

# **REGIONAL INTEREST VERSUS NATIONAL INTEREST IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL AFRICA. THE CASE OF CAMEROON SINCE 1945**

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**Abstract:** Modern African states result from the assemblage of ethnic groups by Western colonizers. It is believed that such an assemblage cannot make a viable nation as viewed in the Western hemisphere. Colonial masters used such a premise in order to play Africans against one another within their respective territories. Accordingly, French colonial authorities used regional interest to prevent regional associations from fully supporting nationalist movement in Cameroon.

This paper attempts to show that the premise whereby regional interest opposes national interest is false, as was proved during the colonial era by Cameroonian nationalists and regional associations that claimed independence and reunification. Our demonstration, which is carried out through the exploitation of archival material, interviews and newspapers, shows that regional associations are capable of transcending regional interest to defend national interest. Unfortunately, from 1945 till today, they have been the victims of the manipulation orchestrated successively by the colonial masters and their postcolonial accomplices, the rulers of independent Cameroon. The use by postcolonial rulers of the divide and rule law is an indication that the colonial legacy they have inherited is well catered for and represents a danger for Cameroonians in particular and for Africans in general who are yet to draw lessons from what happened in Rwanda and is happening in Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan.

**Key words:** national interest; regional interest; Cameroon; regional associations; nationalism.

**Résumé:** Les Etats africains modernes résultent de l'assemblage des groupes ethniques par les colonisateurs européens. Il est généralement admis que ce genre d'assemblage ne peut pas produire une nation viable telle que cette réalité est perçue dans l'hémisphère occidental. Cette idée a été conçue par les colonisateurs afin de diviser et dominer les Africains dans leurs territoires respectifs. C'est dans cette perspective que les autorités coloniales françaises ont utilisé les intérêts régionaux pour empêcher les associations régionales d'apporter un soutien total au mouvement nationaliste camerounais.

Cet article montre que l'idée de l'incompatibilité de l'intérêt régional avec l'intérêt national n'est pas fondée. La preuve en a été servie au cours de la période coloniale lorsque les nationalistes camerounais et les associations régionales ont, ensemble, revendiqué l'indépendance et la réunification du Cameroun. Une démonstration fondée sur l'exploitation des documents d'archives, des coupures de journaux et des entretiens montre que les associations régionales sont capables de transcender les intérêts régionaux pour défendre les intérêts nationaux. Cependant, de 1945 à nos jours, on constate qu'elles ont été victimes de la manipulation orchestrée successivement par les colonisateurs et leurs acolytes postcoloniaux, les dirigeants du Cameroun indépendant. L'usage de la politique du « diviser pour mieux régner » par les dirigeants postcoloniaux est une indication claire que ces derniers ont bien entretenu ce legs colonial. Cela constitue un danger, pour les Camerounais en particulier et pour les Africains en général, qui n'ont pas encore tiré les leçons du drame rwandais et des événements de la Côte d'Ivoire et du Soudan.

**Mots clés :** intérêt national ; intérêt régional ; Cameroun ; associations régionales ; nationalisme.

## Introduction

The foundation of the present African States was laid in Berlin during the 1884-1885 Conference where participant European nations drew the rules for the occupation of Africa's hinterland. After the conference, Africa was partitioned. The Europeans put together different ethnic groups so as to make their colonies. When the colonies became independent, they were made up of the same ethnic groups. Independent African States are therefore colonial legacies as far as their ethnic structure is concerned. The way colonies and present independent African States were shaped has been an issue for discussion. The amalgamation of ethnic groups that formerly were either enemies or had no relationship at all is a point in question. Is it possible that these ethnic groups should live together and in peace? Can they make a nation? These amalgamated groups had settled in regions. In Present-day African States, these regions still exist. The natives of the different ethnic groups scattered in other towns and localities still refer to their regions of origin. They have the propensity of acting according to regional interest lines. Hence, the following question: is regional interest compatible with national interest? Previous studies have addressed the same issue but in different terms. Most of the time, the question is expressed as Kofele-Kale(1981:21) puts it: is tribalism dysfunctional with nationalism?

Tribalism, as will be defined below, has an aspect which is attachment to the tribe or better to the ethnic group. The ethnic group is located in a particular region. With tribalism, there is a belief in the superiority of an ethnic group and therefore of a region. Is that dysfunctional with nationalism? There are some ready-made answers given by two schools of thoughts. The first one believes that the two realities are incompatible. Zambo Belinga (2002:178-179), while addressing the same issue in the field of democratization and ethnic conflicts, presented some authors who share that point of view. Amongst them, are found authors like T. Young and T. Michalon. Their belief stems from the premise that the assemblage of ethnic groups cannot make a nation. The second school of thought is of the opinion that both notions are compatible. That is the view held by authors like M. Sithole, J.A. Wise to name but a few. I share this point of view; therefore, this paper attempts to show that the premise whereby regional interest opposes national interest is a false premise. The demonstration will be done using the case of colonial Cameroon where regional associations and nationalists all claimed independence and reunification. Moreover, colonial masters' action of opposing one ethnic group against the other is another proof that the premise is false. Postcolonial African leaders always act the same as former colonial masters. That legacy damages African endeavors for nation building. It is a hindrance to nationalism, which Africans greatly need to sustain the fight against poverty, the fight for development. The exploitation of archival materials, interviews and other written documents will help us in the process. The first part deals with colonial Cameroon whereas the second one focuses on postcolonial Cameroon.

## REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, REGIONAL INTEREST AND NATIONAL INTEREST IN COLONIAL CAMEROON

By regional association, this paper understands a group of persons hailing from a particular region which can be a quarter, a village, a town, an administrative unit like a division or a province and who assemble in order to work for the interests of this particular area. During the colonial era, many regional associations existed in Cameroon as it is the case nowadays. Did they succeed in conciliating regional and national interests?

### **Colonial regional associations: typology and aims**

When considering post German colonial Cameroon, there are two separate entities: French Cameroon and British Cameroon. Regional associations started in two contexts. In the British Southern Cameroon, that was administratively integrated into Nigeria, they were mainly created as an imitation of what Cameroonians saw in Nigeria, where they went to further their studies, work, or carry out their business. In Nigeria, they were so many regional associations, the most prominent being the Ibibio Union, the Bauchi Improvement Union, the Ibo State Union and the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Sklar, 1963: 65; Kale, 1967: 36; Buah, 1970: 234). Cameroonians copied the Nigerian example by first, creating their own associations on the spot as exemplified by the Mamfe Improvement Union which was created in Lagos. This Nigerian town was also its headquarters. Afterwards, some Cameroonians came back to Southern Cameroons and formed some associations. In the French Cameroon, regional associations took off thanks to the enforcement in French African colonies of the 1901 French law on associations (Mokam, 2005:36) (1) . Before that enforcement, regional associations could not be formed in the French Cameroon. These regional associations had peculiar characteristics that can be used to classify them. The classification proposed in this paper is only an indication for, as Thomas Hodgkin rightly observed, it is difficult to classify regional associations since their functional and structural aspects were numerous (Hodgkin, 1962: 85).

Village associations: under this category, associations defend the interests of a particular village. The *keuteleu* which was created in August 1953 in Nkongsamba for the natives of Bana and the *association des originaires de Badoumga* for the natives of Badoumga are some examples. The Nso Improvement Union defended the interests of the Nso chiefdom.

The second category is made of *Canton* associations. *Canton* is a name given by French colonization to some villages that had a decentralized structure, what Evans-Pritchard calls stateless society. This type of association defends the interests of one or more *cantons*. Here are some illustrations: the *Jeunesse Bikok du Cameroun* and the *Solidarité Babimbi du Cameroun* respectively for the Bikok and Babimbi *cantons*.

Monoethnic associations are groupings belonging to the third category. This type of association defends the interests of only one ethnic group. The *Union Bamileké*, the *Koupé*, the Balong Tribal Union and the *Union tribale Ènuzok* are examples.

The fourth category is made of multiethnic associations. The members of this type of association come from different ethnic groups and together, they

defend the interests of all related ethnic groups. The *Ngondo* for example was to assemble the Doualas, the Abos, the Balongs, the Pongos, the Bodimans, the Malimbas, the Bassas and the Yapakalakis, all coastal ethnic groups (2) .

The fifth type of association is the religious association. This one admits as members only natives of a region who accept a particular religion. This type of association was found only in Northern Cameroon with the *Association Amicale des Musulmans de Maroua*.

The last type of association is made of developmental associations, which were out for the promotion of economic and social development. *L'association pour le progrès social et économique de la subdivision de Ngaoundéré*, commonly called by its acronym APSEN, was one of these associations in the French Cameroon. In the British section of Cameroon, these associations, very numerous, were called improvement unions. So, there were, for instance, the Bimbia Improvement Union, the Mamfe Improvement Union, the Bamenda Improvement Association. The last two associations can go under the category of multiethnic associations or better still divisional associations since Bamenda and Mamfe were divisions. These associations had goals that were mainly regional.

A scrutiny of the byelaws and regulations of regional associations is the best way of knowing their goals. As most of these associations, especially in British Cameroon were in the towns, they were less ambitious. Therefore, their worries were focussed on their members. The main aims of these associations were to seek all means for the well-being of their members. They were out for solidarity, mutual help. Here is an illustration with the Bimbia Improvement Union.

"The object of the Union shall be as follows

- (a) To secure the complete organisation of the Union, of all its members etc, to obtain and maintain just, generally to seek the interest of the members and the country.
- (b) To settle disputes between members whenever possible.
- (c) To provide for members any or all benefits as the executive committee may decide.
- (d) Relief in sickness, accident and distress and funeral expenses.
- (e) Legal advise [sic] and legal assistance when necessary in connection with their members(3) .

In the French section of colonial Cameroon, regional associations had aims that went beyond solidarity and mutual assistance. They had to protect the populations of their various regions. So, the *Rassemblement du peuple Bamoun* was to seek all means of improving the economic, political and social life of the Bamoun population and be the spokesman of the population vis-à-vis the colonial administration (4). The Kumzse was out to defend the Bamileke rights and to deal with any political economic and social issue concerning the Bamileke Region. The Bassa Tribal Union, operating in British Cameroon but having its roots in French Cameroon, had as main aim "to further general improvement and advancement of "the "...fatherland Babimbi (Bassa) educationally, politically, socially and economically (5)." From the above examples, it can be realised that regional associations had the wellbeing of their members as worry number one. Their members belonged to a region. Hence, by seeking the wellbeing of their members, they were defending the interests of the regions to which they

were attached. Secondly, they were committed to protect the respective populations of their regions. From the presentation of the goals of regional associations, there is no doubt that they were defending regional interests. It is easy therefore to think and even state that regional associations were out to defend only regional interests that are incompatible with national interest.

### **Colonial regional associations and national interests**

In the colonial setting, national interest was different from what is put in that concept today. As many ethnic groups were put together to form what was then Cameroon under western rule, national interest was viewed in terms of gaining independence and being free from external domination. That is called nationalism. From the first look, it is difficult to defend regional interest and support nationalist move in a context where we have ethnic groups. That is why several authors have even argued that, in the African context, there cannot be any nationalism.

Robert I. Rotberg (1968: 407-420) summarizes their arguments. In Europe, before the 19th century, there were nations built on the basis of political, linguistic and cultural unity. The conquests carried out by monarchs went along with the expansion of a common culture. During the 18th century, there was a growth of European population. Commercial relations increased thanks to the improvement of transport and communication means. Cities and provinces, that were formerly isolated, became interdependent. All that reinforced the nation and consequently national sentiments since people became aware of the fact that the nation was a common undertaking that was to be led by all nationals. From all these arguments, they conclude that, in Africa, there have been very few nations in the classical European sense. It is therefore difficult to talk of nationalism in Africa. The expression of anti-colonial hostility does not give enough proofs for the existence of nationalism. It is following the same arguments that Post and Lord Haley, whose point of view is presented by Elika M'bokolo (1992: 368), say that, for Africa, it is preferable to talk of Africanism or African independence movement than nationalism. In Africa, in terms of language, culture and political traditions, elements that were the corner stone of European nationalism, there was no unity. Some Cameroonian colonial leaders happened to share this point of view by putting forward the obstacle of tribalism which this paper calls ethnicism or ethnocentrism. According to La Fontaine and others, quoted by Ndive Kofele-kale, the concept tribalism varies with time (Kofele-Kalé, (1981: 30-31). In its first signification, tribalism is characterised as the clinging to traditional life as opposed to an acceptance of modernity among people who are exposed to rapid cultural change. Secondly, tribalism is understood as nepotism or political corruption. The third meaning of tribalism refers to the emotions of solidarity aroused by leaders within certain ethnic groups. All in all, these definitions of tribalism are attached to what William Graham Summer identified as ethnocentrism, "the technical name for the view of things in which one group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it (in which) each group nourishes its own proud and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities and looks down with contempt on outsiders."(Kofele-Kale, 1981:30-31) Considering this description, it seems but obvious that ethnicism cannot go with nationalism. It is on these

grounds that some Cameroonians thought nationalism to be impossible in Cameroon. Guillaume Bissek, the representative of the political party *Evolution Sociale Camerounaise* (ESOCAM) at the 388th session of the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, on 2 December 1953, said that Cameroon, having so many ethnic groups, could not constitute a political community for tribal consciousness was at a primary stage and was therefore the principal obstacle to the evolution of political intelligence. It was impossible for Cameroon to get independence, to build an autonomous country and to invent a democratic system. In a speech delivered in Boumneybel, in 1957, the Premier, André-Marie Mbida, walked on the footsteps of Guillaume Bissek when he declared that “there is no *bassa* country or nation, no *beti* country or nation, no *boulou* or *Fulani* or *duala* country or nation. There is only one nation, one great country... Cameroon.” (Bayart et al., 1992: 198) Therefore, they agreed with the above-mentioned authors that ethnocentrism was incompatible with nationalism. In other words, they were of the opinion that regional interest opposed national interest.

Another group of authors shares a different opinion. One of them is Markov who, according to Elikia M'bokolo (1992: 30-31), has found some elements of resemblance between the 19th century European nationalism and African nationalism. These elements reside in the fight against a political regime and the role of the masses. In the same line, it should be recognised that the concept nationalism has evolved with time. A global vision has led Raoul Girardet (1980:575-577) to discover, through the expression of nationalisms, a common background organised around four themes: sovereignty, unity, common historical past and pretension to universality. It is following this logic that James Kellas (1994:1), in his definition of nationalism, talks of an ideology and a form of behaviour, since ideology is based on the awareness of people and from this national awareness stems a set of attitudes and programs of action in political, economic and social fields. Accordingly, the argument whereby there is no African nationalism is very fragile. African nationalism exists in the framework of the nationalism of colonized peoples (Hodgkin, 1962:20), which is otherwise called decolonization (Brunschwig, 1960: 53). If African nationalism therefore exists, is it compatible with ethnocentrism?

Paul Mercier understands tribalism as “a series of defensive reactions which can quickly disappear when the facts of inequality disappear.”(quoted by Kofele-Kale, 1981 :34) Tribalism finds its expression in the political arena where people wage struggles for the scarce economic resources. In this framework, ethnic group loyalty becomes politicized. Africa witnessed such struggles. In colonial Africa, they were caused by colonial authorities who needed means of ascertaining their powers. In this perspective, colonial authorities played ethnic groups one against the other by letting this group accede to power at the expense of others. In so doing, they gave birth to elements of inequality and ethnic loyalties made their appearance as defence measures. This perception of tribalism indicates that, when its cause is no more, it disappears. It is an artificial phenomenon that is avoidable. This ethnic attachment, being dysfunctional with nationalism, can still be compatible with it as Ndive-Kofele (1981:129) says. The functionality of ethnic attachment with nationalism is possible when there is a capacity to go beyond ethnic framework, when defence reactions are oriented

towards the author of inequality. This was well perceived by some Cameroonian nationalists, notably, the leaders of the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (UPC). Ruben Um Nyobè pointed out that, practically, tribal regime did not influence politics, since, when the independence issue was at stake, Cameroonians forgot about their tribes (Effoua Mbozo'o, 2004: 307). As a proof, he took the example of elections. During elections, in any given constituency, natives who opposed independence were beaten by non-natives who favoured independence. In the same vein, regional associations went beyond ethnic ties to defend national interest as will be illustrated below.

Regional associations acted in different directions in defending national interest in colonial Cameroon. Globally, they claimed the particular status of the Territory, independence and reunification and they supported nationalist parties.

The first major action of a regional association in defending national interest in Cameroon was witnessed in 1945. The action came from the *Ngondo*. When in 1945 it became evident that the Allies would be the victors of the Second World War, France decided to reorganise her colonial Empire. That is why the French Union was created. Cameroon, though a trust territory, was made part of this entity as associated territory. In that capacity, Cameroonians were called upon to elect their representatives to the French Union constituent assembly. The *Ngondo* saw the call as a trick from the French to ignore the particular status of the territory and include it into their colonial Empire. The *Ngondo* then issued a strong worded memorandum (6). It warned all the traitors, especially members of the pro-French movement, the *Jeunesse Camerounaise Française* (JEUCAFRA) not to continue taking money in secret and take part in the elections. All those who would not abide by the warning would be treated accordingly. The traitors would be under a death threat if they took part in the elections. In normal circumstances of the prevalence of regional interest, the *Ngondo*, would have rather found ways and means of assuring the victory of *Duala* native candidates. Instead, the association forgot about that and rather played the national cause. It was a great nationalist action. The election finally took place after some negotiations with the French colonial authorities. All the same, the *Ngondo* had expressed a national concern. This association acted in the same way in different circumstances, notably by giving financial support to nationalist political parties.

In April 1947, the *Ngondo* gave a subsidy of 30 000 francs (65 US Dollars) (7) to the *Rassemblement Camerounais* (RACAM) in order to help this young political party, with openly expressed nationalism, to carry out its goals. One year later, the *Ngondo* granted a 50 000 francs (107.3 US Dollars) subsidy to the *Union des Populations du Cameroun*. This money was given to a delegation the party had to send to Abidjan for the congress of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*. In 1952, when Ruben Um Nyobè was to appear before the Fourth Commission of the United Nations General Assembly, the *Solidarité Babimbi*, a regional association based in Babimbi, granted the party a financial aid of 15 000 francs (32.2 US Dollars). The *Solidarité Babimbi* was walking on the footsteps of the *Ngondo* that gave the same amount to the UPC (Mbembe, 1996:243). On the occasion of the plebiscite organized in the Southern Cameroons in 1961, the *Ngondo* granted a financial support to the reunificationists(7). It was its contribution to national issue that had long been an issue for concern to Cameroonian nationalists in

both sections of the territory.

According to the trusteeship system that governed Cameroon, the United Nations Visiting Mission came to the territory each three years as from 1949. During these visits, some regional associations wrote petitions in which they claimed independence and reunification. In 1949, the first Visiting Mission received petitions from the *Ngondo*, the *Kumzze*, the *Union Bamiléké* and the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi*, all requesting the reunification of the two Cameroons. This is an excerpt of the petition written by the *Ngondo*: “...we consider the partition of Cameroon into two sections as an arbitrary measure taken without the consent of the Cameroonian people. This partition deprives us of important relationships we must have with neighbouring territories. So we sincerely wish an immediate unification of French and British Cameroon that must have the same status.(9)” (Fankem, 1990:51) These associations reiterated their claims for independence and reunification in the petitions they submitted to the three following Visiting Missions that came in Cameroon respectively in 1952, 1955 and 1958. In its petition dated 8 October 1958, the Widekum Improvement League put forward the following argument: “whereas the UN has as main goal to establish peace in the world; whereas that peace reigned after the war that led to the partition of Cameroon, it was high time that parents and nations that had been separated be reunified (10)”. Through these examples, one realizes that some regional associations in Cameroon gave priority to national interests as far as the issues of independence and reunification were concerned. The French and their local accomplices understood that the move was a strong one that could jeopardize their plan in Cameroon. It is why they undertook some actions aimed at breaking that orientation of some associations. The French colonial administration targeted all regional associations that supported the UPC. One of these associations was the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi*. In the Kribi area, the local section of this association had integrated the UPC. In reaction, the central colonial administration prescribed some measures to the local administration. Local colonial authorities in Kribi and Ntem were called upon to support existing associations that could oppose the influence of the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi*. Beyond the action of opposing regional associations one against the other in order to destabilize them, the French colonial administration also resorted to threat. In 1949, when the UN first Visiting Mission came in Cameroon, the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi* presented a petition in which it requested the reunification of the sections of Cameroon as a step towards the termination of trusteeship in the territory. In 1950, during the congress of the association that took place in the presence of the head of the Ntem administrative unit, the latter publicly expressed dissatisfaction for the request voiced by the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi*. Moreover, he asked congress participants what interest the Boulous and the Ntoumous would have in the reunification of the two sections of Cameroon (11). One would have expected the colonial administrator to summon the leaders of the association and talk to them. He waited for the congress to express his anger to all the participants. That was a threat. He was warning representatives of the association at all levels not to undertake such an action in the future. If not they would get what they wanted. The various actions undertaken by the French colonial administration were recognition of the fact that regional associations were capable of defending national interest. Unfortunately, not all Cameroonian regional associations could

be capable of that. Colonial administration manoeuvres and other factors such as internal squabbles, lack of unity and division yielded the expected fruits. Consequently, regional associations did not sustain their nationalist move all along the line. It is why they were absent during important forums that were to discuss the independence issue. When they happened to be present, they were on the side of the colonial masters, supporting their views. Cameroonian regional associations could not conciliate for long regional and national interests. There were unable to accept sacrifice for the others as the Kikuyu did in Kenya in the framework of the Mau Mau revolt and led ethnicity be at the service of the nation (Buijtenhuijs, 1967:84). That was a failure from which postcolonial Cameroonians were to draw lessons. As will be shown below, they learned no lesson from the colonial experience.

## **REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, REGIONAL INTEREST AND NATIONAL INTEREST IN POSTCOLONIAL CAMEROON**

Postcolonial Cameroon starts as from 1 January 1960 when former French Cameroon is concerned and as from 1 October 1961 when the former British Southern Cameroons is considered. In this period, in matters of regional associations, a global look permits to realize that the terminal phase of colonization influenced the setting and the politics guiding their functioning. Things changed in 1990. An overall assessment shows a domination of considerations inherited from the colonial past. This domination led associations to privilege regional interests to national interests.

### **Postcolonial regional associations in Cameroon**

By the end of the colonial era in Cameroon, few regional associations were still in existence. Political parties had swallowed most of them. Among the few that survived, figured the Bakweri Molongo, the *Union Tribale Bantou*, the *Ngondo*, and the *Kumzse*.

The first Cameroonian Head of State, who happened to be the last French colonial Cameroon Premier, Ahmadou Ahidjo, led the territory to independence in very difficult circumstances characterized namely by the UPC revolt. He thought that the only way to protect and keep power was to be authoritarian. In his authoritarianism, he resented any form of organization that could stand as a rival power. He also thought that there was necessity for unity. His tendency for unity dated as far back as 1956. That year, he dissolved the regional association he founded, the *Association Amicale de la Bénoué* and created the *Evolution du Nord Cameroun*(Bureau politique de l'UNC, 1968:14). This was only a step towards his ambition which consisted of having only one organization for the whole French Northern Cameroon. Ahmadou Ahidjo, remarking that each major administrative unit of Northern Cameroon had a major regional association, put into practice the principle whereby “united we stand, divided we fall”. He contacted the leaders of these various regional associations and succeeded in convincing them to accept the idea of uniting their organizations into a single political body. As they accepted, a meeting of these leaders took place in Garoua in 1958 (12) . The meeting ended up in the creation of the political party, the *Union Camerounaise*. As mentioned earlier, Ahmadou Ahidjo resented the existence of organizations that could stand as challenge or rival to his power. A case in

point was that of the *Union tribale bantou*. The Head of State and his *Union Camerounaise* took all necessary measures for its demise as Robert Kpwang Kpwang (1997:299-305) presents the facts. Since Ahidjo's intention was to establish the one-party system in Cameroon, he used all the means possible to attract militants of other political parties into his *Union Camerounaise*. The appointment of Charles Assalé Mbiam as minister of finance was a move to attract the *Boulous* who were members of the *Union Tribale Bantou* and militants of the political party, the *Mouvement d'Action Nationale du Cameroun* (MANC) to join the *Union Camerounaise*. After several rounds of discussion between Ahmadou Ahidjo and Charles Assalé Mbiam, who, in December 1960, was the only active leader of the MANC, the latter finally consented that his party should be dissolved to the advantage of the *Union Camerounaise*. Therefore, during the second national congress of this party held from the 22nd to the 30th of January 1961 in the village Azem-Essakoe near Ebolowa, participants took the decision to dissolve the MANC. It was an apparent victory for Ahidjo and his *Union Camerounaise*, because the demise of the MANC was not synonymous to the death of the *Union Tribale Bantou* to which the *Boulous* were still faithful. The association constituted a great force to reckon with. The election of Charles Assalé Mbiam and François Obam Ela as members of parliament on 10 April 1960 was due to the massive support of the *Union Tribale Bantou* in which they held the respective posts of adviser and head of the social studies group. In the meantime, Charles Assalé Mbiam was appointed Premier of East Cameroon. Ahidjo instructed him to take all necessary measures for the *Union Camerounaise* to be well implanted in the southern region, the stronghold of Charles Assalé Mbiam. The Premier gave the impression of following the instruction for, each weekend, he went to Ebolowa. Actually, he made no effort to implant the party. Ahidjo discovered that by himself on the occasion of the fourth congress of his party that took place in Ebolowa in July 1962. Intelligence report told him before the congress that his Premier had made no effort in that direction. After the congress, Ahidjo mounted pressure on him for the *Union Tribale Bantou* to be dissolved. As his prestigious position was in jeopardy, Charles Assalé Mbiam took things very seriously. When in Ebolowa on 20 August 1962, the Premier instructed the newly elected president of the *Union Tribale Bantou*, and his secretary general to summon an extraordinary meeting of the association on the 8th of September. The meeting was to be enlarged to all local leaders of the association. During his opening address, Charles Assalé Mbiam requested members of the association to immediately dissolve it and to join the *Union Camerounaise*. In spite of the protest expressed by the large majority of the participants, nothing could be done. The Premier was committed in dissolving the association. Before leaving Ebolowa for Yaoundé, he instructed the senior divisional officers of Kribi, Ntem and Dja et Lobo not to authorize any meeting of the *Union Tribale Bantou*. That was the end of that important regional association. It is supposed that Ahidjo was satisfied of this demise and could continue his strive towards the one-party system and national unity. As concerns the one-party system, success came about in 1966 when all political parties of the land joined to form the Cameroon National Union in September.

For Ahmadou Ahidjo, the unification of political parties was a great step towards the quest of national unity in Cameroon. Like his French colonial

mentors, he believed that regional interests were incompatible with national interests. He also thought that since Cameroon had many ethnic groups, there could be propensity for the expression of tribalism that would menace national unity. This is why, on 12 June 1967, he signed the Federal law No 67/LF/19 governing freedom of associations in the Cameroon Federal Republic (13). Article 4 of this law prohibited the existence of associations presenting exclusively a tribal or clannish character. As a matter of fact, this law aimed at preserving national unity. In practice, until 1990, there was toleration, since here and there regional associations existed. This fact can be exemplified with the existence of associations of natives of villages in the various towns of Cameroon. For such associations that promoted solidarity and mutual help, beneficiaries could only be those who hailed from the regions or villages concerned. Other Cameroonian could not benefit from their activities or actions. In this sense, they were out for regional interests only. This administrative toleration can be understood since the system was an authoritarian one. Nobody could dare go beyond the limits fixed by the authorities. In addition, the intelligence service was very active to pre-empt any action of these associations that could be harmful to the country. A law on subversive activities was in force since 1962. Elenga Mbuinga (1989:94) gives another explanation to the underground existence of regional associations. According to this author, it is due to the lack of political democracy. Citizens, who were prevented from assembling in accordance to the affinity of their ideas, could not defend their real social interests. They were therefore obliged to assemble only in the ethnic framework that they trusted. This process of encouraging ethnocentrism was supported by the state since it helped in preventing the development of class-consciousness in different popular circles. It is why regional associations were tolerated by the administration. In 1982, Paul Biya replaced Ahmadou Ahidjo at the summit of the State. On taking office, he promised continuity. It meant that, he would walk on the footsteps of his predecessor and consider that regional interests are incompatible with national interests. The 1967 law governing freedom of associations was maintained. The same toleration towards village associations was exercised. This was the case until 1990, when the Eastern wind blew on Africa and created a new context. That wind of freedom led the Government to pass into law a new text relating to freedom of associations in Cameroon.

A global look at the Law No 90-53 of 19 December 1990 shows a slight evolution from that of 1967. The first aspect of that evolution resides in the fact that non-foreign associations are only declared. They do not need any authorization. The second aspect of the evolution relates to consideration about national unity. In article four of the law, the phrase national integration has been added. So the law forbids any "association founded in support of a cause or in view of a purpose contrary to the Constitution, the law and public policy, as well as those whose purpose is to undermine especially security, the integrity of the national territory, national unity and national integration or the republican character of the State... (14)" As the new law governing freedom of associations has changed the provisions concerning its creation, the consequence has been the flourishing of regional associations in Cameroon. Regional associations that used to exist underground function openly. New associations came into being. The Laakam, the SouthWest elite association (SWELA) the *Association des Ressortissants de*

*l'Adamaoua* (ARA) the *Association Culturelle Guiziga* (ACGUI), the *Association Culturelle Kanuri du Cameroun*, the *Dynamique Culturelle Kirdi*, and the *Dynamique Culturelle Mboum* are some of these associations that are out only to defend regional interests.

### **Postcolonial regional associations and national interest**

National interest in postcolonial Cameroon is understood as an interest that concerns the country and not only one region. It is based on the love for a country and the willingness to sacrifice for it. So regional associations are called upon to work for the overall development of the country, knowing that the interest of the region is merged in the interest of the country. Is that what postcolonial regional associations have been doing?

When village associations are considered, one notices that, in their functioning, they treat only issues that are related to the natives of the concerned villages. As they flourish especially in towns, they are interested in favouring the spirit of solidarity and mutual help. They cater for those who are ill by granting them financial assistance for their drugs. When a member passes away, the association is in charge of all the funeral arrangements. When a family member dies, the association pays a visit to his member to condole with him and give the necessary moral support. Each member contributes to savings which are lent out to start business or to build houses. Members contribute for the development of their home village: the building of classrooms; the providing of pipe-born water or electricity, the financial support to the village soccer team to name but a few examples. In towns that are very remote from the native province, village associations assemble into a divisional association. For instance, in Ngaoundere and Garoua, that are respectively the headquarters of the Adamaoua and North regions (15), natives of the Western region form divisional associations such as the *Grand Mifi*, the *Menoua* and the *Haut-Nkam*. Each village sends a delegation of two to four members to represent it at that level. There, they discuss issues related to the natives of that division in the particular town. A contribution is levied for the purpose of funeral arrangements whenever the division loses one of its members. The aims these associations pursued are laudable. They contribute in fostering national interest. In adjustment country like Cameroon, stricken by man-made poverty, in a country where there is no social security for the majority of the inhabitants, this type of associations proves useful. Through their social actions, they fill the vacuum left by the failure of the State. In most villages, the efforts made by natives through these regional associations permit the building and equipment of schools, health centres and other infrastructures. Villages that expect all from the Government will wait for very long before having these infrastructures. In the meantime, when they are impatient, they blame the Government for not doing anything in their favour. They even blame the Government for giving the priority to other areas. The infrastructures so built with the contribution of village associations become public infrastructures which are at the service of all Cameroonians. When a foreigner visits the area, he will shower praises on the Government, which is the whole nation, not knowing how the infrastructures happened to be built. The problem is that the elites and the Government usually manipulate associations.

Instead of letting members of these associations understand that what there are doing is good for the whole country and that they should take heart and go ahead, they rather take the praises for themselves or use the achievements for selfish purposes. For instance, the elites use this type of achievements to show that the Government neglects the area and that is why the people of the area are rather for the opposition parties. They also use the achievements to let the Government show interest in their own area by appointing sons of the village to high-ranking positions that they will occupy. As Zambo Belinga(2002:198) asserts it, elites manipulate the populations through the usage of ethnic differentiation. By so doing, they gain credibility in the village and therefore, their chances of being appointed as Government ministers or to high-ranking positions in the administration are great. Here are two cases in point as concerns elites associations.

The first case is that of the *Laakam*, a Bamileke related association created in 1990 in order to preserve and extend Bamileke identity in Cameroon. According to Nyamnjoh and Rowlands (1998:326), “the name derives from the initiation house where young men were placed by their elders for three weeks to learn Bamileke ways.” This paper does not agree with that opinion. The name derives rather from the initiation a new chief undergoes for a period of nine weeks before being enthroned or staffed. In the Bamileke land, this initiation is carried out in a particular place of the chief’s palace called *Laakam*. So the *Laakam* is out to defend the interests of the Bamilekes, interests that were seriously threatened during the civil disobedience campaign of 1990-1991. This is why, in 1991, on the occasion of President Biya’s visit to Bafoussam, the *Laakam* gave him a document in which it accused Cameroonian postcolonial regimes of “deliberately fostering ethnic conflict and prejudice against the Bamileke for the purpose of maintaining national unity.”

The second case is that of the South-West Elites Association, the SWELA. This regional association was founded in 1991 by barrister A.T. Enow. According to Nyamnjoh and Rowlands(1998:329) , the creation of SWELA was “in response to the rise to national opposition status of the Social Democratic Front as a regional Grassfield-based party.” In other words, SWELA was created as an opposition to the Social Democratic Front (SDF) that was purportedly supported by the *Laakam* and was considered as regional political party for the North-West province. The South West elites, organised in this association, gave their open support to the Biya regime which, according to them, best pursued the regional interests of the South West province. SWELA stemmed out of what was then considered as external hegemony in the South West province. SWELA’s struggle was outstandingly for the region of the South West. SWELA preached that it would alleviate the poverty of the masses in the province.

It goes without saying that regional associations which flourished in Cameroon as from 1990 would only claim what interested regions rather than the nation. That is what happened. During elections periods, elites went through out the Republic to canvass votes for their party. Campaign teams visited all regional associations. The example of Ngaoundéré illustrates what was going on in other parts of the territory. Candidates or their agents on the field take the timetable of village associations meetings. When time permits, they visit some of them. As in Ngaoundéré many village associations are affiliated to divisional

associations of their native provinces, candidates or their agents will rather visit divisional associations. During these visits, they present the candidate, his program and give an envelope containing money to be shared to members of various associations (16). Antoine Socpa has well described electoral gifts in Cameroon and concluded that it is an electoral arm for ethnic appeal (17). The drama is that, because of ethnicity, voters sell their votes for nearly nothing. In the example we have just presented, at a *Grand Mifi* assembly where the representative of a candidate showed up, the envelope given contained 100 000 CFA francs (214.6 US Dollars) for a population numbering about 500 people. It meant that if the amount were fairly shared, each member was to receive 200 CFA francs (42 Cents). It was an insult. The situation is more dramatic because after the election, candidates or their agents, whether they have won or not, do not come back to thank these people in the various associations. In their minds, the envelop they gave was sufficient. It is a big insult that association members do not understand and take into consideration. For future elections, the same persons will show up and canvass for their votes and association members will not recall the insult they received from them during the last election.

Elites tend only to be agents of manipulation, the main organizers being the state and political parties. In Cameroon, the importance of elections has led the Government and the ruling Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM) to instruct state agents to create elite associations in their respective native villages in order to use them to campaign in favour of the regime during various elections (Bayart et al., 2001:183). This manipulation, coupled with other factors, leads to explosion of violence and exclusion.

Cases of elections related ethnic violence are numerous in the recent history of multiparty politics in Cameroon. One case involved Shuwa Arabs and Kotokos. The armed conflict that opposed, in 1992, Shuwa Arabs and Kotokos in the Logone and Chari division, Far North province, had some historical roots. In the area, the Kotokos settled first as compared to the Shuwa Arabs who came later on. The latter were more numerous than the former. In spite of their numerical inferiority, the Kotokos have always held power positions. As Saibou Issa (2001:171-208) indicates, different administrations had to play on ethnic preferences as concerns rivalries. Consequently, power has always remained in the hands of the Kotokos. The situation was reinforced by the massive school attendance of the kotokos as against the Shuwa Arabs who were less interested in Western school. The Kotokos occupied nearly all administrative and political positions allotted to the division. The 1990-1991 democratic opening led the Shuwa Arabs to believe that finally the majority law will play in their favour during elections. With the advent of multiparty system, new political parties came into existence, notably the National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP) that claimed the Ahidjo legacy. As Ahidjo favoured the Kotokos during his rule, they massively joined the NUDP nursing the hope that this political party will accede to the Supreme Magistracy and reinstate them in their past dominant position that has been uncertain with the advent of Paul Biya's New Deal. Shuwa Arabs joined the CPDM party which gave them hope for liberation. It is in this context that, in 1992, following the registration of voters on electoral registers, voters' cards were to be distributed. The registration process had taken place in a

suspicious background. Kotokos and Shuwa Arabs suspected each other for having allowed foreigners to register in order to inflate figures in favour of their respective camps. On 29 January 1992, Shuwa Arabs refused that a voter's card should be given to a man they considered to be a foreigner (Ngniman, 1993:166). At this juncture, a Shuwa Arab was murdered. That was the stroke that broke the camel's back. A two days war broke out with many victims. The war only ended with the intervention of the army. In the same purpose of opposing citizens along ethnic and regional lines, the Government introduced in the constitution the notion of autochthonous population that some regional associations were quick to exploit, notably in the October 1996 municipal elections.

Thanks to the 1990-1991 democratic opening that took place in Cameroon, so many people expressed their grievances as concerns the functioning of state institutions. A general desire for constitutional change was expressed. The Head of State convened a tripartite meeting which held in Yaoundé from 30 October to 15 November 1991. The main aim of the meeting was to constitute joint commissions in charge of elaborating draft law for an electoral code in Cameroon. During the meeting chaired by the then Premier Sadou Hayatou, the latter observed that there was the necessity to address the issue of constitutional revision. The tripartite meeting ended with the creation of a technical committee in charge of constitutional revision under the chairmanship of Joseph Owona. On 10 October 1992, in a speech closing the campaign for snappet presidential election, Paul Biya promised a constitutional revision. In May 1994, the draft constitution was published in order that anybody wishing to contribute should bring his contribution to the technical committee. On 14 December, the Head of State appointed a 57 members constitutional consultative committee. He himself opened the deliberations of the committee the next day (18). The committee witnessed so many incidents and boycotts before the end of its long session. The result of its deliberations was given to the Head of State. He transmitted the final draft law to the new National Assembly. The constitution the Parliament voted was enacted into law on 18 January 1996. It is in this constitution that the notions of autochthonous and allochthonous populations were introduced (19). The preamble already sets the tone by proclaiming the protection of minorities (20). Part 10 of the constitution deals with decentralized territorial administrative units: regions and councils. Paragraph three of article 57 states that "The Regional Council shall be presided over by an autochthonous personality elected by the councillors from within the Council and for the length of the mandate." The constitution gives argument to some people who thing that, in some regions, Cameroonian are not at home. The SWELA was quick to exploit the argument as to its membership. This is what happened to Bejanga, a university lecturer who thought that he was an elite of the South West province (Bayart et al., 2001:184). That was Bejanga's belief until when he was expelled from a SWELA meeting on the premise that he was a foreigner. He was surprised to hear that he who was born in the South West province, who went through the Anglo-Saxon system of education, could be considered a foreigner in his native province. He took the decision with all those who, like him, had been expelled from the SWELA meeting with the same reason, to found the Eleventh province Association. According to SWELA, a man is native of the place where he will be buried (21).

The Doualas, through their chiefs who spearhead their association, the *Ngondo*, also exploited the new constitution (22). The January 21th 1996 town councils elections witnessed the victory of the SDF in Douala. Therefore, this political party had the responsibility to designate mayors of the five urban districts of Douala. Only one of them was a native. The four other mayors were of Bamileke origin, the ethnic group that is the most numerous in Douala. The decision outraged Douala chiefs who staged a demonstration on 10 February 1996 chanting the following slogans: "No democracy without the protection of minorities and natives", "that will not happen in our home". These slogans were also written on the placards the demonstrators brandished and which also alluded to the constitution (23). In their future actions, the Douala could but only envisage the fight against what they considered hegemony of foreigners. That was due to the orchestration of the regime that fuelled ethnic rivalries before getting some profits. Regional associations in postcolonial Cameroon yielded to manipulation from the elites and the Government. We therefore assert with Francis B. Nyamnjoh that "thanks to the policy of regional and ethnic balance which Ahidjo instituted, borrowing from and reforming the colonial legacy of "decentralized despotism", and which Biya has perfected, Cameroon has become a country much easier to govern than it is to run a family." It is quite clear that postcolonial Cameroon authorities and regional associations only perpetuated the French colonial legacy.

## Conclusion

This paper attempted to show that, fundamentally, the premise whereby regional interest is incompatible with national interest is a false premise. The study of the actions undertaken by regional associations from 1945 till date has shown that they were capable of transcending regional consideration to defend national interest that differs from the colonial era to postcolonial Cameroon. The claim for independence and reunification of Cameroon was not an empty claim. If regional associations granted financial assistance to nationalists to go to the UN headquarters and voiced their grievances, it meant that they were really committed to national interest. In the same way, the contribution to the building of infrastructures that will be used by all Cameroonians or that will make them be proud is an expression of the love of the country. That is even a sacrifice for these associations that could just fold their arms and wait for the Government that is, in principle, the body supposed to undertake such achievements. Unfortunately, as these associations have their roots in regions before aspiring to defend national interest, they are very fragile. That is why, since 1945, they have been subjected to manipulations to which they have succumbed. Colonial authorities and their successors, postcolonial authorities, find their interests only in manipulating regional associations. One can therefore understand the origins of ethnic bloodshed that contemporary Africa has been witnessing for close to two decades now. African should pay attention to all these western inspired theories and endeavour to understand their own field realities.

## Notes

1- It should be noted that these associations did not have the same importance in terms of membership. Some figures were found for the Kumzse and the Solidarité Babimbi du Cameroun. The Kumzse held a congress each year with delegates coming from the different branches the association had in the Bamileke region and in other regions of French Cameroon. Here are the figures given by Marie Noelle Fongang; in 1951 there were 323 delegates as compare to 540 in 1952 and 170 in 1953. Cf. M.N. Fogang, 1989, "Le Kumzse. Assemblée traditionnelle du peuple Bamiléké (1947-1960) », mémoire de DIPES II en histoire, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Yaoundé, p. 84. On 7 December 1947, the Solidarité Babimbi du Cameroun held a meeting in the Nkane-Bonadibong, quarter in Douala. The meeting was attended by 60 of its members. Cf. NAY APA, 10182/B Rapport de sûreté 3-12 avril 1948. From these figures it can be concluded that regional associations in Colonial Cameroon were not artificial as some associations or political parties in present day Cameroon which are made of a handful of individuals, notably the founder and the members of his family. These associations were deep-rooted in the society.

2- NAY 2AC 124 Assemblée traditionnelle du peuple Douala, le "Ngondo" 1952.

3- Buea National Archives (BNA) Si 1950/1 Bakweri Improvement Union Victoria Branch, Bimbia Cameroons Workers Unions.

4 - ANY 1AC 3917 Rassemblement du peuple Bamoun "Mounjomdou".

5- BNA Si 1935/1 Native Societies, organisations and Institutions. Victoria Division 1935.

6- YNA APA 10209/3 Version française du mémorandum du Ngondo, 1945.

7- The amounts given in US Dollars are based on the conversion rate of 28 July 2009. The figures of the colonial period are rather indications. It has been impossible to get the conversion rate of the then French Franc and the US Dollar for that era

8- Interview with Eyobo Esawè, Douala, 20 April 1999.

9- Translation mine

10- BNA Ba 1958/4 U.N.O. Visiting Mission. Petitions and Memoranda Bamenda Division.

11- YNA 3 AC 3681 UTNK, activités 1949. The Boulous and the Ntoumous are two ethnic groups of the region. The colonial administrator asked that question because the two ethnic groups were far from the borderlines between the two sections of Cameroon. So, according to him, only ethnic groups situated along the borderlines could make such a request.

12- Interview with Hamoa Hamatoukour, Ngaoundéré, 25th September 2000; interview with Sadou Daoudou, Ngaoundéré, 6 February 2000.

13- Loi fédérale No 67/LF/19 sur la liberté d'association au Cameroun.

14- Law No 90-53 of December 1990 relating to freedom of association.

15- This is the new name given to the biggest administrative units in Cameroon. They were called provinces before 2008 when the law on decentralisation came into force

16- Interview with Joseph Sakou, Ngaoundéré, 7 October 2000. He told me the story of such an envelope the content of which was emptied by half by a young gentleman who, knowing that they were to be bribed, claimed to be the head of the delegation that a candidate invited after visiting their divisional association.

- 17- A. Socpa, ,2000 ; "Les dons dans le jeu électoral au Cameroun", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 157, 2000, <http://www.etudes-africaines.revues.org/documents5.html>, accessed 12 June 2006.
- 18- Cf. *Le Messager*, No 404, p.6 for all these information.
- 19- E.-M. Mbonda, 2002, "La « justice ethnique » comme fondement de la paix dans les sociétés pluriethniques. Le cas de l'Afrique", <http://depot.erudit.org/retrieve/771/000259pp.pdf>, accessed, 1 July, 2006.
- 20- La Constitution du 18 janvier 1996.
- 21- *The Herald*, April 16th 1997.
- 22- Wang Sonnè, 1998, "De la dynamique de la qualité d'autochtone dans le processus de démocratisation au Cameroun : le cas de la région de Douala", in UNESCO-MOST, *Démocratisation et rivalités ethniques au Cameroun*, <http://www.ethno-net-africa.org/pubs/p95cir7.htm> , accessed 12 June 2006.
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