

‘Wrath from the Gods’: Traditional Institutions and Electoral Politics in Bali

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Abstract

This paper examines the 2013 municipal elections in Bali subdivision, North West Cameroon. The ethnography utilises participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analyses and so forth to unearth strategies employed by the CPDM and SDF parties to retain and/or regain Bali Council. The CPDM, in collusion with traditional authorities, was accused of utilising a sacred cult ‘Voma’ to intimidate voters. The SDF was accused of importing witchdoctors from Nigeria and Pygmies from East Cameroon to cast magical spells on the population, to make the people vote for it. The CPDM won a landslide, but struggled to dispel rumours about the impact and consequences of Voma.

Keywords

Party politics, municipal elections, traditional authorities, sacred society, ancestral gods

Introduction

The government of Cameroon introduced changes to the country’s constitution in the 1990s. These changes heralded a major overhaul of the system of governance towards decentralisation and community participation in development activities. This system accorded local municipalities powers to take decisions on a significant number of areas including economic, social, health, educational, cultural and sports development.¹ This system of governance began to be implemented in 2004. Following the promulgation of the law on the orientation of decentralisation² and the law on the rules applicable to councils,³ elected municipal councils, which had existed for decades, were transformed from bodies with minimal responsibilities, such as performing civil ceremonies, into agents of local development (PNDP, 2009, 2010).

The constitutional reforms of the 1990s were preceded by the legalisation of political parties, which paved the way for open competition for elective posts. This was in stark contrast to what existed during single-party rule, under the dictatorship of Cameroon’s first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo. During that era everyone, including traditional chiefs, in principle belonged to the Grand National Party, and any form of dissent was often violently suppressed (Geschiere, 2009). Meanwhile, the House of Chiefs that had served as an arena as well as an outlet for traditional authorities in the former West Cameroon to engage in national politics, was unceremoniously dissolved in 1972 (Chem-Langhee, 1983).

Consequently, North West chiefs, most of whom were head of native authorities during colonial rule, could no longer be seen to be politically active lest they were branded subversive (Mentan, 2011: 33).

Most chiefs therefore channelled their efforts into tackling the day-to-day concerns of their subjects, as well as developmental activities in their communities. It should be noted that some chiefs were quite politically active and a notable example was Fon⁴ Galega II of Bali, who played a very prominent role in national politics in the years leading up to, and in the immediate aftermath of, independence and unification. He was 'rewarded' with a visit to his palace by President Ahidjo. Curiously, even though Ahidjo's iron rule is now history, a keen observation of traditional rulers and politics in Cameroon clearly indicates that chiefs still prefer to ally themselves with the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party for fear of being sidelined, or worse denied a share of the 'national pie'.

Meanwhile, the advent of Paul Biya, the self-styled advocate of the 'New Deal' was accompanied, albeit reluctantly, by the liberalisation of the political landscape and the legalisation of political parties (Delancy, 1989). The new political dispensation provided a platform for national actors, including chiefs, to re-enter party politics, in some cases pitting them against their subjects. Consequently, most chiefs no longer limited themselves to local issues, as happened in the past, but aspired to play active roles in national politics. Pluralism not only heightened the political stakes but also reinvigorated electoral campaigns. In some cases these were transformed into veritable battlegrounds in which a number of actors including politicians, parties, traditional authorities and ordinary citizens fought it out against each other (nothing close to the epic Hobbesian war of all against all), employing every available means including cash, cults and culinary items to gain votes.

Like elsewhere in Africa, the election timetable in Cameroon is the sole prerogative of the President, who is often referred to by state media as 'the sole master of the electoral calendar'. Furthermore, political parties usually have no manifestos, rather campaigns are fought on the basis of ethnicity and personalities. Opaqueness in the mode of governance implies that decisions which impact the livelihood of millions of Cameroonians are often taken by a select few, namely the President and his close advisers. These decisions take place mostly behind closed doors and usually without popular consultation, not even among pro-regime members of the National Assembly or Senate, who merely rubberstamp presidential directives. Moreover, the: 'mechanisms for holding elected representatives accountable for the use of resources or for the performance of service delivery are generally weak or non-existent' (Devas and Grant, 2003: 307).

Despite this rather gloomy picture, the introduction of decentralisation and its explicit focus on municipal councils as hubs for development somehow revitalised local politics in Cameroon. However, despite the general perception of decentralisation as governments throwing the governed: 'off the scent of (centralisation) by dragging red herrings of (decentralisation) across the path' (Greene, 2000: 120), Cameroonians in general, and people in Bali in particular, genuinely believe that, given adequate resources and room for manoeuvre, councils could become veritable engines for local development. This was the case during the late colonial and early independence eras when local governments in British Cameroon, enjoyed 'limited autonomy' and were not subject to stringent bureaucratic

oversight (Delancy, 1989). I must also add that the functions performed by local municipalities during that period were quite limited.

This paper examines the 2013 municipal elections in Bali subdivision⁵ (herein after referred to as Bali), through the prism of political parties, traditional authorities and ordinary citizens. It unearths the strategies employed by these actors to retain or regain control of Bali Council. I further contend that, unlike the commonly held notion that: ‘the variegated process of political institutionalisation is supposed to have reduced the role of the (occult) to the private sphere of the individual citizen ...’ (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 63), ‘... In Africa, (occult forces still) impinges quite normally and legitimately, on all areas of human activity including politics’ (ibid.: 65).

Background

Once more Mr. outgoing Mayor, I want to thank you and your entire team for all that you achieved for the Bali man for the past six years at the helm of this council. To the incoming team..., I equally want to congratulate you and by extension the councillors, and all the militants and sympathisers of the CPDM, for the brilliant success recorded during the last municipal elections. It was indeed a landslide victory, and the victory was not due to the coming out of Voma. It was a vote of the heart (Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Mezam, 2013).

It was in these terms that the SDO of Mezam Division addressed the assembled crowd, while presiding over the official installation ceremony of the newly elected executive of the Bali Council on 30 November 2013. The ceremony took place at the grandstand, where most public manifestations in Bali are staged, situated off the main road intersection in Bali central town, known locally as Ntanfuang. Like most public ceremonies of this nature in Cameroon, this occasion was marked by pomp and pageantry. Ubiquitous during this event were the different components of CPDM militants (youth, women and men) sporting party gear, bearing the effigy of the Head of State and the party logo (a flame).

The occasion had a festive flair interspersed with performances by traditional dance groups bussed in from all the nooks and crannies of the subdivision, competing to outshine each other by way of ostentatious displays. It was also animated by a local master of ceremonies who, when not announcing the arrival of invited dignitaries, was blasting out loud music. One of the songs aired by the DJ carried explicit messages of praise to the Head of State, likening him to the messiah and reminding him (as if any was needed) that ‘it is not yet time to vacate the Presidential Mansion.

Another song touched on a pertinent issue that drew almost unanimous approval throughout Bali subdivision. The lyrics of this song heaped praises on the Head of State for appointing the Fon and paramount head of Bali Ganyonga III, as Senator, following elections⁶ held earlier in the year. It is important to note that Fon Ganyonga III composed a list under the CPDM, but it was rejected by party hierarchy. This was not Ganyonga’s first attempt at electoral office. In 1996 he made an unsuccessful bid for Bali Council under the CPDM ticket, but was trounced at the polls by the main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party (Fokwang, 2009). His appointment was therefore received with great joy and a profound sense of relief, because there were fears of impending war in Bali. The traditional

ruler of nearby Bawock village, a second degree⁷ chieftom in Bali subdivision, was elected alternate Senator in the list headed by a former prime minister (PM) who, by dint of his alleged support for the above-mentioned chief over boundary claims among other 'crimes' perpetrated against Bali people, is generally viewed in many quarters as an arch-enemy of Bali. Many in Bali perceived the rejection of Fon Ganyonga's list and the election of the chief of Bawock as alternate Senator to former PM, Simon Achidi Achu, as a malicious conspiracy aimed at humiliating the Fon and the people of Bali. The chief of Bawock, however, disputed this charge saying that no individual in Bali was willing to draw up a list with the former PM, for fear of being accused of challenging Ganyonga who had earlier expressed his interest in becoming Senator and who had gone ahead in drawing up a list despite being advised to the contrary.

Conspiracy theorists in Bali advanced reasons ranging from outright cynicism to the sheer banality of the order of arrival at public events, to justify their invectives against the former PM and his alternate Senator. Many people believed that the ageing former PM, alleged to have suffered a stroke was, to put it bluntly, 'a dead man walking', and therefore handpicked the chief of Bawock, who is in his late 40s, as potential successor to replace him upon his demise. This would place the chief of Bawock in an incredible position of power in Bali. If this were the case, popular belief in Bali was that the second degree chief would then become titular Senator and by dint of that outrank the first degree Fon of Bali. The implication of this is that, on public occasions such as the installation of the Mayor, or on 20 May which is celebrated as National Day in Cameroon, the Fon of Bali would precede that of Bawock to the grandstand, and upon the latter's arrival rise up to welcome him. However, contrary to the fears of many in Bali, things turned out to be quite the reverse on 20 May 2013 as depicted in the following newspaper report:

Before the arrival of the Divisional Officer for Bali at the ceremonial grounds, Senator Fon Ganyonga deliberately created anxiety. He kept people waiting for his arrival at the municipal grandstand situated near the palace. The impresarios at the occasion heightened expectations with several announcements, calling on the population to focus their eyes on the road to the palace. Then a black Prado car emerged from the palace flanked on both sides by eight 'royal guards'.

The car moved slowly and stopped where the country's flag was hoisted. Then, Senator Ganyonga, gathering the loose ends of his 'gandura' and fixing his green-red-yellow sash, waved at the population with a smile. He moved to his seat where his wives and notables were positioned. The population applauded ceaselessly and gave him a standing ovation, but for the Fon of Bawock, Fon Nana Wanda, alternate to Senator Simon Achidi Achu, never stood up (CameroonPostline.com, 2013).

The appointment of Senator Ganyonga was therefore seen as a magisterial prestation by the President that saved the people and their leader from potentially unbearable humiliation at the hands of the 'enemies' of Bali. Others saw it as just reward to the Fon for the role his father played in the reunification of Cameroon, and also for his vocal support for the ruling CPDM party of which he is a Central Committee member. Interestingly, Achidi Achu had dangled the prospect of appointing North West Fons into the yet unborn senate as a ploy to get them to campaign 'vigorously' for the CPDM in municipal elections in 1996 (Awasom,

2003). Nevertheless, President Biya's gesture was heartily welcomed by a cross-section of the population of Bali, including members of the opposition SDF party.

The festive atmosphere at the installation ceremony of the Mayor and his team somewhat mirrored that held on 6 November 2013 to mark the 31st anniversary of the accession of the Head of State, Paul Biya, to power, only this time around without the SDO as chief celebrant. Nevertheless, CPDM militants also took the opportunity of this anniversary celebration to declare the end of the opposition SDF in Bali. In fact, speaker after speaker triumphantly declared the invincibility of the CPDM in Bali and called on 'those who are still with the SDF to realise that the game is up'. Some went further to lampoon the SDF party, its district chairperson and former Mayor of Bali Council for being 'a tree that cannot bear fruits', and praised the people of Bali for their political maturity, and for making the wise choice in the last elections by sticking with the 'winning team'.⁸ References to a tree that cannot bear fruits is reported to have been made by the PM, Philemon Yang, during his stopover in Bali on the campaign trail for the 2013 municipal elections. 'Barren' tree in this context can also be seen in light of the following question posed by [Chabal and Daloz \(1999: 151\)](#), in which they wondered: 'what word might be attached to the function of the leader of the opposition, who in the real world, has no resources allocated to his position', and by dint of that cannot adequately 'scratch'⁹ the people's back in exchange for replication of such gestures by the people in the form of positive votes on polling day.

Although the SDO¹⁰ did not make any specific references to Paul Biya on this occasion, his omnipresence manifested by effigies on party paraphernalia loomed quite large. The SDO began his speech by acknowledging the presence of among others the Senator, cum Fon, cum PhD holder, and other dignitaries, including his local subordinate and Divisional Officer of Bali and the heads of different units of the police, and gendarmarie as well as members of the judiciary. The speech delved into many topics including the career and political profiles of the incoming Mayor, the duties assigned to him and his team by law, the challenging road ahead, as well as the need for close collaboration with the administration. On this latter point, he urged the Mayor to contribute his own quota in maintaining peace and order in and around a disputed farming area, and to make sure that perpetrators of wanton destruction of crops on the said land be identified and brought to justice, for: 'your council cannot be a CPDM council and the people are against a CPDM government development project' ([SDO for Mezam, 2013](#)).

The administrator's address touched on two topical issues in Bali subdivision. Firstly he highlighted the intractable land disputes between Bali and neighbouring villages, and secondly he attempted to exonerate the Bali Nyonga¹¹ traditional cult known as Voma from widespread allegations of influencing the outcome of the municipal elections results. The SDO's references to Voma and land issues on this occasion brought forth two fundamental components of Bali Nyonga society, both of whom have contemporary overtones, while at the same time deeply rooted in historical annals. In fact, the origins of numerous land disputes in and around Bali subdivision, can be traced to the 19th century when Bali Nyonga migrated and settled in the present location. Likewise the history of Voma is not unrelated to these movements. Its rituals are firmly embedded in issues of land, farming and witchcraft among others. Voma therefore, is a 'deity' that performs a dual role: on the one hand it is a 'vengeful God that destroys wrong doers' ([Fochang, 2011: 28](#)), and on the other

it is: 'responsible for fruitful harvest' (Fochang, 2011: 28). Before delving into greater details about the role of Voma in Bali society, and accusations about its meddling in the 2013 elections, I will briefly illustrate the debate about how the 'democratic wind of change' that swept across Africa in the 1990s impacted Cameroon.

'Winds of change', political reforms and advanced democracy in Cameroon

The focus of mass protests moved from general dissatisfaction with the effects of corrupt and authoritarian rule to a much more specific demand for the democratisation of the political system through the introduction of multipartyism (Wiseman, 1996: 65).

As can be discerned from the above quote, the enigmatic stranglehold of one-party dictatorships in Africa had by the late 1980s: 'lost its narcotic power on the populace' (Mentan, 1998: 43). By the 1990s political monolithism had totally outlived its usefulness, making the imperative for change on the part of the masses irreversible, and thereby necessitating: 'political renewal' (The World Bank, 1989). Meanwhile debate about the provenance of pressures that forced autocratic African 'big men' to accept political reforms in the 1980s and 1990s was quite extensive. There were those who argued that reforms were largely driven by external actors, notably western governments, through conduits such as the IMF and The World Bank (Young, 1993). The basis for this contention was that both institutions were: 'pushed by their shareholders towards a more explicitly political stance, under the rubric of governance' (Gordon, 1997: 154).

Talk of governance during the latter phases of external intervention in Africa was because agencies such as The World Bank, (herein after referred to as the Bank) up until 1989, largely saw their mission as 'non-political' (Wiseman, 1996: 73). However, from the 1990s donor discourses about political conditionalities became much more forceful (Shaw, 1992). This came in the wake of the publication of a study by the Bank (The World Bank, 1989), about the impact of the economic crisis on African countries. Since then, governance has become a pivotal theme in donor conditionalities (Nyang'oro and Shaw, 1992). According to the Bank: 'a root cause of weak economic performance in the past has been the failure of public institutions' (The World Bank, 1989). This failure was mostly attributable to the self-serving interest of public officials and the lack of countervailing powers to check excesses (The World Bank, 1989). On closer examination, therefore, governance can either mean anything from the conscious management of government structures with a view to enhancing the legitimacy of the public institutions, or involves a patchwork of characteristics including governmental accountability, freedom of speech and media, as well as political association (Wiseman, 1996).

There were many including (Bayart, 2009; Chazan, 1992; Clapham, 1993) among others who, while acknowledging the inputs from donors and other external influences, contend that political reforms in Africa were largely driven by internal forces. Accordingly, local stakeholders impacted the democratisation process in Africa in varying degrees and included churches, trade unions, professional associations, human rights groups, the media, old politicians, university students and youth associations (Wiseman, 1996). The activities of these myriad groups all coalesced into massive street protests, boycotts and other civil disobedience campaigns designed to force entrenched dictators out of their fortifications and down the path of democratic reforms.

According to [Ottaway \(1997: 5\)](#): ‘the problem with democratization particularly in a purely political transition is the problem of power’. Unlike during the monolithic era where everything boiled down to one man rule, power in the context of multipartyism ideally involves redistribution among those with vested interests such as: ‘political parties, interest groups and formal government entities ([Ottaway, 1997](#)). This is the reason why national leaders have to accept ‘institutionalised uncertainty’ and the presence of a ‘loyal opposition’ that plays its traditional role as the conscience of the executive ([Ottaway, 1997](#)). As elaborated upon subsequently, the palpability of the occult in African politics, was certainly not among: ‘what western political theorists had in mind when they conceptualised the democratic political system as one in which there were interlocking checks and balances’ ([Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 75](#)) .

At the grassroots level, local governments were portrayed as being more democratic and quite effective at promoting local development than central governments. Consequently: ‘donors enthusiastically promoted national policies of decentralisation and administrative devolution’ ([Van de Walle, 2003: 6](#)) as a means of democratising social and political life, as well as ensuring the efficient provision of public services. Consequently, advocates of the above-mentioned lofty ideals, particularly those emanating from countries with well-grounded democratic practices, and a democratic culture spanning many generations ([Gabriel, 1999](#)), might have been forgiven for thinking that ‘what is good for the goose is good for the gander’. However, in real life politics, the ideal is often at odds with the reality.

In Cameroon the democratic flame was ignited by a group of lawyers headed by Yondo Black. In January 1990 Black organised a meeting in Douala to examine the plight of democracy in Cameroon and to explore modalities for the creation of an association to pressure for the return to multipartyism. He was promptly accused of being a ‘crooked lawyer’, and of taking advantage of his position as a: ‘traditional tribal chieftain to organize the takeover of the government’ ([Monga, 1996: 37](#)). Black and his colleagues were subsequently arrested and charged: ‘with holding clandestine meetings and circulating seditious tracts’ ([Mentan, 1998: 44](#)).

Not long after what became popularly known as the ‘Yondo Black’ affair: ‘John Fru Ndi launched the first opposition party, the SDF, in Bamenda’ ([Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2003: 8](#)). The launch of the SDF came after Fru Ndi declared his intention on 16 March 1990 to form a political party, but his application was rejected by local authorities in Bamenda. ([Awung and Atanga, 2011](#)). In defiance of administrative injunctions, massive troop deployment, a campaign of intimidation and threats of violence, Fru Ndi went ahead to launch the SDF on 26 May 1990. According to [Mentan \(1998: 44\)](#): ‘the bloody clash, which left six dead, was a strong indicator that the Biya regime was not going to give in to pluralism without a fight’. The government eventually succumbed to popular pressures and on 6 November 1990, parliament passed a bill dubbed ‘liberty laws’ paving the way for the legalisation of political parties and other freedoms, notably that of the media and associations. The bills were promulgated into law in December 1990.

At some point in the 1990s, President Biya gave an interview with a French local radio in which he is reported to have said he would love to be remembered as the person who brought democracy and development to Cameroon ([Mentan, 1998: 47](#)). Since then, CPDM

militants never miss an opportunity to project the National Chairman, Paul Biya, as the man who brought democracy to Cameroon, and is the only person capable of maintaining peace and unity in the country. It is therefore not uncommon to hear party stalwarts constantly refer to Cameroon as an 'island of peace in tumultuous central Africa'.¹² The lyrics of the praise songs cited at the beginning of this paper bear testament to this. For his part, the President is famous for having described his style of rule as 'advanced democracy' (Songwe, 2011: 14). However, as noted above, Biya did not voluntarily decree the return to multiparty politics in Cameroon. In fact, his apologists denounced popular calls for a return to multiparty politics, as: 'models imported from abroad, and not suitable for Africa' (Awasom, 2003).

The SDF was eventually legalised following the promulgation of the so called 'liberty laws' and participated in the 1992 presidential and 1996 municipal elections. After losing the presidential elections under dubious circumstances, the opposition made a strong showing in the municipal elections (Mentan, 1998). The results gave the SDF party control over a significant number of councils in the country¹³ (Takougang and Krieger, 1998). In the North West, the SDF won 30 out of the 32 councils, including Bali (Awasom, 2003). The SDF henceforth reigned supreme in Bali until 2007 when its list was disqualified, paving the way for the CPDM to gain control of Bali Council. The 2013 elections, therefore, presented a unique challenge to both parties. On the one hand, it was an opportunity for the SDF to attempt to regain control of the Council, and on the other, it presented the CPDM with a chance to retain control for another five years.

Election management in Cameroon

During the presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections of the 1990s, MINAT¹⁴ devised and applied additional conditions and diversionary tactics before approving candidacies. In practice, the complicated electoral laws provide the government with precious opportunities to manipulate the electoral roll in its favor while making matters extremely difficult for the opposition (Geschiere, 2009: 52).

Over the past two decades municipal, legislative and presidential elections have been regular features of the political landscape of Cameroon. On many occasions elections results have been the subject of bitter contests amid allegations of intimidation and fraud. Very often accusations are levelled against administrative officials who, in cahoots with CPDM party elites, have developed what could be termed a 'sophisticated rigging machinery' that has ensured continued electoral successes in national and local elections since 1992 (Geschiere, 2009; Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2003; Takougang and Krieger, 1998). Extrapolating the above quote, the state apparatus not only expends enormous resources to ensure electoral success, it sometimes conducts outright 'gerrymandering'.¹⁵

The period around publication of results also impact elections' management in Cameroon. In fact, they are quite precarious moments. Most often election results cause public uproar, not least among opposition party members but also the general public. This because the people's hopes for meaningful change are often raised when elections are announced, but have over the years been repeatedly dashed by 'electoral engineering' Cameroon style. Consequently, popular discontent over disputed elections has often turned violent.

According to [Chabal and Daloz \(1999: 77\)](#) violence is not only a phenomenon in: ‘situations where law and order have broken down entirely, but also where conditions are deemed to be relatively stable’. Cameroon certainly falls within the latter category, and when it comes to situations where the regime perceives a threat to its existence, such as during the so called ‘food riots’ in February 2008, or when election results are contested on the streets as has been the case in almost every election since 1990, the level of brutality and bloodletting from government forces can be quite severe.

Regarding municipal elections, it is often organised under a system whereby political parties are required to group candidates on a single list. The number of lists in a constituency reflects the number of parties contesting the polls. In the case of Bali, despite the presence of other political parties, elections are mostly dominated by two parties, i.e. the governing CPDM and the main opposition party SDF. Consequently, such periods are often quite tense, because any list that obtains absolute majority in a constituency grabs all available seats ([Awasom, 2003](#)). However, a coalition may occur in circumstances where no party obtains an absolute majority.¹⁶

In principle, election campaigns officially run for two weeks. Prior to this, political parties employ a number of methods to select candidates including primaries and nominations. In the run up to the 30 September 2013 municipal/legislative elections, the CPDM party hierarchy prescribed ‘consensus lists’ as the mode for selecting candidates. However, many local militants were left seething with anger because some consensus lists formed at the base either disappeared along the way, or were replaced at party headquarters with handpicked favourites. On the other hand, the SDF and other opposition parties conducted primaries, whereby militants elected candidates at the grassroots level. However, this process was also contentious. For example, on 15 July 2013 SDF militants from Bui Centre¹⁷ invaded the residence of the SDF National Chairman, John Fru Ndi, to protest against the replacement by party hierarchy of a certain Ruth Ngando, who had been elected at the base, by Caroline Mbiybe, who had been selected by the party ([Le Messenger, 2013a](#)).

Because of the winner-takes-all electoral system, coalition in local municipalities in Cameroon is the exception, not the rule. Coalition has never occurred involving the CPDM and the SDF in Bali. The 2013 municipal election was, therefore, a three-horse race between the CPDM, SDF and National Union for Democracy and Progress parties ([Elections Cameroon, 2013](#)). In the end it was the SDF and the CPDM that were locked in a ferocious electoral battle. The stakes were so high that the Fon of Bali went out on the campaign trail. His venture into the, at times, muddy waters of electoral campaigning was not without controversy.

The Fon embarked on a tour of all neighbourhoods in Bali town. He encouraged the population to vote in their droves for the CPDM so it could retain the Council and, in what could be seen as a form of ‘patronage politics’ involving: ‘the distribution of ministerial and other major political and administrative posts ([Erdmann and Engel, 2006: 24](#)), he urged the population to thank the President for appointing him Senator by massively turning out on polling day and voting for the CPDM party. Ganyonga did not limit himself to merely cajoling potential voters, he is also said to have: ‘threatened that people who took CPDM money and did not vote will see.’ Some observers attributed the coming out of Voma three days

before polling day as an ominous sign of this threat. Important to note that such allegations from an oppositionist could be easily shrugged off as political posturing. Nevertheless, it bears testimony to the monumental odds at stake in this election. What then is Voma? What is its role in Bali Society? And why did the SDO go out of his way to mention it in his installation speech?

The role of Voma in Bali Nyonga traditional structure

Beliefs in witchcraft assign considerable power to individuals' ability to influence the fortunes of others and reports of the continued salience of witchcraft in contemporary Africa, as a practice and a system of explanation, abound in both popular media and ethnographic literature (a quote from Geschiere, 1992 as cited in [Berry, 2001](#): xxv).

Voma and Lela¹⁸ are two ancient Chamba¹⁹ cults that constitute key components of the traditional state institutions of Bali Nyonga. Their hierarchical position in the traditional political setup means these 'deities' come second only to the Fon ([Chilver and Kaberry, 1970](#)). Between them, Voma has the privilege of being the main custodian of sacred mystical powers of the land, with the highest point of its activities being the enthronement of the Fon ([Fochang, 2011](#)). As the following excerpt illustrates, the multipurpose functions of Voma, notably its capacity to combat witchcraft, are as relevant today as it was in antiquity.

Ever since we were children, Voma has always been part and parcel of the traditional institutions of Bali. In the past our mothers were constantly complaining about loss of crops in the farms. It was common knowledge that people from nearby villages were reputed to be witches and wizards; some even transformed themselves into animals or used the wind to enter farms, harvest crops and take them away. There were also moments where bad people or sorcerers will come into the village to wreak havoc. Sometimes ill-intentioned Bali people could be tempted to acquire sinister powers from elsewhere to target fellow tribesmen.

Under such circumstances, Voma will be sent out, around February to cleanse the land. This period also coincided with the onset of the farming season. Consequently, if any malicious force was present, with the intention to affect crop production, or soil fertility, Voma will neutralise its powers, ensure abundant rainfall, and ensure farming activities are conducted smoothly. I should also add that Voma is not something that people can view; hence, when it comes out, they are expected to stay indoors till the end of its activities.

Depending on circumstances, therefore, different sections of Voma perform different activities at different points in time. Aside from its above-mentioned functions, Voma assists in solving disputes among Bali people. As one informant stated: 'if something goes missing for instance, say a house is broken into, and the owner goes and brings Voma, it frightens people and the thief is unmasked'. The peace-making role of Voma has come under intense scrutiny on a number of occasions during the early years of the 21st century. In 2007 it was intercepted in Bawock,²⁰ and in 2013 it was embroiled in electoral politics. As seen later, these events had implications in varying degrees for the outcome of municipal elections held in both years. The next section will examine the confluence between chiefs as heads of traditional institutions, and party politics in Cameroon.

Traditional authorities and multiparty politics in Cameroon

Historically, Fons in the North West of Cameroon, were near-deities and containers of ancestral spirits, and the loyalties of their subjects were generally unchallenged, particularly when the rulers were benevolent and projected a positive image (Awasom, 2003: 103).

The advent of multipartyism in Cameroon in the 1990s laid bare the rift between chiefs and subjects. The engagement of some chiefs in party politics was not without controversy, particularly where the population was on one side, and the chief on another. The disparity between chiefs and subjects is quite ubiquitous, and was not only a phenomenon that manifested itself in Cameroon but a continent-wide phenomenon dating back to the colonial era. For example, in 1950s Nigeria the 'Oba' of 'Iperu' initially supported the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons of Nnamdi Azikiwe. However, following elections to the Western House of Assembly in 1951, the population overwhelmingly brought him into line. According to Nolte (2003: 58): 'through the ballot, the townspeople made it clear to their king what his political orientation should be'.

In Cameroon the population of Fumban in the West Region has, since the 1990s, consistently elected the Cameroon Democratic Union (CDU) party to run the municipal council, despite the wishes of the paramount ruler of the Bamoum, Sultan Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya.²¹ In Bali until 2007, the population made a similar choice to that in Fumban, and consistently voted for the opposition SDF party. This was quite unlike during the monolithic era (1966–1990), where everyone in principle belonged to one party. Interestingly, upon assuming power in 1982, and within the context of the one-party state, President Paul Biya, pursuant to the logic of eternal monolithism, argued against the participation of chiefs in national politics, and even went as far as predicting the eventual petering out of the later institution (Fisiy, 1995; Biya, 1987). However, the advent of political pluralism saw him backtrack on this position (Jua, 2011).

Manifestation of the rift between chiefs and subjects was quite stark in North West Cameroon. As noted earlier, the formation of the SDF party was well received by the vast majority of the population. In a bid to stem the tide of support for the opposition, the President appointed some chiefs from this area into high positions in the party. Prominent among them was Fon Angwafo III of Mankon, who was appointed first Vice-President of the CPDM (Awasom, 2003; Fokwang, 2009; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Takougang and Krieger, 1998).

According to Awasom (2003): 'acceptance of this appointment at a time when many North Westerners and Anglophones already felt betrayed by their leaders brought a lot of trouble for Angwafo'. This was mainly because: 'as Vice-President of the CPDM he had to comply with party politics and subsequent party behaviour' (Awasom, 2003: 115). Angwafo actively coordinated party activities throughout the 1990s in this part of the country, including a series of nationwide demonstrations organised by the CPDM-led government and chanting a song entitled *Dimabola* to demonstrate loyalty to the party. Angwafo continued to press for the maintenance of the one-party system (Nkwi and Nyamnjoh, 2011). He was not only ridiculed for his 'anti-democracy' stance but he also suffered significant property damage, something that was quite unprecedented considering how revered traditional rulers are regarded in this part of the country.

The question of chiefs and party politics once more came under scrutiny in Bali in September 2013. The dilemma for the opposition and some ordinary citizens was where to draw the line between the Fon as a politician, and the Fon as a traditional ruler. Some chiefs, however, do not see anything wrong with being active in party politics; certainly not Angwafo, who fails: 'to see why chiefs should be treated as apolitical animals, or placed above party politics, when they are citizens just like anyone else' (Nyamnjoh, 2003: 132). Whereas some do not see chieftaincy as anachronistic to politics, it is sometimes the wish of others that they steer clear of politics.

Once the Fon becomes continually active in politics, it is very dangerous, for politics can sometimes be like a fight in a pig sty. If you put on the damask of the Fon, and you get inside a pig sty, to meet somebody who might be wearing a torn rag, both of you must rub mud .

My interlocutor and senior member of the opposition SDF party in Bali also likened the political arena to a rather surreal football pitch where 'anything goes'. According to the rules of this hypothetical soccer match: 'sometimes to score a goal, one must use things like sliding tackles, airlock, etc. Basically, it is a rough game, so when you give airlock to the Fon, what would be the outcome? It will be gruesome!'

The CPDM did not wait for the opposition to use 'gruesome' tactics during the 2013 elections in Bali. As soon as elections were announced, it went on the offensive and instituted legal action against the local SDF district chairperson and former Mayor for alleged misuse of council funds. This according to the former Mayor, was a brazen attempt to stop him from contesting the polls. 'They tried to disqualify our list by telling lies that I embezzled Bali Council money when I was in office. The second lie was that a certain lady from Bossa who was on our list, was a Pinyin woman'.

This was not the first attempt by the CPDM to give the SDF a 'technical knockout'. In 2007 the CPDM successfully arranged for the electoral authorities to expunge the SDF list for not conforming to the 'sociological composition' of the Bali subdivision. In 2013 the CPDM tried a similar tactic (see last line of the above quote). Though they succeeded in arraigning the SDF district chairperson before the courts,²² he was not barred from competing. 'Immediately the Supreme Court annulled it and my list stood, they now descended to the use of money and intimidation. Intimidation through the traditional council and money through the elites'. These actions therefore set the stage for an electoral battle of epic proportions in Bali. The fight to the death between the CPDM and the SDF over Bali Council meant employing all necessary means including money, maggi²³ and Voma. The latter's peace-making role became very controversial and debate over its deployment during the campaigns was quite acrimonious.

Writing about political transitions in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, Chabal and Daloz (1999) wondered whether the return to multipartyism was not likely to lead to an increase in the importance of the 'irrational', which they define as "codeword for religious beliefs in its broadest sense" (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, p. 63). As detailed below, the role of the 'irrational' was certainly a crucial factor in the 2013 municipal elections in Bali. Likewise, the methods employed by the CPDM and the SDF parties to achieve electoral success, went beyond the mundane world of electioneering into the realms of magic and witchcraft accusations and counter accusations.

Voma and the 2013 municipal/legislative elections in Bali

Ba-ngwana²⁴ performed annual sacrifices in September-October at the Voma festival to promote the growth of guinea corn, and again in January; they might also be called upon by the Fon to sacrifice in times of drought, storms, and epidemics ([Kaberry & Chilver 1961: 364](#)).

The process of voting in a multiparty election must be understood as part of (very informal) relations of political exchange which impinge directly, if sometimes obscurely on the electoral result ([Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 158](#)).

During the two weeks allotted for campaigning for the ‘twin elections’, political parties in Cameroon, as noted in the second quote above, employed every available means to convince potential voters to turn out and vote for them. As [Hansen \(2010: 435\)](#) observed in Ngaoundéré, the capital of the Adamawa Region in Northern Cameroon: ‘an important strategy in winning votes was the distribution of material benefits to potential voters during the campaign’.

The passage of time has, however, not dampened the appeal for similar forms of largesse by politicians in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa. For example, in the June 2014 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State, South Eastern Nigeria, the campaign team of the challenger and eventual winner was reported to have: ‘distributed bags of food and fresh naira notes’ ([Africa Confidential, 2014](#)) to ensure victory for the candidate of the governing Peoples Democratic Party. Back in Cameroon, newspapers carried daily reports detailing strategies by political parties aiming to woo voters during the 2013 electoral campaigns. One article described how young people in Bépanda neighbourhood of Douala, Cameroon’s economic capital, attended long campaign rallies that ended up late at night with the distribution of money to buy the consciences of voters ([Le Messenger, 2013b](#)).

In Bali the CPDM conducted what was termed ‘door-to-door campaigns’ in the course of which militants distributed cash, foodstuff and party regalia among other items. The CPDM also held regular meetings at the Fon’s palace to elaborate campaign strategies. One of these involved inviting groups and other associations from different areas in Bali to the palace where they were feted, in the expectation they would vote for the CPDM. However, as the following extract illustrates, generous gifts during campaigns does not necessarily translate into positive outcomes.

By giving people meat and rice, the elite in Ngaoundéré tried to place people under a moral obligation to vote for CPDM. This kind of patron-client relationship required a degree of trust since the patrons had to be generous without knowing if the clients would reciprocate. In most other situations, the population had to take members of the elite at their word. Over and over again, the elite had deceived the people by saying one thing and doing another, leading to widespread distrust in politicians and in the political system. During the elections this situation was reversed and citizens had the advantage over the administration and candidates. The population could eat without voting CPDM, since the candidates would never know who had voted for them ([Hansen, 2010: 436](#)).

It therefore appears that, opportunity to eat from the CPDM during electoral campaigns goes as far back as 1996. This election came in the wake of major political mutations that

occurred in Cameroon beginning with the unexpected resignation of President Ahmadou Ahidjo on 4 November 1982. This was followed by his subsequent falling out with his successor, Paul Biya, and his attempt to regain power via a putsch on 6 April 1984 ([Bayart, 2009](#); [Delancy, 1989](#); [Mbembe, 2001](#)).

A year after the failed coup d'état (24 March 1985), Paul Biya announced the dissolution of the Cameroon National Union party and its replacement by the CPDM in Bamenda. At the time, the country was living in the bubble of one-party rule. However, the launching of the SDF in Bamenda, amid popular clamour for a return to multiparty politics, meant not only that the bubble had burst but that it was a powerful testament to aversion towards monolithism. The aversion extended to its flagbearer, the CPDM, whose acronym became popularly known in common parlance as 'Chop People Dem Moni', meaning 'they eat our money like it's their own' ([Takougang and Krieger, 1998](#): 8–9).

Consequently, association and or affiliation with the CPDM in Bamenda increasingly became precarious and somewhat anathema, making it almost impossible for the party to obtain votes from ordinary people. Likewise, anyone cosying up with the party ran the risk of paying with their lives as was the case of one Al Haji Tita Fomukong,²⁵ who was burnt alive when his residence was set ablaze by an angry mob of opposition sympathisers. Also, as indicated earlier, the Fon of Mankon also suffered unprecedented public humiliation.²⁶ In response, the government declared a state of emergency in Bamenda on 27 October 1992 ([DeLancey, Mbuh and DeLancey, 2010](#); [Doh, 2008](#)).

Violence in the North West greatly affected support for the CPDM. Consequently, party barons, desperate to maintain cabinet portfolios and other privileges from the state, employed schemes during elections that were not dissimilar to what [Hansen \(2010\)](#) observed in Ngaoundéré in 1996. The irony in the political developments around the 1990s was that people ate from the CPDM and voted with their hearts, i.e. voted for the opposition, which in the North West was dominated by the SDF party. Almost two decades after the first multiparty elections, Cameroonians were once again called upon to elect parliamentarians and municipal councillors. Unlike in 1996 where people ate from the CPDM and voted with their consciences, the CPDM in 2013, in collusion with traditional authorities, were hell bent on ensuring that anyone in Bali who tasted a grain of salt must vote for them.

Meanwhile, in relation to the patronage relationships mentioned earlier, and considering that: 'in an African context, clientele relations are relatively unstable' ([Erdmann and Engel, 2006](#): 21), the traditional authorities in Bali resolved to ensure compliance by employing what could be seen as 'irrational' methods. According to [Chabal and Daloz \(1999](#): 63), irrationality refers to the perception that: 'Africans continue to be singularly superstitious; the occult is alive, witchcraft is thriving, ritual ceremonies abound, (and) the link with the ancestors is as strong as ever'. The continued salience of occultic forces in African societies therefore contrasts starkly with the notion held by colonial authorities, missionaries, some post-colonial African officials and religious authorities that as African societies 'modernise', they will not only become more secular but also adopt Christian and Muslim religious practices based on a 'rational God' and in the process abandon ancestral and/or traditional beliefs and practices.

One may therefore be forgiven for thinking that occultic rituals are the stuff of primitive societies. However, the reality was that, during the campaigns for the municipal elections in Bali, there were strong accusations pertaining to the use of the occult. One story goes that, having feted meeting groups and associations invited to the palace, the traditional authorities 'compelled' them to undertake to swearing an oath termed 'Voma pact', pledging them to vote for the CPDM, failing which the Voma curse would befall them. I did not personally attend any of these 'strategy meetings', however, many informants confirmed that they took place, though they would not be drawn as to the veracity of the alleged pacts, rumours of which were quite rampant in Bali.

In December 2013 I was travelling in a commuter transport vehicle that plies the Bali–Bamenda highway. During the trip I overheard a couple of women at the back of the commuter taxi heading to Bamenda from farms in Bali, discussing about the damaging effects of heavy rainstorms that had for several weeks hampered farming activities. One of them sounded confused because Voma (see quote at the beginning of this section), usually comes out in January or February to kick-start the farming season. This is in anticipation of the rainy season that begins in early March, which incidentally is the planting season. Because Voma came out in September, it appeared to them that the rainy season was at hand (mid-November instead of around March). Consequently, they were uncertain about the fate of food crops that were nearing harvest, and when to begin to plant anew.

According to [Chabal and Daloz \(1999: 66\)](#): 'religious conviction entails a belief in the presence and in the power of those who have departed – hence the prominence of the cult of the ancestors'. In the view of these farmers, therefore, there was only one reason for the unprecedented²⁷ rainfalls and strong winds that caused damage to property and crops during what is supposed to be the dry season. According to them, the plausible cause for what I term 'wrath of the ancestors' was the 'inappropriate' use of Voma by the traditional authorities for selfish political ends. Such beliefs therefore feed into the view that: 'the African peasant combines an empirically earned ecological knowledge (i.e. popular technical knowledge) with his [or her] conceptions about the role that spirits and ancestors play in matters concerning [soil] fertility (i.e. magical-religious knowledge)' ([Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 160](#)) to determine meaning and knowledge.

The conversations between the women, in which the driver occasionally interjected, not only weighed the potential consequences of the rains but also veered towards another controversial issue, to which the women expressed equal alarm. This was the fact that traditional authorities invited people to the palace, feted them, and later obliged them to acquiesce to vote for the CPDM on the pain of the 'Voma curse' befalling them. The driver was, however, not in total agreement with them, especially over the link between Voma, rainstorm and harvests.

According to [Chabal and Daloz \(1999: 69\)](#): 'on occasions politicians might be held responsible for events outside their control, [such as] drought or ill-health'. Whereas those in Bali did not anticipate the unintended consequences of deploying Voma on the eve of a crucial election contest, the ramifications of their actions was not only a cause for concern to farmers. In fact, there were many others who also thought the ancestors of Bali were not happy because CPDM elites, including the Fon, had openly violated tradition. Some who

held such views expressed stronger fears, and even raised the spectre of possible famine in Bali. As one informant put it:

Immediately after the elections, all the farms in Bali suffered terrible wind disaster that has never occurred in this community. The storms destroyed almost all crops that were flowering. These are not good signals. Even at the Voma hosting site at Dola in Payila, the sacred tree fell, these are bad signals. I am afraid that we may have famine in Bali.

Traditionalists, being those who belong to key institutions of Bali Nyonga, such as the traditional council, Voma or related societies, strenuously refute such claims arguing that Voma is not a political party, and its deployment bore no political overtones. They further argued that its cleansing activities that night were meant to protect the whole of Bali subdivision. Paradoxically, people in Bawock argued that because Voma is not part of their culture, its activities that night (whether or not it came out for election purposes) had no bearing whatsoever in their village. A similar defence is cited by people from Bossa, which is another community in Bali subdivision.

However, according to [Abraham and Platteau \(2004: 213\)](#): ‘unfortunate events that befall particular individuals are indeed ascribed to violations of social norms that aroused the anger of supernatural powers overseeing human affairs’. Traditional authorities could, nevertheless, be comforted by the thoughts of [Kaberry and Chilver \(1961: 364\)](#) that: ‘bangwana performed annual sacrifices in September-October’; therefore Voma coming out in September 2013 was just a routine exercise. Moreover, [Kaberry and Chilver \(1961\)](#), added that Voma can also be called upon by the Fon to ‘sacrifice’ in moments of difficulty, which is the argument presented by pro-CPDM traditionalists who say the community was under threat from evil spirits brought in by the SDF. Paradoxically, a Voma member intimated to me that the Voma festival now takes place in November. I was reliably informed by another highly placed traditionalist, that the current Fon who ascended the throne in 1985, made a lot of sweeping changes to the traditional setup of Bali Nyonga (some of which were later rescinded), probably explaining why the Voma festival date is now in November.

The fact is, traditional rulers in North West Cameroon hinge their legitimacy on the supernatural. Therefore, by sending out Voma on the eve of an election, the Fon was certainly acting within his rights as the head of traditional institutions in Bali. Under normal circumstances, local opinion in most cases does not question such actions, nor are such actions in principle susceptible to any sanction or punishment.

‘Wrath from the gods’: analysis and discussion

Because the council of elders embody the will of supernatural agencies, lower people are inclined to believe that their decisions and rulings have an incontrovertible force. And if they would nonetheless feel that the elite are erring in their judgments or abuse their power, they have no choice but to comply ([Abrahams and Platteau, 2004: 217](#)).

While actions by traditional rulers, notably the utilisation of traditional instruments such as Voma, may be acceptable under certain circumstances particularly during the launch of the farming season, what occurred in Bali in late 2013 completely turned this view on its head. The combination of unprecedented rainstorms and the threat of possible famine was perceived by many in Bali as collective punishment by the ancestors for ‘inappropriate’ use

of Voma for political purposes. The spectre of ‘wrath from the gods’ generated a lot of anxiety among the population to the point where the traditional council had to act. Members of the traditional council, which serves as the main advisory body to the Fon as well as a native tribunal, went to the weekly Bali main market to publicly denounce rumours linking the persistent rainfalls and the risks of famine to Voma in an effort to reassure the population who had become increasingly agitated. Meanwhile, in what could be seen as buttressing the: ‘simplistic assumptions made by modernisation theory that the irrational (usually taken to mean the “traditional”) necessarily withers with modernisation’ (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 64), some traditionalists and CPDM members in Bali ridiculed the idea of collective punishment by the ancestors as ‘absurd and primitive’. They attributed the rains to worldwide conditions caused by climate change, citing in particular the severe weather conditions in parts of Europe and North America between late 2013 and early 2014, as examples of the events in Bali not being out of the ordinary. Critics, however, cited the falling of a tree at the Voma hosting site²⁸ as proof that the gods of Bali were not happy with the traditional authorities, and had struck back: first at the foot soldiers who executed the orders, and who knows where next...? However, a Voma member I interviewed insisted that the tree fell because of strong winds that occurred before, and not after the Fon asked them to cleanse the land. Accordingly: ‘if the wind was after, than why did we go out? We went out because there were evil people in the village’.

Upon leaving Bali in February 2014, debate over Voma was yet to subside. People were wondering if the dreaded famine would happen, or if the persons accused by the traditional council and the CPDM of bringing evil into Bali would be punished, or further still, if those who ordered Voma to go out and ‘intimidate’ voters would equally face retribution. To oppositionists, it was clear that a coincidence of factors, including the likelihood of voter ‘duplicity’ as experienced in past elections, weariness at the strong challenge posed by the SDF over the race for the municipality, and the quest for victory at all cost, spurred on the CPDM party – in league with some elites and the traditional authorities – to concoct a novel strategy to ensure compliance from potential voters, particularly those that ate during the campaigns. I often heard this when I asked if such claims could be justified.

The door-to-door campaign strategy employed by the CPDM, in the course of which food items, among others, were distributed to a large proportion of households is evidence of this. Cognisant of the fact that the majority of people in Bali strongly uphold traditional values, coupled with a fear of the consequences from Voma lurking in the shadows, people were very much ill at ease over the thought of violating its edict. The SDF therefore concluded that people in Bali voted for the CPDM out of compulsion. As one informant put it:

The traditional council knew that Voma is the most feared and dangerous juju²⁹ in Bali, and the only way to get people who took maggi to vote CPDM was to threaten. So when Voma came out and mentioned that if you took one maggi, you must vote CPDM or arukwa fabia. Arukwa fabia is in Mubako [the old Bali language] meaning, this is the end of your life ... people were terrified!.

Such trepidation could have resulted from the fact that, three days before polling day, Voma left Dola shrine in the dead of night to conduct ‘cleansing activities’. Whereas almost everyone agreed that it is Voma’s duty to cleanse the land, there were, however, very sharp

differences over the reason why it came out on that fateful night. For the CPDM and traditional authorities, Voma came out to counter threats posed to peace in Bali by the SDF. The local SDF Chairman was accused of recruiting Pygmies³⁰ from the East Region of Cameroon and 'importing' witchdoctors from Nigeria to cast magical spells over the population to vote for the SDF, so he could regain the position of Mayor that he had lost in 2007. As one CPDM member rhetorically asked: 'If the Fon gets this kind of information, and decides to send out Voma to cleanse the land, and neutralise the potency of those witchdoctors' charms, what wrong did Voma do...?'

It can therefore be discerned from this informant that belief in the capacity of the ancient traditional cult or Voma to neutralise potential threats to peace and wellbeing in contemporary Bali Nyonga society is quite rife. For the opposition, however, a combination of 'money, mystic and munchies' was employed by traditional authorities, local CPDM officials and elites to secure votes. This, according to the SDF, at best constituted political intimidation and at worst amounted to holding the entire population of Bali to ransom. As one prominent oppositionist in Bali stated: 'The Fon went out to campaign and used tradition to intimidate people. Voma is something people fear, just the sound of it is terrifying! If someone goes out to campaign and threatens to use it, people would be intimidated'.

The preceding quotes have laid bare the differing perceptions about the rationale for using Voma during the municipal and legislative election campaigns in Bali. This therefore feeds into the argument by [Chabal and Daloz \(1999: 76\)](#) that: 'as political competition intensifies, witchcraft and religion may become more, rather than less salient' in political activities. That said, the question of whether or not Voma had an impact on the election results is as stark a contrast as day is from night. Nevertheless, the SDF attributed its electoral defeat to the fact that the CPDM employed a number of 'underhand' tactics, the worst of them being the use of Voma to intimidate voters and the buying of ballot papers to the tune of CFA5000 on polling day from any voter who could provide evidence that they had voted CPDM by brandishing an SDF ballot paper. Important to point out that the CPDM vehemently denied this charge.

Though I could not ascertain the veracity of the above claims in Bali, the press widely covered a court case brought by the SDF against the CPDM over accusations that the latter had bought and cloned the newly introduced, and ostensibly unfalsifiable, biometric voters' cards of several hundred people in Bamenda. It was alleged that the CPDM not only paid these voters huge sums but transformed them into ambulant voters and transported them on polling day to a relatively remote district on the outskirts of town, where it was certain they could not only vote multiple times but do so unchallenged, thereby securing a much publicised landslide victory.

The CPDM also claimed a landslide victory in Bali. However, according to the SDF, the pressure brought to bear on voters left some of its militants with no choice but to vote for its arch rival. Their argument was that, because almost every household in Bali had in one way or another 'eaten' from its bitter adversary, and coupled with the fear of consequences from Voma lurking in the shadows, they were much ill at ease with the thought of violating its edict. As a result, people were left with no option but to bow to intimidation and threats from the CPDM and the traditional council, and voted against their consciences. The CPDM

dismissed these charges, arguing that the SDF had itself to blame if its militants had crossed the political carpet. One local party official had this to say on the matter:

SDF used Takumbeng³¹ as a political strategy in Bamenda in the 1990s. Today CPDM uses a similar tradition to counter a threat to the people of Bali, and they make political capital out of it? If Voma were to intimidate people to vote a party; CPDM will not need to campaign. We will use Voma, and win easy. In fact even Paul Biya will say I want to win elections and comes and takes Voma .

Conclusion

It can only be the stuff of wild fiction to think that President Biya could ever require the services of Voma to win elections in Cameroon. However, what most Cameroonians and many observers of the Cameroonian political scene cannot, and do not doubt, is the fact that Biya is a strong and adept political manipulator. As mentioned earlier, since the 1992 presidential elections which it is widely believed he lost to John Fru Ndi, but was proclaimed victor by the Supreme Court, he has managed to craft a sophisticated winning machinery via a combination of elaborate political, legal and administrative machinations, that has enabled him and the CPDM party to win every election contest in Cameroon, be it at the national or grassroots level.

Meanwhile, the mystical activities of Voma over many generations has enabled it to stamp its authority as the supreme sacred cult of Bali Nyonga. Its rituals are shrouded in mystery, principally because membership is not open to everyone. Likewise, its real or perceived mystical activities has for countless generations imbued a sense of trepidation over non-initiates who happen to be the majority of the population in Bali. No doubt its mythology, as seen by some, could be viewed by others as irrationality. That said, the reality for most in Bali is that the word Voma conjures up mixed emotions, some of which are clearly irrational, but the overriding feeling nevertheless constitutes a blanket of fear.

The SDO's remarks during the installation ceremony, therefore, echoed tremors generated by events leading up to, and after the political earthquake that occurred in Bali on 30 September 2013. His remarks were also clearly designed to dispel the fears of many in Bali that the politicisation of Voma by the traditional authorities had not only brought a cherished, but fearsome, ancestral institution into disrepute, but also that the consequences on the main source of livelihood of the vast majority of the population in the community, i.e. subsistence farming, could potentially be catastrophic, if not lethal. In the final analysis, whether or not Voma had any real impact on the outcome of the elections is still the subject of fierce debate between the SDF and CPDM in Bali.

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Notes

1. Law N° 2004/018 of 22 July 2004.

2.Law N° 2004/017 of 22 July 2004.

3.Law N° 2004/018 of 22 July 2004.

4.In the North West Region of Cameroon all traditional rulers, regardless of the size and population of their constituencies, are referred to as 'Fon'. The Fon is thus an indigenous common denominator for a traditional ruler ([Awasom, 2003](#)). However, the situation is a bit complicated in Bali. This is because of the three communities in Bali subdivision, Bali Nyonga, Bossa and Bawock. The latter are relative newcomers in the area, having settled there in the early 1900s. Moreover, they are of Bamiléké origin, with a distinctive culture that is quite dissimilar in many respects to that of Bali and other communities in the area. Some in Bali therefore think that the traditional ruler of Bawock does not deserve to be called Fon. In fact, he is sometimes purposefully referred to by Bali people as chief (equating him to the level of other sub-chiefs and quarter heads); others go as far as calling him by name to spite him because of his alleged 'trouble making' and 'insubordination' to the Fon of Bali. For the purpose of consistency in this paper, I will refer to him as chief.

5.Bali is one of the seven subdivisions that make up Mezam division. It is situated approximately 16 km from Bamenda the chief town of the North West Region of Cameroon.

6.According to the constitution, senators are elected by members of regional assemblies. However, the latter institution does not exist. For the purposes of this election, the government decreed that municipal councillors whose mandate had expired and been prolonged several times were to constitute the electoral college for the election of 70 out of 100 senators, with the remaining 30 being appointed by the President.

7.Many people I spoke to in Bali during fieldwork not only minimised the size of Bawock but also questioned the legitimacy of its chieftaincy. Many wondered how, what they considered a mere neighbourhood in Bali, could have been awarded a second degree chieftaincy in the first place. Some went so far as to argue that if the rules governing the classification of chiefdoms were strictly applied, then Bawock should have been a third rather than a second degree chiefdom. According to Article 2 of the 1977 decree organising traditional authorities, a first degree chief is supposed to have two second degree chiefs under their jurisdiction and within the territorial limits of a divisional unit. A second degree chief has to have the allegiance of two third degree chiefs, and their jurisdiction should not exceed a subdivision. Finally, the jurisdiction of a third degree chief was limited to a village or a quarter in a rural or urban area ([Jua, 2011](#): 105). However, because such classification is subject to the discretion of administrative officials, the reality is that it is often distorted.

8.CPDM militants often refer to the party as the 'winning team', and the reason often cited is that the party Chairman, Paul Biya, has never 'lost' any election contest since the return to multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s. Another reason is that the party, on average, always succeeds in recording a better score in municipal and legislative elections. Important to note that election results are always highly contested by the opposition on grounds of fraud and other malpractices.

9. The pidgin phrases: 'politics na njangi' and 'scratch my back, I scratch your own' is often associated with former PM, Simon Achidi Achu. He repeatedly used these phrases in the 1990s as a campaign strategy to get people to vote for the CPDM in the then North West Province, in exchange for gifts and other political favours.
10. SDOs are by law the supervisory authorities over councils in their areas of command and all decisions taken by the council are subject to prefectural oversight.
11. The use of Bali Nyonga in this context is to distinguish it from the non-Bali Chamba villages, such as Bawock and Bossa.
12. Political turmoil in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and sometime ago in Chad and Congo Brazzaville, provided fodder for their hyperbole.
13. This included major urban areas such as Douala, Bafoussam and Bamenda. However, to counter the strength of the opposition, the government appointed government delegates to rule over the elected mayors.
14. Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation.
15. Gerrymandering here refers to the manipulation of the boundaries of an electoral constituency to suit vested interests. A poignant example occurred in Bali in 1996, when the parliamentary constituency was moved to nearby Santa subdivision in the expectation that the CPDM would win, because the area is the hometown of the then PM, Simon Achidi Achu. But despite frantic campaigning by an armada of CPDM officials, traditional authorities and state bureaucrats, the SDF ended up winning the seat.
16. In such a case, seats are repartitioned proportionately among contesting parties according to results obtained at the polls.
17. Bui Division, situated roughly 109 km from Bali, is one of the seven divisions that make up the North West Region of Cameroon.
18. This is an annual festival that takes place in Bali Nyonga every December in which the gods of the land are thanked for a successful year and requests are made for peace and fertility for the coming year. The festival also serves as a form of social gathering for Bali people at home and in the diaspora and is marked by massive gun firing, traditional dances and opulent displays of traditional regalia, among others.
19. The Chamba is a group of people that migrated southwards from the Benue and Adamawa plateau areas in present day Northern Cameroon into the Bamenda Grassfields around the late 18th or early 19th centuries (DeLancey, Mbuh and DeLancey, 2010).
20. Voma was on its way from Mantum Village where it had carried out cleansing activities. The incident that occurred is hotly disputed. On the one hand Bawock people accused Voma of attempting to deviate its course and head to Bawock palace. Voma members on their part say they were walking on the highway to Bali and were interrupted by Bawock people under the pretext that they were not supposed to conduct cleansing activities on their land.

It should be noted that Bawock and Bali have a long-standing boundary dispute which has led to constant friction. Some, therefore, see the interception of Voma as a form of protest by Bawock over land, and there is also a Bali shrine situated in the vicinity of Bawock.

21. Senator Njoya, who is a CPDM political bureau member, was appointed on the same day as Senator Ganyonga. Interestingly, the Chairman of the CDU party, Adamou Ndam Njoya, is the cousin of the Sultan.

22. This case went to the Supreme Court and was subsequently thrown out. The procedures were unusually speedy compared to other similar circumstances, particularly in cases of post-electoral litigation brought against the ruling party. Some observers see this as often deliberately delayed to ensure that by the time a verdict is rendered, the case would have lost substance most likely due to the commencement or approach of another electoral cycle.

23. This is a local name for stock cubes or bouillon cubes, used for spicing up meals. It is called maggi after a local subsidiary of Nestlé that produces it in Cameroon.

24. Custodians of the sacra of the cult, e.g. the Dola shrine, gourd trumpets, and lama or throwing knives.

25. He was a politician and vocal supporter of the CPDM, who wrongly gauged the mood of the vast majority of people in Bamenda in the 1990s. He was caught up in violence that engulfed this area following the declaration of the results of the 1992 presidential elections, in which Paul Biya won under highly contested circumstances.

26. His resthouse in Bamenda was razed to the ground, and his traditional palace in the countryside threatened by an irate mob ([Awasom, 2003](#)).

27. The rainy season in the North West of Cameroon usually runs from late March to early September. The rains in 2013 were seen as unprecedented, because there had never been such persistent rainfall in some parts of the North West Region, including Bali, which had lasted right up until late December.

28. The Voma base known as Dola, is situated in Payila neighbourhood in Bali, a stone's throw from the Fon's palace.

29. Juju in this contexts broadly refers to objects (masks and amulets, etc.), worn during public displays by dance groups or by members of traditional cults or secret societies while performing religious and other rites.

30. The Pygmies in Cameroon are reputed to possess powerful supernatural powers that can be used for healing and protection from enemy attacks, among others (for more, see [Geschiere, 1997](#)).

31. Takumbeng is a female sacred society that wields traditional female power and authority within the Mankon Fandom of the Cameroon Grassfields. The group is heterogeneous and derived from indigenous ethnic structures in adjoining villages and chiefdoms of Nkwen,

Chomba, Mbatu, Bamendankwe, Akum, Santa, Bafut, Bambili and Bambui. The Takumbeng came into the spotlight during Cameroon's troubled transition to multiparty politics in the early 1990s, the 1991 'ghost town' operations and the state of emergency declared in Bamenda from 27 October 1992. The Takumbeng surrounded the compound of John Fru Ndi, Chairman of the SDF opposition party, who was placed under house arrest by the state in the aftermath of the proclamation of the results of the 1992 presidential election because he autoproclaimed himself Head of State after losing the election to Paul Biya under dubious circumstances. Their aim was to prevent government forces from storming the building. See [Fonchingong and Tanga \(2007: 120\)](#) for more.

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