Chieftaincy and Decentralization in Cameroon: Unmasking the Opportunities and Challenges in Context

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ABSTRACT
The chieftaincy institution in Africa and particularly in Cameroon represents the oldest politico-administrative institution of governance that predates the colonial intrusion. Even with the advent of the colonial rule, this institution incarnated by the chief was used to consolidate colonial influence and governance in Cameroon. The effective politico-administrative organization of chieftaincy coupled with the traditional system governance explains why they were co-opted as collaborators by the colonial administrators. However, at independence chiefs and the chieftaincy institution were relegated by the new political elites. They were not considered in the formulation and application of public policy like decentralization despite their rich pre-colonial and colonial experience. This can partly explain the failure of the decentralization policy in Cameroon as chiefs who are very influential especially at the level of grassroots are not implicated in the implementation of decentralization. Basing our findings on the analysis of existent secondary information in the form of published books, articles, journals, dissertations and on primary sources essentially based critical interviews conducted on the field with varied informants, our investigation reveals that the decentralization policy in Cameroon operational since 2004 cannot be totally effective especially at grassroots level if chiefs who have a strong politico-administrative and legitimate influence are not incorporated as major actors in the implementation of the decentralization in Cameroon. This is because apart from the rich pre-colonial and colonial experience in local governance, chiefs are revered than political authorities at grassroots level.

Keywords: Chieftaincy, Decentralization, Cameroon

INTRODUCTION
This paper examines the potential role of traditional rulers in the effective implementation of the decentralization policy and efficient local development at the grassroots level. Successful local development has been identified as essential to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) outlined at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000, and the World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy

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Due to the growing interest and support for local development in recent years, many African countries and especially Cameroon have passed legislation to decentralize governmental structures and it has been supported by many international agencies with their own activities. It is fundamental to note that the way in which decentralized structures are organized, actors involved and how decentralization policies are implemented determines the resources available at the local level and the functions of local governments.

It is clear that successful decentralization is not just about building good political institutions, it is not only essential to improve overall governance at the local level but also to involve any actor capable of boasting development, that is Civil Society Organizations, NGOs and traditional leaders who until now play very limited role in the case of Cameroon. This also includes meaningful participation of the local population and their inclusion into decision making processes to foster transparency, accountability and responsiveness, and to guarantee efficient and effective policy-implementation. Meaningful inclusion of all relevant actors at the local level is decisive for successful local development, to ensure that different local power structures work with each other.

The shift in focus from the national to the local level makes a closer look at the social, political and economic dynamics in communities more important in Cameroon. In developing countries in general the state is often weak, and the penetration of the state in rural areas has been poor (Ibid). Decentralization in these cases is not only about shifting power and resources to the local level and making local authorities more effective. It is often the case that the capacity for good local governance also has to be built in areas where governmental activities in general have been very limited. Coupled to this, local government authorities who are supposed to manned and boast decentralization at the grassroots level has not been able to do so. The paradox is even that most of local government authorities do not reside in their area of jurisdiction (councils), rather they live in major towns including the mayors. With their absence and with little or no impact of their authority on the development of grassroots, most people depend on village development associations mostly presided by traditional authorities.

As a matter of fact, a traditional structure has and remains very important in organizing the life of the people at the local level despite modern state structures. Traditional authorities, for example, regulate village life, control access to land, and settle disputes. The existence of traditional authorities means that both the decentralization and the strengthening of local governance are not taking place in a vacuum. Recent experience has shown that successful decentralization has to take existing traditional structures into account. While the standard view has been that they are a historic burden on the road to modernity, it is now widely recognized that for many people, traditional structures are often more legitimate than the modern state.

In many cases, people accept traditional structures because of central government failures in building functioning structures at the local level. To rely on traditional norms and rules is not only comprehensible but also quite rational, especially if there is no better alternative. If the state is unable to improve people’s lives substantially on an everyday basis, it is not surprising that people continue to live according to their traditional structures and rules without taking much notice of the central government.
Most people are not familiar with democratic theory and therefore do not immediately embrace democratic principles and rules. They accept procedures when they make a difference to their lives and help to improve their daily situation. Most people also do not make a distinction between traditional and modern structures. We all simultaneously accept different forms of authority for different things in a flexible way. Authorities can include the elders, parents, religious leaders as well as traditional leaders or elected governmental officials. For some issues we will rely on religious leaders, for others we might rely on the state and accept democratic forms of decision making, and for some other matters we might accept the authority of our parents. Different authorities co-exist everywhere and sometimes they might even compete with each other.

The aim of this study is to analyze existing literature on decentralization and local development and the potential role traditional rulers could play towards effective decentralization policy at grassroots level in Cameroon and also to clarify the basic concepts of their contents and to identify information gaps. The paper is made up of five main sub topics: The first discusses the historical evolution of decentralization in Cameroon. It traces the origins of decentralization in Cameroon from the pre-colonial traditional structures through the colonial and finally the post independent period. It emphasizes that it is because of the failure and weakness of the actors of decentralization policy in Cameroon that chiefs or traditional rulers because of their historical past and attributes could play an important role in effective decentralization at grassroots level. The second part of this paper examines the potentialities of Traditional Rulers as Relevance Actors in Effective implementation of decentralization Policy at Grassroots Level and followed by the challenges they could face. Finally the last part of this paper attempts to present the determinants for an effective implication of traditional leaders towards effective decentralization policy in Cameroon notably at the grassroots level.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF DECENTRALIZATION IN CAMEROON

The concept of decentralization refers to decentralized, directed from center to periphery, organized around and such. This concept, expressed as the transfer of authority from the center to subordinate ends, is important both for more effective and productive management of the areas outside the center organization in public administration and for strengthening these areas in terms of democracy conception. Because of the increasing interest all over the world in issues such as ensuring service–need compliance, the importance of decisions made by the closest unit to the public and the reduction of bureaucratization have made implementation of decentralized systems a necessity in local regions.

According to A. Ozmen (2014) Decentralization can be defined as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations or the private sector. In the classical sense, this concept, which refers to the transfer of authority, responsibility and resources from central government to local governments, has a decisive role in central government local government relations. Several definitions have been offered for decentralization. One of the most general defines it as the transfer of responsibilities and authority from higher to lower levels of government. Decentralization seeks to create relationships of accountability among citizens, service providers, and subnational governments and between the local and central governments.

G.T. Falleti (2004) maintains that decentralization is a process, a set of state reforms. It is a series of political reforms aiming for the transfer of responsibilities, resources and authority from higher level to lower levels of state. Decentralization does not include the transfer of authority among non-state
actors. However, decentralization reforms may take place both in authoritarian and democratic environments, as decentralization and democratization do not have the same meaning. Even the political systems described as centralized and authoritarian can rearrange their structures and functions within the framework of decentralization.

Decentralization has political, administrative and financial dimensions. The political dimension includes the transfer of state administration, legislative authority and judicial autonomy to local governments. The administrative dimension refers to the transferring of some classical functions of the state to autonomous public institutions (A. K. Kose, 2004). The fiscal dimension includes intergovernmental fiscal relations in countries where, constitutional and statutory powers of taxation, budget and expenditure rights are given to federal units within the federal state. Decentralization in its current form in Cameroon is based on the Constitution embodied in Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996(C. Cheka, 2007) Law No.2004/17 of 22 July 2004 on the General Orientation defines decentralization as, the devolution by the State of special and appropriate resources to regional and local authorities for their economic, social health, education, cultural and sports development.

The history of decentralization in Cameroon from a historical perspective can be examine under three major historical periods; the pre-colonial period and the traditional system of political organization, the colonial period with reference to the various colonial policies with a devolutionary tendency that involved traditional authorities in socio-political administration. Finally, decentralization in the post independent era determined by exogenous and endogenous political forces.

**DECENTRALIZATION WAS INHERENT IN PRE-COLONIAL SOCIO-POLITICAL TRADITIONAL SYSTEM**

It should be noted that before the advent of colonialism to Africa and Cameroon in particular, the socio-political and administrative organization of the Cameroonian traditional societies was centered on a well-organized chieftaincy institution with the chief at the helm. In most African Traditional societies, political power was organized in such a way that the chief who was at the apex of traditional administration delegated some powers and competences to other institutions that made up the administrative architecture of the village. Using the case of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, power structure was organized from family lineage head which was the smallest political unit, passing through the quarter head that coordinated quarter activities, the village head managed activities and finally the Fon was at the head of several villages that constituted Fondom. In such architecture, instructions flew from the highest and largest institution which was the fondom to the smallest political unit known as the lineage. In this power structure each institution has its role to play and its specific responsibilities.

**THE REAFFIRMATION OF PRE-COLONIAL DECENTRALIZATION IN THE COLONIAL POLICIES IN CAMEROON**

The Germans were the first colonial masters to formally annex Cameroon. They arrived on the Cameroonian coast in the nineteen century. Upon arrival, they found that the other European countries, notably the British and the French, had already established a noticeable commercial influence along the coast of Cameroon.

Determine not to be left out of this trade area and following what V.J. Ngoh (1989) described as the German coup staged against Britain and France, Germany successfully outwitted the others to
become the first European power to claim colonial control over the coastal area of Cameroon and eventually the whole of the territory. This claim was confirmed following the Berlin West African Conference of 1884. It was therefore against this background that Germany decided to embark on the full exploration of Cameroon and the establishment of its administration. This administration was more or less based on the cooperation of traditional authorities. What should be noted with German colonization was the introduction of municipal administration even though it was not actually named municipal administration (Kaze, 2017). This is because municipal administration presupposes the existence and responsibility of State decentralized structures, in charge of the management of local affairs by local authorities. Initially the Germans were not out to develop Cameroon for development seek, but at the same time to exploit the territory for the interest of its home government.

As the administrative policy put in practice by the Germans was indirect rule even though with a strong gripped on the administrative machinery. According to Engelbert Mveng, decentralization in Africa and Cameroon in particular is not new, because even German settlers in Cameroon were concerned with getting local people to manage their own affairs (Ngoh, 1989). The implication of the indigenous population in the development of their territories was manifested in the administrative organization of German-Cameroon, economic and socio-cultural policy (M. N. Oyono, 2007). It should however be noted once more that traditional rulers were the pillars of German colonial administration.

However, the dream of a German empire in Central Africa notably Cameroon, and the careers of a generation of German speaking Cameroonian was destroyed by the outbreak of the First World War (A. Lee, K. A. Schultz, 2012). Following WWI, the British and the French took over the German colony of Cameroon, portioned it 1916 with each power introducing its own administrative system. The French introduced assimilation in their territory while the British employed the indirect rule system in theirs. This arrangement was confirmed by the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, which gave the allies the ex-German colonies as “mandates” under the loose supervision of the League of Nations. For the next 42 years, “East” (French) and “West” (British) Cameroon would have separate histories and local administrative organization and functioning. The British region of present-day Cameroon (West Cameroon) consisted of what are now the country’s northwest and Southwest regions, while the French region (East Cameroon) covered the country’s remaining eight regions (I. Brownlie, 1979).

Between 1922 and 1945, the British implemented the policy of Indirect Rule thought to be the best rule in British Cameroon. During this period, the British created Native authorities through whom they administered the people of British Cameroons (M. Finken, 1996). The Indirect Rule policy introduced by the British favored the devolution of competence to local authorities. They lorded over local council’s administration. This administrative set up was called Native Authorities and was guided by the Indirect Rule policy.

The British believed that through the chiefs, the local administration will be developed into an efficient organ of modern government (J. C. Anene, G.N. Brown, 1966). The Native Authorities were to be the rudiment or embryo of local government and through this a post-colonial system would eventually emerge. The British also thought that natural feelings would be raised through the NAs and chiefs were to learn from these institutions the technics in the running and management of regional affairs. With this experience, products from these Local authorities’ areas could be able to serve in the executive and legislative. In order to make this dream come true, the British worked
hard to maintain the political divisions or natural boundaries they met and this could only be readjusted to fit the present dispensation. In segmented societies, like was the case in the Southern Cameroons Province, warrant chiefs were appointed to make sure that colonial realities confirm to colonial theory.

As a matter of fact, Native Authorities enjoyed much autonomy in the management of local affairs such as in sectors like education, health, trade, police, municipal prisons, environment, construction and urban planning areas land. Equally, Native Authorities enjoyed financial autonomy (L. Ngongo, 1987). Their financial resources come from taxes, fees for services rendered, income domain, and grants from the federal state of West Cameroon.

Other their part, The French colonial administrative policy, by contrast, was focused on the closer integration of the colonies with the metropole. The mechanism for this was the policy of assimilation, by which Africans who had received western education (évolutés) were granted French citizenship and the legal rights of Frenchmen, including participation in elections to urban councils and the French parliament (N. Rubin, 1971).

France governed her portion of Cameroon as part of the French colonial empire although it retained its autonomy as a mandated territory of the League of Nations. The main consideration in France’s colonial policy in Cameroon was to transform the colonized people into French citizens through assimilation. Though the French found it impossible to immediately dispense with the services of the German-era chiefs, they steadily reduced their autonomy and authority, treating them as petty bureaucrats who could be hired and fired at will (V.T. Levine, 1964). Hence, the French administrative system was in practice “quasi-direct” (Ibid).

As such, the method used by the French to facilitate their administration in east Cameroon was the division of the territory into administrative units. This was contained in a decree issued in May 1916 which divided French Cameroon into nine administrative areas. These administrative units included; Kribi-Lolodorf- Campo, Edea-Eseka, Douala-Yabassi, Barie-Foumban-Nkongsamba, Yaoundé, Mora-Maroua, Doume-Loume-Yokadoma and Ebolowa-Akoafim territory(Ibid).

By 1935, French Cameroon had 19 regions divided into subdivisions and administrative positions. The administrative division was made exclusively on the basis of ethnic criteria. The French ministry of colonies was responsible for the administration of French Cameroon. The Governor was the head of the administration in French Cameroon. He controlled all the civil and military activities and was responsible for the policy of defense. For the smooth functioning of the administration, the commissioner was assisted by the Secretary General, a cabinet director, heads of service and administrative council (R. Chot, 1954).

Furthermore, a council of notables was appointed by the commissioner from locally prepared lists of suitable individuals. The role was to represent and promote official policies, play the role of intermediary between the indigenous population and the administration and to advise French administrators on matters affecting the indigenes on matters such as taxation, road building and railway construction as well as legal issues. Nineteen years after the implementation of Indirect rule in British Cameroon, a similar movement started in the French-speaking Cameroon with the introduction of mixed councils in which the Mayor was appointed and the Municipal Council elected in French Cameroon. No municipality existed yet.
It should however be noted that each administrative division that constituted the major administrative units in French Cameroon later laid the basis for the creation of Councils (L. N. Tsimi, 2015) The first councils, called mixed Councils in French Cameroon were created in the two largest cities of French Cameroon; Douala and Yaoundé, following the decree of 25 June 1941 of the French governor in Cameroon. These two towns were each provided with an executive (head of the region) also called administrator or mayor for the occasion. They were also provided with a municipal commission, consisting of four French notables and two native appointed by the colonial governor. After World War II, an order of 21th August 1952 created mixed rural councils and extended it into all subdivisions of French Cameroon.

Three years later, the French law No. 55-1489 of 18 November 1955 concerning the municipal reorganization of the Black African countries, with the exception of Senegal, introduced the (communes de plein exercice) Councils with Semi-functioning capacity (communes de moyen exercice). In both cases, the condition required by Article 2 of the aforementioned law was “the availability of sufficient level of development to have their own resources necessary to balance with the budget.” The fundamental difference between these two entities was that, in Councils with full-functioning capacity the mayor was designated from among the municipal councilors, while in Councils with Semi-functioning capacity, the mayor was appointed by the head of the administrative district from officials of his locality. It is within this communal landscape that French Cameroon became independent on 1st January 1960. The British and French policies laid the grounds for the post-independent decentralization sequence in Cameroon.

POST-INDEPENDENT SEQUENCE OF DECENTRALIZATION IN CAMEROON

At independence one of the first countries with whom Cameroon established cooperation link was Germany. German foreign Policy in Africa from 1960 was largely subordinated to the policy of friendly relations between France and the United States of America. Meanwhile, since 1960, the cooperation between Cameroon and the Federal Republic of Germany have witnessed harmonious development on the politico-diplomatic angle right to the 1990s when it encountered some hitches due to the fact that Cameroon did not respect democratic principles in elections. As such, from a diplomatic stand point, the Federal Republic of Germany was the second European country to have had an accredited ambassador to Cameroon on the 11th of January 1961 (Batenguene Assil) after the independence of Cameroon. One week after, Cameroon established her own embassy on the 18th of January 1961 in Germany. Following the creation of the German ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation, a veritable policy of cooperation was put in place between Cameroon and Germany.

The desire of cooperating between the two States was concretize by degree No 62/DF323 on the ratification of economic and technical cooperation between the two entities. By this accord, the Federal Republic of Germany engaged to provide assistance to Cameroon in her economic development and recently towards good governance and local development. As such, the international decentralized cooperation between Cameroon and Germany is judicially founded by the above mention degree. At independence in 1960, the then Cameroon Republic experienced the first wave of democratic expression defined in terms of multipartism. The same phenomenon was manifested in what was then the Southern Cameroons. With the advent of a Federal constitution in 1961 developed the Federation of Cameroon whose body politic continued to be characterized by democratic experimentation in the shape of multipartism (E. Ngolle Ngolle, 1996). By 1966, the Federation opted for a different form of political process defined in terms of the One-Party form of
politics in line with the desire to accelerate nation building, rapid economic development and national unity.

The year 1966 thus saw the end of the first wave of democratic politics and the beginning of a new and, at the time, most popular form of politics in the Developing World - the Single Mass Party model of politics. For some, the Single Mass Party form of politics was not only in line with African traditions; it was the most desirable to enable the achievement of rapid economic development and national unity. The rationale being that it would harness all the national energies instead of engaging in dispersed and often conflict-prone pluralistic forms of political expression.

From 1966 when the Single Mass Party form of politics came into being until 1982 with the advent of the New Deal administration, the Cameroonian body politic was characterized by and functioned on a centralized monolithic logic whose central hallmarks were: the absence of competing political parties and other freely formed associations, the absence of multiple candidate elections for public office, absence of local population and elites in political life, the limitation of fundamental political and civil liberties, the lack of emphasis on the protection and promotion of human rights, the concentration and centralization of political decision making powers and the omnipresence of the Party over State organs (W. Johnson, 1970). As proposed in the initial declarations of his administration, liberalization and democratization were to be the hallmarks of the New Deal program of government of 1982. To the successor President Ahidjo himself, liberalization involved the restoration of public freedoms, in particular, freedom of thought and speech.

Democratization meant the introduction of pluralism into national politics that took into account the participation of all Cameroonian in the exercise and development of the nation. The first and second waves of democratic politics in Cameroon were different in at least three respects. While the first was fragmentary in terms of the federation, the second was cohesive and national in character. In the first wave, the political parties were regional parties whereas in the second wave, the political parties are to a large extent national party. In the first wave, there were three constitutions at play; in the second wave there is only one single constitution.

In the first wave, the form of the State was a Federation whereas in the second wave, the form of State is a Unitary Republic. What is however common to both waves is the existence of competing freely formed political parties engaging in pluralistic debate and electoral competition with a multiplicity of candidates. This common denominator of the democratic process in the two eras fits well into the democratic concept as defined in democratic theory. The essential quality being that it is a process based on the rule of law, elected representative government, civil rights, majority rule, protection of minorities, separation of powers and popular sovereignty. In such a process, the elected government is responsive to the people and the people possess the liberty to make a choice in terms of the structure and composition of the government in an atmosphere of civility and order. In this context, multipartism denotes the existence and functioning of a multiplicity of political parties all competing for public office on the basis of freedom of choice and within formal rules of law. The post-1982 democratic process proceeded along two wave lengths or speeds. The first wave length or speed involved preparing the then single ruling party for multiparty competition. This phase involved introducing multiple candidacies within the party in elections for local party officials as early as 1983. The phase also involved reorganizing and transforming the CNU into the CPDM as a way of emphasizing the democratic resolve of the New Deal. In this first phase of the process, the minds of militants and party barons were also stimulated to prepare for competition with other
parties. This phase lasted till 1990 when the law on multipartism was passed by the National Assembly opening up the political landscape to a multitude of freely formed political parties and associations all vying for political expression and public office.

In the second phase, multipartism took shape and on occasion, it seemed unmanageable. This phase also marked the proliferation of the private media which violently took on the government and the ruling party in its commentaries. These activities were coupled with sometimes violent social movements all claiming to express their freedom of speech and expression. The most important factor that later change the form of the state of Cameroon was due to internal public demonstrations in Cameroon in the 1990s and in response to some critical developments on the other, the government of Cameroon undertook some political, administrative and economic reforms. One of these reforms was the democratization of political life, through the introduction of political pluralism in 1990. This was followed in 1996 by a constitutional revision which among other amendments made Cameroon a unitary decentralized state.

It is possible to measure the progress of decentralization in concrete terms from 1996 when it became an official policy till date. Its degree of implantation is visible in three areas, namely, legal framework, territorial reorganization and state reforms. Between January 18th, 1996 and January 17th, 2008, the president of the republic signed two important decrees setting up the national decentralization council and the inter-ministerial committee for local services in charge of implementing the decentralization of state organs. The policy was given another face-lift with the signing of three laws on July 22nd 2004 concerning the functioning of councils and regions (V. K. Ngwoh, 2011).

Between July 2009 and December 2010, eight laws were passed and close to forty decrees have been signed by the head of state to enable the process take root. In order to effectively implement the provisions of section 1(2) of Cameroon’s constitution, the structure of the national territory was recognized in order to bring administration closer to those administered. Province and districts were transformed into Regions and subdivisions, respectively, while 59 councils and 12 city councils were created.

The legal framework giving strength to decentralization process since January 1st 2010 has facilitated the transfer of administrative and financial competences from fourteen ministries to decentralized territorial collectivities. These ministries include those concerned with the provisions of water in rural areas, digging, tarring and maintenance of roads, women and the family, agriculture and rural development, social affairs, fisheries and animal husbandry, health as well as education.

Concerning State reforms, the process since January 2010 moved from theory to effective implementation through the disbursement 50.2 billion of FCFA mostly devoted to city and local councils that constitute the heartbeat of the country’s development (Kaze, 2017). In 2010, nine ministries devolved some of their competences and the corresponding appropriate resources amounting to 23 billion FCFA to the 14 city councils and 360 councils within the framework of the first generation of transfer of competence to local councils (Ngwoh, 2011). The finance corresponds to the project each ministry had to carry out in the council areas in the economic, sanitation, health, social, educational, sports and cultural development domains.
In an attempt to effectively execute decentralization process, the government ensured that Cameroon’s city and councils benefited annually from a 6 billion FCFA from the general endowment of decentralization from a total amount of 9 billion. One third of this is used as salaries of council officials while another 3 billion FCFA as investment. The rest is use in the financing the functioning of decentralization process follow-up structures such as the National Decentralization Council, Local Service Inter-ministerial committee and other institutions that go to strengthen the process. Beside the general endowment, government reassigned taxes and duties to councils amounting to about 17.5 billion (Kaze, 2017).

The second generation of effective devolution powers and resources involve five ministries that are going to transfer powers and the accompanying resources to Cameroon’s 14 cities and 360 local councils in the 2011 financial years. These included the ministry of trade, urban development and housing, Youth affairs; Small and Medium Sizes Enterprises.

For more than 23 years now, the post independent republic of Cameroon has experienced a lot of ups and down in the implementation of the policy of decentralization which is one of the constitutional dispositions. As a matter of fact the decentralization process in Cameroon has been more of theoretical and practical characteristic by a multitude of legal texts, institutions and above all, support from international organizations and donor countries. The ineffectiveness can largely be attributed to challenges at the sub-national level such as limited resources, the Profile of local officials, institutional weaknesses and Problems of Accountability and Moral integrity of some local authorities. At the national level, political will of politicians and an ambiguous judicial decentralization law and the unbalance financial contributions.

One of the major objective goals of decentralization is taking administration to the grassroots by engaging the local population to participate in the development of their communities through the election and sanctioning of their representatives through votes. However and most importantly the lack of credible and legitimate actors at the grassroots level in the decentralization process has significantly contributed in retarding/stalling the effective and efficient operationalization of the decentralization policy in Cameroon. It is against this perspective that the role and implication of traditional rulers or chiefs is necessarily significant towards the effective operationalization of the decentralization policy in the grassroots.

CHIEFS AS CREDIBLE AND LEGITIMATE ACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE DECENTRALIZATION IN CAMEROON

The term chieftaincy or traditional authority today is the relics of the multiple socio-political organizations that characterized pre-colonial African states before the advent of colonial rule. Chieftaincy is first and foremost a political unit created out of a multitude of kin groups all centered on a leader (G. M. Eyenga, 2015). Traditional authorities are the leaders of traditional communities. The word “traditional” refers to historic roots of leadership, which legitimizes the execution of power. There are many existing forms of traditional leadership.

“Traditional leadership” is anthropologically defined as including “those political, socio-political and politico-religious structures that are rooted in the pre-colonial period, rather than in the creations of the colonial and post-colonial states. By these key considerations, traditional leaders can include kings, other aristocrats holding offices, heads of extended families, and office holders in decentralized polities, as long as their offices are rooted in pre-colonial states and other political entities (R. Donald, 2003b).
Traditional leaders are the monarchs and aristocracies of Africa who have pre-colonial roots and their African language titles are often translated into English as “chiefs”, “traditional leaders”, “traditional authorities”, “traditional rulers”, “kings” and “natural rulers”. Chieftaincy includes those political, socio-political and politico-religious structures that are rooted in the pre-colonial period rather than in the creation of the colonial and post-colonial states, these offices we would consider to be “neo-traditional”.

**POTENTIALITIES OF TRADITIONAL RULERS AS RELEVANCE ACTORS IN EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF DECENTRALIZATION POLICY AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL**

Within the perspective of governance and development, traditional authorities by their very historical nature possess a number of qualities capable of assisting the modern state to effective implement its policies on the national territory. These qualities vary from the personality and politico-administrative aptitude of traditional leaders and their traditional legitimacy.

**The Charismatic Personality and Politico-administrative Aptitude of the Chiefs**

In most African traditional societies and notably in Cameroon, traditional rulers enjoyed both sacred and secular authority. In the Grass-fields of Cameroon for example, by virtue of the ritual of the coronation ceremony, traditional leaders underwent a remarkable transformation and became virtually invincible and invulnerable people.

In fact, the newly made traditional leader or chief changed in status and was elevated and kept in a respectful distance from the ordinary man. He was at the apex of the visible hierarchy and his ritual of installation made him a sacred person and conferred on him a number of attributes and said to be endowed with divine powers and the incarnate of the political and religious life of their people. Once a prince had been enthroned as chief and undergone all prescribed rites, it was believed that the life force of his ancestors has automatically been transmitted to him. If the transfer of power did not follow the custom and tradition dictated by the ancestors, the usurper, after sitting on the ancestral stool automatically suffered a serious ailment such as sterility, madness or even death (M. T. Aletum, 1980).

As a matter of fact immediately the chief assumed his ritual functions from his people, he automatically became the divine symbol of his people’s health and welfare as it is believed that the life force of his ancestors is automatically transmitted to him (P.N. Nkwi, 1977). All of these characteristics gave the traditional leader a certain authority before his people. This explains why traditional leaders were feared and revered and their orders executed with diligence. Traditional leaders inspired traditional patriotism and the desire of belonging within their subjects. That is why in some instances in Cameroon, the local population respects orders from the traditional authorities than state authorities. In some circumstances, state authorities are obliged to always collaborate with traditional leaders to better exercise their duties, even though it has not always been an easy task.

The office of the traditional rulers in some traditional societies Cameroon and specifically the Grass-fields was a composite one having many duties, responsibilities and obligations. In the Grass-fields traditional society traditional leaders were considered head of the traditional government. They incarnated the function of the chief executive, chief judge, army chief as well as high priest of his community. This was so because in the Grass-fields traditional societies, like in most African traditional societies, the power and authority of the chief were not considered separate or divisible.
They were the guarantors of the traditional order or system in terms of political, security, justice, socio-cultural development of their chiefdoms.

**Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities as an advantage**

Political scientists and sociologists have recently developed very stimulating approaches to understand African states, to explain most of its failures and to indicate the way in which reforms should be led. They have focused their analysis on the articulation between state and society. On this particular issue it becomes common among them to speak of the illegitimacy of African state. This phrase expresses the fact that African state based on predictions is not (ex ante) locally appropriate or rooted (Englebert Pierre, 2000). It is a process of transplantation without no fundamental cultural and traditional basis.

Sindjoun Luc (2002a) justify this assertion by talking, *L’État ailleurs. Entre noyau dur et case vide*, an assertion in which he holds that the state was created, ride of its content before been exporting it to Africa. Most African countries at independence notably Cameroon copied their colonial masters administrative system. Luc Sindjoun has described this as an institutional and political imaginary practice in post-colonial African States. By so doing the modern state was created without any legitimacy, but rather state legitimacy was imposed on the people. This of course give rise to what Pierre Englebert, using Kalevi Holsti’s terminology (J. Holsti Kalevi, 1996), has distinguished two sorts of legitimacy: the *vertical legitimacy* and the *horizontal legitimacy*. Vertical legitimacy corresponds to the quality of the relation between society and political institutions or in others words the presence of a consensus on the content of the social contract. The exogenous process of state creation had as consequence that

> the leadership or the ruling class inherited the state rather than shaping it as an instrument of its existing and developing hegemony. As a result, African states were born lacking legitimacy, meaning simply that they were not endogenous to their societies, they were not historically embedded into domestic relations of power and domination, and they therefore suffered from dichotomization between power and statehood”. Vertical legitimacy captures the degree to which contemporary state institutions evolved endogenously to society or were imported and, in the latter case, the extent to which such imported institutions clash with pre-existing relations of authority (Englebert Pierre, 2002).

*Horizontal legitimacy* refers to the degree of continuity between pre- and postcolonial borders and is measured by the percentage of a country’s populations that belong to ethnic groups not partitioned by borders. Although the arbitrariness of borders is not particular to Africa, the characteristic of African borders is that they were drawn according to colonial interest without any regard to the social and political realities on the ground.

Even if ethnicity is itself a fluid concept and unreliable source of identity or institutional affiliation, as Englebert (2002) puts it, the fact that an ethnic group exists on both sides of contemporary border, no matter how intense the ethnic identity, means that the border cuts across a pre-existing area of common political culture. Therefore it becomes difficult for an imposing state to get the allegiance of a partitioned group. Contrarily the chieftaincy institution which is the most noticeable features of the socio-cultural heritage of the Africa and Cameroon in particular is very legitimate. This is partly because chiefs have been and continue to be a permanent feature of the Cameroonian society (Kaze,
Throughout history chiefs have been at the centre of the political, socio-economic and cultural life of their respective societies. Although chiefs are referred to by various appellations, the core content and significance of chieftaincy and the functions of chiefs have lots of things in common.

Stressing on the importance of legitimacy vis-a-vis power management Max Weber was famous for emphasizing that power relationships with the subjects are influenced by legitimacy. In political science, legitimacy implies that the subjects accept and recognize that a particular institution has ‘the right to rule’, and that their compliance to this institution is more or less voluntary (M. Weber, 1978). In other words, this means that a legitimate institution has got the right to exercise power it has got through consent and mutual understanding, instead of through coercion. As Weber explains it; the subjects must have an interest in obeying that particular ruler. Seymour Martin Lipset (1984) provides a slightly different definition of legitimacy; however, his definition is still related to Weber’s understanding of the concept. Lipset argues that legitimacy is “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.”

In order to assess the legitimacy of the chieftaincy in Cameroon, the term legitimacy must operationalize. In line with Oomen’s (2005) recommendation, legitimacy within African chieftaincy institution is necessarily operationalized as justified support. Justified as it takes into account the way in which people think of, speak about and justify the way in which the chieftaincy institution obtained its authority”(H.B.Markus,2017) and support it because support forms “a reasonable and measurable indication of whether people will comply when told to do so or not.

In fact because of the reverence citizens have for the chieftaincy institution, chieftaincy is more than ever legitimate. As such, traditional authorities have the capacity based on their legitimacy mobilize local communities for political participation, thereby empowering them to play a part in influencing policy on the distribution of public services. Traditional authorities also have the potential to support the efforts of governments in service delivery by participating in the administration of justice and by mobilizing human and financial resources for expanding educational and health services. African traditional values, thus, not only converge with modern democratic values but also have the potential to complement the mechanisms of modern democracy by filling the gaps in the applicability of modern democratic mechanisms.

**QUESTIONAL INTERGRITY OF CHIEFS AS RELEVANT ACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE GRASSROOT LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

From their historical past traditional leaders enjoyed much legitimacy and influence at the grassroots level and their relevance to the evolution of the modern state has very crucial. Just like Peter Skalnik notes; the consolidation of the state in Africa and democracy necessarily needs the incorporation of traditional institutions that had existed in Africa prior to colonial rule. Chiefs could be very effective in the decentralization process in Cameroon but their involvement is doomed to fail because of a number of reasons.

One of the major challenges capable of jeopardizing chiefs from becoming relevant actors in the effective implementation of the decentralization policy is the questionable moral integrity of some chiefs. Some traditional rulers in Cameroon nowadays continue to witness a drop in respect vis-à-vis their subjects. This is because some of them have failed to play the role for which they were meant
for, but rather, have used the prerogatives given to them by custom and tradition to soil and down
grade themselves. As such, the once respected traditional rulers have become a play toll in the
hands of the powers that be. Instances have been noted in Cameroon where chiefs desecrate their
thrones, betrayed their people and ridiculed their traditions and customs without any shame all in
the name of party politics and the quest for political offices. As a result, it become difficult for such
chiefs to serves as the ideal representative for the effective implementation of decentralization
policy at the grassroots since they are not in harmony with the people and given that
decentralization is about the participation of all local citizens, such a chief is bound to fail in his
exercise of authority.

Furthermore, another major challenge is the resistance of central governments to devolve authority
and competence to local authorities. Again, knowing the capacity of mobilization and influence of
traditional authorities in Cameroon, the central governments and administrations, which are often
legitimately weak before the people of diverse ethnic origins in Cameroon, do not want to give up
control, power or resources to the lower levels so do not substantially support attempts to
decentralize (Olowu 2001). Following Decree No 17/245 of 15th July 1977, traditional rulers in
Cameroon were empowered as auxiliaries of the modern government or administration. This was
because, until that year (1977), the only legal document concerning chieftaincy in Cameroon
especially in British Cameroon was the colonial law No 244 of February 1933. Apart from that there
was the need for a new law that would harmonize the chieftaincy policies of the former states of
East and West Cameroon. The laws of 15th February 1977 in Cameroon recognized traditional rulers
as auxiliaries of the administration. This law equally provided disciplinary sanctions for traditional
rulers who did not cooperate with the state. These sanctions vary from deposition of chiefs to the
suspension of their remunerations.

In the same Local elites who are not necessarily more responsive to local demands are a major
handicap. In almost all chiefdoms in Cameroon, there will always exist a category of elites either in
opposition or in harmony with the chief. In fact meanwhile the elites are holding important political
functions at the national level, the also make sure they have a strong grip on the base as a support
base in case they lost authority at the national level. That is why such elites usually do everything to
be so close to the traditional authority to gain favors. As such ambitious traditional authorities will
generally get into conflict with its elite. Thus minimizing their chances of becoming efficient relevant
grassroots leaders for decentralization policy.

The truth is that decentralization in Cameroon has neither guaranteed more representativeness and
accountability nor more democratic government at the local level. Thus failure arises because the
local people are not the direct beneficiaries but a means of legitimizing elite power, mostly through
patron-client networks. This legitimization is because Cameroon like most developing countries
portrays features of neo-liberalism and elite-dominated democratization. No wonder that in most
developing countries, patron-client relations between citizens, political organizations, and the state,
and a paternalistic and passive political culture that have traditionally predominated have failed to
disappear with the advent of decentralization(A. Nickson, 1995).

However, despite these challenges there exist a number of proposed determinants that could
guarantee traditional leaders effective implication in the decentralization policy at the grassroots
level in Cameroon.
Determinants for an Effective Chieftaincy Contribution in the Decentralization Process in Cameroon

Von Trotha (1996) argues that the reliance of the colonial and post-colonial states upon chiefs to act as instruments of intermediary administration between those state forms and local people, demonstrates the 'weakness' of the 'organizational power' of those state forms.

It reflects the lack of integration of state and society in many African countries which is expressed as a series of antagonistic dualities: rulers and ruled, capital city and hinterland, urban centers and peasants. In Cameroon administrative chieftaincy as per the 1977 chieftaincy degree as an intermediary order has become a “double gatekeeper” (chiefdoms and the modern state) between the state and the local people, restricting and guiding access of one to the other in matters of state action, clientelist politics, national and local culture, state and local legal orders, the individual and economic matters.

In Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa, chiefs continue to draw their strengths from their local roots: they defend local culture and social order as well as being at the center of local political life. Yet chiefs continue to be subject to the pressures of the state, especially pressures to encourage local people to conform to the state's administrative policies, to accept the regime's politics, and to recognize the state as legitimate (Trotha, 1996). Yet despite all of these pressures and various attempts to write off chieftaincy, chieftaincy is likely to be part of the process of democratic renewal of African states (Van Nieuwaal, 1987). Neither chiefs nor the state are going to disappear in the near future, but they do need to be transformed together.

For an effective implication of chiefs in the decentralization policy at the grassroots level in Cameroon, the state has to recognize the de facto legal pluralism and to institutionalize the chiefs' independent legal system, except for such cases as communal violence. In this respect Von Trotha (1996) acknowledges that this local justice may 'perpetuate the injustices' of the local order but believes that local autonomy in this matter is to be preferred.

Chiefs in Cameroon not only have to be guardians of tradition but they must also be active agents of the present and future by promoting the well-being of the community. This is what really validates chieftaincy, not mere calls for 'self-folklorization'. Von Trotha (1996) contends that, while chieftaincy selection is based on ascriptive norms as a means of limiting access to office, and it therefore appears that chieftaincy cannot be reconciled with democratization, this is not really so. Chieftaincy depended in the past on competent leadership. Incompetent leaders could be removed. The kind of competencies that chiefs must have is changing: chiefs have to deal with "the requirements of modern economic, administrative and political challenges and tasks".

Chieftaincy must become 'civil chieftaincy.' When chiefs speak of representing 'their people,' they do not mean that they represent them in the sense that one individual may represent another, but rather they refer to representation as the embodiment of sacred traditions. Yet the political and economic changes associated with colonialism, the post-colonial state (e.g., administrative chieftaincy) and the market economy (capitalism) have undermined this claim to representation by chiefs. Instead chiefs must adopt a new basis for conflict resolution and representation. Von Trotha argues that under civil chieftaincy the chief becomes a forum where issues can be debated and resolved and local interests can be articulated, and a defender of local interests in discussions with the central government.
Any way to a future and promising African polity must give chieftaincy a prominent place in the political institutions and the political process, and integrate chieftaincy in a new system of checks and balances which restrains the abuse of power of the national political actors as well as chiefs and their allies. Peter Skalník (1987) argues that democracy in African states needs to be enhanced by incorporating mechanisms that allow the indigenous political institutions and values to be expressed and to have effect within the imported, i.e., colonially introduced, state. Like Peter Geschiere, he considers the sacred aspect of traditional politics.

CONCLUSION
One of the major development challenges African states faced nowadays are generally linked to the lack of African specificities in policy design and implementation. For instance if some peace processes or conflict resolution have not been sustainable in Africa, it is simply because local specificities were not taken into consideration. Today the structure of state architecture and functioning in Cameroon is fundamentally based on the western model of state organization with very little consideration on local realities in a country with more than 250 ethnic groups, two main cultural identities (English and French) and two main religions (Christianity and Islam) and at the grassroots level, thousands of traditional authorities who in effect one of the most noticeable features of the socio-cultural heritage of the Cameroon. Throughout history chiefs in Cameroon have been at the centre of the political, socio-economic and cultural life of their respective societies. Although chiefs are referred to by various appellations depending on the ethnic group, the core content and significance of chieftaincy and the functions of chiefs have lots of things in common. Based on all these, it is quite clear that the role of chiefs in the effective implementation of decentralization policy notably at grassroots level is very crucial. Above all, the rational valorization of the chieftaincy institution in Cameroon could potentially consolidate state administration and boost development at grassroots level.

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