

## Bamileke Chief Authorities: The Challenges of Ancestral Customs in the Face of Christianity in a Multiculturalist Context

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.16784995](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16784995)

### Article History

Received: 31-07-2025

Accepted: 01 -08-2025

Published: 09-08-2025

### Abstract

Today, we observe a strong penetration of Christianity and new religions revealed in the country in general and in particular in the Bamileke community. This is a phenomenon that contrasts with the Bamileke social organization which remains based on the chieftaincy and ancestral customs. This situation leads to the emergence of new phenomena or even paradigms in the social sphere, thus undermining the old order. This inevitably leads social actors either to redefine a new social contract, or bogs them down in a kind of ostracism, a vector of conflicts. It is therefore appropriate to analyze the foundations of Bamileke chieftain authority to better understand the way in which the traditional chief and the traditional chieftaincy organize themselves in the face of Christianity in a multiculturalist environment. Therefore, what are the challenges facing the Bamileke traditional chief in such a situation? The shock of the encounter between old values and new archetypes, beyond the brutality of the echo produced, plunges the Bamileke chieftain universe into a permanent exercise of reappropriation and reaffirmation of both the authority of the traditional chief and the ancestral values on which the Bamileke chieftaincy is based. From an essentially constructivist perspective, it is a question of analyzing the context of the encounter of cultural models and the mechanisms of construction of new cultural references which are deployed and which certainly establish social cohesion. The data collection for this research took place within the Batoufam chieftaincy in the Koung-khi department. The study thus results: firstly in a hybridization of chieftain authority and cultural references; then in the reconquest of a lost cultural authenticity with its share of avatars; and finally in the catharsis of a true intercultural dialogue which imposes itself as a guarantee of peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords :** *Chiefly Authority; Ancestral Customs; Challenges; Christianity*

### INTRODUCTION

In Cameroon, the Bamiléké chieftains present themselves as a veritable traditional institution within the Bamileke community. Traditional chiefs play a central role in the management of society in all its economic, political, and

cultural aspects. To ensure social cohesion and the transmission of values through the ages, the practices and behaviors of the members of the Bamileke chieftain community are governed by ancestral customs. However,

with the advance of Christianity in this traditional community, we are witnessing the introduction of new practices and beliefs that are not compatible with ancestral customs. The so-called Christian Bamileke community, whose numbers are constantly growing, must balance the Christian faith with ancestral beliefs; which sometimes leads to conflicts or challenges. Thus, in a context of multiculturalism where several influences collide, the Bamileke chieftain authorities are now faced with many challenges. How can ancestral customs be reconciled with Christian practices? How can cultural identity be preserved in the Bamileke community while integrating Christian values? How can chiefly authorities organize themselves to meet the demands of a plural and rapidly changing society? Using a constructivist approach in which stakeholders are heavily involved, this study, while exploring these issues, aims to analyze the challenges and opportunities related to the coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs from the perspective of Bamileke chiefly authorities. This involves examining the opinions of the main protagonists regarding these challenges and proposing possible solutions for a better, more peaceful coexistence between ancestral and Christian practices. The objective of this study is to understand the complexity of the social and cultural life of the Bamileke community, in order to contribute both to the preservation of its cultural identity and to the establishment of a genuine intercultural dialogue. The following will be examined in turn:

- The Bamiléké chief authorities as a traditional institution;
- Christianity in the Bamileke community as a phenomenon of change;
- The challenges of ancestral customs in the face of Christianity;
- The multiculturalist context and its adaptability

Data collection for this work took place in Batoufam and Bamendjou, two 2nd degree chiefdoms of the Bamileke community, located respectively in the Koung-Khi and Hauts Plateaux departments in the western region of Cameroon.

### **I/ The Bamiléké chief authorities: a traditional institution**

The history of Bamileke chieftaincy goes back several centuries. The Bamileke are a grassland people, settled in

the highlands of the West region of Cameroon. Their highly hierarchical political organization is based on the chieftaincy system. Chieftaincies in the Bamileke community are political entities created thousands of years ago and transcend eras and ages, having experienced the diverse influences of Western colonization, marked in Cameroon by the Germans, the French, and the British. Chieftaincies group together a group of villages according to their size. Over the ages, traditional chiefs or chieftaincy authorities have multiplied, adapting to various social, political, and economic changes. This has not failed to influence them. Bamileke chieftaincy authorities are organized according to a hierarchical nomenclature including:

- The senior chief, who is the highest authority within the chiefdom, is responsible for the overall management of the chiefdom and making important decisions;
- The village chiefs who are in charge of the villages that make up the chiefdom; they are responsible for implementing the decisions of the superior chief and ensure the management of the day-to-day affairs of the village;
- The notables: these are people respected within the community according to their rank and power; they accompany the superior chief and the village chiefs in making decisions and resolving conflicts. The latter come together in a council called the council of notables which acts as a decision-making body.

However, traditional chiefdoms in Cameroon are nevertheless governed by the decree of July 15, 1977; the law of January 18, 1996 ensures the representation of traditional chiefdoms within regional councils. Traditional chiefdoms are organized on a territorial basis with three hierarchical levels:

- Chiefdom of 1<sup>er</sup> degree
- Chiefdom of 2<sup>e</sup> degree
- Chiefdom of 3<sup>e</sup> degree

One of the characteristic elements of the chief system remains the hierarchical structure; in fact, the Bamileke chief system is hierarchical both at the level of the chiefdoms and at the level of the internal components of the chiefdom. Tradition and ancestral customs consecrate and sanctify the hierarchical structure within the chiefdom. At all levels of the chief system, the hierarchical order reigns. On this subject, moreover, DELATOUR DEJEAN writes:

The political hierarchy is thus articulated on two non-exclusive statuses, one of which is pre-established and the other to be acquired. Thanks to the permeability between these two statuses which allows new rich in registering in the traditional order, without this being profoundly modified, the social organization of the Bamiléké chiefdoms was able to preserve its particularity until the bloody events which preceded the independence of Cameroon.<sup>1</sup>

This means that the hierarchical order within the Bamiléké chiefdom system remains a fundamental element within the social organization of the chiefdoms; which certainly testifies to the vitality and permanence of this traditional institution that is the Bamiléké chiefdom.

### **1- Role and functions of traditional chiefs in the Bamileke community**

The Bamileke chief authorities play an important role in the social, economic and cultural life of the community.

The traditional chief in the Bamileke community is above all the very first person in charge of the chiefdom. He leads it both as a father, the chiefdom being made up of numerous lineages, as an administrator, but also more as an absolute master, since he is considered the intermediary between the living and the dead, who are still referred to by the term ancestor.

Chiefly governance is first based on customary and traditional values; this is why there is an initiation phase that takes place in the sacred space called "La'akam"; this phase consists of enrolling the new sovereign in the customs and traditions in order to make him capable of exercising traditional power. It is also in this sacred place that the new monarch receives his attributes through numerous rituals that will lead him to fully appreciate the extent of his powers; a power that is exercised both over men and over nature. This initiation phase in this remote place of the chiefdom takes place for 9 weeks. It is the initiation to traditional leadership that begins with what Jean Pierre TCHOUTEZO calls the noviciate. He writes about this:

**The noviciate is therefore the ceremony organized following the death of the king. The noviciate begins with the arrest ceremony of the new king after he has been informed of the delicacy of his new responsibilities as monarch. During this period, he does not reside in the**

**palace, but in the sacred place called "la'akem." It is both a religious and secular initiation whose purpose is to place the heir in conditions conducive to the exercise of his functions.<sup>2</sup>**

It is therefore through this set of rituals and trials that the new monarch acquires the knowledge and powers necessary to build the charismatic character that the community needs to lead the affairs of the chiefdom. Thus, as a father, the traditional chief is the central figure

IDELATOUR DEJEAN, Charles, H. (1976), "The parental structure in a Bamileke chiefdom of Ndé in Cameroon" in *Journal des Africanismes*, P. 96

2TCHOUTEZO, Jean, Pierre, (2006), *The Bamileke kingdoms, from the origins to globalization*, Edition Ymele, Douala-Cameroon P.42

of the community whose responsibility is to ensure the well-being of the different lineages which make up the chiefdom.

The traditional chief also exercises an administrative function. He administers the lands of which he is the main owner. It is he who ensures its redistribution and concession. This administrative role is not limited only to the management of the land; the traditional chief is also the guarantor of order, peace and above all social cohesion. It is in this sense that his majesty NAYANG TOUKAM Innocent, Batoufam senior chief, will say:

### **The primary mission of the traditional chief is to ensure the development of the community.<sup>1</sup>**

In this sense, he ensures justice within the chieftain community, a task for which he is

generally assisted by his notables as well as secret and customary societies. It is also said that he consults before pronouncing on any subject at the risk of attracting the anger or wrath of the ancestors upon his reign.

On another level, the traditional chief is first and foremost a charismatic figure and character surrounded by mysteries. The superior chief of Bamendjou, his majesty Jean Rameau SOPKOU DJOU says in substance to materialize this fact:

**The Fo works with the ancestors who must approve him; the chief must bathe in a course**

**of water and come out dry; this is proof of its legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>**

This admission of royal power makes the traditional chief an absolute master within the

chiefly community who perceive him as a true monarch. Moreover, his inspiration comes from the ancestors by whom and for whom he ensures the management of the chiefly community. The senior chief of Bamendjou will add by declaring:

**The leader is accountable to God; he reigns alone and consults formally. The leader is a religious figure; if he is misinformed by his notables, he can realize it.**<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore this posture that makes the traditional chief in the Bamileke community a monarch and even a demiurge from whom the community expects and hopes for everything. It is, strictly speaking, a true institution; this is why he is in charge of preserving the culture and traditions of the Bamileke community, an essential social determinant.

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1Interview conducted in Batoufam on 7/11/24 (NOUBISSI NGANSY J.)

2Interview conducted in Bamendjou on 04/16/24 (NOUBISSI NGANSY J.)

3Interview conducted in Bamendjou on 04/16/24 (NOUBISSI NGANSY J.)

## **2- Importance of ancestral customs in the daily life of the Bamileke**

The social and cultural system in the Bamileke community is based on a set of rites and practices that constitute the cultural traits of this people; the whole is supported by a functional system that integrates all the elements of the chain, thus forming a coherent whole including art and crafts. Culture in the Bamileke community is thus summarized in a set of acquisitions that successive generations have accumulated over millennia in the areas of the mind and practical life.<sup>1</sup> There are thus several rites practiced by the Bamileke according to the circumstances and the context; among the most common are the rites of birth, widowhood, and the cult of skulls. But in reality, each situation of life in the Bamileke community corresponds to a specific ritual. Ancestrality, which finds its true resonance in the concept of ancestral customs, generally calls upon the ancestor and, by extension, the dead. This is why this notion of ancestrality inevitably alludes to the cult of skulls or ancestors. The link between the dead and the living remains

strong in the Bamileke chieftain community; indeed, contact with the skull of a deceased person allows one to establish a spiritual contact with the latter. This is, moreover, what is the object of a cult whose traditional chief is the priest or the guide; the latter being considered as the representative of the ancestors. For their part, the ancestors are considered intermediaries between God and the living to the point of being deeply involved in the affairs of the living, because they are the guardians of the family and act as an invisible police of the family and the community.<sup>2</sup> Ancestry thus takes on a sacred character and occupies a central place in the social and cultural system of the Bamileke chieftain community. It is concentrated in the term tradition where it integrates a profound meaning in the Bamileke cultural system. This is why it is brandished as a law, sacred and incorruptible, and as a burden that one is obliged to carry, despite oneself.<sup>3</sup> And Roger KUIPOU added:

"A failure, an oversight, a temporary inability to perform a ritual act intended for the ancestors can provoke a "call to order" from them; feeling "forgotten", "neglected", or even more seriously "rejected", they then demand more or less vehemently the respect that is due to them, that is to say, respect for traditions.»<sup>3</sup>

This corroborates very well the central place of traditions in the Bamileke social and cultural system and shows sufficiently that ancestry and tradition form a hermetically linked whole. It is a counterpart that relies heavily on the spiritual and the religious, especially since it implies a cult that is accompanied by adoration and especially veneration. Moreover, one of our informants in Batoufam, a notable of the royal court, told us that the place where the interview took place was his sanctuary; he thus described a space surrounded by a hedge made of bamboo. In the center was a hut made of beaten earth. It was inside this hut that Papa TOUKAM entered to commune with the spirits of his ancestors in order to have

the proper management of the affairs entrusted to him after the death of his father.<sup>4</sup> Thus, ancestry in the Bamileke

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<sup>2</sup> KAMDEM, Michael, *Bamiléké: the keys to an immense culture*, in *Ethnicities, Roots, Rites and Traditions*, ed. ROOTS, 2021. KUIPOU, Roger, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> KUIPOU, Roger, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Interview conducted in the field in Batoufam with Mr. TOUKAM Jean Pierre, notable at the royal court under the name of Bwepo'o since April 13, 1989. (Noubissi Ngansy, November 7, 2024)

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<sup>1</sup> KUIPOU, Roger, *ibid*

chieftain community is similar to a religious practice whose mainspring is the worship of skulls or ancestors.

In the Bamileke community, everything is done in the wake of and respect for the sacred: there are also sacred places and objects. The tendency towards sacredness that animates and punctuates social life here simply shows that social interactions are governed by coercive and immanent principles that do not depend on the simple will of men, but rather on a transcendent or absolute being from whom everything comes. This is why it is necessary to celebrate or invoke it with deference to obtain its favors in all circumstances; the rituals for doing so are as numerous as the circumstances of life that call for the favors of this transcendent being. The traditional chief is rightly considered the guarantor of this secular practice which makes him a demiurge or the traditional priest who unites the community.<sup>5</sup> This is especially remarkable in the phenomenon of ancestrality, which presents itself as the cultural and even religious identity in the Bamileke chieftain community. Indeed, it is through the cult of skulls or ancestors that the divinity is expressed. This is why in popular imagery the chieftain authorities in the Bamileke community and their cohort (notables and servants) are commonly designated or called cranial authorities; a name that very well reflects the role that these authorities play in the life and survival of the community. If the chieftain authorities in the Bamileke community oversee the cult and even the cultural, this means that they constitute the main referents of what could be called traditional worship, since it conforms to traditions. Christianity therefore intervenes in such a context as a true phenomenon of change.

## **II/ Christianity in the Bamileke community; a phenomenon of change**

It was at the beginning of the 20th century that Christianity made its incursion into the Bamileke community, with the arrival of the first European missionaries. It was precisely in a context already dominated by ancestral or traditional religion that Christianity arrived, another form of religion or spirituality carried by different canons. Thus, the gospel of salvation conveyed by the Christian religion found its echo in an environment where divinity was already known and, above all, where the mysteries of transcendence were

mastered. Among the churches present in the Bamileke chieftain community<sup>6</sup>, represents the Roman Catholic Church which shines through its anchoring in this cultural space where divinity is visible through the cult of skulls.

### **1. Impact of Christianity on ancestral customs and Bamileke chiefly authorities**

With a different discourse, the missionaries will encourage the first converts to Christianity in the Bamileke community to abandon certain traditional practices considered pagan or superstitious. And with the ever-growing number of members of the Bamileke community converted to Christianity, certain traditions and customs will begin to dilute or lose their depth. But the changes produced by the advent of Christianity are not only limited to the decline of certain traditional practices; they are also observed in the behaviors and values conveyed by the new converts to Christianity. For example, the love of one's neighbor advocated by the Gospel, not that ancestral customs do not recognize or do not advocate love; but in reality, Christianity, through its so-called works of Christian witness, materializes these values. The construction of schools and hospitals by missionaries and especially the training of the vast majority of members of the Bamileke community in these Christian institutions have further sealed the transformation of this once traditional universe by improving the living environment and the level of education. Several elites of the Bamileke community today boast of the incredible privilege of having been molded in these missionary institutions, bringing to light the preponderant place of Christianity in this Bamileke microcosm. However, the advent of Christianity in the Bamileke community has not only produced positive effects; tensions and conflicts have often been noted between traditionalists who remain attached to their ancestral practices and Christians who oppose them on the pretext that these are pagan practices and therefore proscribed by Christianity.

Between chiefly authorities and Christian religious authorities, the torch has often burned during popular ceremonies bringing together many elites of the Bamileke community. Beyond the issues of precedence, it is often

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<sup>5</sup> TCHOUTEZO, Pierre (2006), *Bamiléké Kingdoms: from origins to globalization*, ed. Yméle, P. 34

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<sup>6</sup> In Batoufam, as in Bamendjou, the Catholic Church as well as the Protestant Church have a remarkable presence both in terms of parishes and members who attend these places of celebration of mass or Christian worship.



verbal jousting that has fueled the dissensions between Christians and traditionalists whose voice has generally been carried by traditional leaders as guarantors of ancestral traditions. By virtue of Christianity, chiefly authorities have often seen their authority called into question. It is common to note that the injunctions of traditional authorities, when they are of a purely religious nature, will rarely be unanimous or will be difficult to follow by all members of the community. This simply shows the visible impact of the behavioral change introduced by Christianity in the Bamileke community. Despite the gaps observed here and there, Christianity continues its glorious march within the Bamileke community.

## **2. State of play between traditional Bamileke practices and Christian practices**

Traditional Bamileke practices and Christian practices shine as much for their diversity as for their divergences and convergences.

Traditional Bamileke practices are rooted in the culture and history of the Bamileke community. They include traditional rituals and ceremonies, including funerals, initiations, marriages, births, widowhood. There are also medicinal practices, with their cohort of plants and spiritualism; and finally ancestor worship, which is a traditional religious practice specific to the Bamileke community.

Christian practices, for their part, are based on biblical teachings and faith in Jesus Christ; these practices also include prayer, meditation, masses or worship, and the various sacraments: baptism, communion, or the Eucharist. There are, however, points that bring traditional Bamileke practices closer to Christian practices; this is the predominant place of social values and their transmission.

In both cases, divinity is at the heart of the discourse of men within the Bamileke chieftain community. It is difficult to determine a point of demarcation between one practice and the other, even if the fields of application are different. In fact, what is ultimately sought? Several informants met in the field in Batoufam state unequivocally that they are driven by the quest for harmony with transcendence in order to live in peace and, above all, prosper in their businesses and activities; moreover, any unfortunate or unfortunate situation that arises in the family or in the community is

considered or perceived as the consequence of a certain distrust of this transcendence. This is the reason why the perpetual quest for this harmony pushes the members of this community to race towards transcendence, which inevitably leads them to embrace transcendence in all its forms. And for good reason, the discourse of the pastor, the priest, the apostle or simply the cranial authorities, produces the same effect and has the same resonance. One would have said a sort of uniqueness of transcendence, better a *de facto* religious syncretism. It is moreover in this sense that Ismaïla DATIDJO makes the following observation:

"Among the Bamileke, Catholicism occupies 53% of the religious space, which includes Protestantism and ethnic religion, with which it competes in the use of different images of the sacred by its followers. The exhumed skulls of the dead, around which the Bamileke belief system revolves, are sacralized in the same way as certain elements of material culture and the animal, plant and mineral world."<sup>1</sup>

This tendency towards cultic and even cultural assimilation, reinforces the members of the Bamileke chieftain community in their tireless quest for social and material well-being; especially since the recourse to transcendence or simply to the sacred, as DATIDJO writes, remains and continues to be the favorable, even enabling or triggering factor. In this sense, going towards the cult of skulls or to the church, contributes to the same end, since the quest for the sacred has no measure, even less limit, especially since we do not know where the expected solution for any situation would come from. Within the Bamileke chieftain community, we observe a rigorous following of the rules when it generally concerns beliefs.

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1DATIDJO, Ismaïla, (2018), Images of imported sacredness and the Bamileke belief system. A relationship of collision or collusion? Harmattan Edition

Fundamentally, the community is driven by the dual feeling of fear and respect; these, in this specific context, are intertwined. Indeed, the fear of what will be said, because a solution that might bear fruit has not been tried, constitutes a real obsession in the conscience of the Bamileke chieftain community, which thus embraces two religious practices as in a sort of normalized religious polygamy. Similarly, the *de facto* respect for traditions at the risk of suffering the pangs or wrath of the divinity, in turn imposes itself like a

guillotine or a sword of Damocles. This is the reason why recourse to the sacred or the transcendent does not necessarily concern itself with the form since the content seems to be the same. Hence this feeling of assimilation or religious congruence which imposes itself as an inextricable alternative in the process of social life within the Bamileke chieftain communities. This is also proof that religion and spirituality have a powerful anchor within the Bamileke chieftain community, that it is becoming difficult to identify its true religious or cultural identity. It is perhaps not wrong that the Catholic Church has made its way by achieving what has been baptized or called inculturation; it was thus a practice whose objective was to enhance religion in the Bamileke community, not without some wondering if it was not just a matter of folklorization.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the assimilation and congruence between traditional and Christian practices and precisely between traditional religion and Catholicism, seem perceptible and it becomes obvious within the Bamileke chieftain community to capitalize on this cultural wealth, especially as it offers perspectives for the accomplishment of the human in social life.

However, alongside what appears to be a point of convergence, traditional Bamileke practices and Christian practices diverge on many points, notably the ritual and ceremonial practices that oppose each other; as does the conception of God and spirituality. It is at this level that tensions can arise linked to the perception or judgment of one with regard to the other. The chiefly authorities and religious leaders are still not in agreement. And for good reason, each camp considers the other camp as an adversary who has come to steal the limelight on a terrain that it nevertheless believes it dominates; this is all the more so since the Bamileke chiefly community's attachment to worship or mass is visible and evident.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, the said community does not put aside the traditional cult devoted to ancestors. This de facto religious syncretism which is observed in the Bamileke chieftain community does not seem to be truly accepted or shared by the main

actors. Indeed, the Bamileke chieftain authorities, in their position as guardian of traditions and traditional priest<sup>9</sup>, believe that they have complete control over the communities for which they are responsible, since these communities are weighed down by traditions with their many prohibitions. Unfortunately, some of these prohibitions are contrary to the Christian faith,

thus subjecting said communities to a choice that is often difficult to make. These communities generally find themselves in a real dilemma that inexorably imposes on them a syncretism that is de facto or simply poorly assumed. The Bamileke chieftain community thus finds itself straddling the chieftain authority whose main pillar is the preservation of traditions and the religious leaders (priest or pastor) who use the gospel and its prescriptions as a mode of leadership. It finds itself trapped by two systems that simultaneously offer it the keys to happiness with totally opposing requirements. Requirements that place the chieftain community at the heart of a choice of leadership or direction: chieftain authorities and religious leaders, ancestral traditions and the gospel. It is a permanent imbroglio that quite often leads to doctrinal jousts, each camp seeking to establish its supremacy or its influence. This type of affront has often been observed in the Bamileke chieftain community, on the occasion of popular funeral ceremonies where a fairly representative number of both chieftain authorities and religious leaders are present. It is an occasion during which funeral orations often turn into veritable verbal jousts, revealing in the background an underlying conflict between the chieftain authorities and the religious leaders; the former literally accusing the latter of diverting their communities from the ancestral traditions of which they are the main guardians. Consequently, the Bamileke chieftain authorities attempt, in a kind of verbal defiance, to regain control where they seem to have lost it. This platform is deliberately chosen by these chieftain authorities, since funeral ceremonies have become the main meeting places for the populations of a given chieftain community; it is the place where the deep village rubs shoulders with its external elites and with all authorities other than the chieftain authorities to which it is accustomed. In this context, we often witness a kind of

<sup>7</sup> FOUELLEFACK KANA, Célestine, For a valorization of religion in Bamileke country in Cameroon after the Vatican II Council (1962-1965): inculturation or folklorization? in *Présence Africaine*, 2017, PP 399-429

<sup>8</sup> Catholicism uses the term mass to refer to its religious celebrations, while Protestant churches, mostly those born from the reform of Martin Luther, use the term cult to refer to theirs.

<sup>9</sup> TCHOUTEZO, Pierre (2006), *Bamiléké Kingdoms: from origins to globalization*, ed. Yméle, P. 34

verbal brawl where the main protagonists (chief authorities and religious leaders) take on the entire community in its great diversity by subjecting it to a doctrinal choice. It is therefore, strictly speaking, a leadership battle far from the community which is thus torn between the said leaders. These are thus challenges which arise for the latter called to walk together.

### **III/ The challenges of ancestral customs in the face of Christianity**

In the face of Christianity today, Bamileke chieftains are called upon to work with other stakeholders to promote social cohesion. There are therefore opportunities for dialogue and understanding between traditional Bamileke practices and Christian practices. This inevitably involves:

- Recognition of the value of the culture and tradition of the Bamileke community;
- Maintaining a synergy or congruence between the two practices
- The promotion of dialogue and understanding between traditionalists and Christians

#### **1. Coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs**

The question of coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs remains complex and especially delicate when dealing with societies where traditions and beliefs are deeply rooted.

To better understand the coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs, it is necessary to analyze the challenges, opportunities and strategies.

##### **1.1. Challenges related to coexistence**

These challenges are of several kinds:

- Conflicts of values: the values and principles of Christianity can conflict with certain ancestral customs and traditions. At this level, it is important for the protagonists to set rules and limits in order to curb the ardor;
- Loss of identity: conversion to Christianity can lead to the loss of cultural or even traditional identity for members of the chieftain community
- Resistance to change: Traditionalists may resist change to the point of viewing Christianity as a threat to ancestral traditions and customs.

##### **1.2. Opportunities for coexistence**

The opportunities associated with coexistence are diverse.

These include:

- Intercultural dialogue: coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs can promote intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding
- Cultural enrichment: the two practices must enrich each other; Christianity contributes to ancestral traditions and vice versa.
- Promoting tolerance: through coexistence, we can promote tolerance and mutual respect between the different protagonists.

#### **1.3. Coexistence strategies**

Among the coexistence strategies we can cite in no particular order:

- Respect for traditions: For Christians, it is a matter of respecting ancestral traditions and customs, while keeping or sharing their faith;
- Dialogue and communication: these two instruments can help Christians and traditionalists resolve conflicts and promote mutual understanding;
- Inculturation: this is the adaptation of Christianity to local cultures; it can help promote a climate of harmony between traditionalists and Christians.

#### **2. Peaceful coexistence for the Bamileke chief authorities and the Christians**

In general, peaceful coexistence refers to harmonious and non-violent coexistence between different groups or individuals; it is a situation that depends on a set of structural mechanisms established to prevent conflicts and, above all, promote peace.<sup>10</sup> Within the community

Bamileke chief, customary authorities still surf on the principle of social prohibitions and the weight of traditions on the community, to build such an ideal of harmony, which is understood as being the set of values and methods used by individuals to accomplish beautiful things. Peaceful coexistence is therefore fundamentally nourished by harmony, the essence of which lies in the perpetual search for common ground while preserving differences. This therefore requires an additional effort from the actors, which goes beyond the simple framework of collaboration or frequentation. In the Bamileke chief community, the cult of skulls remains a central reference within society; on the contrary, the Christian cult or the mass which is based on

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<sup>10</sup> Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict (3rd edition), 2008



the holy scriptures and the gospel sees in the cult of skulls a pure profanation. There is strictly speaking a visceral opposition between two practices or doctrines called to walk together in the same social universe. It is generally in the face of this type of doctrinal opposition that the red line can often be crossed and compromise the desired and desired harmony. But as a general rule, and in the interest of harmonious living or peaceful coexistence, the actors within the chiefly community maintain a climate of tolerance and mutual respect based on the acceptance of others with their differences. In this way, the Bamileke customary authorities are gradually and surely doing everything possible to avoid conflicts both with the religious leaders of the Christian churches, and those members of the community who deliberately choose to avoid the cult of skulls. This is a work of constant vigilance, since the customary authorities remain, despite everything, attached to what founds the unity of their respective communities: cultural identity. They are convinced that what brings the global community together is greater and stronger than what divides it. This is what justifies today within the Bamileke chieftain communities, the rise of development committees whose goal is to bring together the community's vital forces in order to unite energies around community development projects. Within these development committees, questions related to spiritual matters are rarely addressed; only development initiatives count here, which involve all the community's vital forces without consideration of political or religious factions. This means that the chieftain community has several concerns that unite its members, and consequently lead to peaceful coexistence. This is not necessarily the case with religious leaders who are often driven and blinded by their principles. Indeed, in their various speeches or public interventions during occasions that bring together all the sensitivities of the community, each camp seeks to steal the limelight from the other, the aim being to dominate or win the public space; the stakes of this verbal exercise are twofold: to seduce, by the force of arguments, the members of the chiefly community, and to rally them to a specific cause while at the same time diverting them from the vision presented or defended by the opposing camp. It is generally a subtle game which denotes that the actors, beyond their known and accepted differences, have transported what opposes them to another

terrain, that of persuasion. The pretext of a homily, a sermon or even a simple testimony on the occasion of sumptuous funeral ceremonies is often found to

serve this cause. In this context, it is up to the members of the chiefly community to

play their part as in an electoral contest where voters give their votes to those who best carry their concerns and aspirations. This is why peaceful coexistence in the Bamiléké chieftain community remains a permanent construction and a test that must always be negotiated well to promote harmony.

### **3. Some examples of coexistence in the Bamileke community**

Coexistence brings together actors who are opposed by their values and doctrines, but who are called to come together to achieve the same objective. Traditionalists in the Bamileke community, as much as members converted to Christianity, are thus carried by this ideal of building social cohesion and harmony. It is this co-construction that gives true meaning to the enterprise of coexistence materialized by:

- Traditional celebrations: this is a special moment in the life of the community during which the community experiences popular fervor linked to the celebration of some event; it may be a funeral dance. In the perspective of coexistence, Christians can participate in this traditional celebration by observing, so to speak, ancestral customs;
- Adapted Christian rituals: Christian rituals can be adapted to include elements of ancestral culture and traditions; the use of traditional instruments to enliven the mass or worship.
- Collaboration between communities: Traditional and Christian communities can collaborate to promote the well-being or development of the entire community.

In short, coexistence between Christianity and ancestral customs calls for respect, dialogue and mutual understanding.

### **IV/ Multiculturalist context and adaptability**

Living and remaining in phase or harmony with one's environment is generally the desire of men regardless of the context or even the era. In the Bamileke chieftain community, this desire has been made a reality. Indeed, within the Bamileke chieftain communities, adaptability has been made a leitmotif. Adapting to the context or the environment, however, presupposes a prerequisite: ignoring

one's cultural personality, even a little. And by cultural personality, Raymond LEDRUT will write:

When we speak of "cultural personality" we are referring to a level, a "tier" of reality and social life where phenomena have a specific character. The epistemological order is at issue,

**but with it a certain mode of social existence. In a word, with the "cultural personality" we seek to reach social reality in what it has of individual, therefore historically defined.<sup>1</sup>**

In reality, for this Bamileke chieftain community, driven by the desire to live in harmony with its environment, it is a question of detaching itself from what is historically specific to it, although the privileged expression of a society through its cultural personality is not reduced to this. LEDRUT also uses the term collective ethos to better designate the cultural personality and notes that it is:

A general collective mode of existence in which the whole of society expresses itself, and not a particular mode related to a limited social function. It is not a sector or region of social life. In this sense, culture is not a superstructure in the way it is sometimes understood, because it is not a partial structure, neither fundamental nor derived.<sup>2</sup>

In an increasingly globalized world, it is becoming imperative to adapt to one's environment and especially to social reality. In the Bamileke chieftain community, chieftain authorities are grappling with religious leaders whose perception of transcendence or divinity contrasts with their customs; this is a situation that inevitably imposes an attitude of reappropriation or reconstruction of social practices. Indeed, Bamileke chieftain authorities must find by themselves the methods or means necessary to establish their authority and especially their hold over the chieftain community, trapped in two belief systems. In reality, it is a matter of drawing from deep within oneself everything that facilitates adaptability to one's environment; an environment that is above all changing and sometimes losing momentum.

### **1.Impact of multiculturalism on ancestral customs and chiefly authorities.**

Multiculturalism refers to plurality and cultural diversity. It thus refers to the coexistence of several different cultures within the same society or community. This therefore implies the presence of diverse traditions, values, beliefs,

languages, and cultural practices that interact with each other. Multiculturalism presupposes that there is exchange and interaction between cultures. It is therefore a source of cultural enrichment offering prospects for diversity and mutual understanding; it can also cause cultural conflicts when the values and practices of different cultures are in contradiction. These cultures can also make integration a challenge. Multiculturalism can have a strong impact on ancestral customs and chiefly authorities, especially in societies where traditions are truly rooted.

#### **1.1. On ancestral customs**

Multiculturalism can lead to the evolution of ancestral traditions and customs, as communities are exposed to new practices or ideas. It can also cause the loss

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<sup>1</sup>LEDRUT Raymond, (1972), On cultural personality and its relations with cultural type and the social system, in Man and Society, No. 23, PP 133-142

<sup>2</sup>LEDRUT, ibid, P.135

traditions and customs, thanks to the changes introduced. Finally, multiculturalism can encourage the fusion between cultures whose customs and traditions are integrated into the elements.

#### **1.2. On the chief authorities**

As communities are exposed to new forms of leadership and governance, multiculturalism can lead to role changes for chiefly authorities; similarly, it can lead to a loss of authority, as communities are exposed to new sources of authority and legitimacy. Multiculturalism also brings change to chiefly authorities, who must adapt to new practices in their leadership. Chiefly authorities must also face new challenges brought about by multiculturalism. These include:

- Maintaining tradition: for them, it is about maintaining tradition and ancestral customs while remaining open to change.
- Managing diversity: it is a matter for the chief authorities to manage cultural and linguistic diversity within their community by promoting tolerance and mutual respect.
- Promote cohesion and unity, despite cultural and linguistic differences.

Multiculturalism also offers opportunities for the authorities to seize. It thus allows:

- Strengthening the community through new ideas and practices that enrich cultural life
- Economic development, thanks to new opportunities that generate new investments
- Cultural exchange and mutual understanding between different communities

## 2. Opportunities and challenges related to cultural cohabitation

The notion of cultural cohabitation inevitably calls for living together, although living together presupposes rules that are imposed on the different actors. It therefore intervenes in this wake as the panacea or the necessary bridge to build and organize the process of living together, which necessarily involves the need for harmony and social cohesion. Today, cultural cohabitation is a global issue that fuels political debate; it refers precisely to the idea of making people who do not have the same culture live together in peace despite their differences. Cultural cohabitation thus stands out from multiculturalism, which advocates the simultaneous presence of different cultures, languages, and religions in a specific territory. And Joanna NOWICKI, who has devoted and directed an entire collective work on cultural cohabitation, will say that cultural cohabitation implies respect for identities and interest in communication issues; and for this, one must be able to

understand the differences and confront cultural paradigms.<sup>11</sup> NOWICKI will also add that cultural cohabitation is a term that has remained neutral, and which has the advantage of clearly expressing the idea of making people belonging to different cultures live together peacefully.<sup>2</sup> Cultural cohabitation therefore appears as an obligation and a permanent learning process to respect others with their differences, and therefore to manage otherness. This obligation aims to avoid the risk of living in an environment of conflict. It is therefore a concept that must be constructed at the level of social actors through a true exercise of understanding on all dimensions of the social sphere: cultural, religious, political, linguistic and even philosophical. It is a question, as NOWICKI points out, of being able to understand intercultural relations, no

one being willing to renounce their identity. In the Bamileke chieftain community where religious leaders and customary authorities are engaged in an ideological war, cultural cohabitation is imposed as the axe that breaks down misunderstandings and brings social actors closer together towards a common ideal, in a unique environment that they share and whose destiny rests on their common efforts for development. In such a context, the Bamileke customary authorities or chiefs take great pleasure in capitalizing on all the achievements related to Christianity as development actions within the chiefly community; these achievements do not obliterate their belonging, much less their identification as a full member of the chiefly community. And even if the influence of religious leaders, particularly Christian churches, continues to be felt, the real fear within the chiefly community, far from being doctrinal, remains the banishment or denial by the populations of the Bamileke chiefly universe, of their identity. Cultural identity, in fact, is not reduced to a singular aspect of the culture of a people, but rather to all the characteristic traits of this people, since culture covers a wide range. The Bamileke customary authorities thus avoid any ostracism that would bog down the entire chiefly community in a sort of social or cultural implosion. By implosion, we mean the brutal and violent collapse of something great. However, customary authorities, in light of the evolution of the current world and especially the changes that are shaking up traditional society, have an obvious interest in protecting or preserving the human resources of the chiefly community. This inevitably involves recognizing and promoting the talents of each individual. This is, moreover, the necessary cure or the ultimate preparation that must be provided to better ensure cohabitation with others. This is thus the challenge of knowledge by Bamileke customary authorities of their own strengths, to better confront other cultural paradigms. However, the cultural cohabitation called for here is primarily based on social practices that oppose each other and sometimes rout the Bamileke chiefly community, already swept by the winds of modernity. We are thus witnessing a mixing of social practices leading in most cases to de facto syncretisms; otherwise how can we understand that on the occasion of a family reunion in ancestral concessions, a prayer is said by a Christian at the start of the work,

<sup>11</sup> NOWICKI, Joanna, (2019), Cultural cohabitation, HERMES journal, CNRS EDITIONS, Paris, France

<sup>2</sup> NOWICKI, Joanna, (2019), Ibid.

preceded by numerous songs of Christian praise, and that at the end of the meeting the entire assembly moves to a sacred place to undergo a ritual in opposition to the Christian faith? In general, there is a ripple effect which creates de facto syncretisms; but, because no constraint is exerted on the actors, certain members of the community resist or escape these rituals without detaching themselves from the family.<sup>12</sup> This is where cultural cohabitation takes on its full meaning, promoting at the same time the harmonious functioning of the social group. But at the level of customary authorities and religious leaders, this cultural cohabitation takes on the aspect of an intercultural or interfaith dialogue.<sup>13</sup>; it is indeed for the actors to talk to each other and put on the discussion table the object of their disagreements in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings and promote their common integration in the society or the living environment that they share. The chiefly universe thus becomes the cosmopolitan ground where such an exchange takes place. Moreover in Batoufam, his majesty the king of this 2nd degree chiefdom<sup>1415</sup> will strongly emphasize the importance of this kind of exchange that he has almost institutionalized in his leadership. He highlights this very well when he declares:

"Every year-end, we bring together the entire population in all its components and varieties, the administrations and the religious around the same table in order to define the axes of our collaboration for the well-being of the population.<sup>4</sup>

This statement sounds like a call for the necessary and unavoidable cultural cohabitation of different social actors almost bound by the same destiny, that of playing their own part in the same social universe, with the same social body. By social body, we mean the chiefly community or simply the set of individuals sharing the same society. But cultural cohabitation, although proven within the chiefly community,

is not necessarily synonymous with harmony or lasting peace. Peace, however, is a factor to be negotiated or simply built. This is why we must still overcome the test of peaceful cohabitation between the different actors to truly achieve it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ultimately, the real challenges facing customary authorities in the Bamileke community today, grappling with new schools of thought, remain the famous question of living and walking together with the custodians of opposing religious and cultural values, without, however, renouncing oneself. It is an effort to accept the other in the public space with their differences. This necessarily involves the creation of a space for communication between cultures. The chiefly community, which is straddling several transformations that are strongly shaking up the traditions that have long forged its essence, is thus called upon to live for itself and freely the religious itinerary that suits it, without obliterating its cultural identity. Within the chiefly community from now on, customary authorities and religious leaders are undoubtedly becoming social actors in their own right. The latter also have an undeniable role within the chiefly community. This is why ALIOUM DIOP considered the Christian religion as a reality that could help African peoples to meet not only the challenges imposed by decolonization, but also to emancipate themselves.<sup>16</sup> And Engelbert MVENG will add that Christianity in African lands must take into account all the cultural and traditional values which make up its spiritual substratum.<sup>17</sup> The work that falls to the customary authorities and religious leaders, the main social actors of the chieftain community, is to establish a genuine cultural dialogue that leads to a real and lasting cultural cohabitation, a pledge of an obvious peaceful coexistence. This constitutes a project whose construction remains permanent in the consolidation of a harmonious living together.

<sup>12</sup> Observation and interview conducted in the field in Batoufam (NOUBISSI NGANSY, November 7, 2024)

<sup>13</sup> In reality, these are religious practices that clash and the intercultural dialogue mentioned here concerns the cults celebrated by the different actors; skull worship for the customary authorities and Christian worship or mass for the religious leaders.

<sup>14</sup> Traditional chiefdoms in Cameroon have been grouped into degrees since the 1977 decree

<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted in Batoufam on November 7, 2024 with His Majesty NAYANG TOUKAM Innocent, Superior Chief of Batoufam (NOUBISSI NGANSY, 7/11/24)

<sup>16</sup> LOCK, Etienne, (2014), "African identity and Catholicism: the problem of the meeting of two notions through the journey of ALIOUM DIOP (1956-1995)" doctoral thesis, University of Lille, France.

<sup>17</sup> HEBGA, Meinrad, (1963), African Personality and Catholicism, Edition Présence Africaine, Paris, France

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