

The colonial administration in Cameroon: An analysis of the legal and social evolution of German domination and its impact on traditional power structures in Northern Cameroon

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Abstract: *The colonial administration in Cameroon, under German rule (1884-1916), deeply influenced the legal and social development of the country, particularly in the septentrional region known as Northern Cameroon. This process involved a complex reorganisation of power structures, as colonial authorities sought to impose direct control over local populations while interfering with traditional political and social systems. Under German administration, colonial governance relied on a combination of military force and the incorporation of local elites into subordinate administrative roles. The colonial authorities established a legal system aimed at replacing local customs with colonial legislation, often generating conflicts with customary practices and existing political structures, notably those of chiefdoms, lamidats and sultanates. This colonial legal framework also introduced mechanisms of economic exploitation that disrupted social balances and reshaped power relations in local communities. The impact of this administration was evident in the partial dismantling of traditional power systems in Northern Cameroon. Local chiefs, often reduced to mere figureheads under colonial rule, lost much of their legitimacy and authority in the face of the imposed hierarchy. Nevertheless, they sometimes played an ambivalent role as intermediaries between the colonisers and the populations, contributing simultaneously to forms of resistance and to the adaptation of local practices within the new system. What sets this chapter apart from previous studies is its innovative approach to understanding colonial governance in Northern Cameroon: It does not merely describe the administrative structures imposed by German rule but offers a systematic reconstruction of the legal transformations at work, examining how colonial law actively reconfigured customary authority rather than simply coexisting with it. Unlike earlier historical accounts that focused primarily on political events or sociological observations, this study places legal norms, judicial practices and the interactions between colonial legislation and customary law at the centre of the analysis. By doing so, it reveals the dynamic, negotiated, and often conflictual nature of legal pluralism during the colonial period. From a legal perspective, the chapter makes a significant contribution by showing how German colonial interventions laid the foundations for contemporary debates on the coexistence of state law and customary systems in Cameroon. It highlights the long-term implications of colonial legal engineering on present-day issues*

of authority, legitimacy, and the recognition of customary law in the national legal order. Beyond historical insight, the study thus provides a critical framework for understanding the persistent tension between imported legal models and indigenous normative systems in modern Cameroonian law. This study, therefore, offers an in-depth analysis of the legal and social transformations induced by German colonialism, shedding new light on power dynamics in Northern Cameroon and on the lasting impact of this colonial period on contemporary political and social structures.

1 Introduction

The colonial history of Cameroon constitutes a critical area of scholarly investigation for understanding the political, legal and social transformations that have shaped the post-colonial state. This chapter builds on this foundational observation by re-examining a dimension of Cameroon's past that has often been overshadowed in mainstream historiography: the specificity and depth of German intervention in the Northern regions. Among the colonial powers that exerted influence over this territory, Germany, despite its relatively brief presence (1884-1916), profoundly restructured local governance mechanisms and altered existing power dynamics. German colonisation in Cameroon was not merely a project of territorial occupation, but entailed a systematic reconfiguration of traditional institutions, the imposition of foreign legal norms, and the calculated use of coercive force, particularly in the northern regions. Northern Cameroon, marked by a pre-colonial political organisation comprising stratified lamidates, sultanates and chiefdoms, became the focus of a distinctive colonial policy that combined military confrontation with the strategic co-optation of indigenous elites. The German administration introduced a legal framework that marginalised or, at times, selectively instrumentalised customary law and traditional authorities, transforming them into intermediaries of extraction and control while simultaneously eroding their legitimacy. This chapter examines the modalities of German colonial domination in Northern Cameroon with particular attention to its juridical foundations, administrative practices, and their disruptive effects on traditional power structures. Furthermore, it explores the legacies of this colonial encounter as they manifest in contemporary dynamics of local

governance. This inquiry is situated within a broader scholarly tradition that has highlighted the depth of German colonial experimentation and its long-term implications. Foundational works such as Rudin's *Germans in Cameroon*,¹ Austen's studies on Sahelian political economies² and Fanzo's historical analyses of northern chiefdoms³ have elucidated the interplay between coercion, economic extraction and institutional transformation. More recent studies by Geschiere⁴ and Nkwi⁵ have further demonstrated how colonial legal and administrative innovations continue to shape contemporary contests over authority, land and governance. However, few analyses have systematically linked the legal architecture of German rule in Northern Cameroon to its long-term effects on post-colonial political configurations, thereby leaving a crucial gap that this chapter seeks to address. The analysis is structured along three thematic axes: (i) the establishment and instruments of German colonial rule; (ii) the dismantling and reconfiguration of indigenous political and legal systems; and (iii) post-colonial continuities and recompositions rooted in the colonial experience.

2 Foundations, logics and mechanisms of German domination in Cameroon (1884-1916)

The establishment of the German colonial administration in Cameroon, particularly in the northern regions, was neither a linear nor a peaceful process. It was shaped by a convergence of geopolitical, economic and ideological objectives tied to the broader context of late nineteenth-century imperial competition. This part analyses the historical foundations, legal mechanisms and military instruments through which Germany imposed its authority over Cameroonian territories, with a particular focus on the northern regions.

1 HR Rudin *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914: A case study in modern imperialism* (1938) 30.

2 RA Austen *African economic history: Internal development and external dependency* (1987) 102.

3 VG Fanzo *Cameroon history for secondary schools and colleges: The colonial and post-colonial periods* (1989) 78.

4 P Geschiere 'Chiefs and colonial rule in Cameroon: Inventing chieftaincy, French and British style' (1993) 63 *Africa* 151-175.

5 WE Nkwi *Voices from within: Power and politics in the grassfields of Cameroon 1800-2001* (2010) 15.

2.1 The historical and geopolitical context of German penetration into Cameroon

In pursuit of economic outlets and international prestige, Germany joined the colonial race following the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), which established the rules for the partition and colonisation of Africa. Cameroon was declared a German protectorate in July 1884, following treaties signed with coastal chiefs in Douala. However, this diplomatic recognition concealed a deeper ambition for territorial control that lacked the genuine consent of interior populations, particularly in the north.⁶

In Northern Cameroon, a region with a long-standing Islamic presence organised around Fulani lamidates, German penetration encountered well-structured politico-religious authorities. As historians such as Fanso⁷ have shown, the area had, long before colonial rule, developed a complex network of Islamic chiefdoms whose authority rested on both religious legitimacy and centralised administrative structures. Confronted with these entrenched systems of power, the German colonial administration adopted a strategy of fragmenting local forces by exploiting inter-laminate rivalries or by weakening them through targeted military campaigns.⁸ The overarching objective was to assert territorial sovereignty in accordance with the principle of 'effective occupation' mandated by the Berlin Conference.⁹

In this colonial context, 'effective occupation' did not signify mere symbolic possession or nominal claims over territory. It referred to a legal requirement established at the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, obliging colonial powers to demonstrate a real and verifiable exercise of authority over the territories they claimed. This involved showing the presence of recognisable administrative structures, the ability to enforce order, the establishment of military or police posts, and the creation of stable relations with local populations. For Germany, a late entrant in the imperial race, meeting this standard was crucial: Only by subduing or co-opting Northern Cameroon's powerful lamidates could it prove,

6 A Mbembe *Critique de la raison nègre* (2012) 45.

7 Fanso (n 3) 78.

8 As above.

9 E Ardener 'The political history of Cameroon' (1962) 18(8) *The World Today* 341.

under international law, that it controlled the region in practice and not merely on paper.

The implementation of this principle drove the Germans to dismantle autonomous indigenous authority, install military garrisons, and compel lamidos to acknowledge German suzerainty. Through this process, the colonial state sought to replace a pre-existing politico-religious order with an externally imposed hierarchy that redefined legitimacy, authority and territorial control. The requirement of 'effective occupation' thus became both a legal imperative and a political strategy of domination, fundamentally reshaping power relations in Northern Cameroon.

2.2 Legal and political logics of occupation

From the early stages of colonial establishment, the Germans instituted a specific legal regime based on colonial law, distinct from metropolitan German law.¹⁰ The foundational instrument of this regime was the Protectorate Act (*Schutzgebietsgesetz*), promulgated in 1886, which granted the colonial governor extensive powers, including the authority to legislate locally.¹¹ In the northern regions, German authorities sought to impose a centralised administrative system underpinned by colonial legislation designed to structure and legitimise German domination. This legislation, largely unilateral in nature, undermined existing customary laws and marginalised local authorities. For instance, the imposition of forced labour, taxes on agricultural production and compulsory residence requirements were introduced without consultation with traditional

10 In the German Empire, metropolitan law was highly systematised and codified, particularly after the adoption of the *Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* (BGB), adopted in 1896, which entered into force in 1900 and unified civil law across the empire. This metropolitan legal order was complemented by the *Strafgesetzbuch* (Criminal Code of 1871), federal commercial and procedural codes, and a hierarchical judicial structure comprising local courts (*Amtsgerichte*), regional courts (*Landgerichte*), higher regional courts (*Oberlandesgerichte*), and the Imperial Court (*Reichsgericht*) in Leipzig. These legal norms applied uniformly to German citizens within the Reich and were grounded in constitutional principles defined by the *Reichsverfassung* of 1871. In contrast, the colonies were governed by a separate legal system defined by the Protectorate Act (*Schutzgebietsgesetz*) of 1886, which granted the imperial executive extensive discretionary authority to issue autonomous decrees, ordinances, and administrative measures not bound by the constitutional safeguards or legal guarantees applicable in metropolitan Germany.

11 VJ Ngho *History of Cameroon since 1800* (1996) 53.

institutions.¹² Moreover, colonial judicial institutions were established under a dual model: European courts for settlers and indigenous courts subordinated to colonial administrative authority.¹³ This system reflected a hierarchised and discriminatory legal order.¹⁴

2.3 Mechanisms of German power establishment in Northern Cameroon

Germany relied heavily on military force to assert its authority in the north. Beginning in 1899, several military campaigns led by Lieutenant Hans Dominik were launched against the Fulani lamidates of the Adamawa region, notably those of Ngaoundéré, Tibati, Maroua and Garoua.¹⁵ These campaigns were marked by extreme violence aimed at breaking local resistance. The conquest of Maroua in 1901 and the subjugation of the Garoua lamidate in 1902 were symbolic turning points in the consolidation of German control over the northern region.

To solidify their authority, the Germans subdivided the territory into administrative districts (*Bezirke*), each headed by a district officer (*Bezirksamtmann*) tasked with tax collection, the recruitment of forced labour, the supervision of local chiefs and the enforcement of colonial laws.¹⁶ The colonial strategy thus combined repression, intimidation and the co-optation of the most compliant local elites. However, a specific feature of Northern Cameroon was the relative autonomy granted to certain lamidates that agreed to collaborate.¹⁷ These lamidates retained

12 M Atangana *The end of French rule in Cameroon* (2009) 101.

13 Austen (n 2) 48.

14 H Stoecker *German imperialism in Africa: From the beginnings until the Second World War* (1986) 198.

15 MZ Njeuma *The rise of a warrior state in the Cameroon grasslands: The Bali-Kumbat* (1978) 65.

16 Ngoh (n 11) 60.

17 The lamidats of Northern Cameroon were centralised political and religious entities ruled by lamidos, Fulani leaders whose authority derived from Islamic legitimacy and a highly organised administrative system. Originating in the 19th-century Fulani jihads led by Modibo Adama under the Sokoto Caliphate, these lamidats operated as cohesive states with clear hierarchies, taxation systems, judicial structures based on Shari'a, and strong control over local populations. Their pre-colonial cohesion and territorial organisation made them key intermediaries for any external power seeking to govern the region, which explains why colonial authorities later relied heavily on them. During German colonial rule (1884-1916), several lamidats in Northern Cameroon retained a notable degree of autonomy by aligning with colonial interests and facilitating administration,

a semblance of authority but were placed under close surveillance and compelled to adopt colonial norms in their administrative and judicial practices.¹⁸

The study of German domination mechanisms in Northern Cameroon thus reveals a systematic effort to forcibly integrate local societies into the European imperial order. Contrary to the narratives of 'protection' or 'civilisation', German rule was characterised by the dispossession of indigenous authorities, the imposition of a foreign legal apparatus, and the use of coercion to reshape society in accordance with the economic and political interests of the metropole. Traditional leaders found themselves in an ambivalent position: either closely monitored allies or adversaries to be eliminated. This process profoundly disrupted the pre-existing balance of power and left enduring consequences on contemporary social and political dynamics.

3 Transformation of legal structures and the disarticulation of traditional authority

The German colonial administration did not merely seek to impose a new political order, but also endeavoured to profoundly reshape the social and legal architecture of local societies, particularly in Northern Cameroon. This part examines the dynamics through which traditional power structures were weakened, dispossessed or instrumentalised as part of a broader strategy aimed at total domination of the territory and its populations.

3.1 The imposition of a colonial legal order at odds with customary law

One of the most destabilising aspects of German presence was the imposition of a colonial legal system that undermined the legitimacy of

taxation and security. Among the most prominent were the lamidats of Maroua, Mindif, Mora, Bogo and Yagoua, whose lamidos cooperated with German administrators and were rewarded with the preservation of internal authority in judicial, fiscal and social matters. Other lamidats such as Dargala, Méri, Koza and Mogodé likewise benefited from this policy of indirect rule. Their collaboration allowed the Germans to control vast northern territories while enabling the lamidos to maintain significant traditional power.

18 Falso (n 3) 90.

local customs. This process entailed the marginalisation of traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution,¹⁹ which had traditionally been managed by local chiefs, councils of elders, or Islamic courts within the lamidates.²⁰ The colonial legal framework introduced by the Germans was based on European norms, codified without consideration for the region's existing legal pluralism. For instance, district courts (*Bezirksgerichte*) applied rules derived from German civil and criminal law, while granting residual jurisdiction to 'native courts' placed under administrative supervision.²¹ In reality, this legal dualism enabled the colonial authorities to retain tight control over so-called 'customary' justice, stripping it of any autonomous regulatory capacity.

Colonial law also functioned as a tool of exploitation: It codified the requirement of forced labour, the head tax (capitation) and the requisitioning of food supplies and livestock.²² These unilaterally imposed measures created profound social imbalances, provoking population displacements, marginalisation of vulnerable groups, and rising resentment toward traditional leaders who were often forced to act as intermediaries in enforcing colonial orders.

3.2 Destabilisation of chiefdoms, sultanates and lamidates

A core objective of German colonial administration was to neutralise traditional forms of authority that could potentially challenge the colonial order. As a result, lamidates, sultanates and chiefdoms were systematically dismantled or absorbed into the colonial administrative structure not as autonomous centres of power, but as auxiliary

19 Eg, local chiefs who had previously settled land disputes through customary negotiations were stripped of their authority, as such cases were now redirected to German-appointed district courts. Similarly, councils of elders once responsible for mediating family conflicts, inheritance issues, and interpersonal tensions were gradually replaced by colonial administrators or 'native courts' supervised by Germans, which imposed unfamiliar procedures. In many lamidates, Islamic courts that had long adjudicated matters such as marriage, debt, or commercial disagreements were subordinated to colonial tribunals, which reserved the right to overturn their rulings. Finally, forms of restorative justice based on compensation, reconciliation and social harmony were dismissed in favour of punitive sentences aligned with German criminal codes, thereby eroding the cultural logic that had governed conflict resolution for generations.

20 Falso (n 3) 112.

21 Stoecker (n 14) 205.

22 Ngho (n 11) 78.

instruments of governance. In my view, this strategy reveals a deliberate and calculated effort to hollow out indigenous political institutions rather than co-exist with them. The Germans did not simply reorganise local authority; they re-engineered it to ensure that African leaders became extensions of the colonial state, stripped of the legitimacy and agency that once anchored their communities. This transformation, often presented as ‘modernisation’ or ‘administrative rationalisation’, in reality amounted to a profound disfiguration of local political cultures, replacing deeply rooted systems of governance with hierarchical models designed to serve colonial interests alone.²³

The case of the lamidate of Maroua illustrates this dynamic particularly well: Following the military subjugation of the town, the Germans retained a lamido in place but stripped him of any real decision-making power, placing him under the close supervision of a district officer (*Bezirksamtmann*).²⁴ Chiefs were reduced to fulfilling colonial functions against their own populations, by collecting taxes, providing labour and maintaining order.²⁵

This instrumentalisation had profound consequences on traditional legitimacy. Chiefs perceived as too closely aligned with the Germans were often challenged or discredited within their communities. In addition, some were deposed or replaced with individuals deemed more cooperative, sometimes from minor lineages, which triggered internal tensions and contributed to the fragmentation of the traditional political fabric.²⁶

3.3 New forms of power: Between forced collaboration and resistance

In response to this brutal reconfiguration, local elites adopted ambivalent stances.²⁷ Some chiefs, whether coerced or opportunistic, aligned

23 Atangana (n 12) 123.

24 H Weiss ‘The German colonial administration and Islamic authorities in Northern Cameroon, 1902-1916’ in O Kane and J-L Triaud (eds) *Muslims and Modernity in Africa* (2001) 119.

25 Njeuma (n 15) 89.

26 Falso (n 3) 115.

27 The expression ‘ambivalent stances’ refers to the simultaneous coexistence of contradictory attitudes or strategies among local elites facing colonial domination. In this context, it means that many chiefs neither fully resisted nor fully collaborated; instead, they navigated an uncertain middle ground cooperating when necessary

themselves with the colonial administration to retain a minimal degree of authority. Others resisted either openly or more subtly through acts of disobedience, administrative delays, or by invoking religious and mystical traditions to maintain a parallel source of legitimacy.²⁸ Chiefs or notables who chose to resist the colonial order, whether through open defiance or subtle acts of non-compliance, often faced severe repercussions. German administrators could remove them from office, impose fines, seize cattle or property, or deport them to distant regions to break their influence. In cases of stronger resistance, colonial forces resorted to armed reprisals, imprisonment or public humiliation, tactics aimed at deterring further defiance and demonstrating the reach of the colonial state. Such punishments underscored the limited room for manoeuvre available to traditional authorities who attempted to preserve their autonomy.

It is important to emphasise that German domination did not entirely erase endogenous logics of power. In many instances, local practices persisted in disguised forms, particularly in the judicial domain (for instance, informal mediation, customary arbitration). Likewise, religious institutions such as Sufi brotherhoods served as nuclei of cultural resistance.²⁹ This period thus marks a profound transformation of local authority: From a legitimacy rooted in history, sacred traditions and communal recognition, power became controlled, hierarchical and delegated within the framework of a rigid colonial system. The tension between these two logics fundamentally redefined social relations in Northern Cameroon and triggered long-term identity recompositions.

German domination in Northern Cameroon was not merely military and political; it was also legal and symbolic. The imposition of colonial law marginalised indigenous legal practices, destabilised the social foundations of authority, and introduced a lasting imbalance within traditional structures. The authority of chiefs was deconstructed, redefined and frequently instrumentalised in the service of political subjugation. However, this process did not lead to the complete disappearance of traditional power. On the contrary, it gave rise to hybrid forms of authority, in which local rulers sought to reconcile

for survival, while discreetly asserting forms of autonomy whenever possible. Their position was marked by caution, calculation and constant adaptation to a coercive environment that limited their political options.

28 Ardener (n 9) 139.

29 Mbembe (n 6) 98.

their historical legitimacy with the demands of the colonial state. These ambivalent forms of leadership constitute one of the most complex legacies of colonisation, still visible today in the tensions between administrative governance and traditional chieftaincies in contemporary Cameroon.

4 Post-colonial legacies and dynamics: Between continuities, re-appropriations and ruptures

The end of German domination in 1916, following World War I, did not result in a clear break from the structures established during the colonial period. On the contrary, many institutions, practices and hierarchies inherited from that era were re-appropriated, sometimes strategically by the subsequent French and British colonial administrations, and later by the independent Cameroonian state. This final part examines the long-term impact of German colonialism on the contemporary configuration of power in Northern Cameroon, focusing on the persistence of colonial logics, the recomposition of traditional legitimacies, and the socio-political fractures stemming from this historical legacy.

4.1 The persistence of colonial patterns of authority in current administrative structures

One of the most enduring consequences of German colonial domination was the establishment of an indirect rule model,³⁰ based on the delegation of certain administrative functions to local authorities subordinated to the central state. This model originally developed by the Germans and later deepened by the French continues today in the complex coexistence between state territorial administration and traditional chieftaincies.³¹ In Northern Cameroon, lamidates and sultanates, though stripped of their former religious and judicial prerogatives, still operate as intermediaries of authority, especially in rural areas.³² The post-colonial state, far from completely marginalising these structures, has often incorporated them

30 HK Kah 'Colonial legacies and the reconfiguration of authority in Northern Cameroon' (2013) 54 *Journal of African History* 389.

31 Ngoh (n 11) 144.

32 Weiss (n 24) 144.

into its governance system, granting them an official but limited role.³³ Traditional leaders, recognised as auxiliaries of the administration, are particularly responsible for social mediation, maintaining local order and managing customary land. The continuation of this colonial-inherited arrangement poses challenges, as it sustains a hierarchy rooted in colonial ideology wherein traditional elites remain subordinate, without full democratic recognition or genuine autonomy.³⁴ This creates an institutional duality that generates tensions between customary legitimacy and republican legality.

4.2 Social memory of German colonisation and representations of power

The memory of German colonisation in Northern Cameroon is marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, it is associated with a period of violence, dispossession and military brutality; on the other, certain local narratives idealise German administrative rigour and the discipline imposed during their rule, especially when compared with subsequent colonial regimes.³⁵ This ambivalence is reflected in oral accounts passed down within families of traditional rulers or communities that suffered collective punishments during German military campaigns.

This historical memory plays a role in shaping the political identity of certain lamidats, which claim antiquity or continuity of their authority dating back to the pre-colonial or even colonial era. In many cases, current traditional leaders position themselves within a lineage presented as 'historic' in order to legitimise their present-day authority.³⁶ However, this memory also carries fractures. It exposes the social divisions produced by colonisation, particularly between lineages favoured by the Germans (collaborating chiefs) and those marginalised or resistant.³⁷ These tensions can resurface in succession disputes, land claims or local political rivalries.³⁸

33 Atangana (n 12) 189.

34 Fanso (n 3) 139.

35 Mbembe (n 6) 108.

36 Ardener (n 9) 143.

37 Kah (n 30) 405.

38 Njeuma (n 15) 91.

4.3 Contemporary challenges of legitimising local power

The legacy of German colonialism continues to shape current issues in local governance. The question of the legitimacy of traditional leaders remains central, especially in contexts where their authority is contested by younger generations, political parties or minority groups. While some traditional rulers assert their role as social mediators in the framework of decentralisation, others are accused of clientelism or complicity with the ruling political elite.³⁹ In this context, the Cameroonian state employs an ambiguous strategy: On the one hand, it recognises chieftaincies as partners in local development; on the other, it instrumentalises them to control rural populations, mobilise electoral support and reinforce state authority in peripheral regions.⁴⁰ This practice echoes colonial strategies of co-optation employed by German authorities under a logic of indirect rule. The result is a recomposition of local power in which the colonial legacy functions simultaneously as a political resource, a site of contested memory and an institutional framework. Understanding this complexity sheds light on contemporary forms of power in Northern Cameroon, which are shaped by a persistent tension between state-driven modernity and reconfigured traditions.

The German colonial period not only transformed the social and political structures of Northern Cameroon, but also produced lasting effects that continue to the present. Traditional authority, though weakened and reshaped, survived colonial domination and has been reconfigured in a complex relationship with the post-colonial state. Between memory, contestation and instrumentalisation, contemporary forms of local power still bear the marks of an earlier domination, which continues to influence governance dynamics, identity and legitimation processes.⁴¹ In my view, this enduring legacy complicates the region's political trajectory far more than is often acknowledged. Rather than being mere remnants of the past, these hybrid forms of authority now operate at the intersection of state power, community expectations and historical grievances, creating an ambiguous field where legitimacy is constantly negotiated. This situation not only reveals the fragility of

39 Fanso (n 3) 143.

40 Atangana (n 12) 211.

41 Weiss (n 24) 146.

post-colonial state building, but also exposes how colonial restructurings still shape the moral and political imagination of communities.

A first step involves undertaking a critical, decolonial reassessment of Cameroon's legal and administrative framework. Many norms currently in force remain rooted in mechanisms introduced by the German colonial administration, particularly in relation to territorial control and local governance. The establishment of a multidisciplinary commission bringing together legal scholars, historians, sociologists and representatives of traditional authorities would help identify these continuities and propose legislative reforms aligned with local socio-political realities. Such an approach would contribute to dismantling inherited systems of domination and strengthening the social legitimacy of the law.

Furthermore, redefining the role of traditional authorities constitutes a central challenge. Under German rule, these authorities were progressively transformed into auxiliaries of the colonial administration, resulting in a significant erosion of their autonomy and community-based legitimacy. This instrumentalisation persists in the post-colonial context, where traditional leaders often remain subordinated to the central state. It is therefore necessary to rethink their legal status in order to restore a genuinely representative and participatory role, particularly in conflict resolution, land management and social mediation, while simultaneously establishing mechanisms of accountability at the local level.

Along the same lines, effective administrative decentralisation appears to be a crucial condition for correcting imbalances inherited from the colonial period. The excessive centralisation of the Cameroonian state, largely inspired by colonial governance models, continues to marginalise peripheral regions, especially in the North. The genuine transfer of powers, financial resources and decision-making authority to local governments would promote more inclusive governance that is attentive to historically and culturally specific local dynamics shaped by both precolonial and colonial experiences.

Moreover, addressing the German colonial legacy requires the implementation of ambitious educational and memorial policies. The history of German colonisation and its impact on traditional power structures remains insufficiently integrated into school and university curricula. A more systematic inclusion of this history, supported by

accessible archival research and the creation of sites of memory, would foster a deeper public understanding of contemporary patterns of domination. In addition, critical academic cooperation with Germany could facilitate a shared, decolonised engagement with this past.

Finally, any sustainable reform must be grounded in an inclusive political dialogue based on the recognition of historical injustices. Current crises of governance and political legitimacy in Cameroon cannot be fully understood without reference to the institutional structures imposed during the period of German colonial rule. The organisation of national dialogue forums bringing together state institutions, traditional authorities, civil society actors and scholars could pave the way for public policies informed by historical justice, symbolic reparation, and the reconfiguration of the social contract.

In this sense, the critical analysis of the German colonial administration should not be confined to a purely historiographical exercise but should serve as a catalyst for rethinking contemporary Cameroonian institutions. A conscious and structured engagement with this legacy appears to be an essential condition for building a more legitimate, inclusive, and decolonially grounded system of governance.

5 Conclusion

The German colonial experience in Cameroon, although brief in the country's colonial chronology, generated profound, enduring and complex transformations. In Northern Cameroon, in particular, German domination went beyond military conquest or economic exploitation: It entailed a fundamental reconfiguration of the legal and political foundations of local societies. Traditional authorities, once autonomous and vested with legitimate power rooted in culture and religion, were reduced to subordinate roles, governed by a hegemonic colonial legal apparatus. The partial dismantling of lamidats and sultanates, the imposition of an exogenous colonial legal system and the territorial reorganisation according to imperial norms contributed to the weakening of customary authority, while paving the way for ambiguous new forms of power marked by both adaptation and submission. While some chiefs managed to play intermediary roles, others saw their legitimacy contested or destroyed, provoking social realignments that remain perceptible today. German colonialism should be held responsible because it deliberately reconfigured the political landscape

of Northern Cameroon in ways that weakened indigenous authority while ensuring its survival in a distorted form. German officials did not simply interact with existing power structures; they reshaped them to serve colonial interests, producing long-term institutional fragilities. First, the Germans undermined traditional legitimacy by subordinating lamidos, chiefs and sultans to the colonial administration, turning them into instruments of external control rather than leaders accountable to their communities. This fundamentally altered the nature of authority and created hybrid political roles that still complicate governance today. Second, German rule imposed administrative borders, judicial systems and taxation mechanisms that disrupted pre-colonial balances of power and created new hierarchies among communities. Many of these artificially engineered structures survived independence, embedding colonial logic into the post-colonial state. Finally, German rule laid the foundations for deep mistrust between communities and state institutions by using violence, coercion and divide-and-rule strategies. The long-term result is that modern governance in Cameroon remains heavily shaped by colonial era disruptions in legitimacy, authority and identity.

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