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Emmanuel Yenshu Vubo

Management of Ethnic Diversity in Cameroon against the Backdrop of Social Crises¹

The crisis of co-existence between erstwhile largely autonomous ethnic entities within the nation-state structure as it exists in the contemporary period has become a central feature of the problematic of nation-building process in Africa. The multiplicity of ethnic conflicts (both armed and unarmed), the crisis of the tribalistic orientation of the state, tensions between communities and the emergence of ethno-regional social movements are all indicative of this crisis. These processes have been generated with unequal speed within the territorial confines of the modern states to the extent that the crisis of what one would call conviviality within the nation-state takes different dimensions and proportions within the same territorial space. Our aim in this work is to revisit the question of conviviality within the coastal region of Cameroon and examine the strategies employed by the current regime in Cameroon in coping with the crises posed by the coexistence of peoples of different ethnic entities within this area.

This study takes as its point of departure events that characterised a crisis of inter-ethnic relations in the late 1990s, starting with the aftermath of the municipal elections of 1996 and extending into the first half of the years 2000-2010. The events referred to here are the Sawa protests of 1996 and their consequences on the political evolution of Cameroon since then. The method at hand is the sociology of everyday life. I combine my experiences as a researcher living in the coastal areas of Cameroon since 1994 with newspaper reports and secondary data at the basis of previous and parallel studies (Yenshu Vubo 1998, 2003; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2000; Menthong 1996; Tatah Mentan 1996; Sindjoun 1996; Monga 2000). The

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1. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the sub-regional conference for the Central African region celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) held in Douala, 4-5 October 2003 on the theme *Central Africa: Crisis and Reconstruction*. We are grateful to participants of Panel V for their comments, which we have found useful to the development of this paper. I am also grateful to Victor Ngu Cheo for useful comments.

paper is therefore a continuation of an analysis initiated earlier on, the intention being to enrich and complement rather than taking a totally novel direction. My previous analysis was inscribed theoretically within the world systems and historical sociology perspectives by arguing that the world time of capitalism and its version of modernity are essential factors in the development of structures of inequality or polarisation (Amin 1998), alienation and certain forms of collective behaviour. The present analysis of the same events gains inspiration from Morin's assertion that "l'événement doit être conçu au premier chef comme une information qui fait irruption aussi bien dans le système social que le système mental du sociologue"/"the event has to be considered primarily as a piece of information that makes a brutal appearance both into the social system and the mental system of the sociologist" (Morin 1994: 210) (translation mine). Morin proposes two dimensions to the study of social events: firstly, the process of modification and progressive disappearance set into motion by the event; secondly a generation of other events and new processes by the synchronisation of otherwise latent or independent/isolated dynamics. These give the meaning that is necessary for the process of creativity that characterizes social movements. The area under study has been described in a comprehensive manner and with illustrations in Yenshu Vubo (2003: 595). We will start with a narrative of the events that constitute the substance of the study. This will be followed by an analysis of the social crises at the background for ethno regional claims. A second step is an examination of the relationship between social crises and ethnicity. This leads to an analysis of the relationship between local identity politics and national political developments situating the former in a context of global forces that seek to integrate them in a power game beyond the scope of immediate claims.

The 1996 Elections and the "Spectre of Democracy"²

A brief chronology of some events of the Sawa Movement would help us build the framework chronological of our topic. On the 10th of February 1996 three thousand indigenous inhabitants of Douala City³ (Douala, Bassa and Bakoko), who are collectively known as Sawa, marched in protest of the election of non-natives as mayors in "their city". According to the organisers of the protest march, they were dissatisfied with the fact that out of five councils in which the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party won in the municipal elections of January 21, 1996 only one of the mayors was an indigene. The Sawa interpreted this as proof of Bamileke hegemonic intentions,

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2. The same facts are related in YENSHU VUBO (1998) almost verbatim. The repetition is meant to refresh the minds of the reader with the events which we intend to re-interpret. These events are equally reported by TATAH MENTAN (1996: 22).
 3. The city of Douala currently members more than two million inhabitants.

the Bamileke constituting the bulk of the SDF party membership and a demographic majority in Douala city. The protesters carried placards which read: “Démocratie oui, hégémonie non” (“Democracy yes, Hegemony no”); “Pas de démocratie sans protection des minorités et des autochtones” (“No to democracy without the protection of minorities and indigenous peoples”); “La majorité ethnique n’est pas l’expression de la démocratie mais de l’expansionnisme” (“Ethnic majority is not an expression of democracy but rather that of expansionism”).

In an address to the protesters, the chief organiser of the march, Chief Ekwalla Essaka Deido, one of the heads of the traditional corporate groups/segments of the Duala⁴, declared that every Cameroonian who wanted to become mayor had to go back and contest elections in his native council. In an interview to the state-run daily newspaper, Cameroon Tribune, he claimed that the Sawa had the exclusive right to become mayors in their native land and went ahead to argue that although non-natives had bought and occupied land from natives, the former could not claim such land as their homeland. Other prominent Duala natives questioned the possibility of non-natives (in this case Bamileke) becoming mayors in Douala when even in Bamileke land natives of one town (e.g. Dschang) could not become mayors in other towns (e.g. Bafoussam). They also questioned the Land Law of 1971 for making it possible for people to occupy land in an “anarchical” manner.

Sawa chiefs later petitioned the Head of State on the issue complaining about certain ethnic groups that were bent on flouting the principle of peaceful coexistence between Cameroonians thus constituting a threat to national unity. They claimed that they had been taken for granted and their hospitality misconstrued by ethnic groups with hegemonic intentions. Native Douala city inhabitants were mobilised through indigenous associations such as the Kod’a Mboa Sawa (the Sawa Household) and organised protest marches, developments which the radical press interpreted as manipulations by government. The then governor of the South West Province, Oben Peter Ashu was reported to explain the poor performance of the ruling Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement (CPDM) party in his province to the presence of settlers i.e. immigrants⁵.

Later on, the elected Mayor of the Douala III Council, Mr. Souob Lazare, a Bamileke, was expelled from the SDF party for failing to comply with the party’s directives to appease the natives by placing a native as mayor of that council. In view of these incidents, the SDF party decided to guarantee a representation of local native interests in the municipal councils in which it had scored a majority vote in these elections.

4. The use of this spelling seeks to distinguish the people from the town which appears in the French spelling as Douala as one would find in the literature.

5. *The Herald*, February 19-21, 1996.

In the same month, Presidential Decree No. 96/031 appointed indigenes as government delegates (with supervisory and over-riding powers over elected municipal councils and elected officials) in ten metropolitan areas where the SDF won elections and their installation in towns considered Sawa (Douala, Limbe, Kumba) was the occasion for the all Sawa to meet and “congratulate the head of state” for heeding their call to put a check to the hegemony of non-natives in “their cities”. This was interpreted by the radical press—controlled for the most part by Bamileke businessmen—as a travesty of democracy since people who did not win the elections were imposed on the council structures. Indeed the opposition SDF party has continued to treat these appointments, a prerogative of government, as an attempt to subvert the principles of democracy where the fortunes of the party in power are waning especially as the appointees were all militants of the ruling CPDM party which had lost elections in these areas. In fact some of the appointees had run for the elections into the same councils and lost.

On July 6, 1996, a banker of Bamileke origins and deputy co-ordinator of the SDF party in the Littoral province was dismissed from the party for anti-party activities. Poo’lah, a youth cultural organisation for the mobilisation of the Bamileke (organisation culturelle de la jeunesse pour la conscience Bamileke), blamed the provincial co-ordinator of that party, a man of Sawa origins, of being the brain behind his sacking. It went ahead to interpret this act as falling within the framework of a plan hatched by Sawa chiefs and elite to dispossess the Bamileke of their “vital space” (“espaces vitaux”). It also reminded the mayor of the dominantly Bamileke nature of the party and thus of the fact that he owed his position to the latter’s votes and eventually ended up by calling on the party’s authorities to stop the anti-Bamileke plot.

On July 10, 1996, fifteen Sawa Chiefs led by the most senior of them, Prince René Bell, were reported to have gone round the prestigious quarter of Bonapriso, a predominantly native Duala residential area, inspecting houses belonging to non-natives. They were said to have entered the homes of the latter ordering them to quit or renegotiate the value of the land on which they had built. Again, Poo’lah considered this act as provocative and indicated its readiness to react.

On March 8, 1997, chiefs from the South West and Littoral provinces (Sawa) met in Kumba. During this meeting, the Prime Minister—of Bakweri origins—declared that the incumbent President of the Republic as well as the ruling CPDM party stood for the protection of minority rights and the preservation of the rights of indigenous peoples. He therefore called on them to vote for him in the next elections if they wanted their rights as indigenous minorities to be protected.

This has brought to focus the question of the role of indigenous groups in cosmopolitan areas in the conduct of affairs in what they consider their homeland. This is principally an issue of the relation of a people to the

land and a history. An ethnocentric press, developed with the indigene/non-native question in focus, aids groups that raise such issues. On the one hand is the Sawa press (Elimbi, Muendi, Fako International or Mendi me Fako) and on the other Bamileke run press (Ouest Echo, Nde Echo) which transpose the debate from the streets and neighbourhoods to the public place. The Sawa press accused the press predominantly controlled by the Bamileke of intellectual terrorism characteristic of Bamileke hegemony⁶ while the former read either governmental manipulations, political blackmail or a crisis of identity in political terms to the extent that Elimbi's columnist, Eyoum, felt this was going to constitute the crux of political debates in the country⁷. In several parts of coastal Cameroon, especially in the South West Province, there has arisen a distinction in the popular imagination between people considered indigenes (sons of the soil), "settlers", on the one hand, and others considered immigrants, non-natives or "come no go" (Pidgin English expression for permanent immigrants). The then governor of the latter province, Oben Peter Ashu, is reported to have requested that residence permits be issued to immigrants from other areas before they could vote during the legislative elections of May 17, 1997. Although no such permits were issued many non-natives found themselves disenfranchised by discriminatory practices, which they consider were intended to favour the party in power, if not crafted by apologists of the regime.

According to Ekambi⁸ (2003), the situation has crystallized into a face-to-face animosity between the Duala and the Bamileke, who allegedly constitute the dominant component of exogenous peoples in Douala city. He explains this in purely irredentist terms, portraying the Duala as essentially peaceful and welcoming peoples who are facing an assault from the essentially invasive and aggressive Bamileke people who possess a high hegemonic drive. A word of caution is necessary here. It would be wrong to interpret the problem in such simplistic terms. Firstly there are other ethnic groups of Cameroonian origins in the city of Douala with some of them possessing greater cohesion and homogeneity than the so-called Bamileke. This is the case of the Bassa and Beti who constitute some of the largest single ethno-linguistic groups in Cameroon and who have some of the highest concentrations in the city of Douala. If the Bassa have never been in a situation of confrontation with the Duala, it is partly because of the long history of their cohabitation—accommodation with the Duala in the same space and partly as a result of their consequent integration in the revived *Ngondo* annual celebrations and rituals as part of the newly invented concept of Sawa people (Yenshu Vubo 2003: 610-611). The Beti, on their part, have been integrated into the life of the city and are engaged in activities that do not challenge the natives. Secondly the term Bamileke is devoid

6. *Elimbi*, 26 June 1997.

7. *Elimbi*, No. 41, 26 June 1997.

8. Participant at the Conference at which this paper was presented.

of any meaning either as a self-identity label or a concisely descriptive label of acceptable usage largely because of its colonial and thus political origins. In fact this appellation has been adopted by certain persons (even professional anthropologists) to refer to people of the Western highlands of Cameroon or, what is called in some literature, Cameroon Grassfields (hence the equally misleading label of "Grafi") as the latter exhibit wide range of cultural similarities although they do not express a common consciousness.

In the region referred to as Cameroon Grassfields, whose population has been labelled Bamileke, there exist a multiplicity of once autonomous, self assertive groups and independent looking peoples each with its own language or dialect and variant of socio-political and socio-cultural institutions as distinctive identity markers. Although this area of near cultural unity-in-diversity stretches from Bum in the English speaking North West province to Tonga in the French speaking Western province, the term Bamileke is reserved only for the inhabitants of that part which is francophone. Even then the term gains its relevance only in the metropolitan areas where paradoxically no "pan-Bamileke" consciousness has ever developed. What approximates ethnic consciousness is the individual ethnic group association, which brings together people from the same ethnic origin (e.g. Bafou, Fotouni, Baleng, Bamougoum etc.) without an umbrella association congregating all the groups. If the problem of native/non-native became crystallised between the Bamileke and the Duala it was because the former ventured into the politics of controlling the city in which the one-party regime had carefully struck a balance between native and non-native interests. For example during the one-party days so-called Bamileke mayors controlled some district municipal councils (Fampou Dagobert for New Bell) as did other non-natives from other areas of Cameroon (Tanko Hassan of Northerner origins) and Duala natives. The present crisis arose because democracy was evidently overturning this balance and protection of interests supposedly in favour of the so-called Bamileke and confirming the near-total marginalisation of the Duala in an area originally theirs.

What also gave impetus to this debate and public restiveness was a constitutional provision which empowers the state "to ensure the protection of minorities and [. . .] preserve the rights of indigenous populations" (Law of 18 January 1996 to revise the constitution of 1972) which goes further to require that chairmen of the Regional Councils must be indigenes (Article 57/3). The regional structures themselves were introduced as part of solutions to the problem of local peoples in lieu of popular clamours for federalist structures that would have made for local autonomy and initiative. Even then these have not become reality due to the reluctance of the incumbent regime which is very protective of centralist structures and fearful of strong regionalist feelings that it equates with secession. Other provisions of the constitution require that parties running for pluralistic elections within the list system take into consideration the sociological composition of the area

when compiling lists in order to ensure that certain peoples are not under-represented at the level of decentralised organs of the state (Municipal Councils, Regional Councils). One reading is that these provisions are meant to protect people who have come to constitute ethnic minorities in heterogeneous areas but this would equally raise the critical question of who is a minority and who can be classified as an indigenous people capable with claims to rights that have to be protected.

After the first term of office the SDF and other opposition political party saw a steep decline in the vote in these areas following the twin legislative and local elections of June 23 2002, a fact that could be attributed to large-scale disenfranchisement of potential non-native electors. The dream of the protesters and those arguing in favour of indigenous people's rights sort of became true as the majority of the councils in the coastal area were composed essentially of natives as were the parliamentarians elected during the twin elections of June 23 2002. The disenfranchisement of non-natives, which had secured this victory for the local elites, equally served the party in power, the CPDM as the natives had come to identify themselves in the majority with it.

In an earlier examination of the same question I had posited that this situation was the result of the ambivalence with which local peoples lived a modernization of their living space either as people who have lost total control of their own destiny or as people who find benefits in this modernisation (Yenshu Vubo 1998: 34-36). My argument was that the predicament of the coastal peoples was largely the result of modern peripheral capitalism operating to dislocate local peoples and thus situating the roots of the problems in the local history of modernisation. What we are interested in here is not the problem of causes or origins but the way the modern state structure has handled this question. This is tantamount to posing the question of how successive elites have handled the question of plurality and how a citizenry was being constructed out of the motley of social groups that suddenly constituted Cameroon, without making of it a nation (Levine 1964). Levine, in characteristic western conceptions of plurality within the Third World context, argued that, although nationalism had support in Cameroon, the greatest obstacles to its being translated into a factor of integration was the country's diversity which expressed itself in a variety of particularisms (*ibid.*). He went ahead to argue that such particularisms tended to drown the concept of national unity/integration when translated into political demands as these raised a label of conflicting voices. Our own reading of the situation is different (probably due to the fact that one is writing almost four decades away): the argument is that the failure of the national unity project is the result of the inefficacy of policies promoted by successive political regimes. Ambiguous in nature, they professed a vague formula of national unity that fluctuated between tough administrative coercion inherited from the colonial regimes and romantic fraternalism.

It is in this scheme of things that we are going to analyse the management of ethnic diversity as a solution to the predicament of the dislocated coastal peoples and essentially the political strategies of the Biya regime style for managing diversity. The argument is that ethnic claims to exclusive rights and protected positions contributed, in an unexpected manner, to provide a basis of legitimacy for the regime by reconfiguring political arrangements and serving as a counter force to competing forces either resulting from social democratic aspirations or ethno-regional discontent. The semblance of a legitimacy of these is also used by elites as political capital in the claims for a greater share in government without seeking to resolve the social crises which is the basis for the claims in the first place.

Local Peoples between Social Crises and Ethnic Claims

One of the issues echoed in the discourses of the protesting elite is the increasing marginalisation of local peoples that has become the central crisis of the local coastal peoples since colonial times which generated with it a social crises of great dimensions. As the area developed from the use of forced or near forced labour to the voluntary migration of labour in search of jobs in the English and French mandates, there arose a new problem, that of the coexistence of the local peoples with immigrants from other parts of the country, and even beyond. Austen and Derrick (1999: 141) indicate that Duala ethnic consciousness in relation to other groups developed in the French Mandate at a period when they had become an “ethnic minority in their city”. The development of the Duala town into a metropolitan city brought with it peculiar problems of cohabitation and integration which expressed themselves in the 1996 protests.

The protests also had an appeal in the Bakweri community which had had a long and protracted history of an unsolved land crisis. The crisis of cohabitation between natives and non-natives was evident in the friction between these two categories of people as early as 1935. It has to be noted that the concepts of native and stranger as in use today to designate indigenes and Cameroonians from other regions respectively have their origins in colonial discourses and practices: note the use of the term of *native stranger* to refer to immigrants from other areas of Cameroon (British administrator Bridges quoted by Mbake 1975: 19). As such Fako division is the only rare place in Cameroon where the concepts of *native*, *stranger*, *reserve*, *native land*, *stranger quarters* still persist in popular imagination and are pregnant with some meanings that are not obvious to persons alien to the historical dimensions of this reality. Of recent this category of persons has been styled *come-no-go*, a Pidgin English expression for permanent immigrants.

The growth of the Fako area into a cosmopolitan administrative, commercial, agro-industrial growth pole and later on the seat of a university has not gone to alleviate the crisis. Not only did the population in the

camps grow and spill over into the local population to create its own army of job seekers, business operators, craftsmen and farmers among others but also problems of a different kind and magnitude began to make themselves felt as formal economic and administrative activities came to concentrate in the area. The establishment of the national oil refinery, the Société nationale de raffinage (SONARA), in the neighbourhood of Limbe has transformed the human and physical landscape of Limbe, which the carving into a Government Residential Area, Bota and New Town had only gone to show no longer belonging to natives (Courade 1979). The recent resettlement of natives to give way for the establishment of an industrial shipyard company generated protests in the tradition of the Bakweri land question. The colonisation of the West Coast, extending from the national refinery company to Bakingili, by resorts and hotel establishments also goes to emphasise the rate at which capitalist developments are displacing local and largely weak local interest groups. Buea, on its part, has also witnessed chaotic growth since 1970, a situation which puts the government as occupying 54.3% of the land, with 10.9% being in the hands of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) and 13.8% held by the University of Buea whose establishment has also meant an increase in pressure on the land for construction of dependent services (private student hostels, private business services and living apartments) (Forba Fru 1999).

Initially, the spate of developments occurring during the colonial era either in the British or French spheres gave a semblance of meeting the needs of local peoples who had lost their landed property but who could replace this with some cultural capital (western schooling) and vantage positions (employment in subordinate clerical positions in the colonial administration)⁹. Austen and Derrick (1999) have analysed the growth of Douala elitism at this time but also remarks that it was also the end of an epoch as the decolonisation movement and the development of a post-colonial state was going to overtake and have an overbearing influence on the space once occupied by local peoples. The same is true of the Bakweri but to a lesser degree. It appears that it was the appointment of prominent elites to serve

9. Witness the illusory celebration of Douala City and Limbe (formerly Victoria) in the popular mind as centres of civilisation. Douala was literally equated with Europe itself in the use of the term *Douala Mbenge na Sawedi* (Douala the West i.e. Europe of the Sawa people), an expression which became popular with the hit title of a 1970s record of makossa (pop music) king, Toto Guillaume. Victoria, later to be renamed Limbe, was perceived for along time to be the centre of refined life by English speaking people as its colony of resettled peoples (locally known as krios, a deformation of the word Creole) set the standards of supposedly high culture for people in the hinterland. The krios also provided the early stock of the local bourgeoisie when the cooptation of the local people to serve in the administration of the CDC became an option to circumvent the land crisis. When the oil refinery was created, the town was pompously referred to as OPEC city. All these illusory perceptions serve both to legitimate the development of gigantic modern structures as well as to divert attention from the real issues.

on the Board and the recruitment of other natives to work in the administration of the CDC as well as initial domination of the modern civil service and political life in colonial times by coastal peoples that sent the movement for redress into relapse. The political developments surrounding the decolonisation of Southern Cameroon fraught with bitterness, rancour and the manipulation of ethno-regional cleavages further served to divert attention from the land question and its attendant ills (Nghoh 1996). The preoccupation with the question of the ethnic origins of political leaders overshadowed and cast a veil on problems that were real. The policies of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) government dominated by peoples originating in the Grassfields and largely characterised by partisan victimization (Mbile n.d.: 174-177) and a propensity to manage the profits of the CDC than solve the crisis of the structural location of the plantations only confirmed the native conception of their problem as that of the “stranger”.

The native thus came to perceive the new stranger had succeeded the old stranger to continue with the same policies by treating the *status quo* as a *fait accompli* which could not be revisited. It is the political dimension and not the real objective question of human existence that has resurfaced with calls for solutions that are only reminiscent of the cosmetic solutions/palliatives of the colonial period. Just as the Duala had secured a privileged position in the colonial era (even in a subordinate manner) and the Bakweri had secured privileged positions in the CDC, they were requesting for a similar “protection” or privileges as a solution to their predicament in the face of a current neo-liberal drive characterised by individualism (either in the vote or in entrepreneurship). At this point it was the communitarian/identity vision of society represented by Sawa claims against an individualist vision represented by the neo-liberal modernity of a democracy characterised by a shift away from the community to the individual (universal suffrage, secret ballot political party programmes) and unbridled capitalism (liberalisation, state withdrawal from the social sector, privatisation of public corporations, rule of the market and the dominant role of transnational financial institutions). Discourses on being pushed into minority status thus serve as the much needed empirical evidence to boost an essentially political claim.

This leads us to the substance of the question, namely the problem of the commoditization/alienation of once tribal land, which started in the colonial period but has reached dramatic propositions as this is promoted and actively championed by local clan/family heads and tribal chiefs. While the majority of local peoples and the younger elites are clamouring for the return of once tribal land, the chiefs or clan heads are busy either negotiating for compensation to be paid to them by the state, continue to sell whatever land is left or land returned to local communities by the CDC. The case is reported in the Muea (Lysoka) neighbourhood of a chief of Buea who is selling out land returned to the community by the CDC. The paramount chiefs of Buea have also questioned the right of some Bakweri elite in the USA to constitute themselves into a Bakweri Land Consultative Committee

(not to be confused with its predecessor of 1946). Moreover, the role of the chiefs in the privatisation of the plantation (corporation) has been far from desirable and, at worst, ambiguous. There is a failure on the part of the chiefs to represent the tribal landed interest to the extent that one would not be wrong in talking of a crisis of representation. Can the blame there be attributed to Cameroonians of other regions?

The crisis of overpopulated cosmopolitan areas in the coastal area of Cameroon also manifests itself in the problem of political participation and representation, in short, a crisis of democracy. The temporary success of the Sawa elite in securing exclusive rights to privileged positions would evidently be at the expense of the popular vote representative of reactions to deteriorating social conditions and championed by the left-wing SDF in the pre-1996 period. That the original promoters and leadership of this party were of Anglophone and Bamileke extraction does not cancel the fact that the appeal was largely trans-ethnic, cutting across all ethnic groups in what Konings and Nyamnjoh (2003: 11) refer to as the “south western quadrant” in which the Duala or the Sawa are situated. The political vote of the 1990s right up till 1996 was therefore a protest vote and not a simple expression of purely ethno-regional discontent. Although Tatah Mentan (1996: 185) suggests that the Sawa chiefs might have been simply reacting to press accusations of duplicity, having “lunch with the CPDM in the day and romance with the opposition in the night [and] organising public demonstrations against the SDF victory in the Littoral, the Sawa might [have been] out to prove that they [were] not traitors”. I have a different reading as I argue else where that this protest is inscribed in a tradition of protest and claims for a privileged position and exclusive rights in an area which was once tribal space, these protests starting with the Bonaberi uprisings in the immediate aftermath of the 1884 annexation treaties and moving through the opposition to German expropriation plans to Duala petitions against French urbanisation plans (Yenshu Vubo 1998: 34-36; Kala Lobe 1977; Ngoh 1996; Austen & Derrick 1999). However this is only one side of the coin as there is an ambivalent fluctuation between a perception of modernity as alienating and a perception of modernity as capital (Yenshu Vubo 1998). We may still emphasize here that the solutions are short-lived and one will witness a replay of protests or a reversal of attitudes with a reversal of fortunes. The reactions of the Sawa elite went to underscore their opposition to a modification of privileges which had been obtained at the expense of popular interests. The success of these elites in reconverting at least the “natives” into militants of the incumbent CPDM party, although an insignificant following because of its minority status, and progressively disenfranchising the “strangers” has not succeeded in solving the crisis. The situation has moved from one of a crisis of belonging/marginalisation to one of lack of representation which has been unattended to, a situation which is very much favourable to the incumbent regime. That is why I liken this

to political profiteering where the regime is feeding on the ethnic cleavages/tensions and the social crises resulting from the absence of rational management.

On the Articulation between Identity and National Politics

An important issue that is central to the question under study is the socio-cultural or identity dimensions of the crisis and how it has been managed within the current context. This situation has gone to create or forge what has come to be known as Sawa awareness. This term was originally used by the Duala to refer to themselves as seashore dwellers but in the context of the crisis it has come to be extended to related peoples such as the Bakweri, Mongo, Pongo, Malimba, the Bakoko and Bassa of Douala city, Bodiman and Ewudi. Other peoples in the Littoral and South West Provinces were also integrated in the movement viz. Mbo, Bakossi, the Yabassi, the Balong, Oroko, and Bafaw. Prior to 1996 therefore the term Sawa was almost inexistent as a term to describe a local regional awareness. Did the identity awareness motivate the crisis or was it a fall out of the protests? An awareness of political marginalisation is definitely at the basis of the protests but in its original form, it does not exist as a pan-Sawa movement. It is only translated into a regional movement by elites who stress a convergence of interests and thus equate similarity of predicament with similarity of identity. One cannot doubt that there is a degree of similarity in culture and language within the region but that did not translate automatically into a collective awareness. It is the convergence of the crisis of modernisation that forged this new ethnic identity by building it into a common cultural heritage symbolised by the *ngondo* festival. Originally a Duala festival, the aftermath of the 1996 protests translated it into an assembly uniting such peoples as were perceived as related to the former, in a process Monga (2000) terms the “expansion of ethnic frontiers” or the “enlargement of ethnic frontiers”. It is this invented Sawa identity that transforms a political movement into a cultural one and uses the cultural to consolidate the basis for political claims. The Duala elite, who invented this term, as the leading faction of the coastal peoples, thus attempted to carve an ethnic political base for themselves which their members could not guarantee in the geopolitics of Cameroon. It is in this sense that Alain Touraine’s (1974: 114) assertion that dominant classes are the agents of cultural models gains all its meaning. The concept of invention as used here derives its meaning from Hobsbawm’s model (1992: 1) which treats such phenomena as including both traditions “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less traceable manner within a brief period—a matter of a few years perhaps—and establishing themselves with great rapidity”.

Austen and Derrick (1999: 184-190) describes the *ngondo* as a neotraditional creation of the late colonial cum French mandate period. They argue

that at the period when it emerged, it played a clearly political role “[. . .] first as a populist organization directed partially against chiefs; then as an instrument by which the chiefs (and particularly Betote Akwa) represented Duala interests in the politics of decolonization [. . .]” (*ibid.*: 184). They also demonstrate that the balance sheet of this organisation is largely one of limited success or failure whether one were referring to the politics of decolonisation or the search for solutions consequent on the situation of Duala as a capitalist metropolis in the late colonial period viz. commoditization/alienation of land, demographic developments which rendered Duala a “minority [. . .] in their own city” (*ibid.*: 187). This failure is presented as transforming the status of the *ngondo* into that of a ceremonial/ritual organisation with the role or predominant function of providing a cultural unity and serving as an identity marker for the Duala (Austen & Derrick 1999: 189-190). One can understand this argument as the scope of the researchers exclude the late 1990s when the replay of the Duala tradition of protest against unfavourable modern developments witnessed the re-emergence of the *ngondo* as a political instrument. A close observation of the recent developments surrounding the Sawa protests will bring to the limelight close parallels in the political role that the *ngondo* attempted to play in recent times. In analysing the place of the *ngondo* in the recent protest movement one has to bear in the mind that the new *ngondo* was re-emerging albeit in a transformed manner and in completely new circumstances, from a politically motivated ban¹⁰. One also has to note that its reinvention by the Duala chiefs and elites was taking place in a context of political effervescence which presented the same predicament (although in changed circumstances) for the Duala in the face of an invasive modernisation characterized by the growth of once tribal space into a gigantic metropolitan area. A striking parallel between the two versions of the *ngondo* is the attempt to use it to invent a pan-regional ethnic consciousness and to carve out an ethnoregional power block out of the contiguous peoples with cultural similarities with no antecedent in precolonial history. Just as the Duala strove to expand the definition of their identity to include surrounding peoples with linguistic and cultural similarities in the late mandate period (Austen & Derrick 1999: 187) so does the *ngondo* of the 1990s strive to take on itself a regional character¹¹ and to rally to itself distantly related peoples affected by the same dislocating modernization. In fact, although a Duala based protest movement, it later on coopted peoples as territorially situated between Campo in the South Province and Mamfe in the South West Province (Tatah Mentan 1996: 187-188) who were not only invited to the Sawa meetings taking place in the aftermath of the 1996 municipal

10. The *ngondo* was banned 1981.

11. Witness the change of name from ngond’a Duala (assembly of the Duala) to ngond’a Sawa (assembly of the Sawa people).

elections, but were also participants (and later on invitees) to *ngondo* festivals. It is in this regard that one would argue that the *ngondo* was a political instrument and continues to play a political role. This is where we can talk of a convergence between the cultural and the political and the political uses into which cultural institutions can be put.

I have shown elsewhere that this Sawa consciousness was based on the history of the predicament of increasing marginalisation and the “threat of political alienation” (Yenshu Vubo 2003: 611). It was an identity awareness premised on “a history of dislocation and disintegration under the push of modernization” (*ibid.*). I have equally shown that the combined heterogeneous nature of the group and “the threat of Duala hegemony through the Sawa consciousness” led to a decline in the movement itself, a fact which goes to underline its spontaneous and ephemeral nature. Monga (2000) on her own part, report that disagreements within projects to enlarge ethnic political territory also owe much to resistance from more restricted “local [identities] and conflicting interests” that tend to undermine a pan-regional consciousness drive.

If the *ngondo* has failed in its pan-regional bid to serve as rallying point for a regional consciousness movement in the same manner as the Duala hegemonic ambitions of the late colonial period, the political gains have been considerable. The elites in the coastal area have succeeded in clinching a sizeable share of government positions and in maintaining themselves in strategic positions out of their support for the regime and in disproportion to their demographic weight, thereby emerging as an important actor in the power game. This development modifies power arrangements in Cameroon considerably, tilting the alliance away from a North-South-Anglophone axis, wherein the Fulbe, Beti and North Westerners (Western Grassfields) used to play a key role in the Ahidjo era and part of the Biya mandate, to one in which the non-Fulbe northerners (Kirdi), Beti and Sawa come to occupy centre stage and to counter balance so-called an Anglo-Bami block (North West and Western Provinces), politically on the rise via the SDF, and the Fulbe, split between cooperation with the regime and a neo-Ahidjoist opposition. Konings and Nyamnjoh (2000: 6) have argued that by “encouraging a merger [of the South West Elite Association (SWELA)] with the elite association of the native Duala to form the Grand SAWA movement” the Biya regime sought “to weaken Anglophone solidarity through divide and rule”. Monga (2000) also argues that the politics of recourse to the village of origin as electoral base that developed in the wake of protests and calls for democracy “can be interpreted ultimately as a stratagem aimed at preventing Bamileke’s alleged political influence from spreading all over the country”. I would add that the Sawa protests, without being encouraged or created by the regime per se, successfully also employed same in containing the rising protest movement among the Anglophone community that could be observed in the 1990s (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003: 76-106; Menthong 1996: 151-169).

One would be right in affirming that the Biya regime used the political developments resulting from the pressure to democratize as well as the rising opposition movement of the 1990s, concentrated around the south western quadrant, to reconfigure the ethnic arithmetic of hegemonic alliances (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003: 5) by integrating the Sawa into the system of ethno regional alliances just as it had used the political developments of the early periods of his presidency (1982-1984), marked by disputes with his predecessor and the Fulbe elite, to project and create a rapprochement with the Kirdi (Non-Muslim Northerners). In fact this would be the first time since independence that the Sawa have become so prominent in the political life of Cameroon since E. M. L. Endeley lost power as leader of the Southern Cameroon internal government in 1958, and when Prince Alexandre Ndambe Duala and Soppo Priso fell from prominence as leading Duala in search of a national political career (Austen & Derrick 1999: 179-184). One would be right therefore in asserting that the Sawa protests were exploited by local elites and the state alike. In this regard one would not be far from the truth in affirming that there was a convergence of interests between the local bourgeoisie and the regime in search of legitimacy. In the process, the reference to social crises that served as the basis of protest has become totally eclipsed with the regime's social posturing being nothing more than profiteering.

Affirming that the regime did not create this movement means that the antecedents of Sawa restiveness and protest can be found in history and that it was not the regime that motivated the Sawa to protest but that the regime was willing to use same in its quest for political legitimisation. Our argument is supported by the fact that the power base of the regime had been considerably eroded in the early 1990s and the ethno regional drift had sent even the dominant Beti elite of the regime to retreat into its own region. Faced with a strong opposition in the south western quadrant emerging as a new political power block that styled itself the Grand West (in opposition to the Grand North comprising the pre-1983 North Province), the Beti elite were forced to openly make proposals of a separatist nature in the same light as other radical movements of the 1990s. Menthong (1996: 165-166) reports that, during the largely state-controlled constitutional debate that ushered in the revision of January 18, 1996 there were open calls for the creation of a Beti state, either from a movement calling itself the *Mouvement de Renaissance Pahwine* (MOREPAH) or from actors of the civil society of Beti origins. MOREPAH for instance, proposed a confederal arrangement for Cameroon in which one would find a reworked map of central Africa to include parts of Cameroon, the Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Another proposal from the Editor-in-chief of the *Courrier* newspaper, with a Beti tribal orientation bordering on factionalism, had proposed the creation of a Beti state corresponding to the Centre, South and East Provinces of Cameroon. It is our argument therefore that the development of the Sawa identity was against the backdrop of varying autonomist

claims from a variety of groups claiming one form of marginal status or another, claims unleashed by the clamour for political liberalisation and that had culminated in the constitutional debate of 1993 (Menthong 1996; Sindjoun 1996: 98; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2000). Sindjoun (1996: 87) treats this dynamics as the polarisation of identity conceptualisation along ethno-regional lines (la polarisation ethno-régionale de l'imaginaire identitaire). Prior to this period the term Sawa had been used exclusively and only occasionally to refer to the Duala proper. During the debate, elites of the area later to be called Sawa only referred to themselves as "Forces vives du littoral" (Menthong 1996: 158). The regional consciousness only developed gradually at this period until it came to serve the political goals that its exploitation ushered in.

These developments were sustained by a warped but appealing philosophy of managing ethnic diversity premised on arguments to the effect that:

"Every ethnic group wishes to see its sons and daughters employed so that they bring something back home. No ethnic group wishes to be absent at the national dining table where the national cake is shared. Employment in the public service is a source of pride for those whom ethnicity is a highly sentimental affair. Positions in the public service are seen as symbols of ethnic power and superiority or at least equality to other ethnic groups [...]. Ethnic groups have a belief [...] that if they are not represented in the process of public policy-making, they will lose out in the services they receive and development opportunities, programmes and projects coming to them [...]" (Kauzya 2001: 113).

Beyond the oft-quoted metaphor of national cake sharing¹², one can pose the question of the viability of the solution by the promotion of elites. To the question of how representative any elite are, one can say that they represent only their interests and elements of local peoples co-opted by the dominant structures rather end up operating according to the laws of the system than articulating local interests in any democratic way. Neither will they, in any way, replace a viable social democracy capable of meeting the needs of local peoples or rehabilitating local peoples in the process of accelerated disintegration/loss of identity. A co-opted bourgeoisie would often operate as the internal guarantors of the efficiency of the system, the local relay that provides the semblance of a universal character of the system by presenting it as trans-ethnic or the local operatives that provide a false sense of participation.

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While it has become increasingly evident that it is important to manage the crisis of diversity that the creation of the nation—state has ushered in, the

12. For more on the cake sharing metaphor see also MONGA (2000).

solutions so far proposed have been vague. Transcending the unfounded belief in an ethnic reality's propensity to divisiveness, a view now largely discredited (Ake 2000: 92-115), there have been calls for a sane democracy which respects not only minorities (as the 1996 protesters were calling for) but diversity. Alain Touraine (1994: 25-30), for instance, posits that the lessons to be learnt from the tragic events of Bosnia—Herzegovina are the need to respect liberties and diversity and not only to focus on the concepts of participation and consensus. He affirms that:

“Ce qui définit la démocratie, ce n'est donc pas seulement un ensemble de garanties institutionnelles ou le règne de la majorité, mais avant tout le respect de projets individuels et collectifs qui combinent l'affirmation d'une liberté personnelle avec le droit de s'identifier à une collectivité sociale, nationale ou religieuse particulière” (Touraine 1994: 26).

“La démocratie ne réduit pas l'être humain à être seulement un citoyen; elle le reconnaît comme un individu libre mais qui appartient aussi à des collectivités économiques et culturelles” (*ibid.*: 30).

A. Touraine (1994: 228) is however cautious when proposing general solutions to the problem of diversity as he states that it is not sufficient to state that it is necessary to strike a balance between the diversity of cultures that make the nation-state and its hegemonic drive towards universal values. He feels that one has to look for practical ways of how this balance will be achieved. Institutional guarantees such as constitutional provisions have been the earliest but most vague solutions that have been proffered (*ibid.*: 229).

Recently, diversity issues have become part of the research into public management. Kauzya (2001: 117) proposes a holistic model whose aim is “to build a representative civil service that respects the core values of responsiveness to ethnic diversity, inclusiveness of all ethnic groups in the country and high quality service delivery”. Balogun (2001: 43) argues in the same line when he says that “diversity may be perceived as a minimum condition for the safeguard of the rights and autonomy of groups constituting a nation-state”. This is crucial to a lively debate on the future of the nation-state if it would have to develop into a viable framework for social existence although the state as it is cannot and has never been the only framework for social existence. What remains now is how these prescriptions have to become reality. Moreover this is restricted to the domain of the public service whose propensity to treat the social crises by substituting viable social policy with elite based strategies that are not apt or suitable for the management of social questions.

It may be useful examining the implications of the movements such as the one presented in this study and its outcomes on political life in the post colonial state in search of a national identity. Firstly, the approach of apparently legitimising ethno-regional claims, especially when they are codified in the constitution or when standard bearers of such claims are

rewarded, constitutes a serious set back to any nation-building project, thereby “[de-emphasising] the concept of Cameroon both as a geographical entity and as a nation” (Monga 2000)¹³. In fact it rids any such project of its content and only goes to underline the absence of political will on the part of the supposed architects of such a project. Secondly I have shown elsewhere that the promotion of such claims brings to the fore the contradictions between the universalistic claims of states in the South and the particularism of the claims for the protection of ethnic minorities, a tension that is at the centre of the nation-building process itself (Yenshu Vubo 1998: 37). This question raises that of the conceptual limits of the universal and the particular: can the universal eclipse the particular or vice-versa? In which domain does the universal apply and in which does the particular apply? Thirdly, this leads us to the issue of the apparent charm of arguments in favour of protecting the rights of so-called ethnic minorities in an extremely pluralistic situation¹⁴. It is this apparent charm that transforms such discourses into ideological tools in the hands of politicians in an unsuspecting manner. It is therefore important to question the political uses into which both state agents and actors of high politics (Chabal 1992) and local peoples intend to put such discourses. Carefully manipulated, the claims for protection may be powerful tools for much needed autonomy in the hands of local peoples in the search for solutions to concrete issues of survival and social progress. Actors of high politics as we have seen, often resort to such claims in the search for legitimacy and thus a consolidation of dominant positions.

As Amin (1998: 54) has noted, the collapse of national unity projects “seems to have given way to ethnicity as a basis for the reward of the legitimacy of competing forces” in search of a sort of “monopoly mechanism” to borrow from Norbert Elias (in Llobera 1994: 110). It would therefore be worthwhile making a distinction both in theory and practice between the interests of local peoples situated in time and space, with clearly identifiable interests of an economic nature (land, access to resources, situation within the economic system), social/cultural nature (crisis of identity, access to social services, cohabitation) and political nature (representation), on the one hand, and the interests of political elite essentially made up of the search for and preservation of dominant positions, on the other hand. It will enable one to transcend the conceptual muddle that is at the basis of the tendency for social crises to serve as a smokescreen behind which ethno regional

13. SINDJOUN (1996: 99), on his part, has remarked that the constitution of Cameroon institutes a segmented national identity.

14. Recent linguistic surveys show that Cameroon is made up of 276 ethno-linguistic groups. The Cameroon Linguistic Atlas identifies 286 languages for Cameroon out of which 279 are living languages, 3 are second languages without mother tongue speakers and 4 extinct.

politics operates or the propensity for ethnicity to serve as the veil behind which social crises lose their value.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the state of Cameroon has managed ethnic diversity during the reforms period of the 1990s and early years of the 2000-2010 decade. The argument is that the period has seen a new type of crisis management in which a political regime feeds on ethnic tensions and makes political capital out of grievances of local peoples in the metropolitan areas of the highly urbanized areas of the Littoral and South West Province. Beyond these developments, the paper argues for a conceptual distinction between the interests of local peoples and communities and those of elites in search for solutions to the diversity question.

RÉSUMÉ

Gestion de la diversité ethnique au Cameroun dans un contexte de crises sociales. — Cet article analyse la manière dont l'État du Cameroun a géré la crise de la diversité ethnique pendant la période des réformes, des années 1990 et du début de la décennie 2000-2010. Il met en exergue l'argument selon lequel cette période aura vu l'émergence d'une nouvelle stratégie caractérisée par l'exploitation des tensions ethniques et des griefs dans certains centres urbains à des fins politiques. Au-delà des préoccupations conjoncturelles, l'article conclut que, dans la recherche des modes de gestion de la diversité, il serait nécessaire de faire une distinction conceptuelle, aussi bien dans la théorie que dans la pratique, entre les intérêts des acteurs des communautés et ceux des élites.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Cameroon, democracy, diversity, management, minorities, protest, social crises/Cameroun, démocratie, diversité, gestion, minorités, contestation, crises sociales.