



POST PLEBISCITE PETITIONS AND REQUESTS FOR THE PARTITION OF SOUTHERN CAMEROONS

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Abstract:

The 1961 UN-organised Plebiscite provoked serious ethnic tension, bitterness and calls from some quarters for the partition of the British Southern Cameroons. The ethnic groups that voted for independence with Nigeria were not satisfied with the results of the plebiscite and were not ready to join the Republic of Cameroon. They clamoured for the partition of the British Southern Cameroons following the voting patterns so that those who voted for Nigeria could join Nigeria freely. This article based on archival and secondary sources attempts a survey of the crisis, the requests by the defeated ethnic groups for the partition of the British Southern Cameroons and the response of the Yaoundé authorities and the United Nations. The study argues that the requests for the partition of the Southern Cameroons were made out of fear that the reunified Cameroon could lead to the domination and exploitation of the coastal ethnic groups by the more dynamic and land grabbing ethnic groups of the Bamenda Grassfields and not out of some phobia for the French Cameroonians.

Keywords: Southern Cameroons, plebiscite, reunification, ethnic tension, petitions

1. Introduction

In July 1884, Germany annexed the coast of Cameroon and eventually occupied the hinterland. The Cameroon created by the Germans was inhabited by a multitude of ethnic groups. It was one of the most pluralistic colonies in terms of indigenous African

societies with more than 250 ethnic groups as identified by anthropologists and linguists. Like elsewhere in African, these ethnic groups maintained their distinctive characteristics during the colonial period and after.

Following the outbreak of the First World War in Europe in 1914, Britain, France and Belgium invaded German Cameroon and by February 1916, the Germans were defeated. The defeat of Germany was followed by the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon. France took control of four-fifths and Britain the remaining one-fifth of Cameroon. These powers were to administer their respective portions as Mandate B territories of the League of Nations. In 1922, the British decided to repartition British Cameroons into two; British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. British Northern Cameroons was administered from Northern Nigeria and the Southern Cameroons, our area of study, was attached to Southern Nigeria in 1922 for "administrative convenience" (Nfi,2014:37). In 1946, and following constitutional reforms in Nigeria, the British Southern Cameroons became an integral part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. The partition of Cameroon and the British decision to administer the Southern Cameroons as an integral part of Nigeria laid the foundation for the division that characterised the nationalists in Southern Cameroons after the Second World War. The German colonial rule had linked them to French Cameroon and from 1922, the British mandate and trusteeship over the Southern Cameroons linked them to Nigeria

By 1955, the political forces in the British Southern Cameroons, a UN Trust Territory since 1946, were radically divided over the future of the territory. Essentially, the Kamerun People's Party (KPP) led by Nerijs Namaso Mbile and the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) led by Emmanuel Mbella Liffafe Endeley wanted the British Southern Cameroon to gain independence as part of the Federation of Nigeria. The *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) led by Roland Moumie and its offshoot, One Kamerun (OK), led by Ndeh Ntumazah wanted independence for the British Southern Cameroon through reunification with the French controlled territory (French Cameroon). The Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) led by John Ngu Foncha, advocated a separate Southern Cameroon state and eventual reunification with French Cameroon (Chem-Langhëë, 1976:231; Le Vine, 1964:199-210). With this division and the ethnic character of the parties, subsequent elections became opportunities for ethnic groups to identify with the ideologies or leaders of these parties

2. Origin of the Division and Ethnic Tension

The Southern Cameroons had a total surface area of 16,581 square miles and a population of 445,735 in 1938 (Ngoh, 2001:23). It was inhabited by Bantu-speaking

peoples but divided by ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political differences. While the coastal people were organised in decentralised communities, the interior Grassfields people had centralised political institutions. The British reinforced these differences by dividing the territory first into four divisions; Victoria, Kumba, Mamfe and Bamenda. Later in 1949, the Bamenda Division was divided into three; Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe Divisions. These divisions made up the Bamenda Province or the Bamenda Grassfields while the Victoria, Kumba and Mamfe Divisions constituted the Cameroons Province, all of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. There existed cultural and historical differences between the Bakweri, Balondo, Bakundu, Bafaw and Bayang of the Cameroons Province at the coast or the Bantu proper and the Bali, Bafut, Nso, Kom and Mankon or the semi-Bantu of the Bamenda Province or the Bamenda Grassfields. A cultural, historical and administrative divide therefore already existed between the two zones of the Southern Cameroons before the politics of the plebiscite. Political parties inherited these cultural and political differences and some political parties were even identified with some ethnic groups.

The division and differences between the ethnic groups or the two zones and political parties were accentuated by elections especially the 1957 and 1959 legislative elections. In 1957, the ruling KNC won six seats in the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly (SCHA). The opposition KNDP and KPP won five and two seats respectively. The UPC that could not win a single seat, accused Endeley of rigging the elections and the UPC was outlawed by the British authorities on May 6, 1957 (Le Vine, 1964:206; Nfi, 2014:221). The results of these elections indicated that the ruling KNC was threatened by the newly created and Grassfields dominated KNDP. The 1959 legislative elections also revealed that the parties and ethnic groups were divided over the future of the territory. The KPP and KNC that campaigned for union with Nigeria won a total of twelve seats in the SCHA while the OK and KNDP that wanted reunification with French administered Cameroon had a total of fourteen seats. The victory of the reunificationists over the integrationists was so narrow that independence to the Southern Cameroons could not be granted on the bases of the results of the 1959 elections. Worse-still in March 1960, J N Boja, a KNDP reunificationist and deputy from the Grassfields constituency of Wum Division crossed the carpet and joined the KNC and integrationists. The SCHA was therefore divided into two equal camps, thirteen reunificationists and thirteen integrationists (Ngho, 1987:233).

With this division, the UN had to organise a plebiscite in the territory for the indigenes to determine the future of their motherland. This plebiscite was organised on February 11, 1961 with the following questions;

Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Federation of Nigeria?

or

Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Republic of Cameroon?

The KNDP of John Ngu Foncha and the OK of Ndeh Ntumazah, all from the Bamenda Grassfields campaigned for reunification and 233,571 Cameroonians voted for reunification (Rubin, 1971: 199). The Cameroon Peoples National Convention (CPNC) - a KPP-KNC alliance led by Dr E M L Endeley and N N Mbile, all from the coastal zone campaigned for independence with Nigeria and only 97,571 voters opted for union with Nigeria (Ebune, 1992: 229). The plebiscite results were therefore in favour of the reunification of the two Cameroons. The CPNC and the coastal Bakweri, Bakossi, Bassosi, Balondo, Bafaw, Bakundu ethnic groups refused to accept the results and called on the UN to partition the Southern Cameroons. Even before the Plebiscite was organised, and following the continued divergence of views between Foncha and Endeley; N.N. Mbile had suggested that the way out of the dilemma was to partition the territory to allow each tribe or division make its own choice between the two alternatives. The calls for the partition of the territory were followed by threats of war and the intimidation of the Grassfields ethnic groups that massively voted for reunification.

3. Plebiscite Campaigns and Ethnic Tension

As mentioned above, the post plebiscite ethnic tension in the Southern Cameroons had its roots in the alleged ethnic composition of political parties, the antagonisms that characterised the campaigns and the voting patterns in the various divisions or constituencies. The KNDP which led the pro-reunification camp was considered as a Grassfields party probably because its main leaders (John Ngu Foncha, Solomon Tandeng Muna, Augustine Ngum Jua) were from Nkwen, Metta and Kom respectively in the Grassfields. The CPNC on the other hand was considered a coastal or forest zone party probably because its leaders such as E M L Endeley, N N Mbile, Motomby-Woleta and R N Charley were from the ethnic groups of the coast. The Bakweri, Bakossi, Bassosi, Balondo and Bakundu ethnic groups along the coast, saw the CPNC as the party that could protect their interest against Grassfields settlers who were considered as land grabbers (Chem-Langhëë, 233). The ethnic colouration of these parties influenced the campaign declarations.

During the plebiscite campaigns, the CPNC indicated that it was ready to fight against reunification even if the majority Southern Cameroonians voted for it. For example Endeley and the CPNC started the campaigns with this statement:

In the event of a vote in favour of the Cameroon Republic, the CPNC will request unconditionally that the UN partition the territory between the group of persons desiring

a union with the independent federation and those seeking a union with the Cameroon Republic.

(Chem-Langhëë, 272)

Apart from this statement, the CPNC also produced a campaign poster on which was a UN soldier splitting Cameroon with a machete. "*Southern Cameroons to be split*", read the poster "*..this will happen if you vote foolishly at the plebiscite, choose English (Nigeria) refuse French (Cameroon Republic)*" (Ebune, 184). Endeley's declarations and the poster were already indicators that the aftermath of the plebiscite could be chaotic in case the majority voted for reunification.

On the other hand, Foncha played on ethnic and regional sentiments to discredit union with Nigeria. On several occasions and in the constituencies of the Bamenda Grassfields, he presented the plebiscite alternatives as follows; Do you like Dr Endeley, the Bakweri man? Or Do you like Foncha, the Bamenda man? (Ngoh, 1987:233) By putting the plebiscite alternatives as being between "the Bakweri man" and "the Bamenda man" Foncha wanted to benefit from the fact that the Bamenda Grassfields was more populated than the forest zone with close to 52 percent of the population of the Southern Cameroons. Unfortunately, Foncha's declarations raised fears amongst the coastal people that a reunified Cameroon could become what Mbile called the "Bamita Empire", that is, a new republic dominated by the Meta ethnic group and the Grassfields people in general.

The plebiscite results confirmed Endeley's fears. Out of the total of 233,571 votes in favour of reunification, 150,622 came from the Bamenda Grassfields with the Bamenda Division alone having 108,485 votes (Fanso, 1991:154). The overwhelming vote for reunification in the Bamenda Division in particular could be explained by the presence of two leading reunificationists Foncha and Ntumazah. Generally, while the Grassfields voted for reunification, the coastal indigenes especially the Bakweri, Bakossi, Balondo, Bakundo and Bassosi voted against.

In Kumba Division, the indigenous people led by Hon. Francis Ajebe-Sone, N N Mbile, J N Nasako, R N Charley and R N Ntoko voted for union with Nigeria. In the Kumba north-east, Kumba south-east and Kumba south-west constituencies where the majority voted for reunification, it was realised that the Grassfields settlers from Bamenda and the Bamileke region of French Cameroon were those who inflated the votes in favour of reunification. Despite their pro-reunification votes, Kumba Division generally rejected reunification by 32,733 votes for Nigeria and 27,600 votes for Cameroon (Ebune, 230).

In the Victoria Division, home of Endeley and Motomby-Woleta, the Bakweri, Bomboko, Wovea, Bimbia, Bakolle, Balong, Efik and Mungo people (indigenes), rejected

reunification by voting for Nigeria. After the plebiscite, the Bakweri themselves made a very careful study of the voting pattern in their villages and it revealed that fifteen villages predominantly inhabited by the Bakweri had 6,546 voters and only 840 voted for Cameroon. The rest 5,706 voted for Nigeria. These Bakweri votes were as follows:

Bakweri Villages	Votes for Nigeria	Votes for Cameroon
Bota	356	40
Batoke	279	121
Bakingili	109	45
Bamuso	310	10
Bova	656	17
Small Soppo	299	86
Great Soppo	453	150
Membea	655	11
Bonjongo	960	69
Bonabavio	165	09
Wokova	243	10
Ekona Lelu	163	01
Lysoka Natives	483	63
Molyko 2	276	71
Muea 2	299	147
Total	5706	840

Source: *Cameroons Champion*, vol.2, no.7 February 15, 1961, p.3

In seven villages of the division predominantly inhabited by non-Bakweri, a total of 11,185 votes were cast, 3,846 for Nigeria and 7,339 for Cameroon. In nine plantation polling stations, a total of 11,280 votes were cast at the plebiscite, 1,885 for Nigeria and 9,392 for Cameroonⁱ. The Bakweri like other indigenes of the coast therefore concluded that they were solidly against reunification while settlers and plantation workers from the Bamenda Grassfields were for reunification. French Cameroon immigrants in all the divisions of the Southern Cameroons also inflated the votes in favour of reunification (Nfi, 2014). Was it therefore, proper to impose reunification on these coastal ethnic groups? Had they the right to self-determination? It was in attempt to answer these questions that the ethnic groups along the coast refused to accept the plebiscite results and petitioned the United Nations.

ⁱ *Cameroons Champion*, 15 February 1961, p.3

4. Requests for the Partition of the Southern Cameroons

The publication of the plebiscite results on February 14, 1961 was followed by an avalanche of petitions from the CPNC and pro-CPNC ethnic groups along the coast. Since the UN had not defined the details on how the results were to be interpreted, the CPNC petitions proposed that in the interpretation of the results only the ethnic groups or Kingdoms should be consulted rather than the nation Southern Cameroons created by the colonial masters. The CPNC position was stated in these words:

In our opinion, the tribe or clan constituted that unit, and it must be that unit that the UN was to use in the final interpretation of the results. If any tribe indicated by majority where it wished to be, there it was to be allowed to go. If the effect of that choice was to last a thousand years, then that ethnic group would have chosen its destiny by itself.

(Mbile, 2000:156)

With this stance, Endeley encouraged the ethnic groups that had voted for Nigeria to organise protests or petition the UN and clamour for the partition of the Southern Cameroons so that such ethnic groups could freely join Nigeria. The first group to call for a rebellion was the Bakweri *Molongo*-a cultural society embracing all the Bakweri speaking people. In a protest message published in *Cameroon Champion* of February 17, 1961, Chief K Lyonga of Soppo Wovila-President of Bakweri *Molongo* called for a Bakweri uprising in the following words:

*"I wish to praise and congratulate all Bakweri at home and at work for the way they voted during the last plebiscite of the Southern Cameroons. Their votes clearly indicated that they do not like unification. The votes of strangers in our division cannot bind us to a cause we do not accept. At a time like this, it is imperative for all Bakweri to stand firm, myself as president of the Bakweri Molongo and the Bakweri Assembly men are prepared to provide the dynamic leadership necessary to thwart domination from strangers on our land. I call on all Bakweri therefore to provide the militant followership necessary for a successful defiance against domination from other tribes."*ⁱⁱ

In the same edition of the newspaper, the publisher and CPNC propagandist, Peter Motomby-Woleta asked Foncha the following question; "*if Ibo domination is not good for Cameroonians, should Grassfields domination be good for the Bakweri*"? Foncha throughout the plebiscite campaigns had rejected union with Nigeria because he feared

ⁱⁱ Cameroons Champion, 17 February, 1961, p.2.

Ibo domination given that the Ibo were controlling more than 70 percent of the economy and 60 percent of the public service of the Southern Cameroons (Nfi, 2015). This is how he framed the plebiscite alternatives in the majority of the areas, "*Do you like to stay in your country, the Cameroons?*" Or "*Do you wish to sell your country to the Ibo who will dethrone your chiefs and take away all your land and property*" (Ngoh, 1987:233)? Motomby-Woleta's question clearly indicated that the Bakweri were resisting reunification because they feared Grassfields domination just like Foncha had rejected Nigeria out of fear of Igbo domination.

In a petition to the UN on February 17, 1961, the Bakweri Assembly indicated that they had voted for union with Nigeria because "native strangers" had developed a "plot" to "deprive" them of their "land. According to the petitioners, "native strangers" voted for reunification in Victoria Division in order to seize the Bakweri land, and in order "to spite and over-run the Bakweri".ⁱⁱⁱ With these ambitions of the settlers, it was necessary for the Bakweri to remain in Nigeria. The UN was therefore invited to partition Southern Cameroons and allow the "Bamenda" people to go on with their Cameroon proposition.

On February 27, 1961, the Balondo of Kumba Division also complained in a petition to the UN that the "sinister motive" of the Grassfields people in voting for reunification was to "drag" the coastal peoples "to a lawless society" where they would then "seize" the Balondos "fertile lands" which they envied.^{iv} In an interview granted to Cameroons Champion on March 11, 1961, Mbile declared that Foncha's ambition was to "extend the Bamita Empire to the Congo and Lake Chad". In order to be out of the Grassfields dominated "Bamita Empire", they called for the immediate partition of the Southern Cameroons between those who voted for Nigeria and those who voted for Cameroon. According to Mbile and Nasako who led the petitioners, the Balondo had registered a decisive majority in favour of union with Nigeria and could not accept Grassfields domination.

The next ethnic group in Kumba Division to complain was the Bakundu. In February 1961, the Bakundu People Convention informed the UN that they never voted for reunification and that they were prepared to fight against it to the last man if justice was not done by partitioning Cameroon. On March 4, 1961, the union of all the Bakossi speaking people, *Mwane-Ngoe* Union, organised a general assembly at Muambong. The close to 2,000 delegates from all the fifteen clans of the Bakossi and Bassosi groups called on the UN "*to make all appropriate arrangements whereby the Bakossi people would be administered with other kindred tribes, who have voted solidly for federation with the*

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations, Trusteeship Council, T/PET, 4/L, 21 March, 1961, pp.1-3.

^{iv} United Nations, Trusteeship Council, Petition from the Balondo Speaking People's Convention Concerning the Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration, Kumba, 27 February, 1961, pp.1-4.

independent Federation of Nigeria".^v Like the Bakweri and the other ethnic groups in the Victoria and Kumba Divisions along the coast, the Bakossi feared the expropriation of their land by settlers and land grabbers from the Grassfields.

The Bafaw also joined the anti-reunification movement. On March 21, 1961, the Bafaw Youth Association wrote a petition to the UN complaining that Foncha's campaign slogans misled the electorate and that they were not for reunification. According to the Bafaw petitioners "*those who voted for reunification did so because Foncha's slogans emphasized on the need to free Cameroon from the Ibo and not because they wanted reunification*" (Chem-Langhëë, 332). The Bafaw petitioners did not raise fears of settler seizure of their land or Grassfields domination.

Besides, it should be made clear that the anti-reunification petitions were not limited to the coastal communities. For example, the Fon of Nso in the Grassfields refused to recognise the plebiscite results in his kingdom in a petition to the UN on March 3, 1961. As a CPNC militant, he advocated union with Nigeria but his subjects opted for reunification. In his petition, he proposed that his kingdom be integrated in Northern Nigeria in case of the partition of the Southern Cameroons. Some petitioners from Nkambe Division also requested that their constituency be annexed to Northern Nigeria.

Again, not all the ethnic groups along the coast were against the plebiscite results. The Mbonge ethnic group through their chiefs wrote to the UN on March 20, 1961 solemnly and solidly declaring their support for reunification. It should be recalled that Mbonge was the only electoral district in Kumba South East which voted with an overwhelming majority (12,827 votes against 6,105) in favour of the Cameroon proposition. Some of the Bakweri people were happy losers. Eleven Bakweri chiefs and thirteen Bakweri elders denounced the proposed partition of the Southern Cameroon and Dr Endeley for advocating such a hideous idea (Chem-Langhëë, 332). They were prepared to oppose the balkanisation of the already balkanised Cameroon. In Kumba, M Bokwe also stood tall against the meetings and resolutions in favour of partition. Mamfe which was geographically closer to Nigeria than Kumba or Victoria and where the electorate opted for reunification did not register any petition in favour of partition. It was perhaps the presence of people like Bokwe, the pro-reunification Bakweri chiefs and elders and the situation in Mbonge and Mamfe that made the post plebiscite ethnic tension and requests for the partition of the Southern Cameroons to end in threats not war.

^v Cameroons Champion, 11 March 1961, p.1

5. Reactions from the UN and the Republic of Cameroon

Endeley and the opponents of reunification along the coast did not end at the level of written threats and petitions. An important delegation of the CPNC and representatives of the various petitioning ethnic groups was sent to the UN in April 1961. While the CPNC paid travel and lodging expenses for Endeley and Mbile, the Bakweri *Molongo*, the Bakossi *Muane-Ngoe* and other ethnic associations paid the cost of sending their delegates (Mbile, 157). Finally, a CPNC team composed of E M L Endeley, N N Mbile, S M L Endeley, E K Martins, chief Sakwe-Bokwe and Rev. Andoh Seh arrived in New York in April 1961. The mission of the delegation was to convince the UN on the need for the ethnic groups that voted to join Nigeria to be given the chance to join Nigeria. The delegates addressed the UN in turns presenting various and varying arguments in favour of the partition of the territory.

After several presentations, the validation of the Southern Cameroons plebiscite results was put to vote. Before the voting proper, Charles Okala, the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Republic of Cameroon invited all the Francophone countries at the UN to boycott the session because he feared that the UN resolution to put the matter to vote was another British attempt to rob Cameroon of part of its land. Despite the absence of the Francophone states, the plebiscite results in the Southern Cameroons were declared valid by a UN vote of 26 for and 6 against with 33 abstentions (Mbile, 157).

The UN validation of the plebiscite results and rejection of appeals for the partition of Cameroon were not immediately considered as the end of the struggle by the CPNC and affiliated ethnic groups. It took quite some time for some "wise men" at the UN to change the hearts of the delegates along the corridors of the UN. Amongst these "wise men" was Dr Bebey Eyidi from the Republic of Cameroon. He in a very conciliatory voice appealed to the delegates to avoid the further fragmentation of Cameroon and to accept reunification as all may not be "*fire-eating east of the river Mungo*". With this, the CPNC delegates and the representatives of the petitioning ethnic groups accepted to meet Foncha and S T Muna in one of the UN halls. At the meeting, the petitioners accepted to abandon the struggle for the partition of the territory and to work with the KNDP for a smooth or hitch-free reunification.

After the entente between the Southern Cameroonians at the UN in April, 1961, Ahidjo, the President of the Republic of Cameroon decided to visit Buea in May 1961 so as to ensure that the threats of secession were over. During the visit, Ahidjo sprang all a huge surprise by inviting Endeley, Mbile, Motomby-Woleta and other CPNC militants known for their pro-Nigerian stance, to the *Schloss* (Prime Minister's residence) in Buea. He assured them that despite their views, he harboured no bitterness against them and that the task of nation building which lay ahead, was the concern of all Cameroonians

(Mbile, 159). This was clever on the part of Ahidjo who appeared to have known that these Foncha's opponents could be used in future to weaken Foncha's position in the new state. The rapprochement between Ahidjo and the CPNC made the dreaded reunification more and more acceptable to the Bakweri, Bkundu, Balondo, Bakossi and Bafaw ethnic groups which had vowed to fight it to the last man.

6. Conclusion

The post plebiscite political situation in the Southern Cameroons was very tense. Although the plebiscite results were challenged in almost all the constituencies, the coastal Bakweri, Bakossi, Bakundu and Balondo ethnic groups were more vocal and rebellious in their refusal to recognise the results. Using the CPNC propaganda paper, *Cameroons Champion*, the leaders of these groups published anti-Foncha and anti-reunification literature threatening to fight to the last man to secure the partition of the Southern Cameroon. They feared that reunification was to lead to the seizure of their land by Grassfields settlers and the establishment by Foncha of a Grassfields dominated "Bamita Empire"

These threats remained on paper and the Southern Cameroons escaped partition probably because the Mamfe and Mbonge people and some Bakweri chiefs were against partition. However if the Southern Cameroons was not partitioned as requested by the pro-Nigerian ethnic groups, it was largely because the UN validated the plebiscite results to the chagrin of the petitioners and also because Ahidjo resolved to build the new nation even with those who had opposed reunification. The Bakweri, Bakossi, Balondo and Bakundu ethnic groups therefore remained within the reunited Cameroon much against the choice they made in February 1961 because of UN's validation of the plebiscite results and Ahidjo's determination to work with all West Cameroonians. This conclusion undermines previous findings by Willard Johnson and others which indicated that the opponents of reunification in the Southern Cameroons based their arguments on the fact that it was unwise to abandon the British system for the French culture in a turbulent and "terrorist" threatened French Cameroon. This paper enriches the empirical literature on the attitude of the ethnic groups towards reunification of with French Cameroon.

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