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The Shadows of German Colonialism: Collective Memory of Trauma in Cameroon's Bamenda Grasslands

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ABSTRACT: German colonial legacy in Cameroonian historical memory is increasingly fraught with unease, as recollections of brutal colonial practices ranging from inhumane labour policies and disrespect of traditional authorities to the expropriation of indigenous lands, the desecration of sacred cultural artifacts, and forced conscription into the German militia continue to haunt affected communities. These traumatic experiences, deeply etched into the collective psyche, have been transmitted across generations. This study departs from this premise to critically examine the enduring impact of German colonial rule in the Bamenda Grasslands, arguing that the immaterial legacies of German administration have produced conflicting outcomes, most notably a persistent sense of collective trauma among the indigenous populations. Drawing on oral testimonies gathered through focus group discussions with seventeen participants across three sessions, individual interviews, archival materials, and documented sources, the research uncovers how the wounds of colonial violence remain unhealed and embedded within the community's collective memory. These memories are preserved and conveyed through oral histories, manifested in enduring scepticism toward both colonial and postcolonial state authority, and reflected in recent efforts to repatriate looted cultural artifacts from Europe. The study underscores the urgent need for a structured process of collective healing, one that demands sincere acts of acknowledgment, restitution, and reconciliation from former colonial powers, in order to mend historical fractures and foster renewed, equitable relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

A century after its end, the period of German rule (1884-1916) in Cameroon remains deeply ingrained in the minds of Cameroonians. This is because German rule left indelible imprints not only on the territory and its communities but also in the minds of the peoples therein. Several authors have engaged the subject of the German legacies in Cameroon not just from the material perspective, but also from a glorious field of vision. Some have argued that in terms of development, the period of German rule is generally acclaimed for high quality and long-lasting infrastructure. The plantations (specifically in Bakweri land)[1], roads (notably, the Bamenda-Banyo Road), bridges (especially the Edea Bridge)[2] and railways[3] all bear testimony to a solid German presence in Cameroon.

[1] German plantations in the Southwestern Coast of Cameroon had grown to over 100,000 hectares by the end of 1916. See Ambe J. Njoh, "Development implications of colonial land and human settlement schemes in Cameroon". In: *Habitat International* 26(3):399-415. DOI: 10.1016/S0197-3975(02)00015-2. Found online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223322812_Development_implications_of_colonial_land_and_human_settlement_schemes_in_Cameroon. Accessed on 15 March 2023.

[2] The Edea German Bridge, built in 1911 by *Gutehoffnungshütte* of Oberhausen, Germany, was a 160-meter railway bridge over the River Sanaga near Edea and the largest in Africa at the time. Its strategic significance made it a focal point during World War I, leading to two intense battles. In December 1914, British and French forces forced the Germans to retreat to Yaoundé, and in

Attention to these glorious material relics of German rule in Cameroon has tended to obliterate the inglorious and immaterial patrimony that the Germans left on the indigenous peoples of this territory. An attempt to contribute a scholarly engagement to this question has necessitated the study of collective memory of trauma within the German colonial context in Cameroon. In fact, while the Cameroonian experience with the Germans has left a conspicuous memory of infrastructural development, the gory tales of the inglorious activities of the Germans have also never departed the psyche of individuals, communities and the Cameroonian nation. This study therefore chronicles the trauma that Cameroonians experienced in their interactions with the Germans as individuals, as communities and as a nation. The study lends particular attention to how the German labour policy, brutal administrative scenes evident in suppression of revolts, seizure of indigenous lands and spiritual as well as cultural artifacts and forceful conscription into the German militia during World War I left affected individuals and communities with trauma that have persisted several years after.

Understanding the concepts

The impulse to seek an unambiguous comprehension of the concepts of "collective memory", "trauma" and "colonialism" as used in this study has necessitated an excursion into diverse literature spanning across a wide range of academic fields. The desire to ruminate these concepts is engendered by the fact that they are inherently ambiguous and used differently in different contexts by different scholars depending on their backgrounds. To say the least, there are as many definitions and meanings to the concepts of "collective memory", "trauma" and "colonialism" as there are theorists attempting to explicate them.

Collective memory

While the past invariably affects the present life of individuals and communities, the degree of impact varies tremendously depending on the nature of the event concerned. The concept of collective memory has gained attention in scholarship across a wide range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and history in the recent years. This is because the past continues to have an imposing impact on the present and keeps shaping and reshaping group actions and reactions into the future. As enunciated by the French philosopher and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory has a social dimension[4] and is significantly associated with group's identity. Even more, collective memory significantly interplays with the history of a people. However, the difference between history and collective memory is best understood when comparing the aims and characteristics of each. The goal of history broadly is to provide a comprehensive, accurate, and unbiased portrayal of past events. This often includes the representation and comparison of multiple perspectives and the systematisation of these perspectives and details to provide a complete and accurate account. In contrast, collective memory focuses on a single perspective, for instance, the perspective of one social group, nation, or community. Consequently, collective memory represents past events as associated with the values, narratives and biases specific to that group.[5]

Pierre Nora, a French historian who developed the concept of "*les lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory) states that collective memory is embedded in physical and symbolic sites.[6] He argues that the role of physical sites in shaping collective memory cannot be overemphasized while maintaining that these sites serve as tangible links to

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January 1915, a German attempt to reclaim the bridge was repelled by the French. For more on the Edea German Bridge, read: Léonard I. Sah, (1982). "Activités allemandes et germanophilie au Cameroun (1936-1939)". In : *Rev. Franc. d'Hist. d'Outre-Mer* (1982 : 129-144). Found online at : Activités allemandes et germanophilie au Cameroun (1936-1939) - Persée (persee.fr). Retrieved on 17 February 2023.

[3] The first railway in Cameroon was a 600 mm line operating between Zwingenberger Hof in Soppo (near Buea) and the port of Victoria (now Limbe), offering both freight and passenger services. The second was the 160 km Douala-Nkongsamba railway, or Northern Railway (Nordbahn), built between 1906 and 1911 by the Cameroon Railway Corporation (Kamerun-Eisenbahn-Gesellschaft). The third was the Douala-Ngaoundere line, known as the Central Railway (Mittellandbahn). Read: Helmut Schroeter, *Die Eisenbahnen der ehemaligen deutschen Schutzgebiete Afrikas und ihre Fahrzeuge Die Fahrzeuge der deutschen Eisenbahnen 7*. (Frankfurt am Main : Verkehrswissenschaftliche Lehrmittelgesellschaft, 1961).

[4] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*. (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925).

[5] For more information, read: James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger, "Collective memory: conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches". *Memory* (England : Hove, April 2008). 16 (3) : 318-326.

[6] Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, *Bibliothèque Illustrée des histoires*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1984). See also Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". In: *Memory and Counter Memory*, *Special Issue* No. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

the past. He also shows how collective memory is constructed through social and cultural practices, such as rituals, ceremonies, and commemorations. Nora also explores how collective memory shapes identity and informs the understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.[7] This dimension of memory is particularly relevant to this study as the material relics of German colonialism will be analyzed as they relate to their abilities to bring back memories of German colonialism to the minds of the people of the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon. Additionally, Paul Connerton (a British sociologist and cultural theorist) has analyzed the relationship between collective memory and bodily practices. He examines the ways in which collective memory is embedded in social practices.[8] Aleida Assmann (a German cultural theorist and historian) on his part, has also written extensively on collective memory, cultural identity, and the politics of memory. Her work, *Erinnerungsräume* (Spaces of Remembrance) explores the relationship between collective memory and cultural identity.[9]

As part of attempts to ponder the concept of collective memory, other scholars have propounded related concepts. For instance, James Edward Young has introduced the notion of "collected memory" which emphasises memory's inherently fragmented, collected and individual character.[10] According to Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist and cultural theorist the notion of "communicative memory" refers to a variety of collective memory based on everyday communication.[11] He also examines the role of collective memory in shaping cultural identity.[12] Other theorists have also suggested other concepts like "constructed memory", "social memory"[13] and "collective consciousness". Evidently, collective memory either imposes itself on a people or it comes by choice. In other words, people choose to remember episodes in their history depending on how those events impacted on them or depending on their shared prides and prejudices. Collective memory therefore refers to the shared pool of memories, knowledge and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity. This concept also refers to the shared memories and experiences of the past that are passed down through generations, shaping the identity and worldview of the community.

Colonialism and Trauma

These concepts recognize the historical trauma inflicted upon the indigenous populations of the Bamenda Grasslands by German colonialism, including forced labour, land expropriation, and cultural suppression. The concept of trauma has often been used in association with individual plights. However, the social dimension of trauma requires a careful attention given that it is becoming a common occurrence even in today's world. Like collective memory, some authors have harped on the concept of collective trauma to provide academic clues to its meaning. According to Seth Abrutyn, collective trauma refers to "the destruction of social infrastructure and the ensuing negative mental health outcomes".[14] From his perspective, Gilad Hirschberger submits that:

> Collective trauma is a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society … it refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma to make sense of it.[15]

In trying to delineate collective memory from individual memory, Hirschberger further argues that:

> Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space. These subsequent

[7] *Ibid*.
[8] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[9] Assmann Aleida, *Erinnerungsräume, Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munchen: CH Beck, 1999).
[10] James E. Young, *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
[11] Jan Assmann, "Communicative and cultural memory". In: A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008): 109-118.
[12] Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Massachusetts; London, England, 1998.
[13] Guy Beiner. "Troubles with Remembering; or the Seven Sins of Memory Studies". *Dublin Review of Books* (2017).
[14] S. Abrutyn, The Roots of Social Trauma: Collective, Cultural Pain and Its Consequences. *Society and Mental Health*, Found online at: https://doi.org/10.1177/21568693231213088 accessed on 12 June, 2024.
[15] G. Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning". *Front Psychol*. 10, Vol. 9 (August 2018) :1441. Found at: Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441. PMID: 30147669; PMCID: PMC6095989.

> generations of trauma survivors, that never witnessed the actual events, may remember the events differently than the direct survivors, and then the construction of these past events may take different shape and form from generation to generation. Such collective memory of a calamity suffered in the past by a group's ancestors may give rise to a *chosen trauma* dynamic that weaves the connection between trauma, memory and ontological security.[16]

These definitions, implicitly and/or explicitly inspire the understanding and use of the concept of collective trauma in this study. In fact, the study illustrates how the traumatic experiences of German colonial rule in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon do not only impose themselves on the collective memory of the people today but also continue to affect their lives, actions and reactions.

It is evident that collective trauma affects an entire community and are experienced across generations. Collective memory is essentially communal and generational in nature. The gory colonial experiences of the people of the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon which manifested in the forms forceful labour exactions, the seizure of spiritual and cultural artifacts, the ill-treatment of royalties and military brutality continue to haunt and affect the present generation through a process akin to the psychological concept of compassion fatigue. By compassion fatigue, we are referring to the state of psychic exhaustion that results from exposure to other people's suffering experiences overtime. The exposure of the present generation of the people of the Bamenda Grasslands to the sufferings and life-threatening occurrences of the past generation within the German colonial context have tended to affect community lives, actions and reactions in significant ways. This concept referred to as the "intergenerational transmission of trauma" acknowledges that traumatic experiences can be transmitted from one generation to the next, influencing the collective memory and identity of the community.

Cultural resilience, decolonisation and healing

The concepts of cultural resilience, decolonisation and healing also underpin the present study in significant ways. Cultural resilience brings to the fore the ways in which indigenous cultures resist and adapt to colonialism, preserving their cultural heritage and identity. This highlights the concept of indigenous agency, which asserts that indigenous peoples, both overtly and subtly actively resisted colonialism and played a decisive role in shaping their interactions with colonial powers. In fact, colonialism inadvertently reinforced the patriotism of the indigenous people in their indigenous systems and adherence to their identity. Decolonisation and healing, for their part, emphasize the necessity of confronting historical trauma and the persistent impacts of colonialism through sustained and transformative efforts.

Interpretive models

The present study is succoured by several academic paradigms that further illuminate its understanding. These theoretical underpinnings include the Postcolonial Theory, Trauma Theory and the Social Memory Theory.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is a theoretical framework that examines the cultural, social, and economic impacts of colonialism and imperialism on colonised societies. It emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the dominant Western epistemological and theoretical frameworks that had been imposed on non-Western societies including Africa. This scholarly viewpoint interrogates the ongoing legacies of colonialism and emphasizes the need for decolonisation and indigenous self-determination. Several theorists have harped on aspects of this perspective and have significantly contributed to shaping this field of vision through generations. Some of the authors who have pondered the postcolonial theory from different angles include Edward Said (A Palestinian American literary theorist and critic)[17], Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (An Indian philosopher and literary theorist) [18], Homi K. Bhabha (An Indian philosopher and cultural theorist)[19], Frantz Fanon (A Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist) [20], Albert

[16] *Ibid.* for more details about chosen trauma, read: V. Volkan (ed.) "Chosen trauma: unresolved mourning," in *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism,* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux1997), 36-49.
[17] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, 1977).
[18] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can Subaltern Speak". In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds,), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* (Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988): 271-313.
[19] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture. (London and New York, Routledge, 1994).
[20] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the World* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963). Translated by Constance Farrington.

Memmi (A Tunisian philosopher and writer) [21], Ngugi wa Thiong'o (A Kenyan writer and scholar) [22] and Achille Mbembe (A Cameroonian philosopher and historian)[23]. In their diverse academic works, these authors have demonstrated not only the destructive human, psychological and economic nature of colonialism but also the urgency and necessity for Africa and other colonised communities in the world to extricate themselves from the colonial mentality and legacies.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is a multidisciplinary framework that explores the psychological, social, and cultural effects of traumatic events on both individuals and communities. It reveals that experiences marked by profound fear, anxiety, or helplessness can have lasting psychological effects, emphasizing the essential role of healing and recovery. This theory is supported by several related models including the psychoanalytic theory which views trauma as disruption to the psychic structure, resulting in repression, denial, or dissociation; the cognitive-behavioural model which considers trauma as a learned response, leading to maladaptive coping and negative thought patterns; the social constructivist theory which frames trauma as a concept shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts; and the neurobiological model which focuses on trauma's effects on brain structures involved in emotion regulation and memory. The study incorporates these perspectives through both explicit discussion and implicit influence.

II. SOCIAL MEMORY THEORY

Grounded in the dynamics of remembrance and identity, social memory theory investigates the ways in which collective memories are constructed, negotiated, and transmitted, ultimately shaping communal self-understanding and worldview. It is a multidisciplinary framework that examines how societies remember and represent their past. It explains the shared memories and experiences of a group or society, which shape their identity, culture, and understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It is underpinned by collective memory which is a type of social memory that refers to the shared memories and experiences of a group or society, which are passed down through generations. The Social Memory Theory is elaborated by several authors in different models including Halbwachs' Theory of Collective Memory[24], Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory[25] and Nora's Theory of *Les lieux de Mémoire.*[26]

Bamenda Grasslands, Cameroon: A Geographical and Ethnological Profile

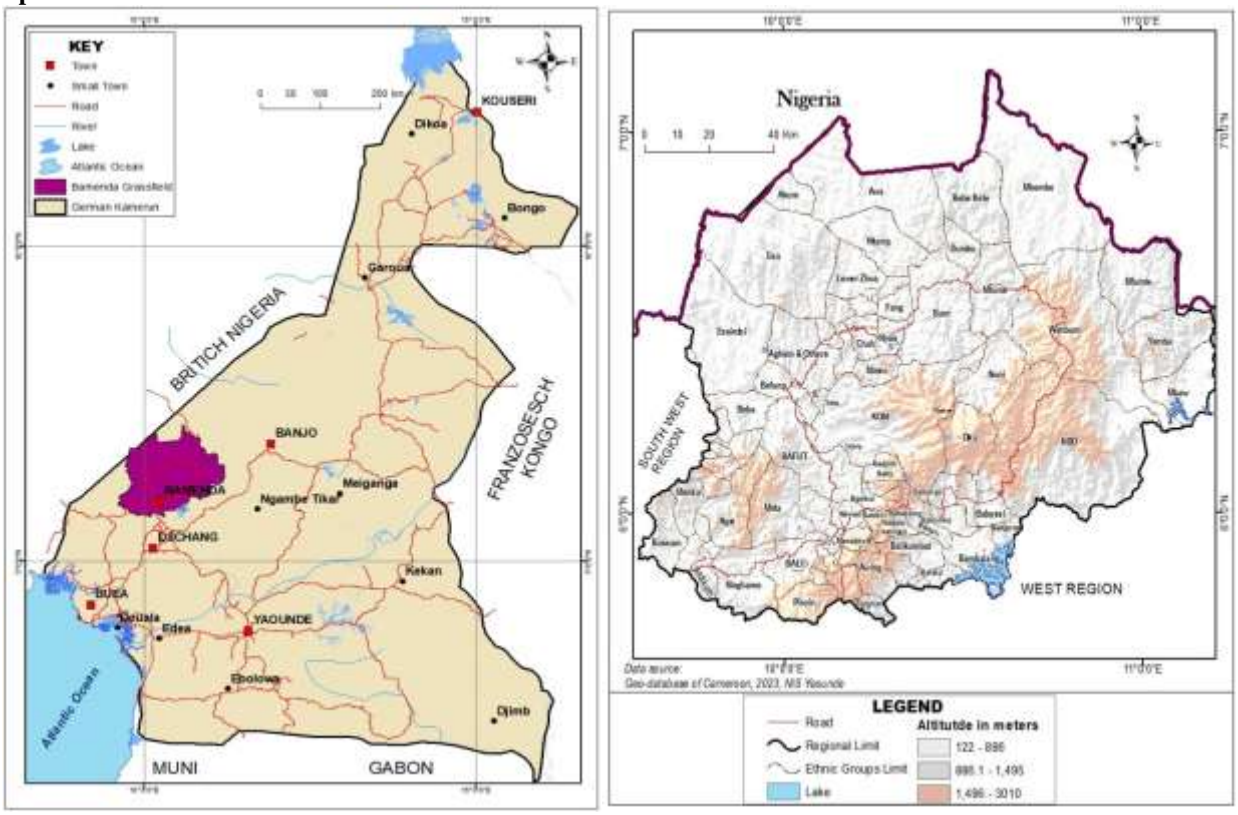
The Bamenda Grasslands known variously over time as the "Bamenda Grassfields," the "Western Grassfields," the "Western High Plateau," the "North West Province," and, more recently, the "North West Region" is located around latitude 5º15' north of the equator, stretching from longitude 9º17' east to 11º25' east,[27] covering a surface area of approximately 17,812 square kilometres.[28] It is made up of different ethnic identities. That is why the region is described as the "melting pot of African races".[29] These groups speak different languages and live in a number of distinct geographical locations which has been shaped and has also helped to shape its history.[30] The region is made up of a mountain chain known as the Western Highlands extending into the West, parts of the South

[21] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (New York: The Orion Press Inc., 1957).
[22] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (London: James Currey Ltd, Nairobi: Heinemann and Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986).
[23] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics". In: *Public Culture* 15. No. 1, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003): 11-40. Translated by Libby Meintjes.
[24] Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux.*
[25] Assmann, "Communicative and cultural memory". 109
[26] Nora, "Between Memory and History. 7-11.
[27] E.Y. Sobseh, "Land Tenure and Land Conflicts in the North West Region of Cameroon, 1974-2008, A Historical Perspective", (Ph.D. Thesis in History, University of Yaoundé I, April 2011), pp. 34.
[28] H. K. Kah, "Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organisation and Leadership, 1957-1961" in *African Studies Quarterly, Vol.12, Issue 3*, September 2011. pp.68. Found at http://www.Africa.ufl.edu/asq/v12/v12i3a4.pdf accessed on 27th December 2013.
[29] E.A. Gwan, "Types, Processes and Policy implications of the various Migrations in Western Cameroon", Ph.D. Thesis in Geography, University of California, 1975. pp. 3-9 and V.G Fanso, "Anglophone and Francophone Nationalisms in Cameroon", in *The Round Table, Vol. 350,* (1999). p. 281.
[30] T. Eyongetah et al, *A History of the Cameroon, New Edition,* (United Kingdom: Longman Group, UK Limited, 1974), p.1.

West and Littoral Regions of present-day Cameroon. The mountains include Mount Lefo (2550m), Mount Fungom (1804m), Mount Oku (3011m, which is the second highest mountain in the country after Mount Cameroon which is 4095m above sea level). The region has major plains that go as low as 400m below sea level. Examples include the Ndop plain, Caldera-like Wum plain and the low-lying Basins of Ndop and Mbo as well as the erosional Basin of the Middle Menchum.[31] The region is also host to the Menchum Falls, one of the largest of its kind in Cameroon and in the Central African sub region.

The Bamenda Grasslands are predominantly inhabited by communities with long histories of migration, some tracing their origins as far as the northern, western, or northwestern regions of the African continent. According to Kaberry, the population of the region is divided into five major groups including the Tikar (approximately 175,000), Widikum (83,000), Mbembe (22,000), Chamba (14,000), and Aghem (7,000).[32]

Map 1: German *Kamerun* showing the Bamenda Grasslands and Map 2: Ethnographic and Geographical representation of the Bamenda Grasslands



Sources Map 1: Adapted from V.E Mukete, *My Odyssey: The Story of Cameroon Reunification (With Authentic Letters of Key Players* (Yaoundé, Cameroon: Eagle Publishing, 2013), p. 29. Drawn by Melorine Maps. **Source Map 2:** Adapted from Anthony Ndi, *Southern West Cameroon Revisited, North-South West Nexus, 1858-1972: Myth, History and Reality*, Vol. 2 (Bamenda, 2013), p. 7. Drawn by Melorine Maps.

However, the 1953 population census reported different figures, estimating the Tikar population at 259,914; Widikum at 110,126; Bali Chamba at 29,000; other ethnic groups at 2,976; Fulanis at 9,931; and Hausas at 3,451.[33] In the Bamenda Grasslands, there exist several powerful kingdoms, including Bum, Kom, Bali, Bafut, Mankon, Nso,

[31] Gwan, "Types, Processes and Policy". p. 9.
[32] P.M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1953. p. 3.
[33] R. Ritzenthaler and P. Ritzenthaler, *Cameroons Village: Ethnography of Bafut*, (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1962), p.12.

and the Mbum, among others.[34] The original populations of the Bamenda Grasslands are said to be the aborigines of the Tikars and Widikum.[35]

The largest of these groups is the Mankon, located to the west of the city of Bamenda, the largest city in the region, from which the Bamenda Grasslands take their name. Besides the aboriginal settlers of Bamenda, the region is also made up of a large population of Hausas, Nigerians and Bamilekes from neighbouring eastern Grasslands. Generally speaking, and according to Nkwi, the Bamenda Grasslands is composed of several major ethnic groups. These include the Tikar, encompassing but not limited to the Nso, Kom, Oku, Mbiame, Wiya, Tang, Warr, Bum, Bafut, Mbaw, Fungom, Mmen, Bamunka, Babungo, Babessi, Bamessing, Bambalang, Bamali, Baba, Bafanji, Bangolan, Kedjom Keku, and Kedjom Ketingoh. The Widikum group includes the Essimbi, Beba-Bafang, Ngemba, Ngie, Moghamo, and Metta. The Chamba is represented mainly by the various Bali Fondoms such as Bali Nyonga, Bali Kumbat, Bali Gangsin, Bali Gashu, Bali Muti, and Bali Gham. The Tiv group is composed predominantly of the Aghem Federation, while the Mambila include the Mbembe, Misaje, Mfumnte, and the Kaka[36] These groups speak different languages including *Lamnso* (by Nso), *Li'Mbum* (Mbum), *Bande* (Mankon), *Boufe* (Bafut), *Mbele* (Bambui), *Muka'a* (Bamunka), *Mbeligi* (Bambili) and *Mumbakuo* (Bali Chamba except Bali Nyonga) and *Mungaka* (Bali Nyonga).[37]

Among the indigenous peoples of the Bamenda Grasslands, hard work and resilience stand out as predominant traits. These communities also demonstrated a high level of development in the organisation of their societies and in their inter-community relations. Notably, some European visitors to the region recognised and documented these qualities in their observations. For example, Hutter[38] had observed that:

> If we look at these people with the eyes of colonialist, we find simply that they are highly developed country. We also find that they are a people who have not only the capacity but also the will to improve themselves. They will also learn to appreciate very fast the advantages of our higher culture and get used to it if it is offered to them in an appropriate way.[39]

In fact, within the Bamenda Grasslands, the German colonialists encountered a broad cross-section of well-organised ethnic polities, many of which traced their lineage to a shared ancestry, with common histories, mythologies, and cultural ties. These communities were fiercely protective of their sovereignties, yet coexisted peacefully, bound together by resilient networks of indigenous diplomacy. This intricate web of relationships fostered unity and mutual respect, all set against the backdrop of a naturally gifted landscape, picturesque mountains, expansive plains, and a continuous stretch of tall grasses, occasionally broken by pockets of dark-green forest. The Bamenda Grasslands is a region of remarkable richness and diversity, both in terms of its human capital and natural resources.

German colonial presence and governance in the Bamenda Grasslands

In their efforts to persuade Chancellor Bismarck to approve the annexation of Cameroon, German traders agreed to bear the costs of administration as he requested.[40] In actual fact, to ensure their adequate protection, German traders had told Bismarck that; "they wanted a government of a regular sort: with governor, the advisory council, police, buildings, frequently appearing gunboats, and launches to enable the governor travel along the coast

[34] Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development, *Investing in Cameroon*. p.29. It should be noted however that, the indigenous people of Cameroon can be classified into several ethnic groups. Broadly speaking, the people of Cameroon fall into either the Bantu and Semi Bantu in the South or the Sudanese and the Fulbe in the North. See V.J. Ngoh, *History of Cameroon Since 1800*, (Limbe: Presbook, 1996).

[35] E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda, The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields* (Buea: Government Printers, June 1967), 3.

[36] P. Nkwi, Traditional Diplomacy: A study of inter-ethnic relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon, (Yaoundé: The University of Yaoundé, Department of Sociology, 1987), 15.

[37] *Ibid*. 3

[38] Captain Franz Hutter was a German Soldier and head of labour recruitment bands in Bali-Nyonga during a greater part of the 1900s. He led the over 6,000 "Basoge" traditional troops of Bali-Nyonga that was notorious for its brutality on vassal kingdoms and other villages in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon.

[39] See Franz Hutter, *Wanderungen und Forschungen im Nord-hinterland von Kamerun* (Braunschweig, 1907), 122.

[40] The main reason for which Bismarck finally accepted to enter the colonial race for Cameroon was to protect German trade in the territory against competition from British and French trading interests.

and on the rivers of the Cameroon".[41] After annexation, these traders refused to shoulder the responsibility of administering the colony's affairs, despite Bismarck's initial request.[42] Moreover, after annexing the coastal region of Cameroon, the Germans, driven by the demand for land for plantations and labour, intensified efforts to extend their influence into the interior of the territory. As they expanded into the interior, authority was initially vested in the hands of expedition leaders, then later transferred to heads of stations, and eventually to the administrators of districts.[43] This situation significantly influenced German administrative policy in the territory. However, the limited number of these officials forced Germany in some instances to "rule through chieftains whom they placed in authority over rivals".[44] Thus, German administration in Cameroon and in the Bamenda Grasslands in particular, was based on what was later termed by the British as "Indirect Rule".

Meanwhile, German colonial interests in Cameroon bordered on at least three axes - namely, economically, to exploit to the maximum indigenous lands and labour at the minimum cost; culturally, to deprecate indigenous practices, belief systems and ways of life; and politically to relegate indigenous leadership while imposing theirs. As a result, Germany pursued a colonial philosophy and policy that was based on the Master Race Theory and the Divide-and-Rule principle cumulatively with Zintgraff's African development policy of; "Africa for Africans and Africans for us (Germans)". This means that German colonial agenda in the Bamenda Grasslands reflected a situation of an entity that was as benign as possible to avoid taking administrative risks and failures but as heavy-handed as possible to make economic gains. The condition of the region at the time of Zintgraff's arrival and the nature of coexistence between various groups offered possibilities for the adoption of such policy. Despite the involvement of traditional authorities in administration, the Germans strongly upheld the Master Race theory[45]. By this, the indigenous peoples were made to regard the Germans as their masters because their race was superior ("higher culture" as described by Hutter).[46] Consequently, the territories under German administration were meant to serve the German capitalist interests and the indigenous people had to be made to work in the service of these interests.[47]

Economic considerations were equally quintessential to the kind of policies Germany adopted in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon. In fact, Zintgraff's report to the Colonial Bureau of the German Foreign Office in Berlin in 1891 was unequivocal on the economic agenda of the Germans in the Bamenda Grasslands. The report intimates that: "… the Western (Bamenda) Grassfields as far as known to the explorers should be developed for German trade, as market for German exports, and as recruiting area for soldiers and labourers".[48] In fact, against their expectations, the Germans did not find valuable resources in the Bamenda Grasslands to satisfy their voracious economic appetite for African resources especially palm oil, ivory and rubber. Chilver discusses this situation in an article, noting that many areas in the Grasslands…

> … were a disappointment to the German coast-based trading firms since they were devoid of easily reachable surpluses of palm oil, not more greatly blessed with resources of ivory and [wild]

[41] *Ibid.* Though Germany had annexed Cameroon, the British were still more influential in the territory. The English traders and missionaries outnumbered the German traders, the court of equity was controlled by the British, English gunboats often appeared in the river and Consul Hewett frequently visited the area. All these made the German traders anxious and thus they increased calls for the appointment of a Governor to administer Cameroon on behalf of Bismarck.

[42] Harry R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914: A Case in Modern Imperialism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 178.

[43] Rudin. *Germans in the Cameroons.*183.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] The Master-race mentality was a European colonial ideology that promoted the belief in white racial superiority and justified domination over other races, especially Africans and Australian Aborigines. Promoted by writers like Arthur de Gobineau, (1816-1882) who wrote the Book, *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, 1853-1855 (French: *Essai sue l'inegalite des races humaines*, 1853-1855). This theory influenced colonial policies, fostering racial hierarchies, indirect rule, and long-term identity crises in Africa. It also inspired systems like Nazism in Germany and Apartheid in South Africa.

[46] Note that this was a cardinal colonial policy, as it made the African feel inferior to his white master. This rendered control easier because Africans were made to lose confidence in themselves.

[47] John Mbori Buinda, "The Socio-cultural and Political Institutions of the Yamba from Pre-colonial Period to 1965: A Historical Perspective", (The University of Yaoundé: Post-Graduate Teacher Diploma in History, 1986), 106.

[48] Chilver, *Zintgraff's Explorations in Bamenda.* 11.

> rubber than more conveniently situated regions, nor endowed with any natural products except kola which repaid the heavy costs of collection and transport to the coast.[49]

Since the basic commodities needed to satisfy German economic interests were not readily available, "their most easily exploitable commodity was manpower"[50] which was used as plantation labour, public construction workers, and active soldiers, primarily for policing purposes.

German colonialism and its traumatic legacy in the Bamenda Grasslands

The checkered history of the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon is characterized by alternating phases of pride and prejudice, blessings and curses, as well as relief and trauma. From its traditional context marked by both conflicts and a strong tradition of diplomacy that united the people through the period of colonial intrusion and into the post-colonial era, the Bamenda Grasslands has witnessed episodes of pain and progress, regret and celebration, loss and achievement. The encounters of the indigenous people of the Bamenda Grasslands with colonialism were both profoundly epic and deeply unforgettable.[51] This period remains a pivotal chapter in the history of the Bamenda Grasslands, shaping its socio-political landscape and leaving a legacy on its peoples. In fact, after establishing a foothold on the Cameroonian coast in 1884, the colonialists began expanding their influence into the hinterlands, including the Bamenda Grasslands. This region, known for its diverse ethnic groups and traditional governance systems led by *Fons*, became a focal point of German colonial administration.[52] The Germans employed both diplomacy and force to establish control. They introduced new administrative structures, often disrupting traditional systems of governance. German colonial policies and practices in the Bamenda Grasslands were to usher a new episode of pain and trauma in the lives of individuals and communities in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon.

a- Incendiary labour policies and oppressive labour tax system

Talla and Budi (2020) argue that during the German colonial period in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon, the colonial administration implemented a range of extractive and coercive policies aimed at maximising economic gain from the region.[53] These measures included the imposition of excessive taxes, the conscription of local populations into forced labour for infrastructure projects such as road construction and administrative posts, and the reorganisation of indigenous agricultural systems to prioritise cash crops over subsistence farming. Such measures disrupted long-standing social and political structures, particularly the authority of traditional leaders and the communal landholding practices that were central to Grassland societies. These policies not only strained relations between the German authorities and the indigenous populations but also provoked various forms of resistance ranging from passive non-compliance to outright rebellion.[54] The legacy of these colonial disruptions continues to inform socio-political dynamics in the region to this day. The German imposed taxes on the indigenous peoples, which were often paid through labour rather than money, which further entrenched forced labour practices.[55] The labour system disrupted traditional livelihoods and social structures, as people were taken away from their communities to fulfil colonial demands. Resistance to these policies was met with harsh punishments, including physical coercion and imprisonment.[56] The exploitation and mistreatment of the local population under these labour

[49] E.M. Chilver, "Native Administration in the West Central Cameroons, 1902-1954". B. Chem-Langhee and V.G. Fanso (eds.), *Nso and its Neighbours: Readings in Social History,* (Amherst College, 1996), 134.
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] Charles Ndifor, (Babanki Elite and retired civil servant), in discussion with author in Bamenda-Bambili. December 18, 2024.
[52] P.N. Nkwi, *The German Presence in the Western Grassfields, 1891-1913: A German Colonial Account,* (The Netherlands, Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1989). 10. See also Elizabeth Dunstan, "A Bangwa account of early encounters with the German colonial administration". In: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria III, No. 2.* (1965): 403-412
[53] Richard Tanto Talla and Reymond Njingti Budi, "Colonialism, Ethnic Disintegration and Clan-Based Politics, among the Mbum of the Bamenda Grasslands-Cameroon, 1916-1961". In: *South Asian Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2 Issue 1* (Feb. 2020): 28-36. DOI: 10.36346/sarjhss.2020.v02i01.006.
[54] This idea emerged during one of the focus group discussions conducted as part of this study, held with seven participants in Mankon, Bamenda, on January 12, 2025
[55] Mathias Zang Adig and Joseph Lon Nfi, "Chiefs and the Crisis of Transition from German to British Administration in the Bamenda Grassland of Cameroon, 1916 – 1922". In: *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences 4, Issue 5,* (2017): 1-6.
[56] Christian Pagbe Musah and Sammy Bessong Arrey-Mbi, Colonialism and the Development of Social Infrastructures in Bamenda. In: *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2 Issue 3* (2021): 1-9.

policies left a lasting impact on the collective memory of the Bamenda Grasslands.[57] Communities such as the Bafut, Nso and Bali-Nyonga were particularly affected, as they were required to provide labour for the construction of roads and other colonial infrastructure. This disrupted their traditional agricultural practices and strained their social structures.

Ndi contends that the German colonial administration resorted to coercive and often violent methods to secure labour from the Bamenda Grasslands, with indigenous populations being forcibly conscripted through what he describes as being "press-ganged at gunpoint" to serve on coastal plantations.[58] This aggressive recruitment strategy was not incidental but rather a deliberate aspect of German colonial policy. The opening up of the Cameroonian interior, particularly the Bamenda Grasslands, was driven largely by the need to establish a reliable and controllable labour supply for plantations operated by German enterprises along the coast. Coastal communities proved increasingly resistant to labour demands, and the economic burden of importing labour from abroad was deemed unsustainable. In this context, the Bamenda Grasslands became a strategic reservoir of manpower. Reflecting on this dynamic, Bob O'Neil argues that:

> The question of labour supply had been a critical problem at the coast. The point was that the coastal peoples refused to work on plantations and the practice of contracting foreign labour from Cape Verde to the Congo, especially for Wey, Bassa and Krumen from Liberia, could not be continued. It was thought that the workers from the Grassfields, being acquainted with agricultural practices more than coastal and forest peoples, were better suited to plantation work.[59]

Confronted with a growing demand for labour to sustain their economic ventures along the coast, the German colonial authorities increasingly turned to the Bamenda Grasslands as a key source of manpower. To legitimise and streamline this process, they capitalised on earlier treaties of friendship signed with local rulers, most notably the accord between *Fon* Galega I of Bali-Nyonga and the German explorer, Dr. Eugene Zintgraff. These agreements, often framed as mutual alliances, were strategically leveraged by the Germans to justify labour conscription. As a result, Bali-Nyonga emerged as a central hub for labour recruitment, supplying workers to major German enterprises on the coast, such as the *Gesellschaft Nordwestkamerun* (GNK) and the *Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft, Victoria* (WAPV). This arrangement not only elevated Bali-Nyonga's political significance within the colonial labour network but also entrenched it in the exploitative dynamics of the colonial economy.

As part of the colonial labour extraction system, *Fon* Galega I of Bali-Nyonga and his successor, *Fon* Fonyonga II, became instrumental in meeting German labour demands through increasingly aggressive and indiscriminate human raids across the Bamenda Grasslands. Under their leaderships, Bali-Nyonga became a centre of forced labour recruitment. By 1904, *Fon* Fonyonga II had already supplied approximately 1,700 men to German plantations along the coast. The demographic toll was devastating. By 1912, the male population of Bali-Nyonga had dwindled to fewer than 4,000, a drastic decline from an estimated 20,000 in 1900.[60] In a bid to consolidate this labour supply network, the German colonial administration not only granted *Fon* Fonyonga II full protection under the imperial government but also elevated his political status, appointing him suzerain over thirty-one surrounding villages. To enforce his authority and facilitate further labour conscription, the German Governor equipped his formidable paramilitary force of 6,000 *Basoge* troops *(Balitruppe).* These heavily armed raiding bands extended forced recruitment campaigns deep into both Bali-Nyonga vassal states and neighbouring communities. Among the most affected were the villages of Batibo, Widikum, Ngyen-Mbo, and Ngyemuwah, which suffered repeated raids and population loss under the brutal system of colonial labour exploitation.[61]

[57] Singke Murring, (great granddaughter of a victim of German oppressive labour systems) in discussion with author in Nkambe, February 22, 2025.
[58] Anthony Ndi, *Southern West Cameroon Revisited: North-South West Nexus, 1858-1972, Myth, History and Reality*. Vol 2. (Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2014). 14.
[59] Bob O'Neil, 114. Cited in Ndi, *Southern West Cameroon*. 44
[60] *Ibid*. 46
[61] *Ibid*. 46-50.

Large number of palms produce carriers serving German interests at the coast and a German labour recruitment camp located at Ntumbaw, in Ndu Subdivision of Cameroon

Even more harrowing than the violent recruitment methods was the inhumane treatment endured by the labourers once they reached the coastal plantations. These individuals were not merely separated from their families for brief contractual periods; many never returned at all. Sent to work under harsh and often life-threatening conditions, countless labourers perished due to disease, exhaustion, and neglect. As Bob O'Neil poignantly observes, "unfortunately, malaria as well as cocoa did well on the slopes of Cameroon Mountain, and many sent from Bali died. One report sent in 1901 stated that between 25 and 50% never returned after their contracts were up."[62] To lend credence to the foregoing, Boneh has intimated that:

> When a relative was taken to serve the Germans as a plantation labourer, road construction worker or a porter, it was unlikely that they would ever be seen again. The gory tales and reports of harsh working conditions and numerous deaths sent many families into mourning whenever their relatives were abducted into the colonial labour force.[63]

The physical toll was devastating, but the psychological impact was no less profound. This widespread loss and suffering became more than a historical episode. It formed a collective memory of trauma that remains deeply embedded in the consciousness of affected communities. Passed down through oral histories and cultural narratives, this memory continues to shape identities, inform intergenerational relationships, and evoke painful reflections on the legacy of German colonial exploitation in the Bamenda Grasslands.

III. TREATMENT OF ROYALTIES AND RAZING OF PALACES

Another deeply traumatic aspect of German colonial rule in the Bamenda Grasslands was the systematic humiliation and undermining of traditional rulers, or *Fons*. The Bamenda Grasslands is characterised by a highly centralised socio-political structure in which traditional authorities command deep respect and play a pivotal role in community cohesion, governance, and cultural continuity. The *Fon* is not just a political figure but also a spiritual and cultural custodian whose legitimacy is rooted in centuries of tradition. However, under German colonial rule, this authority was repeatedly disrespected and manipulated. German officials often subjected *Fons* to public humiliation, coercion, or forced collaboration in colonial projects such as labour recruitment and tax collection. Some were dethroned or replaced with more compliant individuals in total disregard of traditional prescriptions, while others were reduced to mere administrative tools of the colonial regime and stripped of their sacred status and autonomy. This erosion of traditional leadership not only destabilised local governance but also inflicted psychological and cultural wounds on entire communities. The assault on the dignity of the *Fon* symbolised a broader colonial effort to fracture indigenous systems of power and identity, leaving behind a legacy of institutional disruption and cultural trauma that continues to echo across generations in the Bamenda Grasslands.

[62] Bob O'Neil, 114. Cited in Ndi, *Southern West Cameroon*. 44.
[63] Sixtus Ngombe Boneh (60 years old, retired jurist and civil society activist), in discussion with the author, Nkambe, February 22, 2023.

This facet of German colonial administration had particularly devastating consequences for communities across the Nkambe Plateau, especially among the Mbum, Mfumte, and Kaka peoples, as well as in Batibo, Ngyen-Mbo and Nso. In their effort to extend control over these regions, the Germans employed a system of indirect rule that involved appointing local chiefs often without legitimacy in the eyes of their people and arming them with both symbolic authority and military support. Among the Mbum, for example, the Germans promised protection and political backing to these appointed rulers. In instances where these chiefs reported resistance or tax defiance from subordinate leaders or communities, the German administration would respond by dispatching native soldiers, sometimes as many as six to enforce their will. Unfortunately, this military support enabled a wave of abuses. Chiefs such as those of Mbot and Tabenken became key agents in executing German colonial violence. The *Fon* of Mbot played a central role in the burning of entire villages, including Wat, Kungi, Nkambe, and Binshua. Under his watch, the chief of Mbaa reportedly died in prison, while German soldiers acting under his authority flogged the chief of Binshua to death and drowned another local leader.[64] Similarly, the chief of Ndu who had been placed in charge of several neighbouring villages governed with notorious brutality. Backed by German firepower, he ordered the destruction of Mfumte and Kaka villages, inflicting immense suffering and displacement.

The *Fon* of Tabenken also exploited his German-appointed position, using it to consolidate his own power. Elevated and granted jurisdiction over Bii and Konchep, he forcibly relocated populations from these communities into Tabenken, inflating his village's population and, by extension, his influence.[65] These abuses of authority enabled and legitimised by German colonial policy deeply fractured the region's sociopolitical fabric, undermining traditional leadership structures and sowing long-lasting trauma among the affected communities. What emerged was not merely a system of indirect rule, but one of militarised oppression that blurred the lines between collaboration and coercion, often turning indigenous leaders into instruments of colonial violence.

In Batibo, resistance to German-backed forced labour recruitment came at a severe cost. *Fon* Acha, who opposed the violent conscription of his people by Bali-Nyonga labour raiding bands, faced harsh reprisals. He was arrested, publicly humiliated, fined and ordered to hand over valuable elephant tusks as a symbolic submission to the *Fon* of Bali-Nyonga, a German ally. Ultimately, he was banished to Banyo, stripped of his authority for defending his community's autonomy. This punitive response sent a clear message about the consequences of defying the colonial order. The violence did not end with individual leaders. In 1905, Bali-Nyonga troops operating under the command of German Captain Hans Glauning launched a brutal assault on the village of Ngyen-Mbo, burning and looting it in a show of force meant to crush resistance and instill fear.[66] Similarly, in Nso-land, the colonial administration exacted deadly vengeance on *Fon* Sehm (Sehmbum II), who had also resisted German authority. He was arrested, detained in the German prison in Bamenda, and died in captivity. In a final act of domination, his palace was razed to the ground in 1906, a deliberate act aimed at erasing not only a political figure but a cultural institution central to the identity and unity of the Nso people. These acts of violence against traditional rulers were not isolated incidents but part of a broader colonial strategy to dismantle indigenous systems of leadership, suppress resistance, and replace spiritual and political authority with fear, coercion, and submission. The trauma of these events continues to live in the collective memory of the Bamenda Grasslands, shaping local historical consciousness and narratives of resistance and resilience.

[64] NAB, Hawkesworth, "The Nsungli Clans". 9

[65] Anthony Ndi et al. *The evolution of Warr Cultural and Development Association (WACUDA, 1989-1999) with Brief introduction to Mbum History*. (WACUDA Publications, 1999), 7.

[66] Eliana Nug Fonsah, "The Ngyen-Mbo-Bali Nyonga Land Conflict, 1905-2003". (MA Dissertation in History. University of Yaoundé I, 2005). p. 49.

Fon Sehm or Sehmbum I of Nso (1875-1907). He was arrested during the German-Nso War and later "disappeared" in German prison in Bamenda. The memory of his disappearance has never eluded the attention of the Nso indigenous people till date. Second image is a 1905 Picture of Laikom Palace after the German victory over them following a stiff resistance.

The violent treatment of traditional rulers and the targeted destruction of royal institutions by German colonial authorities had far-reaching consequences that extended well beyond the loss of individual lives or the burning of palaces. In societies like those of the Bamenda Grasslands where the *Fon* is not merely a political figure but a sacred symbol of continuity, cultural identity, and ancestral lineage such acts amounted to a direct assault on the spiritual and emotional foundations of entire communities. The arrest, humiliation, and exile of *Fon* Acha of Batibo, the burning of Ngyen-Mbo by German-commanded Bali-Nyonga troops in 1905, and the arrest and death of *Fon* Sehm (Sehmbum II) of Nso in Bamenda prison followed by the destruction of his palace in 1906 were not simply colonial reprisals. They were calculated efforts to break indigenous systems of authority and suppress communal resistance by inflicting symbolic violence at the highest levels of social and cultural life. The palace, as both a political seat and a sacred space, holds deep symbolic importance in the Grasslands tradition. Its razing was akin to cultural desecration a deliberate erasure of memory, lineage, and legitimacy. These actions disrupted the societal balance, instilled collective fear, and created a historical rupture that reverberated across generations. Communities that witnessed the brutal subjugation of their sacred leaders internalised a deep sense of vulnerability, loss, and injustice. This traumatic historical experience became embedded in the collective psyche of the affected groups, passed down through oral traditions, rituals, and communal memory. It not only weakened trust in political authority and external governance but also fostered a lingering sense of historical grievance and marginalisation. To this day, the memories of those violations shape narratives of resistance, inform local political identities, and underscore demands for recognition, restitution, and historical justice.

The seizure of spiritual and traditional artifacts

The forced seizure of spiritual and traditional artifacts by German colonial authorities in Cameroon inflicted a profound and enduring form of cultural trauma on affected communities' trauma that continues to reverberate more than a century later. Among the most striking examples is the case of the Nso people, whose revered *Ngonnso*, a sacred statue representing the mythical female founder of the Nso kingdom—was confiscated by German colonial forces in 1906 during punitive actions against the Nso leadership. The *Ngonnso* is far more than a historical relic, it embodies the spiritual essence, ancestral lineage, and cultural identity of the Nso people. Its seizure was therefore not just the removal of an object, but a symbolic dismemberment of the community's soul, a violent severing of the spiritual continuity that links past, present, and future generations. To this day, the *Ngonnso* remains in Germany, held in the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, despite decades of calls for its repatriation.

Ngon-Nso: The Ngon-Nso statue has a fascinating history. It originates from the Nso people in Cameroon, symbolising the founding queen of the Nso kingdom. Royal Stoll of the Bamum Kingdom on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Germany.

The loss of such a spiritually significant artifact left a lasting cultural void and a deep sense of historical injustice among the Nso. It disrupted traditional practices and ceremonies tied to the object, contributed to the erosion of communal confidence in sacred traditions, and became a lingering wound in the community's collective memory. For many, the absence of the *Ngonnso* is not just a reminder of colonial theft, but of an ongoing struggle for dignity, restoration, and historical reckoning.[67] More broadly, this cultural dispossession mirrors a common pattern across colonized societies, where the looting of spiritual objects was used as a tool of domination dislocating communities not only from their material heritage but from their cosmological frameworks. The trauma of such loss is intergenerational, feeding into contemporary movements for decolonisation, cultural revival, and the global demand for restitution.

Manifestation of Collective memory of Trauma in the Bamenda Grasslands

The legacy of colonial violence and exploitation in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon has not faded with time. Rather, it has been etched into the cultural, political, and psychological fabric of the region. The collective memory of trauma rooted in the experience of forced labour recruitment, violent suppression of traditional authorities, raids and displacements, and the looting of spiritual artifacts continues to shape how communities in the region relate to power, identity, and history.[68]

Oral history remains a central vehicle through which trauma is transmitted across generations. In communities like Nso, Batibo, Mbum and Mfumte, elders continue to recount colonial raids, forced labour, and the humiliation of *Fons* by German officials. Such oral narratives serve both as memory preservation and as socio-political commentary.[69] These stories, passed through families and clan gatherings, are vivid recollections of specific events, such as the burning of Ngyen-Mbo in 1905 or the exile of *Fon* Acha of Batibo. The persistence of these memories illustrates what Halbwachs (1992) terms "collective memory", a social framework for remembering shared trauma.[70] Rituals and commemorative performances often serve as subtle but powerful reminders of past trauma. For example, the absence of looted sacred objects, such as the *Ngonnso* of the Nso people, is ritually

[67] This idea emerged during one of the focus group discussions conducted as part of this study, held with seven participants in Mankon, Bamenda, on January 12, 2025

[68] A. Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. (California: University of California Press, 2001) and A. Ndi, *Mill Hill Missionaries in Southern West Cameroon: Their Impact on Culture and Evangelization, 1922-1972*. (Bamenda: NAB, 2005).

[69] P.N. Nkwi, and J.P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*. (Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé, 1982) and F. Mbunwe-Samba, *Nso Cultural Values and Historical Reflections*. (Shiyika Publishing, 1995).

[70] M. Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

acknowledged during specific cultural ceremonies. This reflects a form of "ritual mourning" a process of symbolic coping in the aftermath of cultural dismemberment.[71] The *Ngonnso*, which was seized by German forces in 1906 and is still held at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, is central to the Nso spiritual cosmology. Its removal caused a "ritual fracture" and a rupture in the community's spiritual lineage that has not been healed.[72] Beyond the Nso kingdom, several other communities across the Bamenda Grasslands such as the Mbum, Kom, Oku, Widikum, Batibo, and numerous villages in the Ndop plains also suffered the systematic plundering of spiritual and cultural artifacts at the hands of German colonial forces. These objects, often imbued with ancestral power and sacred significance, were not merely decorative items or relics of the past. They were living embodiments of lineage, identity, and cosmology. Their forceful removal constituted a profound cultural violation, severing communities from core elements of their historical and spiritual continuity.

Many of these looted items including ritual masks, royal regalia, sacred stools, and lineage figures now reside in European museums or private collections, far removed from the contexts that once gave them meaning. The absence of these artifacts continues to haunt the communities from which they were taken, contributing to a deep cultural dislocation and intergenerational trauma. For these societies, the loss is not simply material, but spiritual as rituals remain incomplete, shrines remain symbolically vacant, and cultural knowledge tied to these objects risks fading with each generation. This trauma has endured across time, passed on through oral histories and cultural memory. Elders and spiritual custodians lament the void left by these removals, while younger generations inherit a sense of dispossession and historical injustice. The continued exile of these objects often displayed without consent in foreign institutions serves as a persistent reminder of colonial violence and unresolved grievances. Today, these legacy fuel growing calls for repatriation and cultural restitution, not merely as acts of return, but as vital steps toward healing and the reconstitution of cultural sovereignty. The collective memory of this loss reinforces a powerful sense of identity rooted not only in survival but in the enduring demand for historical justice.[73]

The memory of colonial manipulation of indigenous leaders has created a long-standing scepticism toward both colonial and postcolonial state authority. This is especially evident in the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in the Bamenda Grasslands, where historical grievances rooted in colonial trauma are often invoked.[74] The brutal dethronement, imprisonment, and killing of *Fons*, such as *Fon* Sehm of Nso, are remembered as examples of external interference in sacred leadership. This contributes to what Geschiere describes as the "politics of belonging" a contested space where legitimacy is framed by historical memory.[75] Although there are few formal memorials to colonial atrocities, local sites of trauma such as burned villages, former prison locations, labour raiding camps and destroyed palaces are remembered and referenced in oral discourse. These *lieux de mémoire*, as Pierre Nora describes them, are not necessarily marked by physical monuments, but by emotional and cultural significance.[76] In some communities, certain forested or abandoned areas and buildings are avoided or spoken of with reverence because of their association with German atrocities or forced labour camps. This is the case with the German labour recruitment camp in Ntumbaw village of Mbum-land which evokes the memory of German presence

[71] N. Argenti, *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[72] P.M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons*. (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952).

[73] It has been revealed by the French government-commissioned 2018 report by Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr and French historian Bénédicte Savoy that, up to ninety percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's material cultural legacy is outside of the continent. Even more revealing are the figures and the specific archives hosting these artefacts. For instance, 180,000 are lodged in the Musee Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, Belgium; 75,000 in Humboldt Forum, Germany; 70,000 in Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, France; 69,000 in British Museum and 37,000 Weltmuseum of Vienna, Austria. In the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, France alone, artefacts from the following African countries are lodged in significant numbers as follows: Chad (9,296), Cameroon (7,838), Madagascar (7,590), Mali (6,910), Ivory Coast (3,951), Benin (3,157), Congo-Brazzaville, (2,593), Gabon (2,448), Senegal (2,281) and Guinea (1,997). See Quartz Africa, The battle to get Europe to return thousands of Africa's stolen artifacts is getting complicated. Found at: https://qz.com/africa/1758619/europes-museums-are-fighting-to-keep-africas-stolen-artifacts/. Accessed on 24 April, 2025.

[74] P. Konings, and F.B. Nyamnjoh. *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon*. (Brill, 2003).

[75] P. Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

[76] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". In: *Memory and Counter Memory, Special Issue* No. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

in the land.[77] "There is also a road in Ntumbaw associated with the Germans, commonly referred to as *Mandze German*, meaning "German road".

Efforts to recover looted artifacts especially the campaign to return the *Ngonnso* reflect not only a quest for restitution but a response to long-standing cultural trauma. For the Nso people, the *Ngonnso* is considered a living spiritual entity whose absence continues to affect the moral and ritual order of the kingdom.[78] International discourse on restitution has brought renewed attention to these struggles. Scholars such as Savoy (2018) and Hicks (2020) have called for the return of African artifacts looted during colonial rule, framing them as essential to healing historical wounds.[79] Within the Bamenda Grasslands, teachers, researchers, and local historians increasingly incorporate trauma narratives into historical education. These efforts ensure that colonial brutality such as the flogging to death of the chief of Binshua or the burning of Mfumte is not erased but confronted.[80] Such approaches help students develop a critical understanding of the past, in line with theories of historical consciousness and memory studies.[81] They also form the basis for local advocacy movements that push for political recognition, reparations, and a more honest reckoning with Cameroon's colonial past.

Several groups across the Bamenda Grasslands have formed advocacy units to demand the repatriation of their spiritual and cultural relics from European museums and institutions. One of the most committed among them is the Mbum's Relics and Documentation Committee. This committee has engaged in dialogue with civil society organisations such as RegArtless, Cameroon's Ministry of Arts and Culture, and the German Contact Point for Collections in Colonial Contexts to trace and reclaim their heritage. Through these collaborations, they successfully compiled an expanded inventory of their artifacts housed in various German repositories. This achievement was confirmed in a letter dated February 28, 2025, from the Secretary General of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federated States to the committee. An excerpt of this letter read:

> We are pleased to inform you that we have completed the survey of German museums and other institutions regarding information on the whereabouts of cultural heritage from the Mbum communities in Northwest Cameroon…. We received a total of 31 positive responses from German museums and institutions regarding potential Mbum objects. Of these responses, 13 institutions reported holding objects from Cameroon that could not be attributed to a specific community or whose origins remain uncertain. For the sake of completeness, we have also included this information in the survey results, which you will find attached to this letter. Furthermore, 1 institution provided information on objects that could only be broadly classified as of African origin. This case has not been included in the results. However, please let us know if you would like to receive this information separately.[82]

At the time of this study, the committee was actively deliberating on the next steps concerning restitution and potential reparations, aiming to secure the return of their cultural artifacts and address the historical injustices tied to their displacement.[83]

IV. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the enduring legacies of German colonial rule in the Bamenda Grasslands are not limited to the physical remnants of the German empire, but persist as deeply rooted, immaterial traumas that continue to shape the lived experiences and collective memory of affected communities. These legacies, manifested through generational narratives of dispossession, cultural desecration, and political exclusion have cultivated a profound scepticism toward both colonial and postcolonial authority structures. The evidence gathered through oral

[77] Ndzi Gilbert, (indigene of Ntumbaw) in discussion with the author, March 14, 2024.
[78] Sylvie Njobati, (Bring-Back-Ngonnso Activist and indigene of Nso-land) in discussion with author, December 14, 2023.
[79] B. Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. (Pluto Press, 2020).
[80] A. Ndi, *Mill Hill Missionaries in Southern West Cameroon: Their Impact on Culture and Evangelization, 1922-1972*. (Bamenda: NAB, 2005).
[81] Jan Assmann, "Communicative and cultural memory". In: A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008): 109-118.
[82] Markus Hilgert, Secretary General, Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States. Email "Your request regarding information on the whereabouts of cultural heritage from the Mbum communities (Northwest Cameroon) in German institutions". Dated February 28, 2025.
[83] Tamfu Yerima, (Chairman of the Mbum Relics and Documentation Committee), in discussion with the author on March 15., 2025.

testimonies and archival sources underscores the urgent need for an intentional, historically informed framework of restorative justice. This framework must move beyond symbolic gestures to include concrete actions such as the repatriation of cultural artifacts, public acknowledgment of colonial atrocities, and the establishment of long-term partnerships centred on healing and empowerment. As such, former colonial powers, in collaboration with local communities in the Bamenda Grasslands and state actors, bear a moral and historical responsibility to engage in a deliberate process of reckoning, repair, and reconciliation. Only through such an inclusive and transformative approach can the complex wounds of colonialism be meaningfully addressed and a future grounded in dignity, equity, and historical truth be envisioned.

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