

CHAPTER FOUR



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE CHIEFDOM OF BALI NYONGA

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the migration and history of the Chamba group since the 18th century to the early 1990s. It examines the disintegration of the Chamba group into several chiefdoms, one of them being Bali Nyonga. Unlike the chiefdoms of Venda, no dominant authority sought to reunite them under a single leader thereafter, although Bali Nyonga chiefs emerged more powerful than the others during the colonial encounter. This was partly because of their relative military strength, and also their alliance with the German colonialists. Although Bali Nyonga was the last major group to settle in the grassfields, the chapter shows that its chiefs became the dominant political actors in the region during the colonial period.

The chapter also unites the particular history of Bali Nyonga with that of the state in Cameroon. It shows that the consolidation of the postcolonial state under the authoritarian regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo was invariably accompanied by the sidelining of chiefs in local and national politics. This period also saw the emergence of a new bureaucratic elite that sought to dominate local and regional affairs. With the demand for democratic reform gathering momentum in the 1980s and the eventual commencement of democratic transition in 1990, chiefs began to reclaim the space they had lost over the decades.

The object of this chapter is, therefore, to give the reader an idea of the history of Bali chiefs and how their political actions became entangled with that of the colonial and postcolonial states. I also show the rise of *fon* Ganyonga into national politics, particularly in the structures of the ruling party, the CPDM. This chapter sets a stage for the reader's understanding of the kinds of legitimacy that Ganyonga claims in the

democratic era (discussed in chapter five). I also emphasise that although the contexts have changed as will be seen below, there is continuity in the ways that successive Bali chiefs have claimed legitimacy by aligning with significant sources of power. Even though this has undermined their popularity in the eyes of the people at one stage or another, they have, however, succeeded in maintaining dominance in regional politics.

4.2 A Political History of Bali Nyonga

Bali Nyonga, commonly known as Bali, belongs to the Chamba Leko group that migrated from the Chamba area of what is today known as Northern Cameroon to the Bamenda grassfields.⁴³ The date of their exodus is not certain but could be estimated to be the beginning of the second quarter of the 19th century (Hunt 1925). Historical accounts hold that the Chamba were the last of the ethnic groups to settle in the grassfields of Bamenda in the second half of the 19th century (Nyamndi 1988; Chilver and Kaberry 1967).

Under the leadership of Gawolbe, the Chamba group arrived at Banyo in about 1825 where they incorporated a number of other groups such as the Peli, Mboum, Buti and Tikar. The Chamba group and its new allies continued their journey further south and settled near the powerful Bamum kingdom, which today is found in the Western Province. There, the Chamba tried to subjugate the Bamum with the aid of the Bati, a small group that had been suffering constant persecution from the Bamum. Although the Chamba failed to subjugate the Bamum, they incorporated some of the Bati and continued towards the south. They crossed the river Nun and entered the Bamenda grassfields where they fought with the already established kingdoms of Mankon, Bafut, Pinyin, Meta and Moghamo. Unable to find a territory where they could settle without hostility from the neighbouring groups, the Chamba left the Bamenda grassfields and moved further west into Dschang, located in the present-day Western Province. There, their leader, Gawolbe was killed in battle forcing the group to retreat

⁴³ The term grassfields was first coined by the Germans to describe the Bamenda highlands, which was geographically different from the forest coastal region (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996).

southwards towards Bagam where they reorganised and selected a new leader (Nyamndi 1988:29-32).

Gangsin succeeded Gawolbe in about 1836 but his unpopularity and inability to sustain the cohesion of the large group triggered a struggle for the throne. Owing to the fact that none of Gawolbe's sons was able to emerge as the dominant figure, the group eventually split into seven separate factions led by each of the six sons and one daughter. The seven groups were Bali-Kumbat which eventually settled in the Ndop plains in the Bamenda grassfields, Bali-Gangsin presently found south-east of Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gashu also located east of Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gham located near Santa, Bali-Muti found in the Tabara State of Nigeria, Bali-Kontan which was later incorporated by Bali-Nyonga and finally, Bali-Nyonga located near Mankon. Thus except Bali-Muti, all the other factions migrated back to the Bamenda grassfields where they settled permanently. I shall now concentrate on the particular history of Bali-Nyonga.

'Of these sections Bali Nyonga had the largest following with Bali-Kumbat as his most formidable rival' (Hunt 1925:9). Gawolbe's only daughter, Nanyonga led the Bali Nyonga group taking with her most of the Bati, Tikali, Buti, Peli and Kufat that had been incorporated over the years. This accounts for the composite nature of Bali Nyonga, which includes non-Chamba elements from within and beyond the grassfields (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996). Nanyonga later handed over power to her son Nyongpasi who became the first *fon* of Bali and was known as Fonyonga I.⁴⁴

About 1855, Fonyonga moved to Kufom, a site not far from the present Bali Airport, at that time occupied by Bali-Kontan that had arrived at the area much earlier. Bali-Kontan was subjugated and incorporated into the Bali Nyonga group and its leader compensated with the office of sub-chief under Fonyonga I. Other neighbouring groups such as the Baku and the Kenyang were also incorporated into Bali Nyonga. A year later, Fonyonga I died and his son Galega I succeeded as the new *fon* of Bali-Nyonga. Galega I later moved his palace to the present capital in about 1875 where he

⁴⁴ Fonyonga literally means the *fon* of the Nyonga people.

devoted his time in expanding and constructing a strong centralised state (Titanji et al. 1988).

Whilst Galega I was busy consolidating his authority in Bali, several developments were going on at the coast, about 300 miles away. In July 1884 the coastal chief of the Douala, Chief Manga Bell signed a treaty with the German representative, General Nachtigal. This treaty made Douala and the hinterlands a German protectorate. But the Germans had never been to the hinterlands and it took a couple of years before their explorers could move further into the country. On 16 January 1889 Dr Eugen Zintgraff, a German explorer arrived at Bali where he stayed for four months and built a German station. He signed a blood pact of friendship with Galega I and also took a Bali woman as wife. It should be noted that Galega was not on friendly terms with the other powerful chiefs of the grassfields due to Bali's expansionist ambitions and also because the Chamba had attacked them before as seen in preceding paragraphs.

When Zintgraff visited Bafut later in 1889 and belittled the Bafut *fon*,⁴⁵ Galega was blamed for instigating Zintgraff to behave in this manner. Relations between the Germans and the Bafut *fon* deteriorated and eventually resulted in armed conflict. Although Galega helped the Germans in their attempt to subjugate the Bafut, it is evident that such assistance was related to Galega's territorial ambitions in the grassfields. In August 1891 Zintgraff reached an agreement with Galega that recognised and safeguarded the interests of each party, although critics of the treaty have pointed out Zintgraff's intentions to dupe the Bali *fon* (cf. Nyamndi 1988:132). The agreement read as follows:

The exercise of all power over the Bali lands is transferred by Garega (sic) to Dr. Zintgraff so far as Garega disposes of such power at the time being, namely, the power of life and death over the Bali people as also the exclusive decision over peace and war. In return for the above *Garega is assured of the establishment, recognition and protection of his position as paramount chief over the surrounding tribes of the northern hinterland of the Cameroons.*⁴⁶ (My emphasis)

⁴⁵ Zintgraff is alleged to have done two things that angered the Bafut *fon*. He had seized the drinking cup from the *fon*'s hands and drank from it and he also insisted on calling the *fon* by his princely name which was considered an abomination. Cf. <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/Chilver/Paideuma/setting.html>

⁴⁶ Pact signed between Galega I and Dr. Eugene Zintgraff in August 1891.

For a long time, Galega became the dominant political figure in the grassfields by siding with the Germans to further his own interests. Consequently, Bali became the centre of trade in the grassfields as German traders frequently made trips to Bali to sell their goods and buy local products such as ivory and carved products. In 1901 Fonyonga II requested the Germans to build a Basel mission station. This was promptly accomplished and two pioneer missionaries were sent to cater for the interests of the mission. The '1903 church' is still surviving today and it continues to attract Protestant worshippers throughout the grassfields. The first modern school was also built soon after the church had been completed. This consolidated Bali as the centre of German activity in the grassfields (Bali Nyonga History and Culture Committee, 1986:9). Furthermore, the German missionaries adopted Mungaka, the Bali Nyonga language as the principal medium of evangelisation.⁴⁷ Mungaka was subsequently introduced in formal schooling and soon became a lingua franca in the entire grassfields. By 1915 the Basel missionaries had already translated sections of the Bible into Mungaka.

Meanwhile, Zintgraff died in December 1897 on his way back to Germany but Galega outlived him and died in 1901. He was succeeded by his son, Tita Gwengang who was crowned Fonyonga II. Fonyonga was the one who asked the Basel Mission to set up a station in Bali, as indicated in the preceding paragraph. After the German colonialists had subjugated the powerful chiefdoms of Mankon and Bafut, the new challenge was to administer the grassfields. Once again, they had to rely on the Bali chief for this purpose. In 1903 the German colonial Governor, Puttkamer acknowledged Fonyonga II's 'faithful services' and granted him 'full protection of the Imperial Government'. The Governor provided further that all colonial officials and other Europeans residing in Bali or travelling through it were expected to 'pay their respect to the defence given him and always to be willing to afford Chief Fonyonga of Bali every possible assistance' (cf. Nyamndi, 1988:108).

⁴⁷ Except for Bali Nyonga, the Chamba group speaks a different language called Mubako. Mungaka emerged from a mixture of the Bati and Bamum languages soon after the Chamba had split into different factions. Although the royal family retained Mubako for a long time, Mungaka became the dominant language in Bali and subsequently spread to other parts of the grassfields.

On 15 June 1905 in the assembly of 47 grassfields *fons*, General Hauptmann Glauning (a German emissary) formally installed Fonyonga II at Bali as paramount chief of 31 non-Bali villages (Hunt, 1925:13). In turn the Germans expected two principal functions from Fonyonga: to collect taxes and to recruit labour for the plantations at the coast.⁴⁸ This new role later complicated relations between Fonyonga II and his subordinate chiefs. For instance in 1906 the Germans brutally resettled eleven Meta villages into Bali territory to ensure the smooth collection of taxes and in 1910 the chief of Batibo was exiled to Banyo for insubordination to Fonyonga (cf. Nyamndi, 1988:110). These developments placed Fonyonga at the centre of controversy leading to his unpopularity among some non-Bali villages. Gradually the Germans fell out with Fonyonga and returned most of the vassal chiefdoms back to independence. This decline in their relations continued until the Germans were expelled during the First World War. The German military station that had been erected in Bamenda fell to the Allied Forces in 1915.

After Germany's defeat and expulsion, Britain and France jointly administered the territory for a short while although the two powers later divided the Protectorate into two separate territories. This division was confirmed with minor adjustments by the Milner-Simon agreement of July 1919. As a result, Bali fell into the British zone. Once the British took over Bamenda in January 1916,⁴⁹ Fonyonga II produced a list of several villages under his control and promptly sent a 'fine elephant tusk to His Majesty the King [of England], who sent in return an autographed portrait' (Hunt 1925:19). Although the *fon's* control over the other non-Bali villages continuously waned, the District Officer noted his intention and determination 'to restore as far as the principles of Native Administration permit the position of the Bali chief as the most influential chief of the countryside, so that he may regain in moral prestige what he has lost in manpower' (emphasis mine).

⁴⁸ Several German firms had been set up in the coast and needed a cheap supply of labour. Previously, these companies recruited labourers from Ghana and Liberia but it was costly to maintain them since the labourers stayed for two years only. The Bali chief was therefore expected to supply cheap labour to the coastal plantations in return for colonial protection and expansion.

⁴⁹ The British Government officially assumed effective office in Bamenda in January 1916. The area became known as the Bamenda Division and its first Divisional Officer was Podevin (cf. Nyamndi, 1988:132).

Most of the British administrators were pleased with Fonyonga II partly for his help in defeating the Germans but also because of his relative dominance in the grassfields. The first D.O. for instance described Bali as ‘the most advanced of the various tribal divisions’ in the Bamenda grassfields. His successor, N.C. Duncan, later described Fonyonga II as the ‘most intelligent and farseeing native gentleman whom I have encountered during eighteen years spent in West and South Africa’.⁵⁰ Soon after the British had taken over, they instituted a new form of local government by creating Native Authorities. Bali Nyonga became an important Native Authority and was credited with the first Native Authority school in the Bamenda grassfields. This was soon followed by the establishment of a Native Court in 1925.

When Fonyonga II died in August 1940 he was succeeded by his son, Vincent Samdala who was crowned Galega II. The *fon* is remembered principally for his leading role in the struggle for independence. Galega II became an eminent politician in the British Cameroons (also known as the Southern Cameroons) and attended many of the conferences that were held to discuss the future of the British Cameroons. Although he was initially on good terms with the Premier of the British Cameroons, Dr. E Endeley, he soon fell out with him owing to Endeley’s disrespect for traditional rulers. In the 1940s he joined the coastal chief, Manga Williams, to represent the Southern Cameroons in the Regional Legislature at Enugu, Nigeria.⁵¹ This position placed Galega II as an influential politician in the nationalist movement for independence and re-unification with East (French) Cameroon. Some of the important conferences in which he participated were the Mamfe Conference of 1953 and the 1957 Nigerian Constitutional Conference at Lancaster House, London. It was at the last conference that he expressed his support for re-unification with French Cameroon, thereby tilting the balance of power in the favour of Dr John Ngu Foncha, who was then the leader of the opposition party in the British Cameroons. Upon his return to Bali, he campaigned quite forcefully for his people to vote for the Re-unification Movement led by Foncha. The other camp led by Endeley advocated independence by joining Nigeria.

⁵⁰ *Confidential Memorandum on the Bali Area*, Bamenda, 3/10/1921.

⁵¹ At this time, the Cameroons Province as it was called then was attached to the Southern Provinces of Nigeria for administrative purposes. The headquarters was in Enugu.

Galega II was also credited for being the architect of the Southern Cameroon House of Chiefs. This is understandable since he brought the idea from his experience in Nigeria. Upon its formation the Bafut *fon* headed the House while he became the vice-president. Southern Cameroons eventually got its independence through reunification with East Cameroon on 1 October 1961. Thereafter, a two-state Federal Republic was established led by President Ahmadou Ahidjo (Bali Nyonga History and Culture Committee 1986: 9-14).

4.3 Galega II in the Post-independence Era (1961-1985)

I wish to examine further the historical background of Galega II in the first half of the postcolonial era. This is intertwined with the history of postcolonial Cameroon and the general position of traditional rulers in this period. I wish to show further that although the postcolonial state sought to relieve chiefs of their relative power, Galega II still made use of the changing political landscape to claim new legitimacy and foster his own interests. This section is therefore not only a history of Galega II and other chiefs, but also a history of the state in Cameroon.

As indicated earlier, the Federal Republic was made of two states: West Cameroon (formerly Southern Cameroons) and East Cameroon (formerly *La Republique du Cameroun*). West Cameroon was economically less developed than the East but had a more pluralistic and participatory political system as opposed to the centralised system of East Cameroon. As a result, there was concerted effort to develop the economic potentials of West Cameroon through the construction of roads, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure (Eyongetah & Brain 1974). With regular French aid, Cameroon was able to register stable economic growth and prosperity. Ironically, it was the peace and stability enjoyed by Cameroon that provided the basis for authoritarian rule, although other ideological factors came into play such as the protection of national unity in an extensively diverse country - especially along ethnic and linguistic lines⁵² (Eyongetah and Brain 1974: 142).

⁵² For instance, there were people who felt that unification between a minority English-speaking state and a dominant French-speaking territory was doomed for failure.

Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo provided the ideological rhetoric for a strong, centralised and unitary state by proposing the dissolution of political parties in West Cameroon to form a single party state. He achieved this in 1966 following the emergence of the *Union National Camerounaise* (UNC) as the sole legal party in the Federal Republic. This was followed soon by the abolition of the federal structure in May 1972, which was replaced by a unitary state known as the United Republic of Cameroon. The collapse of the federal structure simultaneously saw the demise of several pluralistic structures in West Cameroon. It was at this period that the House of Chiefs was abolished, thus relegating chiefs to the background in terms of national politics. Once the unitary state was put in place, Ahidjo made progress to consolidate authoritarian rule through effective centralisation of state power, assisted by a handful of politicians and new bureaucratic elite from the different regions of the country. This became effective to the extent that the distinction between the state and the party was more or less blurred. State institutions and the UNC were used to further the hegemonic project of dominant groups such as politicians, civil servants and the business elite (Eyoh 1997:5-10).

After abolishing the House of Chiefs in 1972, Ahidjo issued a presidential decree in 1977, which sought to define the role of chiefs in the 'nation-building' project. Many critics have observed that the decree not only is controversial but also seeks to co-opt chiefs as clients into a largely patrimonial system (cf. Jua, 1995; Fisiy 1995). It should be pointed out that this decree is the principal official document that defines the role of chiefs in Cameroon up to the present. Article 20 of Presidential Decree No. 77/245 of 15 July 1977 stipulated that recognised 'chiefs were to act as auxiliaries of the administration.' Their job, among other things, consisted of serving as 'intermediaries between the administration and the people, helping the administrative authorities in the execution of government directives and recovering state taxes within their domains' (Jua, 1995:43). Article 2 of the decree went further to classify chiefdoms in terms of their relative power and influence. To this effect, three types of chiefdoms were outlined. First degree chiefs⁵³ were those with two Second Degree chiefs under their jurisdiction, which extended over a so-called divisional unit. Second Degree

⁵³ In accordance with this decree, five first class/degree chiefdoms were recognised viz; Bafut, Bali, Kom, Mankon and Nso'. The rest were classified as Second or Third class chiefdoms.

Chiefs were expected to have the allegiance of two Third Degree chiefs and their jurisdiction could be no larger than a sub-division. The jurisdiction of Third Degree Chiefs was limited to a village or a 'quarter' in a rural or urban area (Jua 1995:43). In accordance with colonial policy, they were also paid a monthly salary in addition to a small commission of tax collection, which has dwindled over the years after some of the basic taxes were abolished.

Prior to exercising their functions as auxiliaries of the administration, the decree recommended that an 'express note of administrative recognition' needed to be granted. Article 29 even carried threats of sanctions in case of non-compliance. It was therefore not unusual to hear of *fons* being threatened or punished for not co-operating with the administration. For instance one can cite the Prefectoral order which forbade the *fon* of 'Nso' to leave his palace, as penalty for supporting his subjects in their refusal to pay water bills to a parastatal that had taken over their supply system (Jua, 1995:43). In another example, the *fon* of Fungom was arbitrarily jailed in 1997 for supporting his people in their confrontation with Fulani grazers who had destroyed their farming fields.

Although the Chieftaincy Law of 1977 revealed 'the State's hegemonic project to co-opt traditional rulers into an already burdensome bureaucracy' (Fisiy 1995) it was evident that chiefs (especially grassfields chiefs) had lost their privileged role in national affairs. Thus, it was up to individual chiefs to look for new means of making their influence felt in local and regional politics.

In this regard, Galega II was quite shrewd. He quickly embraced the idea of a single national party and became a leading regional leader of the UNC. Actually he was the first section president for the UNC branch in the Mezam division. This administrative division (to which Bali still belongs) consists of two other powerful grassfields *fons*, namely the *fons* of Mankon and Bafut. Galega's influence as a politician was recognised in local and regional circles. This was evident when President Ahidjo paid an official visit to Galega at his palace in Bali. It was also during his reign that Bali became a sub-division in Mezam division (Bali History and Culture Committee, 1986:14).

Galega II passed away in September 1985 and for the first time in Bali history, a late *fon's* will was used to choose a successor. Galega had willed that his son Dohsang Galega should succeed him and this was undisputed. The new *fon* chose to call himself Ganyonga III (cf. Nyamndi 1988:153). Although most subjects did not know him owing to the fact that he had spent a long time abroad, it was anticipated that a highly educated chief of his calibre would successfully lead the kingdom into the 21st century. The subjects also presented to him a brand new Mercedes car as tribute.

Ahidjo voluntarily resigned in 1982 and appointed Paul Biya, Prime Minister since 1975, as his successor. Although Ahidjo retained the position of chairman of the state party, he apparently developed nostalgia for power and sought unsuccessfully to amend the Constitution whereby the state would be subjected to or made an instrument of party-defined policy. In April 1984, a coup d'état, led by presidential guards mostly from Ahidjo's northern region, failed in what was popularly believed to be Ahidjo's desperate attempt to come back to office. The failed coup provided enough reason for Paul Biya to purge his regime of Ahidjo's leftovers thus establishing a new configuration in Cameroon's political order. He also renamed the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the *Republic of Cameroon* (the name borne by the former East Cameroon). In March 1985 Biya replaced the UNC with his Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM). This was interpreted as Biya's final purge of Ahidjo's remnants and the consolidation of his New Deal government. Biya's consolidation and dominance of the new single party simultaneously saw the emergence of a bureaucratic elite from his ethnic group, the Beti, which is found in the Centre, South and Eastern provinces of Cameroon.

Biya's tenure in office was characterised by a reversal in economic prosperity and growth that had depended much on oil revenue (Jua, 1993). Biya's poor performance can be contrasted to the annual growth of 6-7% GNP in the 1970s during Ahidjo's leadership (Rowlands & Warnier, 1988:119). The decline of the economy reinforced the resort to kinship and regional politics, provoking even fiercer competition for diminishing state resources. Corruption also worsened under Biya as the bureaucratic elite and politicians from his ethnic group publicly contended that it was their turn to monopolise the 'dining table.' With declining conditions of material subsistence, the legitimacy of the authoritarian state was greatly eroded and a growing sense of dissent

began to dominate public discussion. This situation worsened between 1987 and 1990 provoking greater demand for the liberalisation of political space (Eyoh 1997:10).

Although Biya was reluctant to heed the concerns of the population, John Fru Ndi braved the odds in May 1990 and launched the first major opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). This triggered more demand for democratic reform compelling the state to liberalise political competition and the press in December 1990. Biya's continuous reluctance to meet the increasing demand for democratic change further provoked over half a year of civil disobedience championed by leading opposition parties and civic movements. This period was popularly known as 'Ghost Towns' or *Villes Mortes*⁵⁴ in French. Eventually Biya consented to the pressures and opted to host the 'Tripartite Conference', a flawed mimicry of the Sovereign National Conference that was held in many Francophone countries in the early 1990s. Although the talks yielded little dividend, it paved the way for legislative and presidential elections in March and October 1992 respectively.

4.4 Fon Ganyonga and Democratic Transition in 1990

1990 was a turning point not only for civil society and many political actors but also for chiefs. Soon after the SDF had been launched, Paul Biya backtracked on a promise he had made earlier in the year, specifically to exclude chiefs from active participation in party politics.⁵⁵ This was evident in July 1990 when he appointed Ganyonga and the *fons* of Mankon and Bafut into key positions of the CPDM. According to the appointments, Solomon Angwafor III of Mankon became the first Vice National President of the CPDM⁵⁶ and the *fons* of Bali and Bafut became alternate members of the Central Committee of the party. The Central Committee consisted of elite members of the party from all regions of the country and was second in importance to the Political Bureau.

⁵⁴ As the name implies, towns and cities were either deserted or economic activities stopped. The cities were expected to be as calm as a 'grave yard'. During the ghost town period, business activities were limited to Saturdays and Sundays, which permitted people to buy groceries needed for the rest of the week. The principal aim of the ghost towns was to weaken the economy and force the Biya regime either into a dialogue with those advocating more democratic reform or to resign.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Cameroon Post*, Wednesday September 12-19, 1990 pg. 2

⁵⁶ Angwafor was appointed to replace John Ngu Foncha. Dr Foncha had resigned from his post as vice president of the ruling party for several reasons, which shall be explored later in the thesis.

Thus the reintroduction of multiparty democracy offered enormous space for chiefs to play, once again, an important role in local and national politics. The appointment of Ganyonga and the other chiefs immediately raised their political status to the national level. This development also provided a major opportunity for Ganyonga in particular to play a prominent role in regional politics as his father had done in the 1950s during the struggle for independence and later in the 1970s as the divisional president of the UNC.

But the chiefs' new status in the CPDM and consequently, their overt participation in party politics triggered substantial debate on the role and status of traditional rulers in the new democratic dispensation. Initial reactions to the chiefs' appointment were generally bitter against Paul Biya and the CPDM government. Biya was accused of trying to destroy the powerful chiefs of the grassfields (for whom he allegedly had no respect) by politicising their role. The newly independent and critical press frequently carried articles authored by members of civil society and subjects of the chiefs in which they condemned the *fons* for allowing themselves to be manipulated by the Biya government. 'By accepting to be dragged into partisan politics,' one newspaper argued 'it goes without saying that these *fons* have abdicated from their roles of impartial referees in the impending multiparty competition expected to begin soon in the country.'⁵⁷ Other critics of the decision assumed that Biya had made this move as a strategy for winning future votes through the influence of the powerful and respected chiefs of the grassfields. It was against this background that a columnist asked: 'hasn't it ever occurred to the CPDM leaders that these *fons* govern a traditionally democratic people whose thinking cannot be done for them by the *fons*?'⁵⁸ But Cameroon Tribune, the government newspaper, saw things from a less critical perspective. It applauded Biya's decision as worthy and decisive, completely in harmony with the spirit of the democratic transition: 'there is nothing more reasonable' it contended 'than giving credit where it is due. Our ancestral custodians should not fight battles to get what is naturally theirs.'⁵⁹ In other words, the co-optation of the chiefs into prominent positions in the ruling party was expected to

⁵⁷ *Cameroon Post* No. 38 Tuesday July 31-August 7, 1990 pg.1

⁵⁸ *Le Messenger* No. 004 of Tuesday August 21 1990 pg.3

⁵⁹ *Cameroon Tribune* No. 1012 1990 pg.5

reinforce their influence at the local level rather than to undermine it. Given the above, two diametrically opposed camps emerged on the one hand, those who strongly advocated the neutrality (exclusion) of chiefs in party politics, and on the other, those who argued that chiefs should participate freely in party politics. At this point, I will examine in brief only the views of those who advocated that chiefs should participate in party politics.

A leading member of this camp was *fon* Angwafor III of Mankon. As the Vice President of the ruling CPDM he was very vocal about the democratic right of chiefs to participate actively in any party of their choice:

How can you deprive a citizen of involvement in politics simply because he holds a traditional title of *Fon*? The traditional ruler cannot be excluded from anything - politics, farming, trading, teaching, business and so forth. It is unthinkable to say chiefs should remain neutral in politics.⁶⁰

This view was supported by many chiefs including Ganyonga. The Meta chief *fon* Teche Mbah II, for instance argued that:

I personally see nothing wrong in supporting a given political party. Since a *Fon* has the right to participate in politics, he equally has the right to support any party of his choice. Is there anything wrong if we decide to support the CPDM? If we support the CPDM, it is in order to attract development to our areas.⁶¹

This debate has been going on from 1990 to the present, but Ganyonga and his colleagues have maintained their position in the party and have succeeded in co-opting previously reluctant chiefs into the ruling party. His involvement in national politics and specifically in the side of the ruling party has brought his political legitimacy into question. What has brought about these changes? What kinds of legitimacy is the *fon* claiming, who is persuaded or not, and why? These are the issue I intend to address in the next chapter but before I embark on this, I wish to examine briefly some of the contentious political issues that became dominant in the

⁶⁰ *The Herald* No. 110 Thursday May 26-29 1994 pg.3

⁶¹ *The Herald* No. 574 Friday February 20-22 1998 pg.8

democratic era. These issues did not affect the subjects alone, but the traditional rulers as well.

Political liberalisation created space for the articulation of perceived or actual injustices by groups and communities that had been reluctant to do so during the authoritarian period. Foremost among these was the rise in Anglophone objection to what was popularly perceived as Francophone domination and the latter's attempts to re-colonise the Anglophone population. The history of the post-1990 era in Cameroon is replete with numerous Anglophone lobby groups advocating different and sometimes conflicting solutions to what has become known as the 'Anglophone problem'. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Another issue that became discernible was the ethnicisation of political parties. This was a situation whereby major political parties tended to have their greatest support in the home areas of the leaders or founders. Although Cameroon had over a hundred political parties by the end of 1992, only 4 major parties were in endure. One was the ruling CPDM of Paul Biya which was perceived to be a *Beti* party (the President's ethnic group). The second was the SDF of John Fru Ndi, considered to be an Anglo-Bamileke grouping (dominated by people from the Northwest and Western provinces). The third was the Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (UNDP) of Belo Bouba Maïgari with a huge following among the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Cameroon, and finally the fourth was the Union Démocratique Camerounaise (UDC) of Ndam Njoya which enjoyed much support among the Bamum in the Sultanate of Foumban in the West Province (Eyoh 1997:18).

The balkanisation of political competition became apparent during the presidential elections of October 1992 in which the incumbent, Paul Biya scored 39% of the vote, Fru Ndi of the SDF 35%, and Belo Bouba of the UNDP 19%. Biya drew his support mainly from the Centre, South, and Eastern Provinces while Fru Ndi commanded a following in the Northwest, Littoral, West and Southwest provinces. Finally, Belo Bouba captured the votes in the northern region of Adamawa although he had to compete for votes with Paul Biya in the other two Northern Provinces.

The post-1990 era has also been characterised by the decline in the nation-building project. In its wake, there has been an increased reversion to the politics of belonging and ethnic forms of identity and solidarity (Geschiere 1993:151; Nyamnjoh 1999; Bayart et al 2001). This consists of an obsession with the exclusion of the *other* or the stranger from what is perceived to be an area or resource exclusive to the indigenes or autochthons (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). Although this view is not necessarily true of the grassfields, the emergence of the discourse of autochthony has provided an enabling environment for the resurgence of chiefs in regional and national politics. By posing as the protectors or guarantors of the rights of their subjects, some chiefs have appropriated the discourse of democracy and autochthony to secure advantages for themselves and their regions.

4.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter was divided into four broad sections. There was the pre-colonial migration of the Chamba group to the grassfields, the colonial period which saw the coming of the Germans and later the British, the post-independence era up to the 1980s and finally the era of democratisation which began in 1990.

The pre-colonial section documents the migration history of the Chamba group from what is today known as North Cameroon to their present location in the Bamenda grassfields. I also described the disintegration of the Chamba group into several autonomous chiefdoms of which the most powerful was Bali Nyonga. This process is similar to the break up of the Venda kingdom after Thohoyandou's reign into smaller autonomous chiefdoms as seen in chapter two. This section was concluded with a detailed description of the arrival of Bali-Nyonga in its present location.

In the next section, I examined the arrival of Zintgraff and eventually the German colonisers to the grassfields. I described Galega I's friendship and co-operation with the Germans and how this fostered his political ambition of dominating the grassfields. It was against this background that Bali became the centre of German expansion in the hinterlands of the grassfields. Bali also became the centre of trade and learning and this trend continued during the British period of colonial rule, after the Germans had been defeated and expelled during the First World War. I also examined the prominent role of the Bali chief, Galega II during the struggle for

independence from British rule. This was eventually achieved in 1961 when the British territory chose to reunite with French Cameroon to establish a federal state.

At this juncture, Bali history merged with that of the postcolonial history of Cameroon. Although I endeavoured to limit myself to chiefs in particular, this was impossible given the relevance of broader developments. However, I showed how chiefs were relegated to the role of ‘auxiliaries of the administration’ after the House of Chiefs had been abolished in 1972. I also emphasised that although the state provided no national role for chiefs after the abolition of the House of Chiefs, Galega II continued to play an influential role in politics such as heading the Mezam Division section of the state party, the UNC. His leading role was appreciated when the president visited him at his palace.

The last section showed the demise of Ahidjo and the passing away of Galega II. This period was marked by the rise of Paul Biya to office. Biya’s first decade in office was characterised by worsening economic crisis and increased demand for democratic change. The rise of Ganyonga to power in Bali coincided with these transformations. Although he was not initially an influential chief, he became involved in regional and national politics following his co-optation into the ruling CPDM of Paul Biya. He since then has been involved in national politics continuously up to the present.

It should be emphasised that the principal objective of this chapter was to present a historical background to the chiefdom of Bali Nyonga and *fon* Ganyonga in particular. This narrative was intended to provide answers to the basic question: why has Ganyonga used his position as chief as a springboard into national politics? By means of secondary sources and analysis, I have shown that two main factors account for Ganyonga’s involvement in national politics. On the one hand, the ruling party co-opted him into the central committee of the party thus bringing him into national prominence. On the other hand, it was in his own interests to join the ruling party, given the ‘cosmetic’ nature of the democratic transition in Cameroon and the atmosphere of political uncertainty in the country. The last factor will be discussed in detail in chapters five and six below.

Nevertheless, the historical narrative reveals that chiefs in Bali have tended to align with more powerful political forces to foster their own interests. This can be witnessed in Galega's pact with Zintgraff, Fonyonga II's collaboration with the British, Galega II's prominence under Ahidjo and finally, Ganyonga's involvement in contemporary politics on the side of the CPDM. This shows that although the contexts have changed, there is still continuity in the ways chiefs in Bali have coped with the challenges facing their status and institution.

Despite this, Ganyonga's involvement in national politics has provoked hostility towards the idea that chiefs should participate overtly in party politics. This hostility has been expressed in many ways, thereby questioning Ganyonga's claim to legitimacy in the domain of modern politics in the democratic era. In the next chapter, I will explore and analyse the nature of Ganyonga's claims to legitimacy and show how his relationship with his subjects has changed since 1990.