

ELITES, ETHNO-REGIONAL COMPETITION IN CAMEROON, AND THE SOUTHWEST ELITES ASSOCIATION (SWELA), 1991– 1997

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ABSTRACT The construction of ethnicity by ethnic elites assumed a wider dimension in most African countries south of the Sahara after 1990. The reasons were many and various, and *inter alia*, included the efforts made by authoritarian regimes to retain power and ethno-regional elites gaining access to the state and its resources. Cameroon was not an exception. This paper critically explores how the Southwest Elites Association (SWELA) and its historical antecedent fit into ethno-regional politics and the invention of ethnicity in Cameroon. It also attempts to show how the government has used SWELA, and how SWELA, in turn, used the government to achieve its own aims.

Key Words: Competition; Elites; Ethnicity; Forest zone; Grasslands.

INTRODUCTION: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

According to Searl (1995), the mind imagines ideas, institutions, and materials, and makes them effective in daily operations. He argues that collective consciousness and compromise can construct certain beliefs that may later become enduring and effective, so much so that, in time, they could be seen as natural. The idea of social identity conforms to and confirms Searl's theory. Social identities, whether manifested in class groupings, gender, or ethnic classifications, are potential targets for conflict and violence. Ethnicity, in particular, plays a significant role in the prevailing crisis of development facing Africa today. In Cameroon, the focus of this paper, colonial and post-colonial periods produced ethnic groupings, which gave rise to what will be referred to in this paper as elites, or ethnic elites. The creation of social identities, and giving them substance, has given rise to ethnic regions. This paper defends the position that elites have been at the center of the effort to manipulate ethnic diversity in Cameroon, a phenomenon begun by the colonial regimes that has been developed by post-colonial elites (political and traditional) for their own self-interested ends. Throughout the course of this manipulation, the regime in power has used ethnic associations to maintain power.

In 1990, many parts of Africa south of the Sahara embraced a new political dynamic. There was an unprecedented drive towards political and economic liberalization, including threats to evict most African dictators, sparked by a general call for democratization and the consequent rebirth of multi-party politics. Political kleptocrats responded by engendering and intensifying the struggle over

belonging and forms of exclusion among their citizens. Some were branded “natives,” while others were called “strangers,” even if they were citizens of the same country. Although this undermined the very notion of national citizenship, which most regimes in Africa had upheld in the early 1960s and 1970s, using unity as a precondition for nation building (Geschiere, 2004), these same authoritarian regimes began encouraging conflict between indigenous groups and strangers to remain in power. In Cameroon in particular, the ruling government since 1990, under Paul Biya, has placed additional emphasis on ethnicity, making use of political and traditional elites. This effort was born out of a neopatrimonialistic and clientelistic system in which appointments were made based on one’s relation to the government rather than on merit and ability. In this way, it became fashionable to use ethnic associations to retain the government in power.

The ethnic associations in Cameroon included the Southwest Elite Association (SWELA); the Northwest Elite Association (NOWELA); the elites of the Grand North representing the interests of the three northern provinces of Adamawa, North, and Far North; Essigan, representing the Beti and Bulu heterogeneous groups of the Center Province; SAWA, representing the interests of the littoral people; and LAAKAM of the Bamilekes of the West Province. In some of these provinces, there were associations of traditional rulers, such as the Southwest Chiefs Conference (SWECC) from the Southwest Province and the Northwest Chiefs Conference (NOWECC) from the Northwest Province. In the course of establishing these groups, the government appointed proxies and surrogates to important positions, and funneled money to them, while the masses were struggling with poverty to a large extent (Bayart, 1973; Korvenonja, 1993).

This practice gave rise to “ethnic jingoism, brazen provocation and the formation of ethnic militias” (Fochingong, 2004). In the Southwest Province (see Figs. 1 & 2), the focus of this paper, the non-indigenous population, especially those from the Northwest and Western Provinces were frequently and repeatedly reminded that they were strangers, “settlers,” or “come-no-goes” (translated from the Pidgin English version and referring to a difficult-to-cure disease that leads to scabbing) (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998). Near election time, the citizens would be reminded by the political elite (ministers, directors of parastatals, governors, and divisional officers) that they should go to their villages of origin to register and vote.

Amongst the multifarious elite associations, this paper focuses on SWELA, which was formed in 1991.⁽¹⁾ The Southwest Province has particular features, a brief description of which would help delineate it as a context. For example, it has a unique ecology and geology, the most obvious feature of which is Mt. Cameroon, a volcano that towers more than 4,000 meters above the coast; it is also one of the most populous provinces in Cameroon, with a large plantation complex and large-scale immigration. This high population density has not only led to pressures on arable land but has also sparked fierce resentment among groups that consider themselves indigenous toward so-called strangers (Geschiere, 2004). A large proportion of the more than 300 ethnic groups in

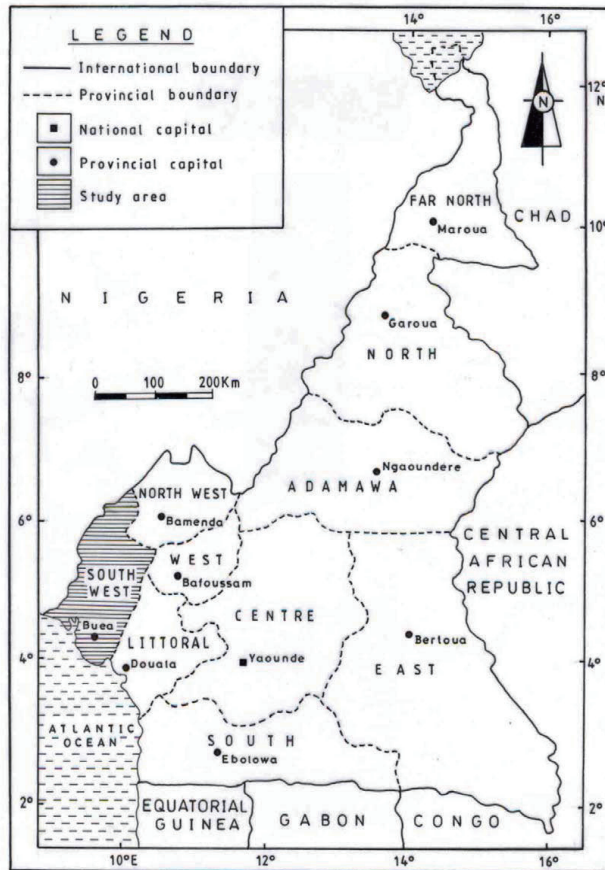


Fig. 1. Location of the South West Province in Cameroon.

Cameroon live in this province (Breton, 1983).

In the wake of political pluralism in 1990, the political elites of this province, in an attempt to frustrate the ambitions and will of strangers who opposed the status quo, formed an association, SWELA, in 1991, which they described as apolitical but which had political underpinnings. As a direct consequence, a new political vocabulary emerged. In local parlance (Pidgin), the immigrant laborers and their children and grandchildren were often referred to as settlers, strangers, and come-no-goes. The 1996 constitution did not help matters, as it made official a clause that questioned citizenship and minority rights in major city councils in Cameroon. According to this constitutional proviso, the state was empowered “to ensure the protection of minorities and reserve the rights of indigenous populations.” It goes further, requiring that chairmen of the regional councils be indigenes. Although the protection of minorities (i.e.,

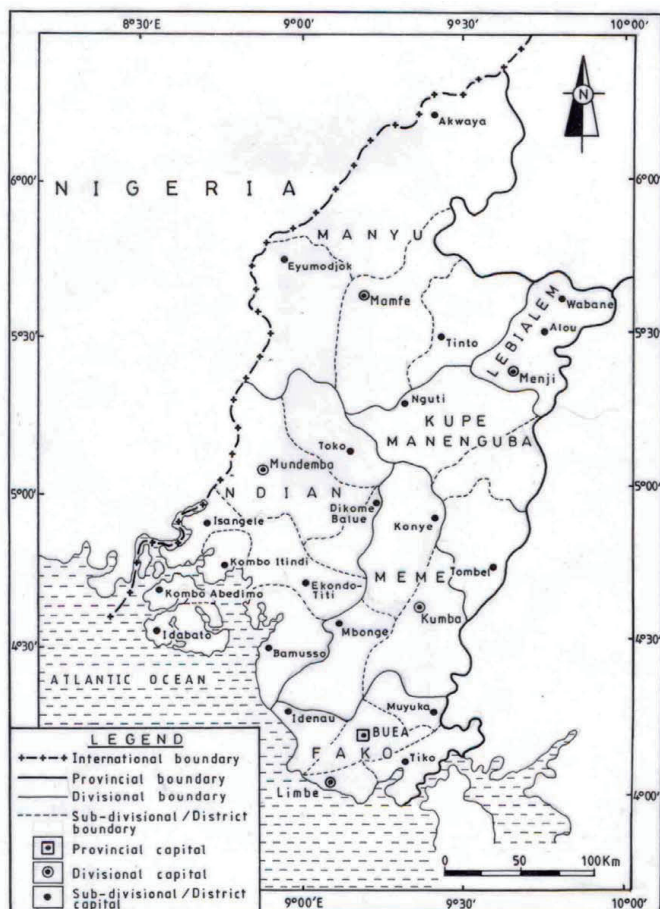


Fig. 2. Study area at South West Province of Cameroon.

endangered minorities such as pygmies) was upheld by the United Nations, the Cameroon political elite twisted its interpretation. According to the government, minorities became indigenes/natives who were at risk of becoming extinct. This raised the critical question of who was a minority and who could be classified as indigenous with protected rights in a country with more than 300 ethnic groups (Breton, 1983). Nonetheless, Presidential Decree No. 96/031 appointed indigenes as government delegates in 10 metropolitan areas in which the Social Democratic Party (SDF), the main opposition party, won the elections. This was an attempt to put a check in place on the hegemony of non-natives in these cities.

Although this was not particular to the Southwest Province, it seems to have had the big effect in this region. For one thing, it is peculiar to the Southwest

Province to hear people called either indigenous (“sons of the soil”) or settlers (non-natives). In addition, the governor of the province, Peter Oben Ashu, is the only governor of 10 provincial governors in Cameroon who issued residence permits to settlers before they could vote during the legislative elections of 17 May 1997, thereby disenfranchising a good number of non-natives (Yenshu, 1998). This maneuver was intended to favor the ruling party, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM). During in this time, SWELA was born, but in the terms used by elite literature, it suffered a rumpus in 1993, at which point it segmented into its component parts. By 1997, there were three factions of SWELA, guided by inherent differences among elite groups. Nonetheless, the three factions were pro-government. An anti-government SWELA also formed, as did another group led by Akpo Mukete, the YCPDM subsection president for the Meme Division and the son of chief Mukete, the traditional ruler of the Bafaw people, who believed that anybody could belong as long as he or she contributed to development. This paper focuses on the pro-government SWELA. According to Section 3 of its constitution, SWELA’s objectives include:

- Promote unity and foster development among its members and the Southwest Province in general.
- Promote the socioeconomic development of the Southwest Province in line with government action.
- Provide assistance to deserving students of the Southwest Province in educational institutions.
- Promote and preserve historical and literary works of the Southwest Province.
- Organize cultural activities so as to achieve the preservation of our cultural heritage.
- Promote and encourage all activities likely to foster national unity.

From these, it becomes apparent that not everybody living in the Southwest Province could automatically belong to SWELA, which by extension meant that SWELA *ab initio* had started the politics of exclusivity. This opportunity was fully exploited by the government in the 1996 constitution. Moreover, its structure revealed that its activities touched the nooks and crannies of the Southwest Province, thereby actively involving the masses in its politicking. In addition, while it is difficult to identify anything political about its objectives *per se*, it is equally difficult to deny that politics played no part in its formation. For instance, SWELA was born in a political whirlwind, and was the direct result of re-splintering and re-appropriating political space in English Cameroon. The region now harboring SWELA was and is a colonial invention, branded into various sections, such as the forest zone, Cameroon Province, and the Southwest Province, by the British colonial administration and the post-independence administration. The creation and activities of SWELA do not make the elites monolithic; rather they are fighting for monopoly and hegemony

over the state. In doing so, differences have occurred at various levels, though in general SWELA has become a supra-ethnic association.

Most literature on SWELA (e.g., Fochingong, 2004; Geschiere, 2001; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998) has treated the subject from a sociological or anthropological point of view. Those who have written from a political science and/or historical point of view (Awassom, 2003; Fochingong, 2004) have not, in my opinion, placed enough emphasis on how the government has been using SWELA and its antecedents. The primary goal of this paper was to fill a gap in the historiography of SWELA by limiting discussion to its historical antecedents while demonstrating how this fits into ethno-regional politics and the invention of ethnicity in Cameroon. Furthermore, this study attempts to reconstruct the nature and dynamics of Cameroonian politics, especially in terms of elite intrigues and manipulations, and critically appraise how the Biya government has been manipulating SWELA and how SWELA (and its members) has been using the government for its own gains.

ELITES: SOME THEORETICAL ISSUES AND DEBATES

This section examines some of the views posited by scholars on the concept of elites and, an objective that is of critical importance, this study tests these views against the elite peculiarities vis-à-vis SWELA. A clear-cut definition of "elite" is very difficult to achieve and is, at times, controversial, despite its common usage in everyday parlance. The idea of elites in Africa has attracted much attention in academia, and there is an abundant literature on the topic (e.g., Barongo, 1983; Buijtenhuijs, 1978; Korvenoja, 1993; Mboukou, 1981; Mphahlele, 1959; Osaghae, 1991; van den Lindfors, 1974; Wallerstein, 1965; Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1992). Although these scholars have not agreed on a single definition, elites are generally considered those individuals who have a profound influence on society and have therefore become prime players in societal systems. Thus, this definition will be adopted for the analysis in this paper. Important categories of elites include political, social, economic, traditional, and military, but this paper is limited to the political and traditional elites.

The analysis presented here is based largely on a theory of Fernand Braudel. Braudel (1969) proposed a two-layer model of historical time, comprising short-run time (*temps court*) and the *longue durée*. Instead of *longue durée*, however, this paper adopts an historical antecedent to confirm that, before the formation of SWELA, there had been another association, VIKUMA, which became the primary force behind SWELA. The analysis herein is also informed by Bottomore's theory (Bottomore, 1976) of democracy and a plurality of elites.

Above all, this paper will employ what I call the center-periphery theory of elites, based on the idea that differences between Yaounde elites (center) and provincial elites (periphery) led to the break-up of SWELA.

ETHNO-REGIONAL RIVALRY AND SWELA'S ANTECEDENT (VIKUMA)

VIKUMA stands for Victoria, Kumba, and Mamfe, the three divisions of the Cameroons under the British colonial administration (Kale, 1967). The origin of this pressure group can be traced back to 1959 when, in the heat of political campaigning, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC), a party with its bastion in the forest zone, was toppled by the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP), based in the Bamenda grassland zone. This was the handiwork of political and traditional elites in these divisions. Aluko (2003) maintains that ethnic diversity has always been manipulated for various reasons and purposes, ranging from individual or selfish ends, to class (and other subgroup), communal sectional, and parochial interests. VIKUMA was manipulated by elites for their own selfish gain.

The rise of Foncha as the leader of the KNDP and premier of British Southern Cameroons in 1959 brought political victimization, tribalism, and nepotism at the expense of the people from the forest zone and others not affiliated with the party.⁽²⁾ In other words, the creed of this party was regionalism. The victimization and/or regionalism of the Foncha government was intended to address the demands of the people of the forest zone (Bakweri, Balong, Bakossi, and Bayangs, among others) in the post-plebiscite discussions (March–April, 1961) under the banner of tribal associations such as *The Molongo*, *Mokanya*, and *Nwan-goe*, who sought “a kind of separate status under the supervision of a special U. N. commission for a period of three years” (Johnson, 1970). This ran parallel to KNDP, which advocated reunification with the French Cameroons. The proponents of this idea were politically elite individuals such as E. M. L. Endeley, P. N. Motomby-Woleta, S. E. Ajebe-Sone, and N. N. Mbile. They were nationalists during the decolonization period; additionally, it should be noted that one of the problems of nationalists in West Africa, in general, was that “appeals to traditional sentiments lead to micro-nationalism of units” (Hussain, 1973).

In a situation of political victimization and growing “graffiphobia” (the word “Graffi” is used to describe individuals from the Bamenda grasslands of Cameroon), Mesumbe Walter Wilson, publisher of the *Cameroon Spokesman*, launched VIKUMA on 4 September, 1964⁽³⁾ The creation of VIKUMA was a milestone that initiated a process of ethnic formation that distinguished most Southwesterners (forest zone) from Northwesterners (grassland zone). Henceforth, Southwesterners were increasingly perceived as a people with natural territorial and cultural boundaries. However, it also gave Southwesterners a sense of common destiny, and launched a common front against “institutionalized” discrimination.

As early as 11 October, 1963, before VIKUMA was even established, a meeting was held in Dr. Endeley's house; in attendance were Mbile, Henry Namata Elangwe, D. B. Monyongo, and Ajebe-Sone, the political elite of the coastal zone. They resolved to “fight so hard that the vice president [of the Federal Republic] and the Prime Minister [of West Cameroon] should not all be from the Bamenda grass field” (Ngoh, 1999).

VIKUMA was radical, and provided a forum for discussing problems of the coastal people or forest zone. At the top of its agenda was the idea of freedom from the "Bamenda oligarchy." According to its founder, Walter Wilson, the Bamenda people were not sincere about reunification, and had accepted it only on condition that they would dominate it.⁽⁴⁾ Wilson reported that between 1949 and 1954 Southern Cameroons had two separate provinces: the Cameroons Province, corresponding to the present-day Southwest Province, and the Bamenda Province, presently the Northwest Province. When Southern Cameroons was granted the status of an autonomous region in 1954, the Bamenda people protested that they did not want the Bamenda Province to be abolished (Kale, 1967). They argued that, with Dr. Endeley as leader of governmental affairs, political power was in the hands of those from the Cameroons Province, which in turn would make defending their own interests difficult. As a compromise, the British opened a liaison office in Bamenda to aid the Bamenda Province. Once Foncha broke away from the KNC and formed the KNDP in 1955, the liaison office automatically disappeared, because the Bamenda political elites did not feel threatened by Buea. VIKUMA was formed, therefore, to fight for the same issues that the Bamenda people had been fighting for between 1954 and 1959, when they were not in power. VIKUMA, however, went further in that they advocated a territorial reorganization of the Cameroon Federation on ethnic lines, regrouping the present Southwest with the Littoral Provinces, and headquartering it in Kumba, as well as the present Northwest and the West Provinces, headquartering it in Bafoussam.⁽⁵⁾

Other than emphasizing the chauvinistic and jingoist attitudes of the VIKUMA president, the foregoing sets out constructions of ethnicity by the various ethnic elites. To say that the Bamenda people protested the autonomous region of 1954 is largely an error with respect to Cameroon historiography (Fanso, 1988; Johnson, 1970; Kale, 1967; Mbile, 2000; Ngoh, 2001). It also shows that the conglomeration of the Grand SAWA movement, an ethnically-related coastal elite of the Southwest and neighboring Francophone Littoral Province, on the basis of common feelings of exploitation and domination by grassland settlers in the 1990s, is something that had long been whispered among VIKUMA members (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). Above all, it portrays in no small way the creation of ethnicity by the colonial administration and the continuation of an appropriation of political space by the post-colonial elites.

However, VIKUMA was dissolved in 1965 when its founder joined the Cameroon United Congress (CUC) as publicity secretary. This was striking, because the party was led by Solomon Tandeng Muna, who was from the grassland region (Northwest). Perhaps the demise of VIKUMA fell in line with historical trends that included an ambivalent perception of modernization as, on the one hand, essentially destructive and alien and, on the other hand, a provider of scarce beneficial resources (Yenshu, 1998). The coastal people were the first to come in contact with the Europeans, and their attitudes towards modernization have fluctuated, from collaboration when there were benefits to be

reaped to protest and opposition when it became invasive. Thus, VIKUMA and SWELA were formed to protest the Bamenda hegemony, thereby inventing an ethnic association. Whatever the case, VIKUMA's politics created, first and foremost, a keen sense of self-awareness within the present-day Southwest Province. Second, it helped launch several subsequent elite associations, including SWELA. Third, VIKUMA and SWELA were created to compete for scarce resources, whether economic, social, or political, with kin from the Northwest.

The 1970–1980 decade was one of despair and disillusionment for the Southwest elites, who claimed they had been marginalized. This feeling stemmed from the fact that all prime ministers of West Cameroon succeeding E. M. L. Endeley had been from the Bamenda grasslands (LeVine, 1965). In response, the Southwest elites either blackmailed other Southwesterners to gain favors from their francophone-dominated political masters, or remained silent while their resources were “raped.”⁽⁶⁾ Consequently, a frustration bordering on alienation began to form, as claimed by these political elites. To prevent this trend developing further, a pressure group that would fight for the interests of the Southwest became necessary. SWELA was born, therefore, in 1991 as a continuation of VIKUMA, and as a re-appropriation of political space.

DEVELOPMENTS LEADING TO THE FORMATION OF SWELA

SWELA was born out of the desire by Southwest elites for collective leadership that would articulate ethnic and provincial interests, both of which they felt had become increasingly marginalized in political, economic, and social domains. Most Southwesterners had come to realize that by pursuing Anglophone/Francophone logic, the distribution of value within the system would not favor them, for the Northwesterners were the dominant Anglophone group, and they usually received most of the benefits reserved for the Anglophone community.⁽⁷⁾ In other words, SWELA was established to compete for social, political, and economic resources against the Northwest elite, who were in an advantageous position as the majority group. The fact that they were not well represented in the government, but provided much of the country's resources (e.g., oil, rubber, bananas, palms, and tea) is similar to the situation of the Niger Delta minorities in Nigeria (Isumonah, 2001).

The idea of an elite association was given an additional fillip with the election of President Biya in 1982; this was part of the effort to create a propaganda weapon on the part of the regime so that it could demonstrate popular consensus and consolidate its power. In this light, a group of Southwest elites, mostly high-level players in the Cameroon National Union party⁽⁸⁾, in Buea (headquarters of the Southwest Province) and Yaounde (capital of Cameroon) signed motions of support for Biya during his conflict in 1983 with Ahidjo, his predecessor (Fanso, 1988). The Biya–Ahidjo fracas was apparently sparked when Ahidjo attempted to unseat Biya in a coup d'état, which was ultimately prevented (Takougang & Krieger, 1998). After the fracas, Biya decided to test

his popularity by calling a snap presidential election in 1983. During the election, many ethnic elite associations sent motions of support to Biya.⁽⁹⁾ (Oben & Akoko, 2004)

The first major challenge that emphasized the necessity for a powerful SWELA was the Pamol Plantation Du Cameroun (PAMOL) crisis. In October 1987, it was rumored that PAMOL was to go on voluntary liquidation (Nyamnjoh, 1997), and that a group of Northwest business magnates, namely Daniel A. Nangah, Martin Che, and Wilie Nango Kimbeng, had tendered to buy it. In response, a meeting of more than 60 Southwest elite individuals in Yaounde gathered at the residence of Minister Martin Kima.⁽¹⁰⁾ A Southwest-based company, CAMAGRI, was asked to tender and compete on-the-spot, and registered with shares of 50,000 francs (US\$ 100 each). Two major players involved in this effort were Minister Ogork Ntui, board member of PAMOL, and Governor Enow Tanjong. The purchase of PAMOL, which Southwesterners viewed as tantamount to mortgaging most of the fertile lands of Ndian and even rendering some 6,000 Southwesterners unemployed, rekindled the concerns of Southwest elites.

But what helped galvanize the coming together of the Southwest political icons were two outstanding events that occurred in 1988. First, the death of veteran politician E. M. L. Endeley took place; this was followed by the resignation of Solomon Tandeng Muna, speaker of the National Assembly (Nghoh, 1987). The death of Endeley was a great loss for the Southwest elites, who were aware of the great vacuum he had left behind, and of the fact that there was no-one in the province who could fill that gap. Consequently, there was a need for a pressure group to provide collective leadership in the absence of any respectable Southwest spokesman.

The resignation of Muna was even more serious than the death of Endeley, because the Southwesterners had been planning on the basis of him being the speaker of the National Assembly. They had even held, rightly or wrongly, that W. N. O. Effiom or Thomas Ebongalame, old and experienced politicians of the province, could fill the gap.⁽¹¹⁾ However, the Northwest elite smartly positioned Achidi Achu and Joseph Awunti, from Mezam, and former vice minister of agriculture and minister, in charge of parliamentary relations. Whether by design, accident, or political expediency, Biya then appointed Fonka Shang Lawrence, from the Northwest Province. This appointment either demonstrated how impotent the Southwest lobbying group was, or Biya's lack of faith in them. It further pointed to the fact that the Southwest elite individuals residing in the capital of Yaounde showed little tact when it came to defending the position of the Southwest Province. The appointment also aggravated the conflicted relations of Southwesterners over state resources in relation to Northwesterners. The appointment of Fonka, in any case, showed the Southwest elites that it was necessary to base an elite association in the province, not in Yaounde.⁽¹²⁾

In 1989, with increased political tension following the end of the Cold War, a wind of change blew across Cameroon, leading to widespread student riots in the over-populated University of Yaounde (Nyamnjoh, 1997). This political con-

vulsion led to the creation of the Anglo-Saxon-only University of Buea⁽¹³⁾, and the differences between the Northwest and Southwest became clearer. The creation of the University of Buea helped give birth to SWELA. In fact, immediately following its establishment, a group of Southwest elites residing in Yaounde, led by Yaounde University Vice Chancellor Dr. Peter Agbor Tabi, sent a motion of thanks to the government of Paul Biya. Suspicious that the Northwest elites might attempt to decentralize the new university for their own benefit, Tabi's group, called SWEG, held a series of meetings and sent a memorandum to the Minister of Higher Education condemning any moves for decentralization. The birth of SWELA had thus begun.

THE BIRTH OF SWELA

SWELA was fostered into existence primarily by five prominent Southwesterners, namely, David M. Iyok, Barrister Abraham T. Enaw, and chiefs Emmanuel Tabe Egbe, Ephraim Inoni, and Fomenky. Their power lay in the fact that most had already been working with the government in at least a ministerial role. The exception was David M. Iyok, who was a financial baron and founding manager of a paper company (SAMCO). Moreover, some had gone by traditional titles, such as chief, which, by implication, meant that they were custodians of culture and of the people. It was at Chief Egbe's house that these prominent Southwest elite individuals, and others such as Iyok, organized as a single entity to address the issue of the University of Buea. Then, on 25 May 1991, the Southwest Elite Forum summoned another meeting in Victoria Hall that laid the foundation of SWELA. Jointly organized by Chief Inoni and Limbe Urban Council Mayor Dan Matute, it brought together 38 people, drawn from Yaounde, Limbe, Buea, Douala, and Kumba.⁽¹⁴⁾

Although this meeting had no defined agenda, Chief Inoni emphasized the necessity to unite and speak with one voice to solidify the strategic position of the Southwest Province and fight for its interests. In this way, he helped bridge Yaounde to the provincial forces of SWELA. One week later, another meeting took place (31 May 1991), attended by 99 retired "sons of the soil," including Mola Njoh Litumbe and former ambassador Fossung. The aim of the meeting was to identify the major problems of the province, and its importance lay in the fact that it dispatched a six-man delegation to the All Anglophone Conference held in Buea, 3–6 June 1991.

D. M. Iyok also played a very important role in the establishment of SWELA. He helped give the forum a provincial dimension, and acted more or less as the propaganda hub through which all patrons and elders were contacted. Moreover, he sensitized many others, including barristers Nkongho and Chief Tabetando in Douala, and Chief Fomenky, Chief Raymond Beseka, Ekinde Sona, Dr. Nzume, and Dr. Meboka in Kumba⁽¹⁵⁾, to the importance of a provincial association. Furthermore, he largely organized the next crucial meeting, which took place on 8 June in Kumba.

The Kumba meeting brought together some 300 people, and essentially served as the inaugural meeting of SWELA. Lawyer A. T. Enaw chaired the meeting, and S. N. Dioh was Vice Chairman. Lawyer Edjua proposed the name of Southwest Elites Association, and a constitutional draft committee was created, consisting of lawyer Eseme, justice Bawak, and S. N. Dioh.

Another meeting in Limbe (6 July, 1991), which attracted a crowd of 1,500 people, closely followed the Kumba meeting. The issues of membership of the 11th province in SWELA, and a 10-state federation for Cameroon were discussed.⁽¹⁶⁾ The constitution was adopted, and on 7 August 1991, SWELA was officially registered in conformity with law No. 90-153 with the Senior Divisional Officer of Kumba. Kumba thus became the birthplace of SWELA. On 21 August 1991, the association was recognized and legitimized by the indigenes of the Southwest province. Thus SWELA was established in a context of ethnic, civil, economic, political, and social marginalization for the Southwest Province. Its future was uncertain.

INTERNAL WRANGLING WITHIN SWELA

In contrast to the euphoria and conviviality at the inception of SWELA, it was greeted with suspicion and obstruction both within and outside the province. The first major problem that confronted SWELA was that of the relationship between the Yaounde Southwest Elites and those based in the province. As previously mentioned, Dr. Endeley had succeeded in providing leadership from the province (not Yaounde). The creation of SWELA signified a rejection of the Yaounde elites, who were accused of not addressing the interests of the Southwest people. Henceforth, Southwest interests were to be articulated from the province, and not Yaounde.

This rift between the provincial and Yaounde elites manifested in late September, 1991, during President Biya's visit to the Southwest Province. The presidential protocol reserved some 100 invitations for SWELA. Unfortunately, all were withheld by a Southwest minister who never delivered them to the national executive.⁽¹⁷⁾ Consequently, the protem chairperson and vice chair and secretaries could not sit in the grand stand where the president sat.⁽¹⁸⁾

The second conflict arose when a SWELA delegation comprising Abraham T. Enaw, lawyer Edjua, Nnoko Mbele, and Dr. George Atem were prevented by Southwest minister Benjamin Itoe from having an audience with the president on 28 September 1991.⁽¹⁹⁾ Following these events, and Minister Ogork Ntui's anti-national conference campaign⁽²⁰⁾ it became clear that the Yaounde elite would attempt to hijack the association for their own ends. The words of SWELA Secretary General A. T. Enaw, spoken at the Mamfe conference (December 1991), clearly sums up the situation:

The visit of the Head of State to the Southwest Province on 27 and 28 September 1991 has now become history but there are lessons to

be learnt by all members of SWELA. The first problem of determination is where is the seat of SWELA located? Is it located in Yaounde the national capital of the Republic of Cameroon or is it located in the South West Province.... Let no man or group of people give the impression that SWELA is under their armpit and they control it through a remote control (See note 17).

The tussle in SWELA had started, arising primarily out of competition with the state over resources. The conflict was mainly political because, to a large extent, Yaounde was the seat of government and the Yaounde elite felt that they should control SWELA. It should be noted that factional struggle within a pressure group and/or party, such as that which took place in the Kenyan African National Union between 1969 and 1996 (Buijtenhuijs, 1978), is common. This competition illustrates what I call center-periphery theory, or vertical competition among elites, which is simply the struggle between elites in the center and those on the periphery (i.e., in the provinces).

The second major challenge, which permanently fractured SWELA, stemmed from the newly created Southwest Chiefs Conference (SWECC). Its members were custodians of the people, and most of them (e.g., Mukete, Endeley, Elangwe, Molongwe, Arrey, and Manga) had been active politicians. They considered themselves core elites; most represented conservative ideals, and all were staunch members of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Including them in SWELA, with special roles as national executives and advisers at chapters and branches, transformed these traditional elites into political elites, and marked the beginning of SWELA's decomposition. The differences that occurred within SWELA illustrate, in concrete terms, inter-elite competition stemming from a political elite's desire to identify with the state and control political and economic resources (Chazan *et al.*, 1992). Such situations are more acute in impoverished regions, because poverty often drives the ambition and activities of elites (Barongo, 1983).

Compounding SWELA's problems was the general perception that it was a xenophobic association aimed at containing the settler population, which was mostly from the Northwest Province (Delancey, 1974). However, it also incurred the wrath of the Southwest French Cameroon settler population.⁽²¹⁾ There was some basis for this, and it appeared to accord with the intentions of the government in that some of the French Cameroonians who had settled in the Southwest Province long before had been refused membership to the association (Geschiere, 2001). This conflict over the political center was a major force leading to the split of SWELA. However, other factors were equally important.

First, Cameroon is made up of more than 250 ethnic groups, and SWELA included Orocko, Bayangi, Bakweri, Bangwa, Bassosi, Bakossi, Bafaw, Balong, and Mbo, with six administrative divisions. Although SWELA was a supra-ethnic association, it nonetheless had individual indigenes that fought for their own specific group's interests. Second, SWELA was born in a political whirlwind by politically hungry leaders, many of whom intended to use it as a

shield for their own political ends. In the heat of that multiparty tempest, and from within SWELA, emerged opposition leaders as well as those of the ruling government. The differences became acute, contributing to its eventual fragmentation. Third, the nuances between traditionally educated elites and politicians *per se* were never differentiated from the onset. Some traditional elites claimed to be superior and saw SWELA as an arm of SWECC. Finally, the organization put into place the “derivative policy,” which meant that the more a region contributes to national development in terms of natural resources, the more it is rewarded in terms of development. However, in practice, some regions contributed more resources but were not rewarded while others contributed less but were rewarded. Consequently, the elites from regions that contributed more but received less felt slighted, and such sentiments fragmented SWELA.

SWELA GOES PLURAL

The first step towards the plurality of SWELA took place in 1992, before its 1993 split, during the general assembly meeting in Mudemba, Ndian division, shortly after the 1992 elections. During the assembly, it was stated *inter alia* that “SWELA addresses any government present and future to consider the development of the South West Province as its pre-occupation as a condition for our continual loyalty.”⁽²²⁾ This statement declared that if the government showed any interest in the development of the Southwest Province, then SWELA was going to show unalloyed loyalty and vice versa. This did not go unnoticed by smart politicians, who exploited the opportunity.

The opportune moment came with the death of SWELA’s Secretary General, A. T. Enaw in May 1993.⁽²³⁾ Konings & Nyamnjoh (2003: 112) maintained that “the military brutalities in the South West Province during the 1993 government anti-smuggling campaign led to a split in SWELA.” While not overtly rejecting this notion, the death of the Secretary General may have had more to do with the split than the anti-smuggling campaign, because through that death a power vacuum was created.

Martin Nkemngu, who was vice secretary general, thought he was constitutionally granted the right to fill the space, pending future elections. However, Nnoko Mbelle did not consider Nkemngu a true Southwesterner, even though he was Bafaw, a prominent ethnic group in the Southwest Province and was in close contact with the Yaounde elites. The general assembly in Menji, Lebialem division, on December, 1993, provided the occasion for Nnoko Mbelle to boycott it, alongside his supporters, calling it illegal. He went ahead to form his own faction.

Nnoko Mbelle’s opinion that Nkemngu was not a true Southwesterner stemmed from the fact that the former belonged to the Social Democratic Front (SDF), an opposition party with a strong following in the Northwest and Western Provinces. Secondly, Nkemngu comes from the Lebialem division, which is halfway into the grasslands and the forest zone. Thus, Mbelle felt that

Nkemngu had never been generally elected. It was in this environment that SWELA suffered a split, with Mbelle heading a faction. Although he was taken to court several times, all such efforts was as effective as a “storm in a tea cup.”⁽²⁴⁾

Nnoko Mbelle’s faction of SWELA had highly-placed CPDM agents, and was thus called a pro-government SWELA, or SWELA II, given that there is no clear-cut distinction between the party and the state in Cameroon. These high-level CPDM members included Emmanuel Tabi Egbe (Roving Ambassador), Peter Agbor Tabi (Minister of Higher Education), John Ebong Ngolle (Minister), Ephraim Inoni (Minister), and Caven Nnoko Mbelle (Secretary General). There were also prominent Southwest chiefs, such as Mola Samuel Endeley and Nfon Victor Mukete⁽²⁵⁾ (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). The handwriting was clearly on the wall; SWELA had gone plural, and the government had penetrated its fabric.

The governor of the Southwest Province, Peter Oben Ashu, was one of the first to identify with the pro-government SWELA, because of his CPDM’s leanings. He began by giving his blessings to the executive, and promised to grant their request to hold their general assembly in Kumba, but remarked that “these days nothing goes for nothing.”⁽²⁶⁾ He apparently wanted his guests to provide him with assurances that they would reverse the disastrous fortunes of the ruling CPDM in the coming elections by capturing councils for the CPDM in the Southwest Province. He regretted the fact that the CPDM had a very poor standing in the province.

Reacting to Governor Peter Oben Ashu’s attendance at the “illegal” SWELA meeting in Kumba, Peter Agbor Tabi remarked that:

It is unfortunate that we are in a country where on the one hand the governor expects state institutions to be respected, and on the other hand, he deliberately supports a recalcitrant individual in breaking the law. This is an unfortunate situation, which we see as double standards, and I do not think any right thinking Cameroonian will condone with such behavior.⁽²⁷⁾

It is difficult to accept Tabi’s position, given that he too was in the government and at the same time a member of SWELA. Perhaps he was just playing the role of Pontius Pilatus.

The SWELA II faction executive, however, accepted the governor’s condition, promising to contribute 16 million francs (US\$ 35,000) to sponsor the CPDM campaign in the Province at the upcoming elections. As a mark of further assurance of the SWELA II acceptance to support the CPDM election campaign, the creation of action committees was discussed, with one of them called the “committee of strategy.” What had become clear was that SWELA had missed its original objective and *ipso facto* had been hijacked by the government. Yet the members of SWELA were also expecting to gain from the government.

They started seeing benefits following the 1996 municipal elections, in which Nnoko Mbelle was appointed the government delegate for Kumba urban council. His rival, Martin Nkemngu, was placed on a 'punitive' transfer to Yaounde as an ordinary member of staff of CAMNEWS. This was essentially a punishment, because he had formerly been the head of CAMNEWS in Buea (Geschiere, 2001). However, this point is still debatable, because the act of transferring civil servants in Cameroon is a government action.

The Yaounde-based pro-government SWELA faction also suffered a rum-pus, over the admission of Southwest candidates into Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS).⁽²⁸⁾ Each of the six divisions of the Southwest Province were entitled to 10 places in the ENS, with the Manyu division having 26 extra seats, because the Minister of Higher Education, Peter Agbor Tabi, came from that division. The list was arranged and handed over to Chief Ephraim Inoni, Assistant Secretary General at the presidency; John Ebong Ngolle, Minister for Special Duties at the Presidency; and Peter Agbor Tabi, who was to be the final arbiter of the list. Much to the chagrin of these elites, out of 83 candidates from the Southwest, only 10 came from their list. This was particularly unusual, because the ENS had been established to train professional teachers, who were admitted on merit alone. But because the Minister of Higher Education belonged to the Yaounde SWELA, the political elites of the province wanted to make a fortune out of this prestigious institution by grabbing more state resources for it.

In response, the executives resigned *en masse*, leading to another split.⁽²⁹⁾ This intra-elite competition stemmed from conflict over who would gain access to a greater share of state resources. Peter Agbor Tabi, who had been promoted from Vice Chancellor of Yaounde University to the Minister of Higher Education, was held responsible for letting down the Southwest Province with respect to the utilization of state resources. Whatever the case, the pro-government SWELA never failed to support the government during election campaigns.

THE FORTUNES OF SWELA

The political campaigns of the pro-government SWELA were at times direct and at times indirect. Regardless of their technique, what became clear was that most citizens did not exercise their civic responsibility. When Governor Peter Oben Ashu gave his blessings to the 'rebel' faction of SWELA, it was on condition that they would help redress the poor CPDM situation in the Southwest Province. The SWELA II group responded positively, promising to contribute 16 million francs to sponsor the CPDM campaigns in the province at the upcoming council elections. This constituted a tacit entente between pro-government SWELA and the government, and it demonstrated that the latter was dedicated to campaigning.

After being appointed Prime Minister of Cameroon in 1996, Peter Mafany Musonge's words at his reception left nothing in doubt. Amongst other things,

he said, "Biya has scratched our back and we shall certainly scratch the Head of State's back thoroughly when the time comes"⁽³⁰⁾ (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). Musonge was emphasizing that Biya should be rewarded abundantly during the next elections for appointing him Prime Minister, an appointment the Southwest had not experienced since 1958. Assistant Secretary General of the pro-government SWELA, Norbert Nangiy Mbile, also used the appointment of Musonge to campaign: "Therefore he [Musonge] has to be assured of the support of all South Westerners. The support has to be oral, total and convincingly expressed in the forthcoming elections. Only then can we expect him to deliver the goods."⁽³¹⁾

On 12 March 1997, SWECC Secretary General Atem Ebako called upon Southwesterners to support the ruling party in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.⁽³²⁾ He said:

Our communities especially those in Fako and Meme divisions, are swarmed by Cameroonians from other places and provinces.... It is not possible to have Cameroonians who are not indigenous in the Southwest Province to become representatives of South Westerners at local councils, parliament and government. This aspect of the evolution of the political life of the Southwest Province which became very obvious after the 21 January 1996 municipal elections is most repulsive, resentful indignant and pre-occupying. Our choice is clear as we stated in the general Assembly Meeting in Kumba on 8 March 1997. We call on all South Westerners of voting age to register and vote massively for the candidates of the CPDM party of president Paul Biya at the forth-coming parliamentary elections.⁽³³⁾

However, the pro-government SWELA also used intimidation to campaign. Governor Peter Oben Ashu did not mince words when he said that the Southwest was ready to go to war to keep Biya, Musonge, and the CPDM party in power. He went ahead and issued a war cry on the eve of the 1997 parliamentary elections, declaring, "we are ready to fight to the last man to maintain our son as prime minister. This is the time for all South Westerners to be ready to die or survive. We have the South Westerners and what we need now is only satisfaction and social amenities. The Southwest is satisfied with what it has and anyone who is not here to safe guard the interests of the province should immediately pack to his home."⁽³⁴⁾

As a direct consequence of this campaign, the CPDM scored a spectacular victory in the Southwest Province, via manipulating elites: to reward the pro-government SWELA, many individuals from the Southwest were either appointed into new positions or confirmed in their old positions. It was on this direct connection with the comfortable position of the CPDM in the Southwest Province that SWELA had to re-focus its objectives.

CONCLUSION

The multiparty politics in Cameroon in the early 1990s helped create and shape elite associations along ethnic lines. Some were born with the government's blessing, while the government hijacked others. Nonetheless, these elite associations reflected the ethnic and geographical boundaries of Cameroon. SWELA *per se* was established in the Southwest Province with an initially, superficially, apolitical objective. The real objective, however, was to contain the political and economic *modus operandi* of the grasslanders in this province. After its birth in 1991, the government hijacked it for its own ends. This study has demonstrated that while SWELA had been using the government for its own ends, the government had also used SWELA to retain power. It has also been argued that SWELA was created by a small number of elites to foster and defend their whims and caprices within the authoritarian regime of Paul Biya. This paper has also proposed that SWELA and its historical antecedents may be linked to concepts of ethnoregional politics and the construction of ethnicity. The democratic process remains an illusion in Cameroon, and in most of black Africa, mainly because of the self-interested nature of elite groups, but also because of government manipulation of the masses via elite proxies and surrogates.

NOTES

- (1) News paper: *The Oracle*, 5(2) 2000: 10-11.
- (2) News paper: *Cameroon Champion*, 4[12].
- (3) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 14–21 Feb. 1994.
- (4) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 1994; *Cameroon Spokesman*, 1964.
- (5) News paper: *Cameroon Mirror*, 1965.
- (6) The Southwest Province has many natural resources, including rubber, cocoa, banana, timber, and crude oil deposits. It also hosts the only oil refinery. As a result, the region's political/traditional elites felt and still feel that they should play an important role in national politics.
- (7) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 14–21 February 1994.
- (8) The Cameroon National Union Party (CNU) was formed in 1966 after all the opposition parties had been dissolved. The name of this party was changed in 1984 to the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM); Pamol was an agricultural plantation established in 1952 by the Unilever Brothers in Ndian Division, Southwest Province. In November, 1986, it was liquidated.
- (9) Newspaper: *Cameroon Tribune*, December 1983.
- (10) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 28 February – 7 March 1994.
- (11) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 1994.
- (12) The Southwest elites had sound case to make in relation to this political marginalization, primarily because they had never designated a prime minister or a speaker of the national assembly since Endeley faded from the political stage in 1958. Foncha was succeeded by Muna, Fonka Shang, and then Achidi Achu, all of whom were from the Bamenda grassland zone.

- (13) Decree No. 92/034, 19 January 1993, organized the University of Buea along Anglo-Saxon lines.
- (14) News paper: *Cameroon Post*, 1–8 December 1993.
- (15) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 1994.
- (16) This issue has been gaining currency in Cameroon since the 1990s. The 11th province is largely composed of inhabitants who, as a result of colonialism, cannot be identified as purely Anglophone or Francophone today. For more details, see Geschiere (2001: 93-108).
- (17) News paper: *The Oracle*, 1(1) 1991: 15-18.
- (18) News paper: *Weekly Post*, No. 0052: 10.
- (19) During an interview with Dr. George Atem on 10 October 2003, he told me that the biggest shock in this respect was that it had been their contemporaries from Yaounde who had prevented them from seeing the President. "I knew things were rapidly changing," he said.
- (20) The cry for a national conference in most African countries became fashionable in the early 1990s. Most governments, including that of Cameroon, initially did not want it.
- (21) The French settler population was a colonial product; they had emigrated to British Southern Cameroon to avoid harsh colonial policies by the French and terrorist activities by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC). They settled, married, and gave birth to children who were educated in the English culture. In 1991, most of them were painfully reminded that they had never officially belonged to the Southwest Province.
- (22) News paper: *The Oracle*, 1(2) May–June 1992: 33.
- (23) News paper: *The Herald*, 15–18 June 1995.
- (24) News paper: *Weekly Post*, 16–23 October 1995: 6; *Weekly Post*, 4–10 November 1994: 6; *The Herald*, 6–8 February 1995: 6. *The Oracle*, 2(1), January 1997: 12.
- (25) News paper: *The Herald*, 21–24 July 1994.
- (26) News paper: *The Herald*, 23–25 May 1994: 6.
- (27) News paper: *The Herald*, 31 March–3 April 1994: 3.
- (28) News paper: *The Herald*, 1995.
- (29) News paper: *The Herald*, 1995; *Star Headlines*, 20 November 1996: 1–7; *The Herald*, 11–12 November 1996: 3.
- (30) News paper: *Cameroon Post*, 12–18 November 1996: 1&3.
- (31) News paper: *The Oracle*, 2(1), January 1997: 23.
- (32) News paper: *Pilot Magazine*, May 1997.
- (33) News paper: *Pilot Magazine*, May 1997: 9.
- (34) News paper: *The Herald*, 6–8 June 1997: 3.

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