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Author(s): Francis Nyamnjoh and Michael Rowlands

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ELITE ASSOCIATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN CAMEROON

Francis Nyamnjoh and Michael Rowlands

Anthropologists of the Manchester school are generally credited with first recognising the complexity of the family and kinship ties that bind urban migrants to their regions of origin in Africa (Gluckman, 1940; Mitchell, 1969). Gluckman distanced himself from the structural-functional paradigm of conservative 'tribalism' surviving in a modernising town setting by stressing that, whatever their origins, 'traditional' urban ethnicities in southern Africa were organised as associations for immediate self-help in town rather than as extensions of rural ethnic politics. The direction of the urban-rural divide was reversed, so that ethnic identities were recognised as a cultural fact of town life and not as some remnant of tradition left from staying in touch with the village. In West Africa, it has been argued, ethnic ties uniting those in town with kin and affines in regions of origin have exerted a more positive feedback effect to both reinforce and transform traditional identities in the village (e.g. Gugler, 1971). Inventing 'tradition' in the village as a means of taking advantage of the political driving force emanating from the town has become a recognised feature of urban post-colonial history in West Africa.

In order to understand different processes of urban/regional ethnic identification, we shall compare the role of elite associations in two regions of Cameroon; one in the Grassfields, characterised by 'chiefly' titles and 'chiefdoms', the other on the coast (South Western Province), distinguished by more diffuse, acephalous polities. We argue that the influence elites exert in their home regions depends on the respect they acquire in local politics for their knowledge of and influence over external affairs. The central point is that the extent to which urban elites will play a significant role in defining a regional identity for their home area depends on the resources they bring with them and the incentives that encourage them to mobilise local political support. To some extent this depends on the number of educated, literate adults that exist to represent a particular rural population as well as their willingness to remain identified with local interests. Encouraging the young to gain an education and go abroad, yet not to forget their debt to those who supported them at home in the village, is one of the benchmarks for measuring regional progress and development in Cameroon.

During the era of President Ahidjo, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was much less reason for elites to remain attached to their 'village'. The pursuit of regional ethnic loyalties was inimical to the authoritarian interests of a centralised administration with which elites were encouraged to identify as their source of patronage. How people of influence in the 'village' managed to keep control of their upwardly mobile elites at that time has been a much discussed subject (e.g. Geschiere, 1982). Witchcraft and the need for protection against the malice of envious people left behind in the village were widely recognised as a fear that secretly bound urbanites to their homelands (cf. Geschiere, 1997; Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996). Others attached

importance to the village as 'home' or 'place', where it would be unthinkable not to be buried. The push and pull between the dependence of elites on the central government and their attachment to place produced an ambivalence that expressed itself often on the front pages of newspapers.

Since 1989 such ambivalence has been accentuated in Cameroon by the impact of democratisation and liberalisation policies encouraged by political conditionalities attached to structural adjustment. A major consequence of multi-partyism and the weakening of authoritarian control has been the attempt by the ruling party to maintain local support at all costs, principally through appropriating the support of elite associations and their representatives. With the current *impasse* in multi-party politics encouraging devolved regionalist politics, elite associations now play an unprecedented role in mediating between people who have grown used to the idea of elections and having a vote. The attachment of elections and citizenship to regions encourages a more formal distinction of rights based on birth or residence: the distinction between *autochtones/allogènes* or natives and strangers. We argue that in the 1990s this has led increasingly to the replacement of political parties by ethnicised elite associations as the prime movers in local regional politics. Instead of the development of multi-partyism the trend is for local regional ethnic politics to compete for 'party' status and access to state resources. The inclination of elites at present to identify with their home regions is part of this tendency for devolved power to be accompanied by increasingly violent polemics about 'ethnic cleansing' and the removal of 'strangers' who in many cases are second or third-generation descendants of migrants.

ELITE ASSOCIATIONS IN CAMEROON

Associations of urban-based educated men and women who identify with a particular region or ethnic group are not a new phenomenon in Cameroon or elsewhere in West Africa. In the anglophone part of the country Lions clubs, school and college associations, Church groups and other fund-raising organisations are a long-standing feature of urban life. Associating access to education with progress goes back to the very early years of German colonisation, when chiefs competed with each other to invite the missions to found schools in their villages. Ostensibly it was the responsibility of educated elites to help others from the same family and to pass the benefits of their success back to their village of origin. In many cases associations were founded principally for mutual aid on the basis of having gone to the same school or belonged to the same church or lived in the same neighbourhood, so that membership would often cross ethnic ties.

Many of these associations go back to the 1950s and the first major expansion of secondary education in Cameroon. Martin Njeuma (1987) describes the age group who went through Sasse College (the St Joseph's Mill Hill Mission in Soppo) from 1953 to 1958 as a strongly bonded association of classmates united by the common struggle to expand secondary education in what was then the Nigerian Crown colony. The club, which was founded in 1971 by those returning from university education in Britain and North America, has a core of anglophone civil

servants and academics based in the capital, Yaoundé, who call themselves 'the Recorders' and meet regularly each month. Known to one another as 'one of the worst bunch of students the college had ever known', the class prides itself on its militancy, which led to fundamental changes in the living conditions of students and in the college curriculum in the 1950s (Njeuma, 1987: 6). They pride themselves on having achieved the best examination record in the college and on the fact that many, now middle-aged, are in senior positions of political and economic power. The members donate funds for the development of the college, help each other promote their business interests and organise events that support an anglophone identity. The organisation is extremely formal, with a written constitution specifying financial contributions, the dates of meetings, the hierarchy of officials and the contribution and roles of the members.

The tendency towards bureaucratising functions is characteristic of many types of association in Cameroon, ranging from Church groups to rotating credit associations as well as businesses. The association of discipline with success and achievement is seen by some as an 'anglophone virtue' and by others as an inheritance from mission schools run by the 'white fathers'. For most of the boys entering the college between the ages of 12 and 16 the wearing of uniform, the rigorous timing of the day, which would start with a bugle call at 5.30 a.m. and end with 'lights out' at 10.00 p.m., tidiness and the arrangement of daily life around predetermined goals were a strikingly new routine summed up by the word 'discipline'.

Apart from the Sasse Old boys' Association, of which the Record Club is a part, other active *alma mater* associations in anglophone Cameroon include the Bali Old Boys' Association, the Sacred Heart Ex-students' Association, Lourde Ex-students' Association, Saker Baptist Ex-students' Association, Okoyong Past Students' Association, St Bede's Ex-students' Association and St Augustine Ex-students' Association. Their concerns are similar, and their continued existence since the reintroduction of multi-party politics in 1990 depends on members avoiding party political discussion at meetings and dwelling on neutral issues such as the marginalisation of anglophones and the development of their former college.

The formal organisation of elite associations reflects the virtues of vertical integration, providing the contacts and self-help necessary to gain access to resources for local development, and describes the special characteristics of ethnic/regional politics in the articulation of state power. For example one of the long-standing features of the multi-faceted form of Grassfield associations has been their espousal of anglophone politics and identity in a predominantly francophone post-colonial state. A post-colonial history of exclusion from state power and resources is explained by anglophones as the only way francophone Cameroonians can cope with anglophones' obvious superiority in all things to do with administration, education and business (cf. Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 1996; Gobata, 1993, 1996; The Postman, n.d.). The waste and bureaucracy of the francophone way are constantly compared with the frugality and efficiency of the anglophone heritage. What is termed the 'zero option' (full secession by anglophones from the francophone-dominated United Republic of Cameroon) has been articulated most vehemently by the older generation of anglophone

politicians and civil servants.¹ Their marginalisation was poignantly illustrated in 1995 when the architects of the unification of the former West Cameroon with francophone Cameroon in 1961 (Foncha and Muma) travelled with a delegation to New York to request the UN Security Council to set the plebiscite aside as illegal and return the former West Cameroon to the status of a mandated territory.²

In a more prosaic mode, the political ambitions of most of the elite associations that developed by the 1980s were directed to developing cultural programmes to educate the young or develop self-help rather than forming political groups (Fodoup, 1997). When he first took over from Ahidjo, Biya made several attempts to emphasise the unity of the state over 'ethnic factionalism' (Biya, 1986), condemning traditionalism and ethnic favouritism whilst in practice distributing ministerial favours to garner ethnic and regional support (in particular that of his own Beti; Bayart, 1993: 45; Kofele-Kale, 1987: Nkwi and Nyamnjoh, 1997: 8–10). Nevertheless, through claiming to grant access to national/urban politics, elites could exercise power and influence in their 'constituencies' in proportion to the resources this brought them. Among the chieftaincies of the Western and North Western Provinces, including both anglophone Bamenda and francophone Bamileke, elites were frequently accused of conniving with chiefs to gain access to traditional titles and rights to land and labour. During the 1960s the destruction wrought by the war in the Bamileke chiefdoms effectively allowed the educated elites, with state support, to take over many of the vacant chiefly titles and reinvent chiefship on administrative/bureaucratic lines. The end of British rule in the Bamenda region saw greater continuity in the accession of title holders and greater resistance to what was perceived as the usurpation of traditional titles by wealth. Yet the pressure to 'modernise the chiefdoms' meant that the majority of Fons and clan heads were chosen from the educated elites in the expectation that they would pursue clear modernising goals. The presence of an illiterate Fon without educational qualifications or national contacts was popularly seen as a sign of backwardness and lack of development. In the South West Province the Grassfields' retention of ritually active chiefs was in itself seen as a traditionalising backward step. From the 1950s elites in the south-west had played a more open and significant role both in the run-up to independence and the union with francophone Cameroon and in the subsequent power broking, where they were more concerned with curtailing the influence of the Bamenda and Bamileke in national politics than with representing a common anglophone view.

Elite associations have evolved in very different local political settings. As in the case of the Record Club, there was much greater awareness in the south-west of a modernising project and the role that elites could play in developing new business and administrative opportunities. The actual role of elites in promoting local interests was often cloaked in the language of development. A common aim of the ambitious young in the 1970s and 1980s was to gain access through the central administration to capital for business ventures at the local level. The straddling of private and public sectors became effectively the means by which the resources that had been invested over many years in the education and advancement of an *évolué* was finally

returned to the village through the benefits of development gained through access to a ministerial budget. The development of a more diverse political, administrative and business elite in the south-west, linked with the greater economic opportunities offered by the commercial development of the plantation economies, contrasts with the need to convert economic or political capital into symbolic capital in the Grassfields region as the means by which elites could exercise influence at the regional level. The common accusation that the latter strategy promoted regionalism and limited development and access to the state has an element of truth in it, as witness the relative underdevelopment of elite/ethnic associations in the anglophone part of the Grassfields.

In the last two or three years significant changes have occurred in the political role of elite associations. The previous pattern has been almost inverted. With the pressures of multi-partyism and the rise of oppositional politics, the boundaries between state and civil society have become more fluid as the fortunes of the state have ebbed and flowed. The tendency in recent years for elite associations to reinvent or rework ethnic loyalties as part of the political mobilisation of regional support to gain advantage in a less organised and predictable arena of state politics has encouraged more explicit recognition of the political ambitions of these social movements.

The trend for local associations to take on increasing political significance as a means of representing local interests has also been encouraged by the unpopularity of a single-party state that has lost considerable direct local influence. Instead of responding to local demands through a mesh of cross-cutting associations that harness national resources to local needs, urban elites find themselves increasingly representing ethnic regional social movements that profess neither national political ambition nor the status of a political party yet are sought out by national leaders attempting to appropriate their local influence. The motives claimed by elites for pursuing these new alliances are the furtherance of local development, the maintenance of cultural rights and the assertion of regional identities. In the forefront of the movement are members of urban elites, who are often the first to call a meeting based on ethnic/regional loyalties.

The scope of these associations is also more ambitious than were those of the 1970s and 1980s. Their networks are often international, linked to diaspora communities in Europe and the United States. They are quite likely to originate in the diaspora of students and businessmen abroad representing the interests of ethnic homelands. The role of the internet in facilitating the exchange of information about events in Cameroon means that acts of violence against or persecution of minority groups can no longer be perpetrated in the silence of remote parts of a little known country. The opposition party, the Social Democratic Front, was the first political party to set up a web page on Camnet to report political resistance to the Biya regime.³ The Bamileke make outstanding use of their web site, with regular features on dance, music, business contacts, social events and deaths, linking the homeland with Bamileke resident in Europe and the United States. The claims that are made to defend local interests, spanning a range of issues from conserving the rain forest, land rights, the cultural heritage and demands for local museums to preserve regional traditions, demonstrate that

'issues' are as likely now to be part of global discourses that are internalised as they are to be of 'local' origin.

ETHNICISATION OF ELITE ASSOCIATIONS

The mobilisation of regional elites for political purposes has therefore been a consistent feature of post-colonial politics in Cameroon. In the 1990s this trend has been transformed as elite networks have developed to give political expression to fears of exclusion and conflict stemming from the impact of political liberalisation. The consolidation of numerous elite groups into larger regional blocs has increasingly taken an ethnic tone as claims to indigenous origins and hostility to 'strangers' have become part of the rhetoric of exclusion. The ethnicisation of elite associations as an alternative to multi-partyism helps to maintain authoritarian rule through the 'traditional' manipulation of local networks.

However, the historical bases of the different regional blocs that can be mobilised are very different. Laakam is an association identified with the Bamileke of Western Province, who, although francophone, are generally considered ethnically part of the Grassfields and to support the Social Democratic Front (SDF), an anglophone party dominated by north-westerners. In the face of what was seen as an anglo-Bamileke threat, the elites of South Western Province came together to form SWELA (South West Elites' Association). Whilst the Grassfielders supported the SDF and a two-state federal option for the future of Cameroon, SWELA, concerned to confront the growing strength of the SDF, and fearing domination by an alliance of francophone Bamileke and anglophone north-westerners, recently merged with other francophone coastal elite associations to form Sawa in an attempt to unite in support of the CPDM. The francophone/anglophone divide is therefore cross-cut by alliances that oppose coastal versus Grassfield elites and their supporters.

Laakam

It is described in its literature as a socio-cultural association founded to preserve and extend Bamileke identity in Cameroon. The name derives from the initiation house where young men were placed by their elders for three weeks to learn 'Bamileke ways'. The culture house is an icon of the integrity of Bamileke identity. This, it is claimed, has been systematically abused since colonial times, because the French saw the Bamileke to be a threat and insisted on treating them as a political and administrative unit rather than as a cultural identity. The events of the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC) rebellion only served to confirm this view, and as a result the Bamileke claim they have been consistently denied power and justice in post-colonial Cameroon (cf. Kago Lele, 1995).

In a document given to President Biya on the occasion of his visit to Bafoussam in 1991 the president of Laakam accused both the Ahidjo and the Biya regimes of deliberately fostering ethnic conflict and prejudice against the Bamileke for the purpose of maintaining national unity. The whipping up of ethnic hatred against the Bamileke with the rise of multi-party politics, he claimed, was to resort to the colonial tactic of promoting tribalism as an

excuse to crack down on political opposition in the name of national unity. Officials of Laakam claimed that, during the national *villes mortes* campaign of strikes, called by national opposition parties to protest against Biya's refusal to consider constitutional change, soldiers stood by whilst crowds ransacked Bamileke-owned shops and petrol stations. It is widely believed that in protest the Bamileke for the first time sent their money out of the country before the devaluation of 1991 when there was a run on the banks and Biya begged them to return their funds. During the worst periods of opposition party conflict, after the elections in 1992, the president of Laakam, Robert Nkamgang, wrote to Cardinal Tumi, copying the letter to the presidency, asking him to help organise a national debate to resolve the conflict.

What lies behind much of the urban violence against Bamileke businesses is resentment of 'strangers' and the belief that each 'tribe' should have its own region and its members should stay there. Following the SDF victory in the municipal elections of 1996, the governor of South Western Province, Oben Peter Ashu, was quoted as blaming the defeat of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) on the heavy concentration of 'strangers' in the south-west.⁴ In Douala after the election there was a mass demonstration by 'the Douala youth' in protest at what was perceived as Bamileke domination of local councils (Mentan, 1996), especially the election of Bamileke 'settlers' as mayor on four of the five councils won by the SDF in Douala. Placards with messages like 'Let all tribes vote at their place of origin', 'Mayors should be natives', 'Yes to democracy, no to ethnic domination' emphasise the growth of regional/ethnic politics associating elite associations with particular party loyalties. The threat of 'strangers' and the rhetoric of ethnic cleansing not only refer to north-westerners in the south-west and Bamileke in Douala but have spread everywhere as a sign of indigenous superiority over minorities, supported in particular by CPDM activists. In April 1996, at a party meeting in Bamenda, the Fon of Mankon, one of the major Fons in the Grassfields and a vice-president of the governing party, threatened that 'any stranger unwilling to abide by the norms and traditions of the Mankon people will be dealt with appropriately'. The principal of Sasse College in Buea has been accused in the *Cameroon Tribune* of setting up a Kom dynasty (Kom is a Grassfield chiefdom, i.e. 'stranger') in the school, and the Bishop of Buea was condemned for appointing secretaries only from his home (Grassfield) village.

Laakam claims to be non-party and non-political except that it continues a long-term struggle against the ethnic prejudice shown towards the Bamileke in Cameroon. Able to mobilise the educated elite as well as 'traditional chiefs' through their common respect for custom, the leadership of the association was and still is committed to pursuing national unity and progress without tribalism in exchange for security and political recognition, but claims that they have to be achieved through security and strength. 'Understanding, solidarity and peace' is its clarion call, combined with the merits of nurturing a community that is widely recognised for the entrepreneurial skills it has pursued in the teeth of colonial and post-colonial ethnic prejudice. Attempts by governments to undermine Laakam

by sponsoring the creation of parallel associations have failed (Kago Lele, 1995: 95–6).

In 1991 a group of Bamileke students in Frankfurt issued the first newsletter of a rejuvenated Laakam. For and on behalf of the traditional rulers and title holders of the Bamileke people, it was written and produced by educated ‘youth’ studying abroad, to bring to international attention the prejudice of the Biya regime against their people. Effectively the new Laakam was first promoted in the Bamileke diaspora in Europe and North America, ostensibly with the aim of using its international links to expose potential genocide at home. Parallels were explicitly drawn with the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust. The authorities’ indifference to popular prejudice against the Bamileke during the *villes mortes* campaigns in 1991 was cited as a sign that the authorities would not be averse to some kind of ethnic ‘scapegoating’ to defer popular anger and resentment. Laakam has now established branches in Paris and Washington to co-ordinate its activities among the Bamileke diaspora in Europe and the United States. The aim is to raise funds and to gain political support abroad for the Bamileke cause. Laakam has branch associations in France, Holland, Germany and the United States which hold regular meetings and via the internet publicise the plight of the Bamileke in Cameroon. Its organisation is modelled closely on ‘traditional’ Bamileke ‘houses’ ranked in a strict hierarchy of age and succession so that the youngest, best educated and most voluble spokespersons for the association are the most visible at public meetings and of lower status, not usually being members of the inner council. Great emphasis is placed on transmitting Bamileke culture to ‘youth’ and preventing disaffection from elders and ‘traditional ways’. This is effected through diaspora links and providing contacts, information and resources for young people to travel for educational or business purposes to Europe and North America.

SWELA

The development of SWELA encouraged the identification of peoples of the coast with opposition to what was perceived to be growing external hegemony. This play on elite or ethnic labelling of associations used to be more important as distinguishing between anglophone and francophone Cameroon. Ethnically defined elite associations were not generally characteristic of anglophone West Cameroon, where elites defined themselves by means of cultural and development associations concerned with the welfare of the village. If in 1991 the south-west created SWELA as an association defined by region rather than ethnicity, the aim was to distance itself from the view of anglophones as a homogeneous community where all suffered the same level of marginalisation. Seeing themselves as having suffered greater disadvantage than north-westerners in the distribution of state power, the south-western elite clearly saw more political capital in a regional association than in the promotion of an anglophone identity, real or imagined.⁵

SWELA was founded by an ex-barrister, A. T. Enaw, in response to the rise to national opposition status of the Social Democratic Front as a regional Grassfields-based party. It was initiated as a non-party association that would

neither pursue political ambitions nor use opposition tactics to dissociate itself from the SDF. Instead it planned to combine all the local elite associations that had developed in South West Province into a single organisation dedicated to raising the consciousness of South West people for the development and progress of the province. It published a three-year development plan in 1992 and decided to hold annual conferences of its members in Kumba. At that time the identity of SWELA was explicitly regionalist, federalist, anglophone: anti-centrist and anti-francophone but not anti-government. Its principal supporters, men like Nfon Mukete, E. T. Egbe, and N. M. Mbile, were all former politicians and prominent businessmen resident in the south-west who had a strong personal affiliation with the Biya regime. The main branch was founded in Yaoundé, with Chief John Agbor Tabi as its head. It aimed to achieve regional development and semi-autonomy as a pressure group rather than an opposition party. The belief that SWELA would alleviate the poverty of the masses in South Western Province was justified by the increased freedom to criticise the government, in particular through a plethora of ethnic/regional newspapers and journals that appeared between 1990 and 1993 (Nyamnjoh, 1996).

The formation of SWELA as a pressure group was also justified by contrast with the chimera of pursuing national power in the wake of Fru Ndi and the SDF. Whilst initially a response to fears of SDF dominance in the new multi-party politics, SWELA claimed it would support the party that best pursued its regional interests. It was after a delegation had met Biya on his first visit to Buea, in September 1991, that the association developed the case for a ten-state federation that would leave the South West autonomous (free from the 'exploitative', 'unscrupulous', 'ungrateful', 'domineering' settlers/Grassfielders), effectively undermining support for the two-state federation campaigned for by the SDF. It was this perception of collaboration between the senior members of the Yaoundé branch of SWELA and the CPDM that led to major internal disputes in 1993. When the government sent gendarmes to South West Province, to stop the smuggling of petrol and other goods from Nigeria, some people were killed in the market in Tiko and tensions arose among the elite in the Yaoundé branch over continued support of the CPDM. An opposition SWELA II was formed to support the SDF, led by a journalist from Lebialem division. It held its first meeting there in December 1993, whilst SWELA I held its second meeting in Kumba in April 1994, with the Prime Minister, Achidi Achu, the governor and chiefs of South Western Province in attendance.

In his address Caven Noko Mbele, the general secretary of SWELA I, denounced the aspirations of those who wished to return to a unified anglophone province of West Cameroon. He pointed out that SWELA II had met in Lebialem, which was widely regarded as a Grassfield province, not truly south-west, and that Martin Nkengu, the general secretary of SWELA II, was a journalist who often wrote under the pseudonym of Alexi Atangcho (the title of a Bafut/Grassfield sub-chief), demonstrating his Grassfield loyalties.⁶ The real interests of the south-west, he claimed, would be served only if people freed themselves from anglophone yearnings for a return to the conditions of the 1961 plebiscite and by sharing the aspirations of other Cameroonians to live within a federal state. The leadership of SWELA I

argued that a revival of 'tribal cultures' in the south-west and the reinvention of chiefship would win popular support for SWELA and bring maximum political pressure to bear on the Biya regime. Instead of the obsession with the anglophone identity of the Cameroon Anglophone Movement and the All Anglophone Congress (AAC), which would lead only to conflict and potentially civil war, SWELA I's programme would realistically serve the aspirations of the indigenous people of South Western Province.⁷

In September 1993 the chiefs of the South Western Province visited Paul Biya in Yaoundé and declared, 'we want to register beyond any doubt to your Excellency our absolute condemnation of any attempt directly or indirectly at partitioning the country on the basis of anglophone or francophone culture . . .' Chief Endeley was subsequently appointed paramount chief of Buea and made responsible for appointing new sub-chiefs in the districts that had 'lost' that tradition. Couched in the language of self-help, the creation of the Cameroon Rural Construct in Kumba, the Fish Co-operative in Limbe and the Obang farms in Manyu were cited as examples of the energising force of SWELA in extracting government funds for local development. At its meeting in 1994 members were urged to form themselves into NGOs, co-operatives and local initiative groups that would foster self-help. In the light of what he described as 'the latest friendly gesture of the IMF towards our country' (the IMF decision to renew its loan), the president of SWELA I declared he would compile a new edition of the catalogue of development projects for the south-west to be presented to President Biya.

In February 1996 SWELA merged with the Sawa ('coast', 'frontier' or 'boundary limits' in Douala) movement to form a united front of coastal/forest peoples powerful enough to thwart all attempts by the Grassfields (north-westerners and Bamileke) to 'snatch' power. Associations of Sawa chiefs, Sawa elites and Sawa women were formed to fight exploitation by 'unscrupulous' and 'ungrateful' Grassfielders or 'settlers' and to play up the idea that, as minorities, the indigenes of the South West and Littoral Provinces needed peace, protection, social order and development, which only President Biya and the CPDM could provide.⁸ The fear of Grassfielders among south-westerners originates in the long-standing influx of labour to coastal plantations and the success of Bamileke and anglophones from North West Province in buying land and taking over prominent businesses in the south-west (Kofele-Kale, 1981). Whilst Sawa had emerged as a Douala association to confront Bamileke expansion, its interests converged with those of SWELA to pressurise a regime that for thirty years had consistently denied resources to one part of anglophone Cameroon because it had originally been against unification.⁹ Wider anglophone politics were also being reacted against, including the ambitions of the All Anglophone Congress movement to opt for separation from francophone Cameroon (the zero option) or for two states. The SDF, AAC and North Western politicians (e.g. John Foncha, the architect of the union in 1961) argued for a two-state federal structure that would recognise the semi-autonomy of anglophone and francophone Cameroon within a new federal unity whilst SWELA and most South Western politicians wanted a ten-state federation that would preserve the separate status of South Western and North Western Provinces. It is with

this divide in the anglophone identity that the Biya regime has made considerable progress recently in undermining support both for the SDF and for the two-state federal option.

THE EFFECTS OF MULTI-PARTYISM

The effect of a brief period of multi-party politics has been to erode national politics at the local level. The earlier mode of representation through local branches of the national political party, the CPDM, has lost considerable popular credibility. The major opposition party, the SDF, has extended its organisation and acquired support outside its regional base in Bamenda, particularly in the west, south-west and Douala regions, but it is not clear that the future will be a matter of competing national political parties, especially given current disillusion with the ruling and opposition parties alike (Ngwane, 1997). Instead elite associations, NGOs and co-operative groups and reinvented 'tribal chiefs' have developed as mechanisms for articulating national and local politics. Government Ministers suddenly appear at meetings of an association or a new co-operative in the South Western or North Western Provinces offering to build a road or fund a new farming project. A French cultural centre opened in Buea in 1993 just below the Mountain Club, where civil servants since the days of the British have gone for a drink after work. With its access to satellite television for sport, films, documentaries, serials and CNN news, plus a weekly programme of imported videos, there is perhaps no more telling a symbol of where the conflict lies when articulated in terms of ritualised consumption.

More worrying has been the evidence of increased conflict and violence, particularly in the Grassfields, where old land disputes have flared up and there are claims of significant numbers being killed. In June 1995 men from the village of Balikumbat attacked Bafanji, burning the centre of the village and killing eighteen people. In another dispute, in July, fifty people were reported killed by men from Babessi armed with automatic weapons. The apparent cause of the violence was a revival of long-standing disputes stemming from the past actions of men now in opposition politics, e.g. 'we have been deprived of our land because the Hon. S. T. Muna, who was then Prime Minister [of former West Cameroon] influenced the courts because of a grudge that we supported the Bali Nyonga in 1952 against the Widikums.' Reports of over 100 deaths in fighting between Bambili and Babanki were greeted with comments in the press about warmongering Grassfielders, their *penchant* for fighting over trivia and the consistency of such behaviour with their ethnic character. Regardless of the accuracy of the figures, there is a tendency to interpret everything in ethnic terms, to use the rhetoric of 'ethnic cleansing' in response to problems and to encourage antagonism to 'strangers' as parasites and 'traitors in the house' (C3, 1994; FES, 1997; Jua, 1997).

Nor is any of this particularly spontaneous grassroots-type anger. The hidden hand of CPDM politics is discernible in a number of ways (Mentan, 1996; Jua, 1997). In May 1995 Prime Minister Achidi Achu founded the North West Fons Conference Bureau as an association of chiefs who would support the government. The Fons of the major chiefdoms in the Grassfields,

who had already formed an association of North Western Fons, refused to join, owing to their support for the opposition SDF party. The Fon of Mankon, a prominent CPDM supporter, was the only major Fon to join the new association, together with the Fons of Balikumbat and Babessi and a number of other second-rank chiefs who otherwise had little political clout in the Grassfields. The manipulation of ethnic/regional rivalries to divide and rule is a long-standing strategy in national politics. The difference in this case is the scale and intensity of the violence that has been generated by disputes that are themselves routine and unremarkable but have been re-energised by the new politics of the 1990s. Much of the violence has been perpetrated by gangs from the villages belonging to the CPDM-supported North West Fons Conference. In January 1997 Peter Mafany Musonge, the Prime Minister appointed from the south-west by Biya, went to the north-west and, despite protests from the first-rank Fons, accepted an invitation from the North West Fons' Conference to speak at a reception in Bamenda. Attributing natural violence to Bamenda men, he continued, 'If we give this country to the SDF they will kill everybody in war' (*Herald*, No. 352). In August 1996 the Senior District Officer of Momo division, John Neba Nchotu, blamed the Metta for being the architects of their own underdevelopment because of their *penchant* for tribalism. Nchotu lamented that the Metta had 'tribalised the local transport business to the extent that non-indigenes were prohibited from operating on the road'. The pattern of CPDM intervention in Grassfield politics, supporting or encouraging the development of rival elite associations, yet condemning the resulting violence as ethnically characteristic, is how multi-party politics operate at the local level.

The transformation of elite associations into ethnic ones promotes the fear that any kind of hybrid will in the end be harmful to the interests of a minority. A scramble to indigenise is justified by the need to protect minority rights, and what should be the right size of a regional/ethnic bloc becomes an issue. In 1996 when the Grand Sawa movement was formed, linking the elites of South West, Littoral and Southern Provinces, V. Mukete, a prominent businessman and politician from the south-west, justified the need for the new association because people were 'being subjected to conditions that militate against their progress . . . and unless something is done to protect their rights as indigenes their extinction will be only a matter of time'. If it is regions that have rights they must also be indigenised. In the Sawa region most of the chiefly titles are a recent invention, and all meetings are accompanied by traditional dances, music and dress that were scarcely known ten years ago. In December 1996 the Fon of Bafut announced to a group of students visiting the palace that, with German aid, he was arranging to have a palace museum created in the former colonial rest house that would, among other things, commemorate the victory of the Bafut over the Germans in 1891 by putting four of their skulls on display. Standing out against these tendencies, the mayor of Buea, speaking in the Baptist chapel in April 1997, proclaimed, 'There are no Bakweri or Bamileke or Douala in church. Here we are all God's children.'

A language of ethnicity promotes the fear that any kind of mixture will in the end be injurious to the interests of the minority. What is emerging in the

late 1990s is regionalism linked with ethnicisation as the key to control of resources.

REGIONAL ETHNIC POLITICS IN THE LATE 1990s

The victory of the SDF in the municipal elections of 1996 seems to have shifted the balance of power significantly towards the opposition parties in key cities and towns.¹⁰ It is striking how in a little less than two years the tables have been turned and the SDF is hemmed in as a regionally based, mainly Grassfield party whilst the CPDM has expanded to regain an element of legitimacy as a national ruling party. The presidential elections in October 1997 that brought Biya back with 92.57 per cent of a low vote were characterised by avoidance of the main opposition parties.

Despite threats and talk of non-co-operation with the government, secret discussions have gone on to distribute posts and budgets to the major holders of regionalised and increasingly ethnicised power. The development of regional/ethnic politics has potentially re-established a degree of balance in the sharing of state resources that, looking at events in Brazzaville, may have been a wise move. It may also be that competition for the presidency is now less important than securing a sufficiently large and secure regional ethnic base on which to found party-political power. The result of the parliamentary elections in May 1997 was to allocate seats to political parties on the basis of regional affiliation. The SDF now has most of its parliamentary seats in North Western and Western Provinces and elsewhere only where there is a significant Grassfield/Bamileke diaspora. The CPDM is the 'real' national party, with a predominance of seats in Southern, Central, Eastern, Far North and Southern Western Provinces. Its popularity among the indigenes of the South Western and Littoral Provinces is surging, thanks to its alliance with the Sawa elite. But whether the Sawa movement is a party in the making or can keep up its momentum of 1996 without support from the CPDM is hard to say, especially as attempts by Sawa elites to create their own parties within the democratic process (e.g. the *Mouvement progressiviste* of Jean-Jacques Ekindi of Douala or the *Liberal Democratic Alliance* of Mola Njoh Litumbe of Buea) have failed. In other words, just how possible is it for the Sawa movement to remain an active force if the CPDM and the government no longer see any need for its allegiance?

The memorandum from the five Sawa chiefs to Biya after the municipal elections in 1996 drew attention to the supposed threat posed to national unity by the attitude of 'certain ethnic groups [i.e. Bamileke] bent on flouting the spirit of peaceful coexistence among all Cameroonians'. The signatories called on the President to enact laws and ordinances aimed at defending and protecting minority groups, quoting the country's constitution. The ambition of the promoters of Sawa led them to float the idea of the Grand Sawa political party stretching from Campo to Mamfe. In response to critics who called it a shameless act of political expediency, Ekindi wondered why the Sawas were condemned while Laakam of the Bamileke and Essingan, an elite association of the Beti, were revered. He vowed, 'This is the time we want to assert ourselves and reorganise, and nothing can stop us.'¹¹ Biya's appointment of Mussonge, a south-westerter, as Prime Minister, to replace

Achidi Achu, an anglophone from the north-west, in September 1996, by putting a Bakweri in the top position weakened the anglophone cause as well as spelling trouble for Sawa (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997: 227–8).¹² At a Sawa meeting Jean-Jacques Ekindi accused the South West delegation of sidetracking him and wanting to dominate the movement. ‘Sawas cannot complain of Bamileke domination and later accept South West domination.’

The deterritorialisation implied by recent changes suggests increasing Appadurai-like disjunctions—associations that are no longer regional but diasporic face regions claiming to define a ‘people’ by locality and heritage rather than adherence to nationhood. The latter in turn conduct a contradictory project of reunifying territory and at the same creating multiple peoples within it. After the parliamentary elections of 1997, when seats were allocated on a regional basis, the CPDM could once more claim to be the national party because of its regional support in the Southern, Central and Eastern provinces and, through Sawa, among the coastal populations. The SDF is the major opposition party but its support is limited to the North Western province, the Western province and to Lebialem in South Western Province, together with a few other seats where the stranger population is high. In future, parties will succeed to the extent to which they can build close links with their regions, which will turn party politics into a familiar ‘gate-keeper’ role in redistributing state resources and making them flow in certain directions. Effectively the failure of the nation state in Cameroon to contain and redefine the lives of its citizens is reflected in the expansion of informal economies, in the proliferation of NGO-type organisations, in bankrupt development projects, local violence and, most worryingly, in the transformation of elite associations into ethnic/regional blocs with which political parties identify rather than with a central administration.

CONCLUSION

Whilst the ties between urban elites and their rural origins have been a constant feature of the last three decades, the 1990s have seen a significant change in the way in which elite associations have changed from being informal and separate from national parties to becoming one of the main vehicles of local political mobilisation.

One result is the promotion of local identities in more complex and cross-cutting forms of association. But the definition of the group varies, and basically size matters, as does the form of dependence between urban elites and rural populations. The comparison between Laakam and SWELA illustrates two divergent tendencies. The former is rooted in a long-standing ethnic identity that has been opposed to both colonial and post-colonial government control and has functioned as a means of maintaining strong regional solidarity in the face of threats to economic security and cultural survival. The reworking of traditional titles and rights has a complicated history that now extends internationally to a diaspora that attempts to transcend the particular conditions of the state in Cameroon.

By contrast the history of SWELA and its transformation into Sawa is a reformulation in ethnic terms of the well established strategy of elite support of government policies in return for a share of state resources. The mix of

managers, businessmen and professionals that made up SWELA owed their careers to government support and the continuation of a federal structure. Its opportunistic transformation into Sawa already appears to be breaking down. The support in South Western Province for the opposition party, the SDF, drawn mainly from Grassfield labour on the plantations and unemployed urban youth, is the main threat to the cosy relationship between a local elite and the Biya regime, especially as the south-west has failed to produce a credible party of its own. In the long run, regional politics may emerge that conceal urban class conflict in the guise of urban/rural ethnic ties. But that would also imply a common tendency in both cases to use ethnic discourse in different situations to achieve different goals.

Laakam and Grassfield chiefdoms in general share certain cultural perspectives that are deeply rooted and constitutive of individual practices. The overriding concern is with maintaining cultural integrity and identity in the belief that any weakening of identity would result in dissolution and absorption by powerful outside forces. Resistance to outside interference and attempts to negotiate the nature of such relations contrast with the role of elites in the south-west, which historically have been more outward and inclusive in their external relations. They espouse a more modernising discourse, pointing out that the people of the south-west have always been more developed economically, more receptive to change, exploiting a significant proportion of the country's natural resources. In their different ways both discourses sustain an idea of identity that resists incorporation into a larger totality whilst differing as regards the degree of exclusion or inclusion adopted in practice.

Analysing the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, Ignatieff (1993: 16) has argued that systemic fear arises when a state begins to collapse. Ethnic hatred is a result of the terror that is felt when faith in legitimate authority is lost. Whilst such an ideal may always have been met with some cynicism in Cameroon, if now the state is no longer the provider of public services, and is perceived as serving only the interests of one particular group, it must lose legitimacy.

There are enormous pressures in Cameroon to emphasise regional autochthony as the basis of political power. Regionalism implies indigenisation, encouraged by multi-party politics that are increasingly established through localising strategies. Ironically this espousal of the politics of decentralisation accompanies a new tendency towards authoritarianism and one-party rule, depending on which party represents the most powerful ethnic-regional bloc at any given time. The movement of urban elites to identify with their rural origins also in part subverts the analytical distinction drawn by Mamdani (1996) between 'custom' and 'civil society'. People move between the two and tend to emphasise the value of either, according to their circumstances. In the past this has led to considerable ambiguity about origins, depending on the value attached to rural connections. The drive to emphasise autochthony and origins now links the rural with the urban by creating a base in the village as the legitimation for electoral appeals. The lining up of ambitious politicians behind customary authorities in the village scarcely promotes rural democratisation but acts to subvert urban 'civil society' into familiar forms of ethnically

defined patrimonialism. The support of national regimes for local customary authority has also become a key issue in the ethnicisation of politics and the expression of political competition through identification with regions and origins. Whilst the rural–urban distinction is now more fluid than ever, it functions to promote the politics of belonging at the expense of reforms encouraging both rural and urban participatory ‘civil society’.

NOTES

¹ See *Cameroon Post*, No. 192, 1–8 December 1993, pp. 7–10; *Cameroon Life* 2, No. 10, October 1993, pp. 10–16.

² See *Cameroon Post*, No. 259, 3–10 July 1995, pp. 1 and 6–7; No. 260, 10–17 July 1995 p. 5.

³ Ian Fowler, personal communication.

⁴ See *The Herald*, No. 279, 29–30 January 1996, p. 3.

⁵ See Dickson Eyoh’s article in this issue.

⁶ For an idea of the ‘war of the SWELAs’ see *Weekly Post* 3, No. 0079, 26 January–2 February 1995, pp. 1–2.

⁷ See *Weekly Post*, No. 0069 and No. 0070, of November 1994, for a comprehensive account of SWELA I’s ten-state federation option.

⁸ See ‘From SWELA to Sawa’ in *The Star Headlines* 5, No. 37, 26 August 1996, p. 3; *Impact Tribune*, No. 007, April–June 1996, on ‘Camerounais de nationalité allogène’; *Cameroon Tribune* No. 6037, 14 February 1996, p. 1, on ‘Pourquoi la révolte des Sawa contre le SDF’; and *The Pilot* 1, No. 3, October 1997, pp. 21–3, on ‘Grand Sawa n’est pas un mouvement des xénophobes’.

⁹ See *The Oracle*, April 1992, p. 35; *The Pilot* 1, No. 1, December 1996; *The Pilot* 1, No. 2, May 1997.

¹⁰ A victory which the government, however, neutralised by appointing pro-CPDM government delegates with full powers to manage council projects and finances (see presidential decree No. 96/031 of February 1996). By ensuring the appointment of indigenes as delegates in SDF councils in the Sawa area (Limbe, Kumba, Douala) the CPDM government was able, even without having won the elections in those cities, to make political capital as the party that defended the interests of minorities, thus succeeding, in the eyes of the Sawa minority, in presenting SDF as the party for Grassfield (Bamileke/Bamenda) hegemony.

¹¹ See *Cameroon Tribune*, No. 6121, 18 June 1996; *The Herald*, 19–21 February 1996.

¹² Shortly after his appointment as Prime Minister, Peter Musonge told the anglophone community in Yaoundé to desist from ‘self-marginalisation’ and to consider themselves as fully fledged Cameroonians with the same rights and responsibilities as francophones. At the same time, Musonge saw his appointment as the opportunity for south-westerners to ‘come together to galvanise the second political awakening in the South Western Province’ and to ‘strengthen our [the south-westerners’] position and bargaining power’. (See *The Herald*, No. 364, 2–3 October 1996, pp. 1 and 3; *The Star Headlines* 5, No. 40, 20 November 1996, pp. 1 and 3; *Cameroon Tribune*, No. 6225, 12 November 1996, pp. 1 and 7–10).

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ABSTRACT

The development of elite associations has been a consequence of the growth of multi-partyism and the weakening of authoritarian state control in Cameroon in the

1990s. The attachment of electoral votes and rights of citizenship to belonging to ethnicised regions has encouraged the formal distinction between 'natives' and 'strangers' in the creation of a politics of belonging. The article argues that this development has also led to the replacement of political parties at the local level by ethnicised elite associations as prime movers in regional and national politics.

RÉSUMÉ

Le développement des associations élitaires est l'une des conséquences de la croissance du multipartisme et de l'érosion du pouvoir étatique autoritaire au Cameroun dans les années 90. L'attachement des votes électoraux et des droits des citoyens à faire partie de régions ethnicisées a encouragé la distinction officielle entre les "natifs" et les "étrangers" dans la création d'une politique d'appartenance. Cet article suggère que les associations élitaires ethnicisées se sont ainsi substituées aux partis politiques au niveau local en tant que force motrice de la politique régionale et nationale.