Colonial Rule and Bakundu Traditional Authority

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Abstract: *This paper examines the influence of colonial rule on Bakundu traditional authority in the South West Region of Cameroon. It shows how the imposition of colonial rule led to a systematic abuse and disregard for Bakundu institutions that held the society together. The colonial authorities modified the indigenous political structures in which the traditional elite enjoyed a privileged position to their own advantage. This affected the socio-political and economic set up of the Bakundu that led to a gradual decline of the traditional system. This shift of power to Europeans showed the new unequal power relations between the Bakundu and the European administrators. However, the Germans and later the British colonial administrators did not succeed in stamping out the Bakundu system of authority. Meetings of the traditional elite were still held in secret and issues like marriage and land disputes were resolved by the elders without consulting the colonial state. Thus, traditional authority which the Europeans tried to destroy survived and is recognized by the Cameroon government as part of the country's administrative machinery.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The imposition of colonial rule in Bakundu land impacted the Bakundu in various ways. The Bakundu lost their political power as they could no longer take decisions affecting law, order and justice in their communities and lost control of their economy.This loss of political power began with the Germans whose rule lasted for thirty-two years and was continued under the British mandate.

2. BAKUNDU SOCIETY BEFORE COLONIAL RULE

Pre-colonial African states were either centralized or decentralized. Centralized states were monarchies with bureaucracies which performed functions such as collection of taxes, entertaining dignitaries, serving the king or chief and supervising ceremonies. Decentralized states were republics in which social groups like age-sets, age-grades and regulatory societies played prominent roles in the maintenance of law and order[1]. The Bakundu had the decentralized system in which the village was the basic socio-political unit made up of several lineages divided into extended families. Each village was a self-governing community with a village council headed by *Moele mboka* or "father of the village". The council was made up of lineage heads, members of regulatory or secret societies, title-holders and priestly associations. The main function of the council was to settle disputes among the villagers and to ensure the security of the village.

Direct democracy was practiced at the village level. The views of all groups were heard and the decisions arrived at were in keeping with the customs and traditions of the Bakundu. The title-holders were the ones who consulted the oracles, appeased the gods and performed rites of purification. These actions promoted peace and stability in society. To become a title-holder, one had to be a member of a secret society or societies, be a wealthy man or perform acts of bravery such as killing a lion. In this regard, the welfare of the village rested on their shoulders as they worked to sustain the village in all aspects of political, economic and social life[2]. Thus, politics in Bakundu land involved people in all the levels of the society with household, lineage heads, members of secret societies and titles-holders playing important roles. But the role played by secret or regulatory societies was quite remarkable in the maintenance of law and order.

Despite the general involvement in politics by all the groups, secret societies distinguished themselves as agents of administration in Bakundu land. They were important institutions among the Bakundu as they played a variety of religious, judicial, commercial and social functions. They were thus, both

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[1] Vincent B Khapoya. *The African Experience: An Introduction*. (New Jersey: Prentice hall, 1994), 60.

[2] Ibid, 22

secret and sacred. Only people who qualified to be members were admitted after paying admission fees[3]. Each of these societies had a hierarchy of grades. *Nyankpe*, for example was the highest grade of the *Ekpe* secret society which commanded a lot of power in the community. It imposed fines on offenders and enforced the payment of debts, an essential power in the community as the people adopted a system of credit trading[4]. Other secret societies in Bakunduland which performed similar functions were *dio-male, nganya* and *difoni* for men and *molaba* for women. The role of these secret societies complemented those of the government in enforcing laws to ensure peace and the security of the Bakundu people, within and without.

Religion also played an important part in Bakundu traditional authority. The core religious beliefs of the Bakundu were about the greatness of God, the origin and meaning of life, goodness and evil, and veneration of the ancestors. These beliefs included punishment for wrong doing and the reward that comes in the end for those who observed the traditions and customs of the people. The religious beliefs made people conscious of the fact that good fortune could only come if they adhered to their tradition by doing the right things that would not offend God and the spirits of the ancestors. For the Bakundu therefore, everything that happened to them had a religious undertone, meaning that their society could not function without adherence to their religious beliefs[5]. All these aspects of Bakundu life sustained them by creating social harmony among the people. Everyone knew what role he/she had to play for the society to function well. However, the introduction of colonial rule altered these things leading to a situation where Bakundu interests became secondary to those of the colonizers.

3. COLONIAL RULE AND ITS EFFECT ON THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT IN BAKUNDULAND

The introduction of colonial rule in Bakundu land first by the Germans and later by the British was a turning point in Bakundu history. Germany introduced its own version of indirect rule in its colonies. The Germans as early as 1884 realized that they could succeed in their mission by cooperating with and incorporating native participation in their administration of their colonies. With only rudimentary administrative machinery, the Germans decided to rule using indigenous institutions especially the chiefs whose duties were modified to suit European needs[6]. They introduced the chieftaincy system which never existed before. They modified the functions of traditional rulers and involved the chiefs in the settlement of disputes and collection of taxes. In this way, chiefs became agents of colonial rule which led to their loss of power and influence in Bakundu society.

To effectively control Bakundu society and facilitate the collection of taxes, the Germans in 1906 passed a law to regroup scattered settlements into new communities and ordered the burning of any isolated hamlets[7]. This forced resettlement affected Bakundu traditional authority in a variety of ways: people began life afresh in new sites like Mosanja[8]. They migrated without their shrines and totems. Most importantly, these forced migrations began undermining traditional authority since they led to relocations. Apart from this, in those new village sites, new leaders appointed by the Germans emerged and they did not want to be controlled by the community. The power they now enjoyed in the new sites and their association with German administrators led to a gradual decline of traditional authority.

The appointment of chiefs by the Germans to replace the village heads who were considered weak or too strong to submit to them[9], led to divided loyalties which affected traditional authority. This was so

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[3] File No Ae 37, Assessment Report on the tribal areas of Mbonge and Bakundu, National Archives Buea, henceforth NAB.

[4] A.J.H. Lathan. Old Calabar 1600 – 1891 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 38.

[5] Martin Atinda. "Bakundu Under Colonial Rule, 1897 – 1961" Unpublished M.A. Thesis University of Yaounde 1, 2006, 52.

[6] Harry R. Rudin. Germans in the Cameroons, 1884 – 1914; A Case Study in Modern imperialism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 213.

[7] File No Cd/1921/1 Kumba Division Annual Report, 1921 N.A.B.

[8] Joseph B. Ebune. The Bakundu of Cameroon Yesterday and Today: A Study in Tradition and Modernity. (Kansas City: Miraclaire Academic Publications, 2014), 69.

[9] Ibid.

because the appointed chiefs no longer respected their traditions and instead paid more allegiance to the Germans who appointed them. The protection given to the appointed chiefs some of whom never belonged to a secret society and thus had no recognition in Bakundu society made them arrogant and discourteous to traditional authority. This contributed in weakening Bakundu traditional authority. Side by side these developments were the creation of courts by the Germans and later the British which replaced the secret societies that maintained law and order. Under the Germans and the British, those who presided in these courts wielded a lot of power and influence in Bakundu society. They formed a class apart in the society. Bakundu jurisprudence began to be incorporated into European legal norms[10].

The Germans created a court of first instance at Kombone and appointed a Bakundu notable, Henry Itie as head. Another court was composed of a number of chiefs appointed by the German Governor[11]. Under the British, who also instituted indirect rule as a system to govern the people, there were four Grades of Courts, A, B, C, D which derived their authority from the Resident in Buea[12]. The British further instituted other arms of administration namely the District Officers and Native Authorities to effectively govern the people. Native Treasuries based on the Native Revenue Ordinance were created for levying taxes and collecting revenue[13].

Under the German and the British regimes, the Bakundu lost their political sovereignty. This was however partial as village and kingship bases of politics did not disappear. Councils of Elders continued to meet at night in secret and many important matters like marriage transactions, succession and inheritance, and land disputes were resolved without resource to the colonial authorities.

4. THE ASPECTS OF COLONIAL RULE ON THE BAKUNDU ECONOMY

The introduction of a monetary economy which replaced the barter system of trade brought significant changes in the Bakundu economy. Before this, the Bakundu practised subsistence agriculture growing crops like plantains, yams, cassava and a variety of vegetables. Hunting fishing, wood carving and smithing were also important occupations of the Bakundu. Commodities were traded by barter. The German and British colonizers introduced changes in the Bakundu economy. First was the monetization of the economy with the introduction of European currencies, namely, the German Mark and later the British Pound. The other change was the introduction of new crops like cocoa, coffee and rubber which led to the creation of plantations where they were cultivated. Labour to work in these plantations was recruited from among the Bakundu and other inland peoples who were paid wages to enable them buy necessities like clothing, food, and medication.

These economic changes had far-reaching consequences for the Bakundu. A monetized economy created new sources of wealth and status. New economic fortunes were bound up with the export of primary products; chief among them for the Bakundu was cocoa.[14] They not only cultivated food crops for home consumption, they also cultivated cocoa for export. This improved their standard of living. Although the Bakundu made such progress, it was the European merchants who determined the prices of their commodities leading to a situation where they had to depend on the good will of the European colonizers. As other colonized people in Africa, the Bakundu became producers of primary products and importers of European finished goods. This led to a situation where they became depended on Europeans. This dependency led to a gradual decline of traditional authority. The cultivation of cocoa and other cash crops brought a social revolution among the Bakundu as new men of wealth emerged like Nathaniel Bebe of Banga who worked with the British colonial administration and after his retirement embarked on agriculture. Other aspects of this revolution included new ways of life and new measures of status, prestige, political power and influence in Bakunduland, which did not depend on traditional norms or traditional economic activities.

The monetisation of the Bakundu economy with the German Mark and later the British Pound as legal tender facilitated exchange which helped in the creation of markets in Bombe, Konye and Wone in

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Raymond Leslie Buell. *The Native Problem in Africa* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 690.

[13] Victor Julius Ngoh. *History of Cameroon Since 1800* (Limbe: Presprint, 1996), 179.

[14] File No 143/1 Vol. Ae G1 Ad/ Reassessment Report on the Bakundu Tribal Area, Kumba Division. NAB.

Bakunduland[15]. The Bakundu sold ivory, rubber and cash crops like cocoa and palm oil to Europeans and purchased European goods like mirrors, textiles and liquor[15]. A major consequence of this was the accumulation of capital. This accumulation had a negative effect on traditional authority. It led to a shift of authority from the traditional elite to those who now controlled the wealth in society. They now dealt directly with the Europeans and paid little respect to traditional institutions which they came to regard as un progressive. Their loyalty was now transferred to European merchants and administrators. This state of affairs was enhanced following the introduction of western education or formal education.

Formal education in Bakunduland was first introduced by the Germans. However, it was not the Germans but the missionaries of the London Missionary society who opened the first school in Bombe in 1896.[16]. Later other schools were opened in other Bakundu villages[17]. The main subjects taught were Arithmetic, Writing, German, Geography, Natural Sciences and History[18]. Formal education provided the children with new skills like reading and writing which opened the way to new employment opportunities in government and European firms.

Education defined as formal schooling and broad experience of the wider world created a new dynamic for politics, economic and social relations. It created a new elite, with skills in reading, writing and arithmetic which provided them new opportunities and status and source of wealth and well-being. The new group comprising civil servants, teachers, plantation workers and intellectuals were what we call the "colonial elite"[19].

Initially, the Bakundu resisted western education but accepted it later because of the opportunities opened to those who acquired it and became employed as clerks, teachers and interpreters. Their social status changed and enabled them to interact more directly with the colonial authorities and merchants.

The new class of educated people considered their association with the colonial authorities and the merchant class looked low on the traditional rulers. Because the new class controlled the wealth in society and had achieved new status, they alienated themselves from the traditional elites and dealt more with the Europeans and other Africans who had achieved the same social status[20]. In this way, social harmony became affected with less attention and respect paid to tradition. With heir modern outlook and possession of material wealth such as gramophones, radios, bicycles, modern homes, and new dress codes, these people felt more superior than any other in society[21]. This attitude no doubt affected the traditional authority system as Bankudu society began experiencing change in all aspects of life. It encouraged even the die-hard traditionalists to change their attitude toward western education as they also encouraged their children to acquire western education in order to enjoy the new things bought by the Europeans[22]. One other institution that affected traditional authority more was the coming of Christianity into Bakunduland.

Missionary effort started in Bakunduland is 1873[23] in villages like Bombe, Itoki and Konye. These early attempts met with a lot of resistance from the Bakundu. Despite this resistance the Bakundu accepted Christianity at the end and benefited from missionary activities in the fields of education, agriculture, healthcare and hygiene[24].

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[15] Ebune, The Bakundu, 91

[16] Ibid, 90

[17] W Keller; R Bruutsch and J. Schnellbarch.*The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon* (Victoria: Presbook Printing Press, 1969), 21.

[18] Ebune, The Bakundu, 108.

[19] Atinda, Bakundu Under Colonial Rule

[20] Ebune, *The Bakundu*, 108.

[21] Ibid, 154

[22] Ibid. 156

[23] J. Du Plessis. The Evangelisation of Pagan Africa. A History of Christian Missions to Pagan Tribes of Central Africa(Cape Town and Johannesburg: Juta and Co. Ltd., 1929), 162.

[24] Ebune, *the Bakundu*, 116.

Missionary preaching against ancestor veneration, witchcraft, polygamy, juju practices, and traditional medicine divided the society. Those who had been converted to Christianity became hostile to traditional practices like pouring of libation and saw the chief as any other ordinary person. They became more loyal to missionaries than the traditional rulers or elites[25]. Any society divided against its tradition cannot stand and the support the missionaries gave to the converts weakened the authority of the traditional rulers. This was more so because of the support the missionaries received from the colonial government.

What is even more important in the decline of traditional authority was the message given by the Christian church of equality of all in society that was so stratified, with the chief and title-holders at the top and slaves and outcasts at the bottom, while women, although the elderly ones were respected, had no say in society because by Bakundu tradition, they were men's property[26]. This message meant that law and order had broken down and those who wielded power in society could be spoken to anyhow. There were thus, two communities living side by side in tense co-existence.

The Christian community was distinct from the village community. The missionaries discouraged contacts with non-converts and any association with indigenous associations and their traditional lifestyles[27]. As pointed out already, missionary schooling produced literate Bakundu who got employed and earned wages. They were wealthier and lived more comfortably than the rest of the people in the community. The outcome was that those with more income and new western ideas shunned the traditional elites and clung more to the Whiteman's ways. The end result was that traditional authority began experiencing a decline. Two systems now operated side by side with the modern western system gaining an upper hand over the Bakundu traditional system. This notwithstanding, the Bakundu system of authority did not die out completely. It still existed as does today, although it suffered some intrusion from the West.

There are a number of reasons accounting for the survival of traditional authority in Bakunduland. In Bakundu society, the authority of old people is unquestionable. The hierarchy of power, of consideration, and of prestige are directly linked with the hierarchy of age. The oldest member of any Bakundu village or community is the undisputed head who controls every aspect of community life. The council of elders in Bakundland is the supreme political authority of the ethnic group. As Ki-Zerbo has aptly observed the belief in and adherence to the authority of the elders is common in all traditional African societies [28]. The authority exercised by the old continues in maintaining the stability of Bakundu society in spite of foreign influence. It was the autocracy of the old that evolved into a cult of ancestor worship.[29] This cult identified ancestors with the main acts of the living.

A Bakundu, even the educated reserves a large place in his heart for ancestors. Bakundu land is the ancestral home for the dead. The Bakundu believe in life after death. In Bakundu tradition and customs the dead are still alive and the living continue to consult them in times of need. In marriage and other ceremonies the spirits of the ancestors are invoked through the pouring of libation. The oath at the grave of one's ancestors is the most binding in existence. The veneration of the ancestors has helped in the survival of traditional authority because of the fear of offending them and thereby inviting calamities into the community.

Another important factor that has aided in the survival of traditional authority is solidarity among the people. This solidarity is imprinted in the basic structure of Bakundu culture, especially in its economic organisation. Although some changes have taken place in the economic life of the people, land, the most important source of wealth is considered sacred, was collectively owned and work was most often collective. This feeling of attachment produced a sense of belonging which still survives till this day. The Bakundu have lived a communal life by identifying themselves as one people with a

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[25] Paul N. Nkwi. *Traditonal Government and Social Change: A Study of the Political Institutions Among the Kom of the Cameroon Grassfields* (Fribourg: S.E. Friburgensia, 1976), 161.

[26] File No Ae 37, 1922 Assessment Report on the Tribal Areas of Mbonge and Bakundu. NAB.

[27] Ebune, *the Bakundu*, 130.

[28] Joseph Ki-Zerbo "African Personality and the New African Society" in Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S.W. Robio (eds) *Readings in African Political Thought* (London: Heinemann, 1987), 61.

[29] Ibid.

common ancestor. In communal spirit, fear of the Supreme Being, respect for elders and veneration of ancestors are values that are enshrined in the customs and traditions of the Bakundu people.

The system of Indirect Rule in which the colonizers recognised the immense power and importance of traditional authority and used it to their advantage, also played a part in the survival of traditional authority. This system did not completely destroy traditional authority. It instead helped in legitimising it by helping to empower traditional elite in the exercise of their functions. That is why even after independence, successive governments have continued to recognise the importance of traditional authority in governance, suggesting that it is a veritable arm of government.

5. CONCLUSION

Prior to European penetration into the African continent, Africans had their economic, social and political systems that sustained their societies. These systems operated in the interest of all in societies and the common good of everyone was upheld. African societies functioned well due to those traditional institutions that were instituted for the management of African societies. Bakundu traditional system of government played a significant role in maintaining Bakundu society. There was respect for the traditional institutions by all in society. Thus, in their internal and foreign dealings with other societies, the Bakundu maintained a healthy social relationship, but the introduction of colonial rule altered this system of authority by producing a wedge between those who accepted the western system and those who clung to the traditions of the people. This new power relationship did not only divide the people but brought about a gradual decline of the Bakundu traditional authority. In the community, two groups of opposite orientations lived in tense hostility. In spite of all this, traditional authority still survived and today the government of Cameroon has shown more recognition of the traditional rulers because of their role in the maintenance of peace in the country. To sum it all, traditional authority which the colonial powers tried to destroy still has a place in Bakundu land and the rest of Black Africa.

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