elder in the PCC Njebneg Congregation. Bagnolak Benjamin a Bassa indigene from Ndom village in the Sanaga Maritime Division of the Littoral region arrived Mbengwi on November 4, 1998, and was consecrated an Elder in the PCC Njebeng Congregation in 2004. They were all elevated to such key position without recourse to their ethnic origins or identity, a sign of diversity and the social cohesion that characterised the region. Diversity and identity can also be explained by the heavy dose of acculturation that was manifested in these churches with different identity traits like ethnic praise songs, languages, and displays from the diverse ethnic groups of Cameroon by church groups during mass, church services, religious social competitions and church rallies especially within the PCC and the CBC.

Again, the proliferation of immigrant-led churches in the region also explains the diversity and co-existence that existed in the region. The migrant-led churches date back from 1994 and included churches like Eglise Evangelique du Cameroon (EEC) instituted principally by immigrants from the French speaking regions, Francophone Congregations of the Baptist Church including the avalanche of Pentecostal churches most of whom their creations were for the most part led by the Igbos in the region especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Lang and Astadji, 2018: 8-9). These churches exercised their activities in a free and peaceful environment and even rapidly grew to establish other branches scattered all over the region. The EEC by 2015 for instance counted six congregations in different parts of the region. Pastor Joel Ngo a Yaounde born, led the creation of a church in Bamenda and attested that his mission was to attend to the pastoral needs of the Bamileke's in Bamenda (Lang and Astadji, 2018: 8-9). The creation, multiplication and expansion of these immigrant-led churches was an indication of the social cohesion that triumph in the region.

The Bamoun settlers in Bamenda-Old Town, Bamali, Bambalang, Bangolan Bamessing, Jakiri and the Nso land were amongst their kin and kith bearing similar names and traditions from their ancestral Bankim. The Bamileke and Bamoun were easily assimilated in the Northwest Region unlike in the other regions of Cameroon because of shared cultures, traditional values and identity. The Bamoun settlers in the Ndop plain and Nso kingdom in particular shared a common historical, fraternal and ancestral connections with the indigenous communities which made them integrate smoothly (Nfi, 2021: 288). Thanks to the hospitality of the host communities, many muslim Bamouns settlers served as scribes, court clerks, interpreters, advisers in the first Alkali Court opened in Bamunka Ndop in 1945, by the British colonial administration. They also served in the Alkali courts of Jakiri, Abakpwa and including other courts in the region. The Bamoun immigrants were fluent Fulani or Fulfulde speakers and also read Arabic and these also permitted them to work as teachers in the Koranic schools in Donga and Mantung division (Che-Mfombong, 1980: 20). As such, the Bamoun immigrants with their ethnic diversity, became key components of the social and administrative fabrics of the region. This was made possible thanks to the co-existence, the hospitality of the host communities and the synergy that prevailed in the region. Consequently, the Bamoun settlers felt much more at home as they were with their fellow brethren than the Hausa traders from far away Northern Nigeria.

Diversity and *le vivre ensemble* were also exhibited in the Islamisation mission in the region. This was greatly the influence of the Bamoun muslims who benefitted from the peaceful co-existence to subtly sway most of the traditional rulers in the region, crown princes, members of royal families and other notables in the communities to embrace Islam (Nfi, 2021: 290). In fact, between 1960 and 2014, many traditional rulers in the region renounced Christianity and accepted Islam allured by the symbiosis of ethnic diversity and co-existence. This was the case with King Sehm II (Mbinkar Mbinglo (1947-1972), of Nso who embraced Islam in the early 1960s. He provided land and masterminded the construction of a mosque near the palace which started in 1963 and was completed in 1965. He also initiated a number of policies that promoted Islam. On February 22, 1974, the Fon of Babessi alongside seventy-four people most of whom were his wives and children were also Islamised. The Fon took up the name Mohamadou against Michael which was his catholic name¹. King Sehm II's successor El Hadji Mohammed Dini (King Ngah Bifan II (1972-1983) accepted Islam including some of his sub chiefs of Yuwar, Ndendzev, Taakum, Luum and Mven. He was succeeded by King Ngah Bifon (1983-1995) who embraced Islam in December 1986, dropped his catholic name Lawrence and adopted the name El Hadji Saidou Fanka (Tangwa, 2014: 17). Recently, on October 30, 2014, King Patrick Mbinglo or Sehm Mbinglo I of Nso got Islamised². The Islamisation of traditional leaders and notables was also the case in Babungo, Bamessing, Bamali and Baba kingdoms with many inter-ethnic marriages, especially with the settler population and the Bamouns that acted as a cement factor for the diversity and co-existence in the region accelerated by immigrant Bamoun muslims, facilitated by the conviviality that existed in the region (Nfi, 2020: 291). The Bamileke and Bamoun were therefore easily accepted in the Northwest Region unlike in the other regions of Cameroon because of the similarities in culture and identity. As a result, Alhadji Salifou Njikam, descendant of a Bamoun settler in Bamenda was accepted as the Assistant Government Delegate to the Bamenda Urban Council without recourse to his origins. In the Ndop Constituency, a man of Bamoun origin Njingu Musawas elected Member of Parliament in 2007 and has been representing the Ndop people since then.

Economic specialisation and complementarity between the ethnic groups played a key role in the harmonious living together. Unlike in the Southwest, Littoral and Centre regions where the 'Graffi' were known to be land grabbers and aggressive exploiters of the resources of the indigenes, all the settlers in the Northwest respected the land laws of the

¹ Regional Archives Bamenda, file, NW/2/74, Gendarmerie Security Report of 1974, p. 2.

² The Guardian Post, Wednesday, October 29, 2014, p.3.

indigenes and their sources of livelihood. While the Widikum and Meta specialised in palm-oil production, the Tikar did cereal production and crafts (ceramic ware, wood carving, woven caps, decorated raffia and some iron-ware) and the settler Bamileke and Igbo carried out trade. This specialisation was the outcome of economic necessity, comparative cost advantage and the influence of geography. This guaranteed mutual respect and the desire for *le vivre ensemble*. Whenever the Igbo attempted to cheat in trade, their stay in the region was questioned. After independence and reunification, Igbo superiority complex disappeared and many Igbo traders began respecting the rights of the indigenes. It was under such circumstances that an Igboman Augustin Uzumena was elected President of the cherished PWD Football Club, a prestigious position given the popularity of this club in the region.

The politicisation of identity and ethnic belonging that was common along the coast and in the economically advanced urban centres of the southern part of Cameroon was not common in the Northwest Region. In towns like Douala, Yaounde, Nkongsamba, Mbanga, Limbe, Kumba and Buea where the number of 'settlers' were significantly high, indigenes became disgruntled because these people either outnumbered them or could use their economic power to gain political positions. Consequently, identity and ethnic affiliation became a political tool. For example, in February 1996, three thousand indigenous inhabitants of Douala city marched in protest of the election of non-natives as mayors in 'their City'. They complained that out of the five councils won by the SDF party in the municipal elections of January 1996, only one of the mayors was an indigene (Yenshu, 2006: 136-137). The Douala interpreted this as proof of the Bamileke hegemonic intentions, the Bamileke constituting the bulk of the SDF party membership and a demographic majority in the city. This complained also came up in Kumba and Fako divisions against the Bamenda and Bamileke permanent immigrants labelled as *Come-no-go* (Yenshu, 2006: 137). In fact, when Lobe Monikosso, a permanent settler in Buea was appointed Minister of Health on December 7, 1997, the Bakweri of Buea protested that he was not one of them and could not therefore occupy a ministerial post reserved for them. Consequently, he was sacked on March 18, 2000. This was unheard of in the Northwest Region probably because the settlers were in a minority or completely assimilated. A Bamenda based Bamileke, Felix Mbayu was appointed Minister Delegate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019, and since then there have been no oppositions in the Northwest Region. This is because socio-cultural identities have not been politicised in the region as in other regions where the indigenes are in a minority.

4. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the North West region of Cameroon comprises an avalanche and a melange of diverse ethnic groups with different migration and settlement histories. Though the region has its own history of conflicts of identity, inter-ethnic discord and even intertribal wars, it remained unabated by such identity crisis. The identity of these groups survived through their languages, dress culture, institutions, food habits, traditional values and economic activities. Besides, the people developed similar social and political institutions that knitted the various ethnic groups in to tight units. The high level of integration, assimilation and acceptance of new communities in the Northwest Region resulted in some semblance of homogeneity which made it possible to talk of a common Bamenda Grassfields, Bamenda culture or Bamenda identity. This explains why many observers and commentators referred to all the people from the Northwest as *les Bamenda* or Bamenda people. This was as a result of the synergy and symbiosis that characterised the region. Coupled to this, the region's economic potentials, the hospitality of its indigenes and the inter-dependence between the various ethnic groups made for the *le vivre ensemble* that characterised the peoples. Unlike in the other regions of Cameroon, where stranger populations or newcomers most often outnumbered the autochthons, the indigenes were never threatened by the numerical strength of the settlers. For this reason, there was no fear or inferiority complex amongst the founders of the polities in the Bamenda Grassfields. The politicisation of identity and ethnic backgrounds that characterised the more advanced economically coastal and Southern towns of Cameroon were absent in the region as everyone in the region was considered to be part and parcel of the region. The Northwest Region can therefore serve as a veritable laboratory for Cameroon at this time that national unity and national integration are threatened by ethnic and other forms of sub nationalisms.

5. References

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