

## **The quest for political power and recognition: problems that nearly marred the transfer of sovereignty in the Southern Cameroons at independence in 1961**

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The article focuses on the mixed hopes and political ambitions of the political elite and population of the Bamenda Grassfields on their political unification with *la République du Cameroun* in early 1961. A prominent feature in the venture was the ambition to exercise political power and patronage in the post-colonial nation-state. The emerging political elite from colonization sought to use neo-patrimonial tactics to assert political control over the newly independent political space. This was in a centralised system not much mastered by the political elite of our area of study. Many federal interventions to manage conflicted with the anticipated egalitarian platform which unification was believed to achieve. The feelings of mistrust, frustration and marginalization were borne from the belief that their sovereign and autonomous right were usurped by one sector sanctioned by un-codified advantages of reunification. Since national integration is a daily affair, the need to privilege dialogue to eliminate pent-in emotions of neglect was imperative.

**Keywords:** *Unification, Federation, Southern Cameroons, Sovereign rights.*

### **La quête du pouvoir politique et de la reconnaissance : des problèmes qui ont failli compromettre le transfert de souveraineté dans le Sud-Cameroun lors de l'indépendance en 1961**

Cet article est centré non seulement sur les espoirs déçus des populations, mais aussi sur les ambitions de l'élite politique de Bamenda Grassfields par rapport à l'unification des deux entités politiques au début de l'année 1961. A cet effet, le point dominant porte sur l'exercice du pouvoir politique et la récupération de la souveraineté politique juste avant le départ des colons. L'élite politique issue de la colonisation voulut employer les méthodes néo-patrimoniales pour occuper les nouveaux espaces politiques. Les sentiments de méfiance, frustration et marginalisation naquirent du fait qu'ils pensaient ne pas avoir leur droit dans cette union qui devait se baser sur l'égalité des deux partis. Puisque l'intégration nationale est un vécu quotidien, le besoin de dialogue était impératif pour éliminer ces sentiments de marginalisation et d'abandon.

**Mots clés :** *Unification, Fédération, 'Southern Cameroons', droit souverain.*

## The quest for political power and recognition: problems that nearly marred the transfer of sovereignty in the Southern Cameroons at independence in 1961<sup>1</sup>

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The euphoria that greeted the movement for the independence and reunification of the Southern Cameroons between 1955 and 1960 was nearly marred in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon in 1961 by certain incidents that did not appear to translate concretely the anticipated dream. The federal negotiations between Foncha and his Kamerun National Democratic Party government (KNDP) representing the Southern Cameroons and President Ahidjo representing *la République du Cameroun* were undertaken without adequate knowledge on each other's political culture dating more than forty-four years since World War I.

The choice of a federal option<sup>2</sup> for Cameroon after the plebiscite elections was as problematic as their knowledge of each other's negotiation tactics and strategies. Consequently, many former Southern Cameroonians in general and those of the Bamenda Grassfields in particular were to complain thereafter that *la République du Cameroun* merely camouflaged in the negotiations for unification through a federation of two states to swallow it in its superior size and international sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this article is to highlight the initial mixed feelings within the elite and populations of the Bamenda Grassfields associated to their rights of autonomy or sovereignty in certain matters of their culture in the new nation-state. Our curiosity about the topic was triggered by what seemed an extraordinary spirit of patience, endurance, and forbearance in

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<sup>2</sup> This article draws its inspiration from an on-going research project on the feelings of National Unity and understanding in Cameroon, with focus on the Bamenda Grassfields of the North West Region. A federation could be defined as a system of government whereby several states come together to form a union, but with each partner retaining considerable control over its own internal affairs. Federalism emphasizes both vertical power sharing across different levels of governance and the integration of different territorial and socio-economic units in one single polity. The concept of federation could be discussed from many perspectives, but the common theme, concerning our study, is the existence of different states, and the acceptance of forbidden zones. The forbidden zone here refers to the domain of action whereby the federal or federated authorities have exclusive competences protected by the constitution. The choice of a forbidden zone usually emanates from a sincere debate and/or agreement by the contracting parties. Was this the case with the Cameroon experience? Did the contracting parties create forbidden zones to check against the violations of the rights of one party by the other? Based on its applicability, federalism did not constitute part of the French political culture, whereas Foncha and his sector rose to political glory through the federal native authority areas. This may account why cries of the federal rights tilting in favour of *la République du Cameroun* were much heard in our area of study and almost marred unitary ambitions.

<sup>3</sup> *La République du Cameroun* that contracted the union with the yet to be independent Southern Cameroons already enjoyed independence and recognition by the international community. Its legal sovereignty was guaranteed by a constitution, flag, anthem and other insignia of autonomy, whereas the Southern Cameroons was yet to gain autonomy. How then could the Southern Cameroons hope to safeguard its autonomy in a federation with a sovereign state without constitutional guarantees of forbidden zones affecting its cultural identity?

political antagonisms from the populations, in spite of their frustrations and mistrust of the over bearing centralized system of governance they did not master. This spirit merits proper treatment to prevent militant groups and/or revolutionary groups like the Boko Haram from springing in our corridors to seek to fight and restore certain regional particularisms against marginalization and/or to liberate certain minorities in the nation-state.

We shall briefly analyze, discuss and debate the specific aspects that as early as 1961 almost compounded the concept of national unity in the Grassfields of Bamenda because of insufficient dialogue and sincere concertation. This in consequence pushed the citizens to gravitate between their spirit of belonging to the federal state, their allegiances to their ethnic identities and their euphoria for self-government as another United Nations Trusteeship Territory<sup>4</sup> following the partition of the former German colonies in Africa.

These challenges came up because the political elite of our area of study believed that they were supposed to take the sovereignty of their Trusteeship Territory themselves to the union (Tazifor, 2003: 199-215). The incidents that came up during these early days of 1961 almost marred the euphoria and the nostalgia for union among the Grassfielders who incidentally voted in their great numbers for union with *la République du Cameroun*.

The real test of the ability of the political elite of the Grassfields to keep afloat the spirit of national unity was in the handling of the Ebubu massacre of August 1961, the confusion surrounding the deliberations and promulgation of the federal supreme law, and the ultimate transfer of sovereignty of the Southern Cameroons at independence.

The Ebubu incident, which appeared as the first litmus test to the idea of unity occurred in the CDC plantations of Tombel on 9 August 1961 (Ngoh, 2011: 58). Here, some thirty elements of the *gardes civiques* from *la République du Cameroun* on a special assignment unsuspectingly swopped on the CDC camp of Ebubu and shot in cold blood twelve CDC workers under the mistaken identity that they were terrorists fleeing from their territory.

This unfortunate incident occurred just at a time when the political elite of the Southern Cameroons was carrying out wide discussions on the projected reunification through the form of a federation. The Bamenda Grassfields lost four of its citizens and the federal aspirations sank so low (Ngoh, 2011: 59). In its place, fear, mistrust and the resentment of the continued

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<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Trusteeship Council created after World War I clearly stated that territories formerly held by Germany and other defeated countries were to be prepared for eventual independence. France had done so for its own sector in January 1960 and a majority of Grassfielders expected Britain to do same before any negotiations for reunion as equals.

talks filled the air and almost certainly eclipsed the unitary ambiance Foncha and his KNDP faithfuls were articulating on the field.

The resentment of the federal reunion was greatly felt in Wum Division that lost two of its illustrious sons. The old accusations of seeking to reunify with a country that had no good agenda for the respect of human rights and freedoms resurfaced and became a serious hindrance for the galvanization of unitary feelings. Had honourable Jua not played an immeasurable sense of political wits in the Division, may be a replay of the 1958 on to uprising (Ngoh, 1987: 210) would have occurred against him for negotiating to take the people to a heartless regime that did not respect human dignity. Endeley's government of the Southern Cameroons in 1958 had created the similar shock waves on the population when he introduced for the first time contour ploughing with punitive sanctions on defaulters on the hilly lands of the Grassfields of Bamenda. This unpopular reform led to wide women riots and eventually the fall of his government as Jua and other KNDP faithful exploited to their advantage at that time.

Probably noticing the shock waves created by the Ebubu incident in the Southern Cameroons in 1961, and in order not to compromise the unitary talks in progress, a two men delegation was dispatched from *La République du Cameroun* to Buea on 15 August 1961 on a diplomatic face-mending mission. The British colonial administration in the Southern Cameroons had articulated the conscientiousness and devotion of the citizens with respect to the principles of personal dignity, self-actualization, self-confidence, integrity and self-reliance, which were not fully developed in *la République du Cameroun* (Ndi, 2005: 40).

Since the Southern Cameroons was still under the Administering Authority of Her Majesty's Government, the deputy Commissioner of the territory Lord Malcolm Milne, acting in lieu of the commissioner, treated the fact-finding delegation with scorn in a typical British democratic style. Lord Milne queried the delegation from *la République du Cameroun* to unconditionally accept blame and irrationality of brutal action on behalf of their country, and then proceed with compensations to the victims. (Ngoh, 2011: 58) Lord Milne's submission to those officials certainly surprised them and set them aback, for they instead sought to discuss the incident with Foncha who wielded no power of administration of the territory by then.

This incident was apparently one of the first tests, or at best, the clash of the two experiences in political culture with respect to the management of Human Rights and freedom in the state. Traditionally and as a matter of administrative culture, the delegates from *la République du Cameroun* believed on the supremacy of the state rights over individual rights. This was perhaps in accordance with the francophone administrative law. They were rather so petrified

with the Southern Cameroons legal position in relation to the state and individual rights and so sought to work out the issue in private with Foncha than with the Administering Authority of the territory.

Foncha probably saw this opportunity as one to prove to the Southern Cameroonians that he remains the political elite who would protect their rights in the reunified Cameroon using the Anglo-Saxon respect of the rights and dignity of the person. This may justify his ambition to be given the sovereignty of the Southern Cameroons before the reunion date with *la République du Cameroun*, as we shall later discuss. He probably also wanted the British Administering Authority to recognize that many African issues of the state could well be handled using the African social methods by brothers sharing the same ambitions and convictions.

Foncha in order to comfort and reactivate the spirit of unification in the Grassfields, and in the company of the delegation from *la République du Cameroun* distributed the sum of £50 to the bereaved relatives (Nghoh, 2011: 59). He painstakingly assured them that such a sad event would never be allowed to occur in the reunified Cameroon they were actively contributing in its edification. In these endeavours, Foncha was probably presenting himself to the political elite of *la République du Cameroun* as the best reliable ally against the Administering Authority. To the Grassfields people in particular, he was seen as a reliable defender of regularity and legality in the negotiated union as we shall analyze later. The power balance in favour of the reunification at this initial stage could be attributed to the manipulative skills of Foncha and his KNDP faithfuls.

The compensations probably brought down the fury of the citizens of the Grassfields on the violation of Human Rights by *la République du Cameroun*. Nonetheless, the awaited polite apology and official acceptance of the blame at once that ruffled the feathers off the proud sleeves of the delegation from *la République du Cameroun* were never openly received. More so, the results of the inquiry which Lord Malcolm Milne requested and for which Foncha purportedly claimed were in progress in *la République du Cameroun* were never made public. On 24<sup>th</sup> August 1961, Premier Foncha and Charles Assale of *la République du Cameroun* issued a joint communiqué setting up a commission of inquiry to examine the circumstances of the killings and establish the culprits (NAB, SCIS Press Release, 1961: 1505), but no official statements were released until the two territories reunified and the matter got shelved without any follow-up. This in another manner frustrated the federal aspirations of the Grassfielders who wished to see the state apologize to individuals for its own misdeeds, as it was the case in their own sector. There seem to have developed since then a practice whereby official inquiries

into state criminal acts or state terror on other citizens are hardly made public, whereas in the former Southern Cameroons, public officials directly connected or involved in misdemeanors were forced to resign or received corresponding blame and sanctions. This former concern, has never failed to push admirers of the pre-reunified British administrative system in the Grassfields to be nostalgic of the old days when the inquest commission results were published to spare the citizens from consuming rumours or speculations (Ndi, 2005: 29). Citizens had the privilege to pursue the respect of their rights and dignity even by the state.

The fear of insecurity and the excessive use of force by the government officials in *la République du Cameroun* against the citizens, without regrets or apologies, constituted a serious worry by then on the unification of the two sectors in the Bamenda Grassfields. These elements of *la gardes civiques* in the former Southern Cameroons were regarded as public officials directly involved in misdemeanors and had to be forced to resign or received corresponding blame and sanctions as a matter of conscience and practice (Ndi, 2005: 25). The Southern Cameroons moral stamp on civic responsibility influenced by missionary education was unmistakably discharged on their services in both private and public affairs. Initially, the delegates and government of *la République du Cameroun* certainly mistook this for naivety, but in reality it was a culture too different from theirs and associated to broad-mindedness, civility, moral probity, forthrightness, fearless ability to stand up for one's rights and convictions in the face of all adversity. However, the negotiators for the reunification failed to secure these cultural qualities as forbidden zones in the supreme law of the federation in Foumban, even though they welded a minority status in the up-coming federation.

Another historical event, which almost eclipsed the feelings of national unity in the Grasslands of Bamenda in the early days of the federal talks in 1961, was the confusion surrounding the passing of the federal supreme law. It is likely that because of inadequate time to phrase the whole supreme law in Foumban, President Ahidjo promised to give legal form to the draft proposals emanating from the Southern Cameroons (Soh, 1999: 155). However, no federal parliament existed at the time to vote the draft proposals into law. President Ahidjo probably benefitted from this jurisdictional vacuum to get the parliament of *la République du Cameroun* amend the proposals from Foumban, which he signed into law on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1961. (Ahidjo, 1968: 10) This was when the Southern Cameroons territory was yet to be independent and to reunite with *la République du Cameroun*. The frustration from the political observers in our area of study was borne by the fact that their rights as a sovereign or



autonomous entity in the yet to be unified state were not sought for in their own assembly. This was the more frustrating as no federal Assembly was yet in place.

The omission of this essential historical element of the reunification eventually affected negatively the federal feelings of the majority of the citizens of our area of study. Why did delegates from the two parliaments not hold in a joint session to validate the federal supreme law? Many intellectuals and scholars of our area of study believe that this omission in reality constituted the base of Anglophone marginalization and the springboard of certain movements or agitations, seeking to put to question a laudable achievement in the domain of national cohesion. In fact, certain socio-political movements sprang up in our area of study such as the Cameroon Anglophone movement, Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), Ambazonia movement, Southern Cameroon All Peoples Organization (SCAPO), Free West Cameroon Movement (FWCM) and many others first to challenge Anglophone marginalization in the Cameroon nation, or to seek for secession as a last resort.

Perhaps with the intentions of placating public opinion on this legal omission, some scholars and politicians have often erroneously sought to distort historical facts by asserting that the federal constitution was also debated and adopted by the West Cameroon House of Assembly. Professor Kitchabo in analyzing the deliberations and adoption of the federal constitution emanating from the Foumban Talks gives a clear example as he holds that:

The constitution of 1<sup>st</sup> September 1961 constitutes its legal basis. It was adopted during the extra-ordinary session of the national Assembly of *la République du Cameroun* in Yaounde from 10 to 14 August 1961. It was also approved by the House of Deputies of West Cameroon, under the English expression, and finally promulgated on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1961 as the federal constitution of the federal Republic of Cameroon (1989: 87) (translation ours)

Professor Kitchabo's analysis here appears erroneous and may constitute yet one of those historical distortions which have characterized much of the post-unification historiography of Cameroon, written by some Cameroonians deliberately or not, to portray the praises, good will and/or honesty of certain politicians. Some of these writers ignore documentary evidence, and so make faulty or wrong assertions, and/or draw wrong conclusions under the guise of stimulating the love for one, or the spirit of national unity and concord amongst Cameroonians. Cameroonians would normally seek to understand best the reality of their problems and together look for better and lasting solutions in love rather than in deceit.

It is necessary to clarify here that the bill in question forwarded to the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs on 4 September 1961 and later to the House of Assembly on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1961 respectively (Ngoh, 2011: 69), was instead a motion to be approved on the selfless conduct of the negotiations. That is, between Foncha and the KNDP negotiators with *la République du Cameroun*. We take note here that this bill was forwarded when President Ahidjo had already signed the federal constitution into law since 1<sup>st</sup> September 1961. How did the Southern Cameroon legislature deliberate on the draft before promulgation? However, samples of speech in the deliberation by the Grassfield traditional authorities reflected some strategies of manipulation by the political elite as the chiefs said among other things that:

... The chiefs clearly indicated their unalloyed approval of the motion. Chief Ghogomo of Bambalang in Bamenda requested that the Foncha government should be congratulated for successfully negotiating with the leadership of *la République du Cameroun*. Fon SAN Angwafor of Mankon, Bamenda felt in line and “felt very happy with the constitution” while Fon Galega II of Bali “expressed his conviction to the truthfulness and sincerity” of the leaders of Southern Cameroons and *la République du Cameroun* (Ngoh, 2011: 69).

These statements evidently exposed two shortcomings of the feudal chiefs of the Bamenda Grassfields before then regarded by all native citizens without distinction as sovereign leaders of the Grassfields. First, it portrayed them as late as 5 September 1961 perhaps unaware of the reality that the federal supreme law had been promulgated without any debate by their sector. As such, the federal constitution was no longer a subject for public debate or modification. Secondly, it portrayed the Bamenda Grassfields fons in the Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs (SCHC) who were in their vast majority KNDP faithfuls as seeking to placate any misgivings on the public and secret negotiations of their leaders. This was for the federation at a time when most of their subjects were grumbling that the autonomy of their sector was not adequately safeguarded in the federal talks. This was the more so because President Ahidjo did not accept for debate their resolutions from the Bamenda All Party Conference in Mankon in August 1961 (Tazifor, 2003: 208). His delegation in Fouban roamed about waiting for Foncha’s suggestions from the French text (Bureau UNC, 1968: 34). Was there anything the Southern Cameroon government and KNDP party were out to cover up concerning the negotiators of the federal constitution?

Attention was now focused on the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly (SCHA), reputed for its heated political debates. On 13 September 1961, the House formerly met to scrutinize the motion on whether or not to approve the sincerity of Foncha and Ahidjo in the negotiations



for the unification palaver. Surprisingly, the opposition members of the House pointed out the flaws in the negotiations but failed to say whether they knew about the isolatory vote of the constitution by one party. Endeley the charismatic leader of the opposition in the House summarised the federal feelings of the opposition in these words:

...even if we [were to] criticize this constitution, and we even amend the obnoxious sections of it, we shall never end the job. As long as we have a written constitution, the work of a man is limited to his generation. So, let us not quarrel about the constitution, let us quarrel over the spirit with which we shall make this constitution work (Ngoh, 2011: 71-71). [Emphasis added]

Here paradoxically, the no-nonsense SCHA opposition that usually scrutinised issues to their logical end also failed to discover the reality that any debates on the constitution with regards to any re-orientation was already a belated issue. This is because President Ahidjo had already validated it without their own scrutiny as a competent legislature for their sector. Where then was their autonomy or sovereign position as an equal partner of the federation?

Without the expected fierce opposition in the House, Solomon Tandeng Muna a KNDP Assembly man, on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1961 summarised his views while seeking for adoption of the motion in these words:

This Honourable House, taking into consideration the constitution of the future federal Republic of Cameroon approves the actions of the leaders of the Southern Cameroons in the negotiations with the Government of *la République du Cameroun*, concerning the form of the future federation. (And) thanks the President and Government of *la République du Cameroun* for the co-operative and brotherly manner in which they have conducted the negotiations (Ngoh, 2011: 72). (Emphasis ours)

Muna's submission here either further portrays the ignorance and/or bad faith of the Southern Cameroons politicians. This is because the conclusions of the Fouban Talks and the Yaounde Tripartite negotiations did not involve the legislature of their territory as was expected for an equal sovereign sector of the union. Surprisingly, no one in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly raised this issue, as the season was ripe enough to negotiate and campaign for federal posts and other advantages with the Yaounde authorities. The anxiety to win federal favours certainly also pushed the Southern Cameroonians not to actively campaign for or conclude favourable deals for the general interest of their citizens (Mbile, 1999: 176-189).

Without any obstacles, this bill on the sincerity of negotiators was adopted unopposed by the House. However, certain historians blame Foncha alone for not preparing Southern

Cameroonians well for unification. Also, Mbile and Endeley tabled many criticisms on Foncha for unilaterally negotiating a one-sided union whereas these were opportunities for them to register their disapproval of the neglect of their territorial legislature. Such a major decision affecting the whole of their territory could not be ignored without cause as well. Nonetheless, Foncha who was probably aware of the signing into law of the constitution of the federation by Ahidjo without a second reading by his legislature might have felt a sigh of relief from the tentacles of the no-nonsense Southern Cameroons opposition. However, one wonders the real objective of presenting this motion to the Southern Cameroons legislature rather than the constitutional project before promulgation into law. Was there any secret deal between Ahidjo and the KNDP leadership, which this unrelated bill sought to cover up? Were the negotiating authorities on the Southern Cameroonian side deceived into the adoption deal, and they realized the only way out being the calling for their legislature to approve their honest and sincere attitudes in all the negotiations?

What ever the case, President Ahidjo in signing the constitution of the future federal Republic might also have believed that the Southern Cameroon delegates in the talks had expressed their federal desires in the Fouban and Tripartite Talks respectively in July and August 1961. This was especially as they were on their way to independence. However, could he be unaware that they had an existing legislative body that could be consulted on important matters concerning their existence as a separate human community? At least, the organization of the plebiscite vote uniquely in the territory in 1961 justifies their separate autonomy in political decisions. Public opinion in the Grassfields, especially in the upper and lower Ngemba constituencies were deceived to believe that the Southern Cameroon's legislature had unequivocally adopted the federal constitution, sanctioning the unification between the French and British Cameroons on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1961 respectively. Honourable Sam Mofor of the Upper Ngemba constituency, Nyoh and Nganji of the Ndop constituency held political rallies in September 1961 informing hundreds of KNDP faithful and sympathizers of the ratification by the Southern Cameroons legislature of the federal constitution on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1961 whereas these were merely motions on the sincerity of the negotiators. This even appeared contradictory given that President Ahidjo had already promulgated the law of laws. This confusion later planted the seeds of mistrust and the feelings of marginalization in our area of study. They felt cheated as an autonomous entity in the legislative conclusion of the unitary talks especially as the national party propaganda books bought this thesis (Bureau UNC, 1968: 35).

Notwithstanding the political feelings of marginalisation in the isolative deliberation and promulgation of the federal supreme law by *la République du Cameroun*, the culture of hatred, mudslinging and ideological blackmail found its ugly head in the Grassfields as every politician wanted the Yaounde supreme authorities in the nation to bestow confidence on them for regional leadership. Mbile summarises the political hatred that animated the spirit of belonging and/or internal collaboration at the time, which was also very peculiar to the Bamenda Grassfields in these words:

Since tribal interests often conflict with national goals, parties hinged on ethnic sentiments or on mere personalities... the results in [the] Southern Cameroons politics was that tribal groups were engulfed in bitter and acrimonious feuds kindled by old tribal scores and further heightened by the new political ambitions and pursuits dictated by the urgings of expedience (Mbile, 1999: 198-199). (Emphasis ours)

The federal experiences of the citizens of the Bamenda Grassfields in particular as Mbile asserted for the Southern Cameroons here above, sometimes hinged on ethnic sentiments, personality loyalties and ideological and/or state or national pursuits. These contradictions stem from the fear of one group or individual dominating the others politically in a system that was not understood by all at the conception of the federal Republic. For example, a majority of the Grassfields ethnic nations consciously or not considered Foncha and the political elite of the KNDP party as their all time political leaders. This was in spite of some noticeable political blunders. However, parts of Nkambe Division in the majority always resisted or rejected Foncha and the KNDP as the leaders of the Grassfields preferring mostly Endeley and Mbile from the coastal area (Mbile, 1999: 158).

Another real test of the Grassfielders to keep afloat the spirit of national unity was during the few days before reunification. This challenge harboured on the political transfer of sovereignty of this United Nations Trusteeship Territory. The sovereignty of the territory was to be handed over by the British Administering Authority who exercised it since World War I to an ultimate political authority, subject to no other higher power. This constituted a serious bond of contention between Foncha and Ahidjo.

The background to this thorny issue dates back to the divide and rule system introduced by the British to break up Cameroonian nationalism. Given that the British plan of integrating the territory to Nigeria in the late 1950s was acceptable to the KNC-KPP alliance of Endeley and Mbile, and detested by the governing KNDP of Foncha, the British administrators made very little efforts to reconcile these two factions in the Southern Cameroons politics. The need for

reconciliation between the government and the opposition before reunification, or form a coalition government became imperative, as they were about to reunify with an independent country with international sovereignty. However, intrinsic animosity probably prevented this option.

Endeley and Mbile felt secured in their position because the Resumed Nigerian Constitutional Conference of 1958 in London had clearly accorded the Southern Cameroons an autonomous position within the Nigerian Federation in case of victory at the plebiscite election. Foncha's position on the status of the territory in a reunified Cameroon was not yet clear in spite of several meetings with Ahidjo between 1959 and 1960. Realizing Foncha's indecision on the issue, Endeley and Mbile sought to pressurize him even more (SCIS Press Release, 1959: 516).

The political conflict between Foncha and Endeley was beyond any minimal understanding, and President Ahidjo was certainly aware. In May 1961, Ahidjo demanded the sovereignty of the territory to himself following the plebiscite victory. His primordial aim was certainly to receive the sovereignty of the Southern Cameroons directly to himself, and so make only internal adjustments in his national constitution to accommodate this territory. This was influenced by his belief that the plebiscite victory only returned to his territory part of its German Cameroon that was lost after World War I, and which was returning with special characteristics in administration not yet mastered. Ahidjo's speech in the CNU congress of Ebolowa on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1962 (Ngoh, 2004: 154) bore testimony to his belief. This was may be to escape from a strict application of the contents of Foncha's so-called federation, which he did not master. This could equally allow him to amend to his taste the British culture in governance, which often favoured individual rights to national pride. His numerous speeches beginning with that in Fouban were to express his understanding of the autonomous status of the Southern Cameroons concerning the union when he said:

After we had expressed our desire to reunite, the U.N. decided to organize a plebiscite in the Southern Cameroons to see whether these wishes were genuine. The question put to the population of this part of the territory was "Do you wish to become independent by uniting with the independent *la République du Cameroun*? To this question, the vast majority of the electorate responded clearly in the affirmative.

Consequently, it became incumbent on *la République du Cameroun*, which already enjoyed international sovereignty and which possessed its own institutions to revise its constitution in order to form a union with the brother territory of the Southern Cameroons (Soh, 1999: 153-154). (Emphasis ours)

Ahidjo's statement meant two things: First, he seemed to hold so strongly that the favourable United Nations plebiscite vote in the Southern Cameroons in February 1961 had granted the sovereignty of this territory to *la République du Cameroun*, which he naturally had to take over as the political leader. It goes without saying that if after this vote the negotiations with Foncha on which form of the state to operate failed, he could have used other methods possible, not excluding force to incorporate this territory into *la République du Cameroun*. At least his bitter protests at the United Nations and the declaration of 1<sup>st</sup> June as a national day of mourning in the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Bureau l'UNC, 1968: 36) because of the lost of the Northern Cameroons to Nigeria when his country was no party to the plebiscite bear testimony to this allegation. Secondly, it supposes that in the Foumban and Tripartite Talks of 1961, President Ahidjo was merely seeking for grounds to incorporate the Southern Cameroons into his independent and internationally recognized entity. His major task was to negotiate the modification of the constitution of *la République du Cameroun* to accommodate Southern Cameroons. This is supported by the fact that he handed a copy of the constitution of *la République du Cameroun* to the Southern Cameroon delegation as the only working document for the federal talks in spite of the existing suggestions from the All Party Conference of Bamenda in June 1961.

Consequently, *la République du Cameroun* merely readjusted its institutions to fulfill a United Nations commission by receiving the Southern Cameroons, which was on its way to sharing in its internationally recognized sovereignty. This was quite contrary to Foncha's expectations and negotiations. Foncha was to regret later in 1990 (Soh, 1999: 221). It even ran contrary to Ahidjo's statements in Tiko, Buea and Victoria in 1960 where he told the Southern Cameroonians to vote in favour of a reunified state on two equal bases (Ngoh, 2004: 53). How could the Bamenda Grassfielders not complain for marginalization when no real guarantees were made in the law of laws for the Southern Cameroon's autonomous forbidden zones? The appointment of a federal inspector of administration with plenary powers to coordinate services of the state and render account directly to the federal president simply frustrated the prerogatives of the elected Prime minister of West Cameroon. How could the elite and Grassfielders not feel cheated in the union?

President Ahidjo was to buttress his understanding of the separate sovereign position of the Southern Cameroons in his general policy statement in Ebolowa in July 1962. He said among other things that: "it was the Republic of Cameroon, which had to transform itself into a federation...the question was therefore not one of the birth of a new Republic with a federal

form” (Ngoh, 2004: 157). This statement in no mistaken terms meant that *la République du Cameroun* in 1961 deliberately made only cosmetic institutional reforms to absorb the Southern Cameroons. However, the Southern Cameroonian negotiators on the other hand had seen the two sectors of Cameroon as equal partners capable of blending each other in a unique manner as to strengthen the unity of Africa. Thus, it becomes clear that the inferior constitutional position of this territory in the federal Republic was influenced by differences in perception of the goal sought for in the unitary talks. This may account for the reason why Grassfielders constantly complained to Foncha of an Anglophone inferior status imposed by the federal authorities (Ndi, 2003: 89-121).

In yet another intervention, President Ahidjo demonstrated his understanding of the position of the Southern Cameroons in the federation neutralized on the plebiscite day in 1963. Here, he reacted sternly and promptly to Jua and others in these words: “people of West Cameroon massively voted in favour of reunification and not for a federation in 1961” (Ngoh, 2004: 157). This statement presupposes that he did not consider the federal structure as a condition for the federation of the two sectors of Cameroon, whereas the architects of this come together on the Southern Cameroons side thought so. In fact, a good majority of those who voted for reunification with *la République du Cameroun* from the Bamenda Grassfields hoped to guarantee their autonomy and/or equal status in a federation of two states rather than necessarily re-integrating themselves into a former German Kamerun historical entity, which no longer harboured its originality. This state of affairs was to generate mixed feelings in the area leading to frequent calls from certain citizens for agitations to re-negotiate the state of the nation (Ngwana, 2001: 102-122).

In June 1961, Foncha thought that he could get the sovereignty of the territory before its independence and reunification day. He instructed the Attorney-General of the Southern Cameroons to prepare a legal brief transferring the sovereignty of the territory to him (Ngoh, 2011: 81). It might have appeared to him that letting Ahidjo take over the sovereignty of the territory directly from Britain was synonymous to an outright annexation, or better still, the status of the territory becoming a conquered one wherein his own political identity could be lost. The Attorney-General reported to Foncha that the sovereignty of the territory could only be transferred to an appropriate body representing the future federation and not either to the Republic of Cameroon, Ahidjo, Foncha or both working together. (Ngoh, 2011) This analysis of the situation apparently surprised even Ahidjo who had hoped to reconcile the issue by exercising it temporarily with Foncha before 1<sup>st</sup> October 1961. However, Ahidjo rejected the



legal position of the Attorney-General of the Southern Cameroons, but could not at the time impose his will on the territory. On the other hand, the division between the governing party and the opposition in the Southern Cameroons still prevented Foncha from getting an eminent victory in the thorny issue.

The populations were caught between the two rivaling forces and this certainly acted against the feelings of national unity behind Foncha their all time political elite. It was at this last moment that the British Administering Authorities stepped in as honest brokers of the issue. The sovereignty of the territory was to be settled between London and Yaoundé through the exchange of notes (Ngoh, 2011: 81) on the hour of independence and reunification. Notwithstanding this thorny issue, the other cause of disagreement that was to affect negatively the feelings of national harmony was in the venom-loaded speeches that crowned the effective British exit from the territory.

In their farewell speech from the territory, Ian Macleod, the British colonial secretary on behalf of the Queen read out a speech to Foncha recognizing the independence of his territory and saluted the reunion with *la République du Cameroun* in a federation of two equals. Foncha in his reply speech lauded the efforts of the British in the territory. This speech like the previous one to Lord Milne in the SCHA contrasted profoundly with one made at the occasion by the leader of the opposition E.M.L. Endeley, and which ramifications did not build happy unification feelings amongst the opposition adherents and other observers in the Grassfields, in the post – 1961 federation. Endeley evaluated the situation in these words:

I cannot remember of any territory in British colonial history that has been left in the plight of the Southern Cameroons. It is doubtful if five years hence, there would be a single vestige of the British contact to be seen in the Southern Cameroons... It is utter hypocrisy for anyone in the House to think that the future is certain and bright... One question the British should ask themselves when they leave this territory is whether they leave the people with a sense of accomplishment (Ngoh, 2011: 71)

Dr. Endeley appeared to have highlighted the real problems the British failed to tackle before their departure, which Foncha sought to cover up even when these problems partly contributed to the thorny sovereignty issue. The prominent problem concerned the British laxity in preparing their Trust Territory to statehood in application of the U.N. trusteeship mission, as did the French. These comparisons were to polarize further public opinion on their federal experiences in the federation, and consequently their federal feelings of unity in the nation-state.

It was thanks to the efforts of some political elite of the zone that the unitary feelings were kept alive. Sam Mofor was one of the best all time political elite of the KNDP of the Bamenda Grassfields in spite of his linguistic handicap. He came from Santa in upper Ngemba and was decorated nationally several times for his role in national unity. He mastered political techniques of winning grassroots support in the Grassfields. He stole his famous document from Nigeria purported to have been written to auction Southern Cameroons to Nigeria (Mbile, 1999: 131-137).

However, the fulfilment of the exchange of notes as influenced by the British authorities laid to rest the explosive question of direct hand over of sovereignty of the Southern Cameroons, even if the Cameroonian authorities believed in the logic or not. Lord Milne who represented the British colonial authorities in the territory left in the early morning of 1<sup>st</sup> October 1961 by air for Jos-Nigeria *en route* to London. (Ngoh, 2011: 86) This final departure from the Southern Cameroons marked the final burial of colonial rule, while welcoming fresh cooperation on equal basis between the federal Republic of Cameroon as a single entity and Britain. As a mark of concern from Foncha for the peaceful resolution of the sovereignty issue as well as independence and unification of Cameroon, he exercised without constraint his initial sovereign status in the union by declaring the days from Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October to Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October 1961 as prayer and thanksgiving public holidays throughout West Cameroon. (Ngoh, 2011: 81)

## **Conclusion**

Focusing on the population of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, this article examines the historical roots for the quest for autonomous power and unification of the two sectors of Cameroon by the political elite in a federal state whose form and content were not adequately debated, mastered and understood by the two sectors. The differences and un-mastered political cultures of the other partner in the projected union almost marred the unitary feelings articulated in the Grassfields by the political elite. These differences triggered earlier emotions of mistrust, frustration and marginalization. These feelings found their expression in the Ebulu deaths of August 1961, the unilateral deliberation and promulgation of the federal law of laws by *la République du Cameroun*, and the problematic transfer of autonomy or sovereignty of the southern Cameroons Trust Territory of the United Nations to *la République du Cameroun*. National unity requires continuous dialogue, which the emerging political elite failed to uphold in most of their public utterances. A prominent feature in the success of the political

reunification from the Bamenda Grassfields appeared to be their determination to live with all other Cameroonians as one people within a single nation, sharing a unique destiny, so long as their special rights of autonomy were accorded in certain areas relating to their culture within the nation-state. That is, their hope of forging their grim future with ardent expectations for a better future in a state that recognised the equality of their history and certain sovereign rights brought into the union.

### **General Notes**

1. For consistency, the English-language names and acronyms of political parties and institutions are often used.
2. According to the Third General Population and Housing census of Cameroon in 2010, the North West region had a population of 1,804,495 inhabitants broken into 863,269 males as against 942,426 females.

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