

CHAPTER FIVE



DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND CHIEFDOM POLITICS IN BALI

5.1 Introduction

The introduction of democracy in Cameroon in 1990 created conditions for the return of old political actors such as chiefs to the ‘national political scene’, despite the popular demand for ‘actors’ of a new kind (cf. Geschiere 1993:151). But the principal question was on what legitimacy would such ‘old actors’ play the politics of the democratic era? Would their claim be based on ‘tradition’ or on the grounds desired by the people for their new political actors? In many cases, chiefs attempted to do both, claiming legitimacy on the basis of their status as ‘natural rulers’ and the notion that they sought the good of their people. *Fon* Ganyonga was one of such chiefs whose political career gained prominence in 1990 following his co-optation into the ranks of the ruling CPDM. He was one of the ‘old actors’ clad in ‘new clothes’. But the government’s claim to legitimacy, owing to its introduction of political pluralism, was soon brought into question. It followed that similar claims made by ‘old-new actors’ such as Ganyonga also came into question. This was because the government and the CPDM party in particular were perceived as obstacles towards genuine democratic transformation in Cameroon. The people and the opposition expected chiefs to be ‘neutral’ mediators in the on-going struggle between civil society and the state, but this was not the case. It was against this background that many people expressed hostility not only towards their chiefs who sided with the state, but also to the idea that chiefs ought to participate overtly in multiparty politics.

This chapter therefore examines the different claims to legitimacy by *fon* Ganyonga and how the people reacted to these. I argue that although Ganyonga’s claim to legitimacy as a modern politician has been contested by the people, he has however succeeded to win legitimacy because of his involvement in other political matters sanctioned by the people. But things are more complex than they appear because his

involvement in local and national politics has provoked different, and sometimes conflicting, reactions from his subjects and these reactions have in turn, affected his relationship with them.

5.2 Democratic Transition and Local Politics in Bali

Ganyonga's involvement in local politics has been the subject of much controversy. His claim to legitimacy in the sphere of modern politics can be discerned in three broad areas: his abortive bid for the mayoral office in Bali in 1996, his prominence in chiefs' politics in the grassfields, and his lobby for the 'Anglophone cause'. As indicated earlier, some of these claims have been rejected by the people while others have received approval and support. At issue here is the view that although Ganyonga has failed to provide a shield for his people against the state, he has nevertheless succeeded to use his status as 'natural ruler' to articulate some of the concerns of the people. Before I go into these analyses, I will describe the political situation in Bali since the introduction of democracy.

Since 1990 Bali has been host to competing political interests and personalities. The on-going contest is between two principal parties, the ruling CPDM and the powerful opposition party, the SDF. I have already suggested that the re-introduction of party politics in 1990 served as a strategic entry point for many chiefs who had played a relatively dormant role in local and/or national affairs before this era. Party politics and elections therefore offered a great opportunity for chiefs, not only to participate in the *invention* of Cameroon's future per se, but also, to safeguard and enhance their individual and collective interests. Based on my observations and archival data, this contention is as true of other grassfields chiefs as it is true of *fon* Ganyonga.

Soon after its formation in 1990 the SDF became a very popular party not only in the North West Province, but also in the Western, Littoral and South West Provinces. It was against this background that Ganyonga was seen, together with the government, as an obstruction to the wishes of the people. Although he continued to enjoy the support of some of the Bali elite and notables, the chances of the CPDM winning future elections in Bali were slim. The first multiparty parliamentary election was held in March 1992. This was boycotted by several opposition parties especially the

SDF for want of an independent electoral commission. The SDF and its fellow opposition parties argued that without an independent body to organise and declare the results, the CPDM government would manipulate and outmanoeuvre the opposition by rigging – given that the CPDM was both player and umpire. The SDF's boycott led to a CPDM victory in all 20 parliamentary seats in the North West. Although most of the new parliamentarians were long-standing politicians, the *fon* of Bali-Kumbat made a fresh entry to parliament, thus opening the way for other *fons* to stand as candidates in future elections.

In October 1992 the much awaited presidential election was held. No election in Cameroon attracted as much fervour and enthusiasm as this election. Although the CPDM government insisted on organising the election (without an independent electoral commission) the SDF and other opposition parties decided not to squander this unique opportunity by boycotting as they had done in March 1992. Given the growing unpopularity of the CPDM, many people anticipated the inevitable demise of Paul Biya, but he shocked everyone and emerged victorious. Popular belief is that victory was stolen from Fru Ndi. The results showed that Paul Biya, the incumbent, won 39% of the votes, while Fru Ndi of the SDF and Belo Bouba of the UNDP won 35% and 19% respectively. Owing to violent protests in Bamenda and other parts of the North West, where the SDF commanded overwhelming support, a state of emergency was declared in the province which lasted over two months. Fru Ndi was also put under house arrest for declaring himself the president-elect.

This period was extremely precarious for supporters of the CPDM including the much respected *fons* of the North West Province. Hostile incidents against chiefs were registered in several parts of the province although none was directed at Ganyonga. In Mankon for example, *fon* Angwafor was confronted by accusations and threats from his subjects who blacklisted him for complicity with the CPDM administration. These accusations became more grievous during the state of emergency, when on 3 November 1992, hundreds of subjects stormed his palace to protest against his 'meddling' in partisan politics. Other unidentified protesters burnt down the *fon's* rest house in Bamenda to register their disillusion with him.

Elsewhere in the chiefdom of Ndu, soldiers and other forces of state violence shot and killed six citizens while they protested against the supposedly stolen victory. The *fon's* silence over the matter provoked the subjects to accuse him of collaborating with the CPDM and of being an auxiliary of state repression. Thereafter, subjects began to denounce him publicly and others called him by his name which was interpreted as an open sign of dethronement (cf. Fisiy 1995:55).

According to several schools of thought, the enthusiasm for democratic change in Cameroon was a short-lived experience. Advocates of this view hold that such enthusiasm petered out 'shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992, when the public was made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants' (Nyamnjoh, 1999:114). But this disillusion also intensified resentment against the CPDM and its local supporters, especially in the Bamenda grassfields where the SDF continued to maintain its dominance over other political parties.

This was evident in the first local government election of January 1996. The election coincided with the promulgation of the revised 1972 Constitution which increased the presidential term to a maximum of two terms consisting of seven years each.⁶² Be that as it may, the local council election of 1996 was very significant because of the victory registered by the SDF in many municipalities of the North West Province. In this respect, I wish to describe the nature of this event in Bali Nyonga.

Ganyonga sought to make use of this opportunity to head the local council by standing as the CPDM candidate for Bali. It was not a strange idea to have the *fon* as the head of the local council. In fact, Fonyonga II had headed the Bali Native Authority during his tenure as *fon* of Bali. More recently, Galega II had led the local council during Ahidjo's presidency although it should be pointed out that this was during a different era.⁶³ Many subjects were against the idea of the *fon* standing as

⁶² Cf. 1996 Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Reproduced by the HURCLED Centre.

⁶³ After independence, the Bali Native Authority was transformed to the Bali Area Council. The new council included the chiefdoms of Bali Gham, Bawok and Bohsah under the leadership of Galega II. Later in 1974 a new presidential decree was passed, reorganising local government in the entire country. Law No. 74-23 of 5th December 1974 stipulated that the municipal council shall be headed by a municipal administrator appointed by the state. Although legislation governing the operation of local government in Cameroon has been modified since 1990, it still owes much to the 1972 decree.

candidate against another subject. Informants insisted that it was not ‘proper’ for the *fon* to compete with a commoner in democratic elections, because if the *fon* were defeated it would bring dishonour and shame to his status. This view was particularly prominent among CPDM militants. In general, the subjects resented the entire idea of the *fon* participating overtly in party politics. According to them, although the *fon* had a democratic right to be involved in partisan politics and to vote for a party of his choice, his overt participation had the risk of ruining his relationship with subjects who supported opposition parties.

What is more members of the CPDM were completely against the fact that Ganyonga should stand as the party candidate for the election. The *fon*'s determination to run for the post led to chaos within the CPDM constituency of Bali. CPDM militants who opposed his candidature decided to elect their own candidate which excluded the *fon* from participating. Eventually the CPDM had two contenders for the post of mayor within the same municipality, the *fon* and a rival subject. Although the *fon* emerged as the CPDM candidate, in the end he was defeated by the opposition SDF.⁶⁴ His defeat made him very unpopular as had been predicted by those who opposed his running for the mayoral office.

After their victory, the local leadership of the SDF in Bali decided to pay a visit to the *fon* ostensibly to reassure him of their unalloyed loyalty. Although this was the official policy of the SDF, many of its militants decided to celebrate the *fon*'s humiliation at the palace ground, much to his displeasure. Other subjects who were opposed to the *fon*'s ‘meddling’ in party politics began to disobey instructions from the palace as a way of registering their disappointment with the *fon*. At a particular period, some informants claimed, people refused to supply free labour to the *fon*, provoking him to place a temporary ban on all *death celebrations*⁶⁵ (cry-die) until subjects complied with his demands. Ardent supporters of the *fon* however, insisted that subjects who failed to supply free labour to the *fon* did so, not out of political

⁶⁴ *The Herald* No. 275 Thursday, January 11-14. It is also reported that after the *fon*'s defeat at the polls, some subjects called on him to resign. This was based on allegations that he had threatened to resign if his subjects failed to vote him for the position of mayor. Cf. *The Herald* No. 281, Friday, February 02-04, 1996. Pg.3

⁶⁵ In Bali, it is customary to celebrate the death of deceased relatives soon after their burial. It is believed that failure to do so may invoke the wrath of the ancestors towards the living.

differences or resentment against the *fon* but because those in charge of organising such activities failed to do their job properly.⁶⁶

The *fon*'s humiliation at the polls is still talked about in Bali today. Although the *fon* has not ventured to stand as a CPDM candidate in elections after 1996, he has nevertheless remained deeply involved in CPDM and chieftom politics. This has triggered a major debate about the role of chiefs in the democratic era. I have already raised this issue in the preceding chapter, but at this point I wish to examine the different opinions as expressed in the case of Bali and Ganyonga in particular. The two main positions are on the one hand, the view that chiefs should actively participate in party politics and on the other, that they should maintain a neutral role.

Before I examine the subjects' views, I will first state the specific claims made by the *fon* on this subject. Besides the fact that it was his constitutional right to join any political party of his choice, the *fon* contended that he chose the ruling CPDM in order to attract development to his chieftom. Although he had his own personal interests to protect, he argued repeatedly that given the 'complex' nature of politics in Cameroon (referring to the false democratic context) he was better positioned to protect the interests of his people by siding with the ruling party rather than with an opposition party such as the SDF that was unlikely to win power in the near future. According to him, it was worthless to sow where one was not sure to reap.⁶⁷ This view was not unique to Ganyonga but could be seen as representative of the ideas of many chiefs facing similar challenges in their chieftoms.

Despite this controversial stand, Ganyonga had a few sympathisers among his subjects. An informant contended that the *fon* had responsibility to support the ruling party/government because he benefited in many ways from it. As an auxiliary of the government, it was incumbent on him to be obedient and supportive of the party and government policies. In a patronage system such as Cameroon's, the informant observed, the *fon* owed his job as a university lecturer to the Biya government. According to a popular saying, the *fon* could not dare to bite the finger that fed him.

⁶⁶ Interview with a CPDM militant and supporter of the *fon*, at the D.O.'s Office Bali, 10 February 2001.

⁶⁷ Interview with *fon* Ganyonga at his palace in Bali on the 20 February 2001.

This was because he also received payment from the government as an ‘auxiliary of the administration’. It also emerged that the *fon* was a board member of MIDENO (a government development agency)⁶⁸ and therefore owed allegiance to the CPDM government in this respect.

The above notwithstanding, a majority of my informants resented the *fon*’s overt partisanship. He was accused of showing ‘excessive’ support for the ruling party and condemned for his tendency to politicise every event in the chiefdom. Many informants contended vehemently that he was ‘overdoing’ it. The women of Etoma I (a quarter in Bali), for example, expressed their disapproval of the *fon*’s attempt to woo them to the CPDM during their visit to the palace to present a newly established women’s ‘common initiative’ association. To their dismay, the women alleged, the *fon* ignored what they had come for, and instead reminded them of their obligation to follow wherever he led them, because, as their father, he could not mislead them. The women left the palace discontented with the *fon* and vowed never to go to the palace again.

Youths expressed similar resentment towards him after a visit to the palace. In 2000 a group of youths who had won a football trophy organised by the Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association (BANDECA) went to the palace to present their prize to the *fon*. After congratulating them on their victory, the *fon* suggested that he was waiting to see what they would do to bring victory to the CPDM in Bali during the forthcoming elections. He was referring specifically to the council election that was scheduled to be held in 2001. Although the election was postponed several times by the Biya government, it finally took place on 30 June 2002. Despite the supposed massive irregularities that marred the election throughout the country, the SDF won the local government seat in Bali. Its major rival was the CPDM whose candidate was a Yaounde-based government elite. He was also the national president of BANDECA, an elite association whose activities I will examine soon.

Many of those who objected to the *fon*’s participation in party politics did so from a perspective of custom or tradition. According to them, it was ‘uncustomary’ for *fons*

to compete for political positions with commoners because, as it were, the *fon* was ‘above’ party politics – he was the father of all subjects, regardless of which political party the subjects supported.⁶⁹ An informant drew a distinction between politics in traditional society and politics in the modern state and concluded that in modern politics, there was little or no respect for tradition or one’s status:

Chiefs should not participate in party politics because modern politics is a dirty game. Tradition demands that we should respect our *fon*, but in politics, there is no respect for a person's status or title, so it is not fair for commoners to address the chief in a similar way they would another subject. I have seen common people speaking to our *fon* carelessly and some even insulted him in the face just because of politics.⁷⁰

Others objected to the *fon*’s partisanship on the grounds that the political field was impermanent, given that competition for power was a continuous process. One informant wondered about the fate of *fons* who supported the ruling party and their chances of survival if the ruling party lost elections or was replaced. This, he argued, would bring a lot of dishonour and ridicule to the *fon*. He was referring to Ganyonga’s defeat in the local council election of 1996 by the SDF, which until the present is still the most popular party in Bali.

However, over the years the political climate in Cameroon has changed especially in reference to the people’ expectations about democracy since the early 1990s. After the 1997 presidential election, which was boycotted by the SDF, it began to dawn on civil society that it was unlikely the SDF would take over power in the near future. The SDF seems to be experiencing diminishing returns due to several factors, one of them

⁶⁸ Interview with a notable, 23 January 2002, Ntankoh, Bali.

⁶⁹ The late *fon* of Nso, Nga II seems to have captured this viewpoint explicitly when he issued a letter to all the subjects of his chieftdom stating that: ‘as the *Fon* of all of you, I have welcomed all shades of political opinion. It has been a most uncomfortable experience for me to observe a split between many a traditional ruler and his people because of political difference. Our history as far as the Fondom is concerned – from our various clichés and proverbs and the role of the *Fon* – shows that the occupant of the Stool must be non-partisan. I have striven to be so even though this still has not gained the admiration of all of you.’ *Le Messenger* Vol. II No. 37 Saturday, October 10, 1992 p.12).

⁷⁰ Interviewed at Jam Jam quarter Bali, 5th January 2002.

being its unclear position regarding the Anglophone problem, which has gained more popularity in recent years.⁷¹

The SDF's dwindling fortunes can be illustrated best by the recently held parliamentary elections of June 2002 in which it lost about 50% of the seats it held between 1997 and 2001. On the contrary, the CPDM controls about 80% of the House of Assembly, more than it has ever done since the re-introduction of multiparty politics.⁷²

This means that chiefs who either had sympathy for the opposition or espoused neutrality as their political gospel have gradually renounced such positions and opted for the CPDM. A recent example is the *fon* of Nso, Mbinglo III who gave up his so-called 'neutrality' and officially joined the CPDM in April 2001. It should be pointed out that on his rise to the throne, Mbinglo III mimicked his late father by issuing a letter to all the subjects of Nso in which he expressed his neutrality and commitment to a non-partisan chieftainship.⁷³ In Bali, more people are becoming less hostile to the *fon's* involvement in CPDM politics although it does not mean that his claim to legitimacy in this respect has been approved. On the contrary, the people are preoccupied with the 'Anglophone problem' (discussed below) and it is partly because of the *fon's* involvement in this particular cause that he has won some degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Although the struggle between the CPDM and the SDF epitomised local politics in Bali for over a decade, the *fon's* involvement in specific lobbies also helped to dilute the low esteem the people had for him. But his role in other events such as the 'water crisis' instead revived suspicion and resentment against him. In the following

⁷¹ The SDF has consistently branded itself as a national party as opposed to an Anglophone party. In this regard, it has succeeded to attract a number of Francophone supporters especially from the Western and Littoral provinces. Hence although members of the SDF may belong to different Anglophone lobby groups, their focus is on winning national influence as opposed to representing the Anglophone cause. Because of its failure to privilege the Anglophone cause, some opinion leaders like Boniface Forbin have begun to advocate quite strongly, the need for an Anglophone political party (cf. The Herald 21 October 2001, www.heraldnewspaper.net).

⁷² Cf. <http://www.heraldnewspaper.net> accessed on 5th July 2002.

paragraphs, I will consider the *fon*'s role in each of the different events and assess the extent to which he gained or lost popularity.

Ganyonga was at the helm of a lobby which desired that the chiefdom should be elevated from a sub-division under Mezam division to a fully fledged administrative division. In fact it was rumoured that the President, Paul Biya had already signed a decree for the establishment of the division but had suspended it due to opposition from neighbouring Meta chiefs and notables who accused the Bali *fon* of nursing expansionist ambitions.⁷⁴ But the *fon* and other members of the CPDM in the chiefdom have emphasised the need for the Bali population to show their support to the CPDM government in order to hasten the establishment of the division. According to them, government will delay the process if Bali continues to remain a stronghold of the SDF. Although this was the case, the *fon* and his notables pointed to the fact that the government had already established a new Government Technical High School and a *Gendarmerie Compagnie* in Bali. This was evidence, the notables pointed out, that the Bali Division was in the process of being established since the above-named institutions were found only at divisional headquarters, not in sub-divisions. If the division was created, the *fon* and his collaborators observed, the chiefdom would attract more socio-economic development in the form of more schools, jobs, hospitals, and better roads. But many informants were sceptical about the extent to which their lives would change as a result of the elevation of the sub-division to a division. Some cynics pointed out that such a venture was intended to bring repression nearer to the people, not the so-called administration.

The *fon* was also behind the struggle to regain Bali's status as a parliamentary constituency. This particular issue needs a brief historical background. Before the parliamentary election of 1997, the Biya government re-designed the 180

⁷³ *Fon* Mbinglo III of Nso: 'I wish to state emphatically that, so far as party politics are concerned, I shall follow the strategy of functioning as an 'umbrella' to all the sons and daughters of Nso, irrespective of the political party to which they may belong. I shall not participate in party activities such as election campaign rallies organised by any political party.' *Cameroon Post* No. 0191 Wednesday, November 24 - December 1 1993, pg.2

⁷⁴ Ganyonga has refuted these accusations. He maintained that: 'unfortunately, people have a very wrong image of the Balis, especially here in the North West. Contrary to that opinion we are not aggressive and we are not expansionist. The Balis have their boundaries established since 1954, and since my installation I have never instructed my people to go beyond our boundaries because we are not claiming even an inch of anybody's land.' Cf. *The Herald* No. 214, Monday June 19-21, 1995 pg.6.

parliamentary constituencies in the country. Although this is not obvious, the logic was to place constituencies away from possible SDF strongholds to areas where the CPDM was likely to win. Given the popularity of the SDF in Bali as demonstrated in the council election of 1996, the Bali constituency was transferred to Santa, a neighbouring chiefdom. As a result Bali and other surrounding chiefdoms came under the Santa constituency. It was anticipated that the CPDM would win the Santa seat because the former Prime Minister, Achidi Achu originated from that area. Eventually the SDF won the Santa seat despite desperate attempts by the local CPDM elite to win the seat for the CPDM. This failure on their part triggered renewed hope among the *fon* and elite in Bali that the chiefdom could regain the constituency. This discourse was also connected to the lobby for a fully fledged administrative division. While the *fon* and other CPDM elite were preoccupied with these issues, many subjects on the contrary, did not mind whether Bali or Santa was the elected parliamentary constituency. In fact many informants contended that although the current SDF parliamentarian was not a subject of Bali, he had nevertheless made more substantial contributions to the sub-division than a Bali subject had done between 1992 and 1997 as a CPDM parliamentarian.

Another domain in which *fon* Ganyonga sought to win legitimacy was in maintaining his hegemony in the region and protecting the borders of the chiefdom from other neighbouring chiefs who were making claims on Bali territory. It was also alleged that two non-Bali villages that were previously under the control of Ganyonga had recently got their autonomy. This was interpreted by the subjects as a sign of weakness on Ganyonga's part. In 1995 Bali went to war with the neighbouring chiefdom of Chomba over a border dispute. It was believed that the Chomba fighters had received financial and material support from some CPDM elite of the chiefdom.⁷⁵ While these disputes became more frequent, some notables argued that Bali was not 'CPDM-enough' to be protected by the government. According to them, this meant that the state has sided with smaller chiefdoms against Bali due to the popular support enjoyed by the SDF in the chiefdom.

⁷⁵ cf. *The Herald* No. 214, Monday June 19-21, 1995 pg. 6

Almost every contentious issue in Bali could be explained in terms of party politics. Apparently, the ‘demons’ were CPDM militants while the ‘saints’ were the SDF. This dichotomy was illustrated by the struggle over the control of water supply in the chiefdom. During the period of my research, Bali was in a state of serious water crisis. It was alleged that the recent change in the management of the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC) was partly to blame. According to informants, the hidden hands of certain CPDM elite and the *fon* in particular were behind the crisis. The previous management, led by a non-partisan notable and retired engineer was replaced by a leading member of the CPDM in Bali. When the water crisis eventually started, it was rumoured that the crisis was a deliberate attempt by the new management to hand over the water supply to the National Water Corporation (SNEC) in return for 15 million CFA Francs. In order to understand the complex nature of the crisis, I will describe a detailed background to the story of water supply in Bali.

The Bali water project was built in 1957 during the British colonial administration and was administered by the Bali Native Authority under the leadership of *fon* Galega II. This continued after independence until the management was taken over by the state monopoly, SNEC. It was uncertain at what period SNEC took over the installations, but it was apparent that its management became inefficient and unpopular. In the early 1990s people complained of high bills and untreated water, and sometimes water was unavailable for several days. The Bali Rural Council also complained of SNEC's threats to cut water supply in the town because of unpaid bills amounting to 17 million CFA Francs. But the last straw to break the camel's back was SNEC's decision to cut the water supply to the palace, an action that provoked the anger of the Bali population against SNEC. On the 10th of January 1994, the population of Bali stormed the local SNEC office and ordered the officials out of the town after demanding that their water installations should be handed over to local control. The office was also set ablaze and most of the SNEC documents and bills destroyed.

After the successful overthrow of SNEC, the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC) was established as a management committee to oversee the functioning of the installations. Bills were reduced significantly and Bali elites in Cameroon and abroad were requested to make annual contributions to ensure the smooth operation of

the water supply. In 1996, Bali elites in the United States, under the banner of the Bali Cultural Association - USA (BCA-USA), established a Water Committee that devised a plan through which members could make contributions and pay the bills of their families back in Bali.⁷⁶ The BCWC functioned without any major crisis from 1994 to 2000.

It is recalled, however, that before the Water Committee was established, the *fon* had wanted to head the Committee. But Bali elites had opposed the *fon*'s campaign and advocated that a commoner should be elected who would be accountable to the *fon* and the population. As a result, the *fon* is reported to have withdrawn his candidature leading to the election of a retired engineer, Mr. Jinga*, to head the water committee.

In 2000, the leadership of the water committee was changed following an election that was generally perceived to be dubious. Mr Lang*, a notable and a prominent member of the CPDM, replaced the retired and experienced engineer. According to many informants, it was rumoured that the government had promised to reward the *fon* and Mr Lang with the sum of 15 million CFA Francs if they returned the water supply to SNEC. In line with the rumour, it was alleged that the poor management of the water supply was the *fon*'s ploy to get government to intervene and seize control of the water installations on the grounds that the local population could not look after their own affairs properly. But according to Mr Lang, the installations were old and needed to be replaced. On the contrary, many people insisted that he knew nothing about operating the equipment and had little or no time for the job. Mr Jinga was hailed as a man who had devoted all his time ensuring that the Bali population had a regular flow of water. At the moment, it is unknown if the water crisis has been resolved. But even if the old equipment has been replaced and the management has resumed the regular flow of water, it is obvious that the struggle over control of water will continue for a long time and that this is one of the issues the *fon* will make or mar his relationship with his subjects.

⁷⁶ <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/mbonbani>

* Fictional name.

* Fictional name.

Although Ganyonga has not founded his own development trust like that of Chief Tshivhase in Venda, he was however involved in the development initiatives of his subjects. It was in this particular domain that informants spoke positively about the chief. Ganyonga was involved in the activities of the Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association (BANDECA), an elite group consisting of civil servants and business persons interested in the socio-economic development of the chiefdom. Most of the members were migrants who resided in other towns and cities of Cameroon, but maintained strong links with the chiefdom. Some of the members intend to settle in Bali once they retire from the civil service or business. Because of its 'translocal' nature, the association had regional branches in the major towns and cities of Cameroon such as Yaounde, Douala, Limbe, Bamenda and Kumba, and international branches in Europe and North America where a significant number of Bali migrants live.

The association took over from the defunct Bali Social, Cultural and Development Association (BASCUDA) in the 1990s but soon became moribund itself. However the association was revived in 1999 and eventually resumed its activities in 2000. Its formal operations began on 20 December 1999 during a function where the *fon* installed the new executive in the presence of the mayor and the sub divisional officer of Bali. Since its revival, BANDECA has successfully raised more than 20 million CFA Francs.⁷⁷ It has also set up a community library, built a modern urinal and bathroom at the town centre and donated computers to Government High School Bali and medical equipment to the District Hospital. Bali elite in the US also assisted BANDECA by starting a programme to provide scholarships to promising students of Bali origin, aimed at improving the educational standards in the chiefdom. The *fon* has visited the main branches of the association to encourage and demonstrate his commitment to the cause of the elite.⁷⁸ As indicated above, many informants were delighted with the *fon* on this particular issue although he still remained unpopular in the sphere of modern politics.

⁷⁷ Account Statement of BANDECA as posted on its discussion group:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/mbonbani>

⁷⁸ cf. *The Herald* No. 1072 Monday, 25-26 June 2001. Pg. 7

5.3 Ganyonga and Fons' Politics in the Democratic Era

One of the ways in which *fons* attempted to boost their claim to legitimacy in the democratic era was by forming elite associations that cater for their collective interests. Secondary sources revealed that Ganyonga played an influential role at particular instances regarding the formation of *fons*' organisations. This process began in April 1993 when grassfields chiefs met at the *fon's* palace in the chiefdom of Nkwen to form the North West *Fons* Association (NOWEFA) led by *fon* Fosi Yakum-taw, a former governor of the North Province. *Fon* Ganyonga was elected as the Secretary General of the association. The newly created association had the primary objective of fostering mutual coexistence among the *fons* and their chiefdoms and to lobby development aid to their respective chiefdoms in particular and the North West Province in general. The *fons* also declared the neutrality of their association regarding multiparty politics although individual members were involved in different political parties of their choice.⁷⁹

But it did not take long for the hidden hand of the CPDM to betray itself as an influential factor in chiefs' affairs (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998). In August 1995 the *fon* of Balikumbat with the alleged complicity of the Prime Minister, Achidi Achu, created the North West *Fons* Conference (NOWEFCO) as an alternative to NOWEFA. The new association's objective was to unite *fons* who belonged to the CPDM with the intention of publicly declaring their support for the ruling party (cf. Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998). This was opposed to the policy of NOWEFA which espoused neutrality. As soon as it emerged that the Prime Minister was behind this new association, Ganyonga publicly accused him of being a traitor: 'we the *fons* now look upon the Prime Minister with disdain, as a traitor among the *fons* of the North West Province.'⁸⁰

The split among the *fons* was also interpreted as an expression of the on-going contest between 'first class' and non-first class *fons*. Although NOWEFA was made up of non-first class *fons*, it was dominated by the first class chiefs of the grassfields, while

⁷⁹ 'We are not a political party, but the *Fons* as individuals have the right to militate in any political party of their choice. The Union cannot declare itself for the SDF, CPDM, UPC etc. *But this does not mean the Union is insensitive to political issues.*' (Emphasis mine). Fon Abumbi, Leader of the North West Fon's Union in an interview with *The Herald* No. 658 Wednesday September 9-10, 1998 pg. 9.

⁸⁰ Cf. *The Herald* No. 243 Thursday, September 21-24 1995. Pg.1

NOWEFCO consisted of the majority of second and third class chiefs according to official classification. Actually, in terms of numbers, NOWEFCO claimed to have 200 of the 230 chiefs in the North West Province. Its leader, the *fon* of Bali Kumbat, argued further that: ‘all fondoms are autonomous and equal. No fondom is superior to the other, neither is there any fondom which is equal to 20 fondoms.’⁸¹ This declaration confirmed the suspicion among observers that a major dividing line between the two associations was the distinction and prestige accorded to particular *fons* and not to others. But NOWEFCO’s leader was not the only one who held such an opinion. Although not a chief, the SDF leader, John Fru Ndi also spoke against the system of classifying chiefs into different categories of prestige: ‘A *fon* is a *fon*. No first-class or third-class *fons* exist in the North West, except creations to split and retard the province.’⁸²

While a majority of the first class chiefs maintained that their association was the only legitimate *fons*’ association in the province, *fon* Angwafor III of Mankon opted to recognise and show his support to NOWEFCO. This triggered calls for the dissolution of the two associations and the formation of a new and inclusive association. But some people were of the opinion that a single chiefs’ association was reminiscent of the one-party era. An SDF parliamentarian for example argued that chiefs needed to have several associations because they were no longer in the monolithic period: ‘since multipartyism means the blossoming of various shades of opinion that must not necessarily come from one side, there is a need for many *fons*’ associations provided they are out for the interest of their fondoms.’⁸³ But such opinion did not stop the search for unity among the *fons*.

In May 1998 the *fons* held a ‘union’ meeting at the *fon* of Nkwen’s palace. Even though the leader of NOWEFCO boycotted the meeting, most of his members attended. Also present at the meeting were *fons* Angwafor of Mankon, Ganyonga of Bali and Mbinglo of Nso. At this crucial meeting, the two associations were dissolved and the North West Fons Union (NOWEFU) was created led by *fon* Abumbi II of Bafut. Soon after this formation, Achidi Achu, who was partly to blame for the

⁸¹ *The Herald* No. 231, Monday August 17-19, 1995, pg.1

⁸² Cf. *The Herald* No. 641 Monday, August 3-4, 1998. Pg. 2

division among the *fons*, accompanied a delegation to the Prime Minister's office in June 1998 to lobby for the recognition of the newly created NOWEFU. But reports claim that the Prime Minister was not pleased because the new association had failed to express a 'motion of support' for the CPDM administration, given the fact that he had contributed 2 million CFA Francs for the organisation of the meeting.⁸⁴ This, according to him, confirmed the suspicion that the new association was a pro-opposition faction as pointed out by the leader of NOWEFCO.

Although unity has not been completely achieved, recent developments show that the *fons* have settled most of their differences. Collectively, the *fons* have negotiated their status within the patron-client networks of Cameroon's bureaucratic order by lobbying for posts⁸⁵ and calling for the re-establishment of the House of Chiefs. They have also collectively awarded traditional titles to members of the government elite as a mode of penetrating state circles.⁸⁶

Through these associations, chiefs have made claims to local authority and have competed for recognition even against each other, aimed at positioning themselves in the best possible way within the corridors of state power. In a context where the politics of recognition is rife, chiefs supporting the ruling CPDM have claimed to be the true representatives of their regions or chiefdoms by lobbying for development in compensation for their support to the ruling party. But not all chiefs have been successful to the same degree. Some are more prominent and/or popular than others. In the next section, I will show how Ganyonga in particular has won legitimacy for his involvement in the so-called 'Anglophone problem' which I introduced in chapter four.

⁸³ SDF Parliamentarian for Menchum Division, cf. *The Herald* No. 656 Friday, September 4-6 1998 pg.3

⁸⁴ cf. *The Herald* No. 625 Friday, June 26-28, 1998 pg. 3

⁸⁵ After the presidential elections of 1997, a group of *fons* went to express their support for Paul Biya and to lobby for more posts for their subjects. Cf. *The Herald* No. 528 Friday, October 31 - November 2, 1997 pg.1-2.

⁸⁶ During Prime Minister Peter Musonge's recent visit to Bamenda in April 2001, the *fons* of the North West Province conferred the title of *achendum* or 'Pathfinder' to him. In an elaborate address during the ceremony, the Secretary General of NOWEFU urged the visiting PM to 'Tell the president that we the North West province with one voice assure him that the province is a ripen fruit waiting for him to come and harvest.' Fon Chafah, the Secretary General of NOWEFU in his address to the Prime minister on the 4th April 2001. Cf. *The Herald* No. 1040 Friday 6-8 April 2001 pg. 3.

5.4 Ganyonga and the Anglophone Problem

In the preceding chapter I argued that political liberalisation provided room for the expression of perceived or actual injustices by individuals and communities who had been reluctant to do so during the authoritarian period. One of the issues that arose from the new democratic dispensation was the rise in Anglophone activism and protest against Francophone domination. Since 1990 traditional rulers of the grassfields have been very vocal about the plight of the English-speaking minority in Cameroon. Of these chiefs, *fon* Ganyonga has been most prominent. In this section, I will show Ganyonga's involvement, together with other *fons* of the grassfields in articulating the concerns of their subjects.

The Anglophone problem became popular after the first *All Anglophone Conference* (AACI) which took place in Buea (the capital of the former Southern Cameroons) on the 2nd and 3rd of April 1993 (cf. Konings 1999). Ganyonga not only led the delegation of North West *fons* to this important event, but also served as one of the secretaries at the conference. The outcome of the conference was the Buea Declaration,⁸⁷ which denounced the 'assimilationist tendency' of the Francophone-dominated state and the marginalisation of English-speaking citizens. The Declaration was widely welcomed among the Anglophone community although the South West Chiefs' Conference condemned it. North West *fons*, on the contrary, applauded it as a major step towards debate for a better Cameroon.

During the conference, the *fons* addressed the 5000 conference participants. Among other things, they called for the reinstatement of the House of Chiefs abolished in 1972 'to ensure the active participation of Traditional rulers in decision-making on matters of national importance. That a Federal system of Government be re-instituted, taking cognisance of our Colonial and Cultural heritage. That the Minority rights of

⁸⁷ An excerpt of the Declaration reads: 'As a people, our common values, vision, and goals and those of our Francophone partners in the Union are different, and clearly can not harmonise within the framework of a Unitary State such as was imposed on us in 1972... The democratic principle of majority rule and minority rights leads us to believe in the rights and freedoms of the minority. Francophone Regimes who have lead (sic) this country, have pursued a policy of assimilation aimed at wiping out our identity. Thus, our vision of a bicultural society becomes illusive, unattainable goals, and will remain so until and unless we can find a better framework within which this aspiration can find expression.'

the Anglophone Cameroonians be clearly protected and anchored in the Constitution.⁸⁸

When the *fons* returned to Bamenda, they met at the *fon* of Nkwen's palace on April 25 1993 and voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Buea Declaration despite Prime Minister Achidi Achu's attempts to dissuade them.⁸⁹ In a follow-up address to the visiting Secretary General of the Commonwealth in June 1993, *fon* Ganyonga III of Bali and other elite of the province argued against the admission of Cameroon into the Commonwealth on the grounds that the government had not met the requirements of the Harare declaration. They insisted that:

The Commonwealth needs to be informed that the Anglophones are the main victims of human rights abuses in Cameroon, and that they are the target group of the policy of assimilation into French culture (a process which in present day Cameroon is given that pleasant label of 'National Integration'). The admission of Cameroon to membership of the Commonwealth now, will amount to an endorsement of the policy of assimilation being pursued by the Francophone led governments of this country since 1972.⁹⁰

Despite his membership and prominence in the CPDM, Ganyonga was acclaimed for his public pronouncements in favour of the Anglophone cause. During a visit to the *fon's* palace by the SDF leader, John Fru Ndi, the *fon* argued that:

Cameroon is not for any one person or for any group of people. This country belongs to us all, and we have a right to be here. We (Anglophones) cannot be second-class citizens in our own country.

Though most *fons* did not attend the second All Anglophone Conference (AACII) held in Bamenda in 1994 (for reasons that are not obvious), the *fons* still voiced their opinion on important issues affecting the anglophone community. At the Bamenda conference, a Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) was established as a

⁸⁸ An Address presented by the North West *Fons* on the occasion of the All Anglophones Conference holding in Buea South West Province, 2nd April 1993; *Cameroon Post Special* No. 157 April 17 pg. 16.

⁸⁹ *The Messenger* Vol 1. No. 003 Thursday May 13, 1993 pg. 5

⁹⁰ A Welcome Address presented by Opinion Leaders, Elderly Statesmen and Natural Rulers in Bamenda to His Excellency Chief Emeka Anyaoku. *Cameroon Post* No. 170 June 1993 pg. 5

provisional committee to lobby the government of Cameroon and the international community for more constitutional recognition of Anglophone rights. Following the SCNC's historic trip to the United Nations in 1995, the clamour for anglophone identity and rights reached fever pitch. *Fon Fosi Yakum-taw*, a former Governor of the North Province, called on the government to address the Anglophone problem before it escalated into severe conflict:

if we as traditional rulers find that a certain shade of opinion is pressing and gaining grounds, it is our role to invite government to listen to them. We have not said government must accept or refuse but that government should enter into dialogue instead of just ignoring the existence of certain people or certain issues. Government ought to examine these problems and convince people that these problems don't exist or recognise the problems. Government has so far been talking about unity, about peace and progress. We think government itself should open and talk to the SCNC with a view to preserving the peace and unity of this nation which we as traditional rulers, we as custodians of traditional rights and liberties, see somehow threatened and we think that government ought to initiate action as quickly as possible.⁹¹

Despite the campaign by lobby groups Cameroon was admitted to the Commonwealth on the 16 October 1995. This was a serious setback for anglophone activists, especially those in the SCNC. Gradually the SCNC receded into oblivion, mainly because of the local government and parliamentary elections that dominated the political scene in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Meanwhile the SCNC changed its status from a pressure group to a secessionist movement, causing many chiefs to dissociate themselves from its activities.

On the 31st December 1999 the SCNC, led by retired justice, Alobwede Ebong seized the government-controlled Radio station in Buea and declared the independence of the Southern Cameroons. They were subsequently arrested and jailed, provoking further calls for Anglophone nationalism. Most chiefs joined government officials to condemn SCNC activities, especially on October 1 2001 when the movement celebrated Independence Day leading to confrontation with state security forces and the consequent killing of three persons. Despite their differences, prominent chiefs are still vocal about the plight of the Anglophone community. During the recent

installation of a government minister from the North West province, *fon* Angwafor III of Mankon used the occasion to call on Paul Biya to ‘open a university in the North West, tar the ring road and solve the Anglophone problem...’⁹²

Although *fon* Ganyonga had been an ardent Anglophone activist, many informants were of the opinion that he seemed to have given up the ‘fight’. Informants were displeased that he had joined other *fons* to condemn SCNC celebrations on 1 October 2001. It should be pointed out that some of the prominent leaders of the SCNC are Bali subjects and consequently command a huge following in Bali and the North West Province in general. Other informants held that the *fon* is still supportive of the Anglophone cause but had decided not to publicise his opinion on the matter. But recent developments belie this view as will be seen below.

On the 1 October 2002, the government deployed heavily armed soldiers to Bamenda, the capital of the North West province to pre-empt what it perceived as a secessionist attempt by the Anglophones. But the reality was that the Anglophone population was celebrating 41 years of their independence from British rule. According to local accounts and press releases from the SCNC leadership, the police and Gendarmes arrested more than 25 people at the celebration venue in Bamenda. They also tortured and intimidated people in other parts of the city intended to scare citizens from taking part in the ceremonies.⁹³

Given the resurgence of the SCNC and its dominant role in the political development of the North West Province, the chiefs have decided to join the bandwagon to advocate a solution to the Anglophone problem. Contrary to the position adopted by most chiefs before and after the 1 October celebrations in 2001, the chiefs have become more vocal about the plight of their people and the Anglophone minority as a whole. On 19 October 2002 *fon* Ganyonga and other first class *fons* of the North West Province made a trip to the presidency in Yaounde to present a memorandum on the Anglophone problem and the ‘underdevelopment’ of the North West province in

⁹¹ *The Herald* No. 237, Monday September 4-6, 1995 pg. 1-2.

⁹² *The Herald* No. 1161 Monday 28-29 January 2002 pg. 2

⁹³ SCNC Press Release on the 3rd October 2002 at Bamenda.

particular.⁹⁴ The trip was highly acclaimed by both their subjects and the Anglophone press. The *Herald* for example referred to the trip as ‘a commendable act of leadership’⁹⁵ and urged Anglophone parliamentarians to emulate the *fons* by organising forums through which the Anglophone problem could be articulated and acted upon.

5.5 Ganyonga and Public Opinion

Thus far, the central object of this chapter is to describe and analyse the kinds of legitimacy claimed by *fon* Ganyonga in the democratic era and the extent to which the people have accepted, contested or rejected such claims. The main finding is that although Ganyonga is prominent in national politics, the legitimacy of his participation in the politics of the democratic era has been seriously contested. His involvement on the side of the ruling party is perceived by the people as a failure on his part to provide a shield for them against the predation of the state. But Ganyonga’s status is ambivalent. On the one hand, he is seen to be on the side of the state and on the other, he seems to champion the cause of the oppressed Anglophone minority. This explains the ambiguity of opinions about the *fon*. However, I will examine how Ganyonga’s decisions on political issues has affected his relationship with his subjects. Opinion about the *fon* could be categorised on two principal issues: his involvement in partisan politics and the manner of his interaction with his subjects. Before I examine the different opinions, I will describe the socio-political atmosphere that characterised the period of my research and how opinion about the *fon* crystallised around particular issues.

When I began fieldwork in early December 2001, much of the popular concern was about the *fon*’s long and unusual absence from the chieftdom. This was during the

⁹⁴ The *fons* included Abumbi II of Bafut who is also chairman of the North West Fons’ Union (NOWEFU), *fon* Angwafor of Mankon, Sehm Mbinglo of Nso, Vincent Yuh I of Kom and *fon* Doh Gayonga III of Bali. The *fons* were also accompanied by their *ntumfor* (ambassador), Barrister Nico Halle. See *The Herald* of 21st October 2002. Cf. www.heraldnewspaper.net

⁹⁵ See *The Herald* of 23rd October 2002 - ‘Three Cheers to Anglophone Chiefs’ in which the *fons*’s trip to the presidency is perceived as a heroic gesture. But a word of caution is offered specifically that any Anglophone leaders willing to fight the cause should be ready to fight to the end, though it is not clear what end is envisaged or who defines the end. Cf. www.heraldnewspaper.net

Lela⁹⁶ season, a period of thanksgiving, celebration and happiness dearly cherished by the people. Everywhere in the chiefdom, women, men and the youth were busy preparing for the great annual festival. A new fence had been erected on all sides of the *fon*'s palace, which was an indication of the forthcoming festival. Informants insisted that the *fon* had expressed certainty about the holding of the festival. But news began to circulate that he had travelled and might not be seen for quite some time. Though many people did not know his specific whereabouts, it was rumoured that he had travelled to Europe to visit his German wife and children. Despite his absence, people continued with preparations hoping that the *fon* would be back in time to preside over the festival.

At the end of December the *fon* had still not returned, causing considerable disappointment among the people. I was also beginning to lose patience, trying to come to terms with the fact that I had lost my first opportunity of participating in the Lela festival. Had he known he would not be around, many people suggested, he should not have permitted them to prepare for the festival. This was proof, his detractors argued, that the *fon* was not particularly interested in local affairs. People who had travelled from the cities to attend the festival also felt betrayed by the *fon*. Eventually, rumour began to circulate in mid-February 2002 that the *fon* had finally returned. I was therefore reassured that I would not complete my research without organising an interview with him.

Many informants resented the fact that the *fon* was involved in partisan politics. I have already described the different views about the *fon*'s involvement in this particular domain. However, there was a general feeling that the *fon* had extended his partisan politics to the affairs of traditional government. Notables, especially those of the SDF alleged that the *fon* had marginalized people who did not belong to his party

⁹⁶ The Lela festival is an annual cultural event that celebrates the end of the year and the beginning of a new one. Usually held in December for a period of four days, the festival is characterised by traditional sacrifices to the ancestors, led by the *fon*. It is also a period during which the Bali people commemorate the achievements of the past year and pray for a better and prosperous New Year. In summary, the Lela festival constitutes the meeting point of all Bali members at home and abroad, by affirming the unity of the clan and the central role of the *fon* as *father of all*.

thus, turning the traditional council⁹⁷ into a puppet institution. My discussion with several traditional councillors confirmed these allegations. In my interview with the vice-chairman of the traditional council, for example, he insisted that the traditional council's role was not to contest or check the *fon*'s powers but to facilitate and collaborate with him. Hence, members had no option but to support the *fon*'s party. To emphasise his point, he repeatedly asked: 'how do you expect the *fon* to bring people into the council that he doesn't trust?'⁹⁸ Some of the notables who felt sidelined maintained that they had stopped going to the palace as an expression of their disillusionment with the way things are being run in the chiefdom.

Notwithstanding the above, most women were generally happy to note that the *fon* recently appointed a woman to the traditional council, the first appointment of its kind in the history of Bali:

We support the *fon* as part of our duty to uphold our tradition. That is why the *fon* saw the necessity to appoint a woman into the traditional council in recognition of the role we have played in this chiefdom. As a result, women now have a say in the affairs of the traditional council.⁹⁹

Although this was commended as a positive development, some women argued that a single female representative was insufficient.

The *fon* was also unpopular due to allegations that he had devalued the status of traditional titles in the chiefdom. Whilst several informants accused the *fon* of trading the titles for economic gains others argued that he was simply trying to adapt tradition to modern demands. In Bali, the status of *nkom* (pl. *kom*) was the highest to which a male commoner could aspire. In the past, the title was awarded to persons of substance and ability during the Lela festival, especially to those who had distinguished themselves in warfare. Today it is awarded to bureaucratic and party

⁹⁷ The traditional council has changed significantly not only in terms of its membership but also in its functions. Originally, it consisted of the seven permanent notables (*kom kwatat*) whose positions were hereditary, the sub-chiefs (*fonte*) and palace retainers. During the reign of Galega II the traditional council was broadened to include other sub-groups in Bali society such as the royal children and the king-makers. Ganyonga is the first *fon* to have appointed a woman into the council.

⁹⁸ Interview with the Vice President of the Traditional Council at Njenka, Bali. 20th February 2002.

⁹⁹ Interview with a female informant at Tikali, 20th December 2001.

elite or members of the chiefdom who have made substantial contributions to the community. The title does not give them legislative or executive functions but they form a sort of informal senate which may or may not be consulted by the *fon* as his inclinations dictate. Except for the seven permanent *nkoms* that existed when the chiefdom was established, the title of *nkomo* was usually non-hereditary. This means that aspirants were expected to acquire their titles through achievement and as a mark of distinction the *nkomo* was given a red feather, often worn on a woven cap.

Many informants were unhappy about the growing number of *komo* members in the chiefdom, and accused the *fon* of devaluing the prestige linked to the status. Some key informants held that Ganyonga once awarded three titles at a single Lela festival, whereas his father had often let a festival go by without making one award. But others pointed out that the growing number of title-holders was in proportion to the increase in population. Those who complained, I was told, were jealous and had failed to attract recognition, if they had worthy achievements to their names at all.

The *fon* also became unpopular for acting in what was described as an ‘unfatherly’ manner against a bereaved family and for ordering the exhumation of the corpse of the deceased family head. In August 1996, the Musong family sued the *fon* for ‘disturbance of quiet enjoyment of premises, theft, invasion of residence, threats to lives (sic), illegal exhumation and desecration and reburial of our father's corpse.’¹⁰⁰ The story goes that the late Mr Musong and his family lived on his property a few metres away from the *fon*'s palace. During the reign of the former *fon*, Galega II, a dispute had emerged over the ownership of the land but Mr Musong had won a lawsuit against the *fon*. However, the present *fon* contested the legality of Mr Musong's claim and appealed against the court judgement by arguing that the disputed land was part of the royal territory on which Mr Musong's forebears had settled illegally. When Mr Musong died in August 1996, his family defied the *fon*'s injunction not to bury the deceased on the disputed land. A couple of hours after the burial, the *mupuh* (the traditional police) arrived and ordered the family to evacuate the land in less than half an hour. Unable to pack up their personal effects within the stipulated time, the family was forced to leave many of their things behind. These

¹⁰⁰ *Cameroon Post*, No. 0125 Monday 14 September 1996 pg. 12

became the property of the *fon* according to ‘custom’. The *mupuh* proceeded to exhume the corpse of the late Musong and buried him elsewhere without the knowledge of the Musong family. In the lawsuit filed by Barrister Bobga, the Musong family charged the *fon* and six others for illegally exhuming the corpse of their father and forcefully evicting them from their property.

Eventually the *fon* was found guilty and required to pay for damages. Meanwhile those who were responsible for the actual exhumation were given prison sentences of three months each. This event brought the traditional police into disrepute. It also made the *fon* even more unpopular among his subjects who felt that the prison sentences delivered to the *mupuh* were symbolically directed to him. Just like the *fon*'s defeat at the polls in that same year, this particular event is still remembered in Bali even though the dust is supposed to have settled over the matter.

5.6 Discussions and Conclusion

My evidence and analyses as seen above confirm the works of Fisiy (1995) and Nyamnjoh (2002) who have conducted similar research in different chiefdoms in the grassfields of Cameroon. Fisiy's work was preoccupied with showing the ways in which chiefs sought to legitimise their participation in Cameroon's democratic transition. His main finding was that although many chiefs had become quite unpopular for siding with the CPDM, they had however designed new ways of securing their influence and power through the ‘control and management of land.’ Thus by demarcating a political space (land) within which they could maintain their control over people and resources, chiefs were able to contest the postcolonial terrain and lay claim to local power. *Fon* Ganyonga of Bali has been involved in similar kinds of claims. Although his reputation was brought to question due to his desire to manage strategic resources such as water, he has however focussed on maintaining the territorial integrity of his chiefdom against land claims made by neighbouring Meta chiefs. His lobby for his chiefdom to be elevated to the level of a division is also indicative of his desire to lay claim to local authority.

Nyamnjoh's main thesis is that chieftaincy is a dynamic institution and that chiefs should be seen as agents in their own right. According to him, chieftaincy needs to be

‘understood not only, and not even primarily, as belonging to a pre-modern, pre-capitalist past; but rather as institutions which have either (been) adapted to the contemporary socio-political setting, or even have been specifically created for or by it’ (Harneit-Sievers 1998:57 cited in Nyamnjoh 2002:4). Against this background, Nyamnjoh contends that chiefs’ claims to legitimacy in the democratic era in Cameroon can be ‘determined by anticipation and recognition of or failure to attract state-driven development efforts in their chiefdoms’ (ibid. 14). Taking this view into account, my research shows that although *fon* Ganyonga has failed to persuade the people about the logic of his partisanship, he has nevertheless not given up by making new claims. An example of this is that the road to Bali was tarred because of his association with the ruling party. He and his collaborators also insisted that it was because of his prominence in national politics that his chiefdom was rewarded with the appointment of Bali subjects into positions of importance in the country. For instance, the former director of customs and the minister of higher technical control were from Bali. It was popular rumour among the elite that the former minister had been appointed on Ganyonga’s recommendation. Supporters of the chief also suggested that a government technical high school had been established in Bali in return for the *fon*’s long commitment to the CPDM. As will be seen in the next chapter, Cameroon’s democratic transition was only nominal thereby maintaining structures of patronage as seen in the examples above.

In general my own findings confirm Nyamnjoh’s work, which provides a logical reason why chiefs decided to participate in national politics on the side of the ruling party, despite its unpopularity among the people. Nyamnjoh’s contention is that most chiefs opted to join the ruling party due to growing uncertainty during the clamour for democracy in the early 1990s. Many chiefs reasoned that the best way of securing state protection and safeguarding their interests was to become involved in the CPDM because ‘in the politics of give-and-take, it was out of the question not to expect to harvest where one had sown, and very dangerous to sow where one was not sure to harvest’ (Nyamnjoh 2002:15). Essentially, this logic reveals that chiefs understood better than the people that the so-called democratic transition was a mere farce.

It is in this light that certain chiefs have expressed their agentive endowments more than others. Some chiefs have also been more successful than others in negotiating

their status and interests in the current democratic context. For instance, although *fon* Ganyonga failed in his bid to capture the mayoral office, his counterpart of Balikumbat, *fon* Doh Gah Gwanyim succeeded to emerge as the only CPDM parliamentarian in a province dominated by the SDF. However, the *fons* have made use of various associations such as NOWEFU to enhance their individual and collective interests against other competitors.

To sum up, this chapter has described and analysed the kinds of legitimacy claimed by *fon* Ganyonga in the democratic era and has established the extent to which such claims were accepted, contested or rejected by the people. Ganyonga's case is examined against the assumption that the introduction of democracy offered space to 'old political actors' to stage a comeback into the national political scene. The return of these actors was predicated on several claims for legitimacy but as seen in this chapter, such claims by prominent chiefs were contested by the people because they favoured the idea that chiefs ought to be neutral in partisan politics. Hence chiefs could win legitimacy on condition that they were non-partisan, but those who became involved with the CPDM especially in the higher ranks of the party were seen as betraying the will of the people by frustrating their attempts to vote the opposition into office.

Ganyonga's major challenge was to influence the course of local events in his chiefdom. One of the ways he tried to accomplish this was by standing as a candidate for the post of mayor in the council elections of January 1996. Although he failed to secure the post, he did not relent his claims in respect of legitimacy by posing as the protector of his people in other matters of chiefdom politics. This was observed in such issues as his lobbying for the elevation of his chiefdom to a fully fledged division, the campaign to restore Bali as a parliamentary constituency and his efforts in protecting the existing boundaries of the chiefdom against the claims of neighbouring chiefs. Although these issues seemed to gain the support of the CPDM elite in the chiefdom, the people were not thrilled by them.

But the people were delighted with Ganyonga for his involvement in the lobby for the recognition and solution of the Anglophone problem. Despite the fact that he was not consistent in the activities of the Anglophone lobbyists, he was popular for having

participated at significant events such as leading a delegation of North West *fons* to the historic All Anglophone Conference in 1993. He also joined other elites of the North West to oppose the admission of Cameroon into the Commonwealth until the Harare Declaration had been met. Recently Ganyonga and other first class *fons* of the North West made an official trip to the presidency where they presented a memorandum to the president in which they called for a solution to the Anglophone problem and the economic development of the province.

This notwithstanding, his relationship with his subjects has fluctuated between cordiality and antagonism. Subjects had mixed feelings about him not only because of his involvement in the CPDM but also because he was seen as not conducting himself properly as a 'father' should towards his children. At a particular period after 1996, subjects refused to provide free labour, which was a customary form of tribute to him. It was only after he had placed a ban on 'death celebrations' that people were compelled to resume their supply of tribute to him. However it should be noted that since then, there has been remarkable improvement in his relationship with his subjects. Various accounts indicate that different quarters, groups and individuals now go to the palace to pay tribute to the *fon* usually in the form of firewood and, sometimes, palm wine. In a recent example, the Christian community in Bali led by Fr. James Nsokika paid tribute to the *fon* in the form of food items and firewood. In return, the *fon* distributed salt to the subjects in line with the popular saying that no one goes to the palace and comes out empty-handed. The occasion was also marked by dancing and singing which the *fon* is said to have appreciated considerably. Growing apathy among the subjects regarding genuine democratic change has also led them to dilute their hostility towards the *fon's* political orientation. The fact that the people have thrown their weight behind the SCNC which champions the cause of Anglophone independence is an indication that people are fed up with the promises of political pluralism and the so-called democratic transition.

This chapter has therefore examined the changes that have occurred in Bali and accounted for the factors that brought about these changes especially in terms of the relationship between the *fon* and his subjects. But an important question still remains unanswered: is the exhortation about the incompatibility of chiefs and democracy necessarily true of Bali? Although it appears so, I argue that things are more complex

than this. My ethnographic findings reveal that chiefs can play a role in Cameroon's democracy on condition that they enter the political scene as 'neutral' mediators – a role favoured by the people. It is against this background that the chief's predicament should be understood in the context of Cameroon's so-called democratic transition. My case study shows that *fon* Ganyonga's claim to legitimacy in the democratic era was contested by the people not because 'chiefs' ought not to participate in the democratic process, but because he was seen to be siding with the state against them. The fact that Ganyonga failed to offer protection to his people, thereby leaving them at the mercy of state predation explains the people's initial hostility to the *fon*. The example of the SDO's visit to Bali in 2001 illustrates this claim. One can also recall the example of some chiefs in Ghana who were perceived by the people as willing tools of the government of the day (cf. Boafor-Arthur 2001).

It is precisely because of chiefs' involvement in national politics on the side of the government that most chiefs have failed to assert themselves as alternate sites of power next to the state (cf. Geschiere 1993). Although by joining the CPDM many chiefs 'felt this was the best way of securing state protection and safeguarding their interests in a context of keen competition and differences along ethnic lines' (Nyamnjoh 2002:14-5), it is clear that most of their claims to legitimacy in this respect were undermined by the people. For instance, while the state continued to perceive these chiefs as vote-brokers in rural areas (cf. Geschiere 1993; Oomen 2000), it is evident that these chiefs failed to live up to this expectation. As 'auxiliaries' of the administration, they were expected to play the role of gatekeepers through which the state could capture rural communities (cf. Jua 1995) but the case of Ganyonga in Bali suggests that, far from being a vote-broker, the chief has actually become part and parcel of the state elite thereby failing to negotiate the desired rural votes on behalf of the state. Proof of this is the fact that the ruling party has not won a single election in Bali since 1996 despite relentless effort by the *fon* and the local CPDM elite.

But Ganyonga's loyalties do not lie with the state alone. While his subjects have contested his claim to certain kinds of legitimacy, they have in turn, accepted other claims. Ganyonga's predicament is therefore ambiguous and this chapter has revealed the claims that are accepted and those that are not. Why are certain claims rejected and not others? Does this mean chiefs are more compatible with democracy in Tshivhase

than in Bali? Do chiefs have the same meaning for people in Bali as in Tshivhase? These questions are essentially comparative and therefore need a new section. In the next chapter, I will compare and contrast the predicament of both chiefs and account for their similarities and differences. This enterprise will help one's understanding of the democratic transition in both countries and indeed the nature of the postcolonial state in each case.