

# THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN SANGMELIMA SUBDIVISION AND THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH THE FRENCH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION BETWEEN 1925 AND 1940

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**Abstract:** *The text discusses the administration system in Cameroon, stating that there is no clear separation between French and indigenous administration. Both representatives of the Mandatory Power and the indigenous population participate to varying degrees in the management of public affairs. Traditional rulers have a strong influence over their constituents and a council of notables was established to gather proposals from the grassroots. The French colonial administration used this council to consolidate its power, making traditional rulers a crucial intermediary between the population and the authorities. The focus of the study is on the contribution of traditional rulers, within the council of notables, to the development of the Sangmélima subdivision. The aim is to trace the political, economic, and social proposals made by the traditional rulers. The data for this study was collected from various sources, including general and specialised works, articles, theses, dissertations, and archive documents, and was analysed thematically. After all, traditional rules in Sangmelima contributed to the development of our city. All citizens of our locality noticed it regularly.*

**Keywords:** Sangmelima, indigenous, mandatory power, traditional rulers, local dignitary.

## 1. Introduction

After the end of the First World War, Germany relinquished its colonial possessions, which were subsequently transferred to the League of Nations to be administered by the victorious powers. France, for its part, included its zone of influence as part of its colonial empire while maintaining autonomy as a mandated territory under the SDN (Gourévitch, 2006). It employed an assimilation policy through the implementation of the *indignant system*. In 1916, the territory was partitioned into nine districts, each with a designated capital. At the administrative district level, the Commissioner of the French Republic was supported by regional and subdivisional officers. It was governed by a representative of the French Republic whose main responsibility was to maintain public order and security while fostering economic and social growth. Administrative and litigation councils were appointed to assist the Commissioner in fulfilling his duties. Additionally, each district was further divided into one or more subdivisions.

The Ntem Region underwent a change. On 14 May 1916, General Aymerich published a decree dividing Cameroon into nine districts. The former district of Ebolowa-Akoafem became the circonscription of Ebolowa-Akoafem, with Ebolowa as its capital (Ngoh, 1990). On 8 August 1934, Repiquet, the French Governor, reorganised the administrative units. The administrative districts were set up as Regions. He divided the territory into 17 Regions. The Ntem Region, comprising the sub-divisions of Ebolowa, Sangmélima, Ambam and Djoum, covers an area of approximately 48,140 km<sup>2</sup>. Its capital is Ebolowa. On 29 December 1951, Jean Louis Marie André Soucadaux, High Commissioner, split the Ntem Region into two: the Ntem Region and the Dja and Lobo Region (ANY, JOC, 29th december 1951). The latter comprises two subdivisions: Sangmélima and Djoum. The Ntem Region is made up of two subdivisions: the Ebolowa Subdivision and the Ambam Subdivision (Anonym, 1968). Part of the Ambam subdivision is attached to the Kribi-Lolodorf-Campo district, specifically Nyabessan. The colonial administrators lead the districts and subdivisions with a varying number of subordinate officials, both European and indigenous. The text adheres to conventional academic structure and employs clear, objective language with neutral tone. The text maintains a formal register,

with precise vocabulary and grammatical correctness. Appropriate style guides are used, with consistent citation and footnote formatting (Mveng, 1985). Quotations are clearly marked, and filler words are avoided. The administrators have broad responsibilities, such as administration, agriculture and public works, within their allotted territory. They also act as judges. Technical abbreviations are explained when they are first used. They preside over the local court of appeal for indigenous peoples and collaborate with village, regional, or canton chiefs in their interactions with community members (Mveng, 1985).

When it came to organising and administering the country, the Mandatory Power respected the traditional social organisation. It endeavoured to perfect this organisation and to make it an instrument of progress. The role of the indigenous element is even greater in regional administration. Each administrative district has a council of notables which acts as an intermediary between the population and the administration (Mveng, 1985). It is an association of local executives who participate in drawing up administrative, political, economic and social decisions. What role does the council of notables play? What contribution has this institution made to the development of the Sangmélima subdivision? In what way have the chiefs been involved in drawing up development projects? In order to do this, this work is based on a line of reasoning developed using the main data collection techniques: firstly, selective interviews, then the use of archive collections, and finally second-hand documentary sources (general works and scientific publications).

This article focuses on three main points: firstly, the creation, organisation and functioning of the council of notables; secondly, the chiefs and the defence of political and socio-economic interests through political relay; and thirdly, the social contribution to regional development.

## **2. The advent of the council of local elders**

The French colonial administration set up a council of notables to organise and operate the administrative structures.

### **2.1. Creation**

By decree of 9 October 1925, the councils of notables were created by Theodore Paul, commissioner of the French Republic (Bassa, 2011). They were established in the administrative districts. The text sets out their composition, powers and how they are to be convened. They are made up of canton and regional chiefs and representatives of each major ethnic group in the district (Ngongo, 1987).

In 1931, three categories of chiefs were created: 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree chiefs. Village chiefs were appointed by the district chiefs on the recommendation of the subdivision chiefs (Bassa, 2011). They may only be dismissed by an order of the Commissioner of the Republic. Regional or canton chiefs who occupy a higher rank in the indigenous administrative hierarchy are appointed and dismissed by order of the head of the territory. They have political, administrative and judicial powers.

### **2.1. Organization and Functioning of the Council of Local dignitaries**

Membership varies between 08 and 16 members. Members are chosen by the Commissioner of the French Republic from among family, village and canton chiefs, leading merchants, wealthy landowners and religious moral authorities. They serve for 03 years free of charge. They may be dismissed by the Commissioner of the French Republic (Bassa, 2011).

The council is chaired by the district chief. He is assisted by the subdivision heads. In the Ebolowa district, the council of notables meets at the Ebolowa indigenous court. The Council of Notables deliberates on issues relating to taxation, infrastructure construction, civil status, benefits, etc. Its role is to maintain contact between the various ethnic groups in the region, to study by mutual agreement the political, economic, fiscal and social issues that may be of particular interest to the region's inhabitants, and to collect and study their wishes (APE, Report of the Council of Notables, 1938).

The council is chaired by the heads of region, assisted by his or her deputy. Each subdivision chief heads the delegation for his district. The chiefs are generally identified by tribe. Thus, in the Sangmélima subdivision we have the senior chiefs of the Boulou and Fong races (APE, 1933). The following table shows the notables of the Sangmélima subdivision in 1936.

**Table1: Local dignitaries of the Sangmelima subdivision in 1936.**

<b>Local dignitaries Names</b>	<b>Origins</b>
Mboutou Abeng	superior ruler of the boulou tribe
Mboutou Atchamelame	superior ruler of the Fong race
Mvondo Ekoa	boulou senior ruler
Mfoula Alem	boulou ruler constable
Oyono Azoa	senior ruler of the boulou breed
Zame Mfenda	boulou senior ruler
Enondji Mvomo	senior ruler of the boulou breed
Messele Essiane	boulou senior ruler
Akama Voto	boulou senior ruler
Zili Mimbe	boulou senior ruler
Esian Kpwang	boulou senior ruler
Bomo Minko	boulou senior ruler
Mvom Ela	head ruler of the boulou tribe

Source: APE, *Rapport du Conseil des notables*, 1933.

The board has two interpreters: Rudolph Ebo and Pierre Ebanga. The issues submitted to the agenda of the meetings of the council of notables were proposed by the subdivision chiefs on the following aspects: capitation tax, redemption of benefits, medical assistance and economic issues (APE, 1939). The head of the Djoum subdivision submitted questions for approval by the head of the Ntem region for inclusion on the agenda. On this subject, the head of the subdivision gave his opinion on the development of the Djoum-Gabon track, which had been converted into a road in 1938 along a new route, as far as the village of Nkane, using hired labour (APE, 1938).

Every year, a list of chiefs is sent to the governor containing more names than the number of notables set in the official gazette. The governor chooses from this list and changes the notables so that successively all the chiefs and notables are in turn members of the council. In November 1933, Bomo Minko, Enondji Mvomo and Mfoula Leme were not chosen to take part in the meeting on the 17th. For the chairman of the meeting, Maurice Decharte, the fact that they had been struck off the list for that year did not constitute a sanction against them. They did not lose out, but all the regions, all the major villages, should be represented on the council in turn. The Chairman asked the chiefs for their opinion on how the meetings should be held, as some members had to travel more than eight days from Sangmélima to Ebolowa. Mboutou Abeng proposed the end of June, around the 20th of the month. All the members agreed. On the holding of meetings of the various commissions: the Council of Notables, the Agricultural Commission and the Health and Hygiene Commission. The main issues discussed were indigenous civil status, family emancipation, medical assistance, sport, marriages, dowries and divorces (APE, 1933).

The indigenous population is also represented on the bodies responsible for studying and examining affairs affecting the entire territory. Two indigenous notables sit alongside senior civil servants on the Board of Directors, and two others are members of the Chamber of Commerce, which brings together representatives from the various branches of the country's economy.

### **3. Leaders and the defence of political and socio-economic interests**

The Council of elders deals with political, economic and social issues.

#### **3.1. A relay policy**

Leaders are involved in decision-making and implementation in the field. They participate in the transmission of orders and their execution. They supervise worksites. They are employed as auxiliaries in the census and tax collection. The importance of the chief's role within the council of notable people contributed to the creation of the chiefdoms. With regard to this political position, Mboutou Abeng points out that the authority of the chiefs is diminishing as a result of the erosion of command. The individualist Boulou only wants to be a chief. As a result, for a population of 55,000, there are 310 chiefs or "cheffailons", of whom 70 have fewer than 30 men under their command. In his view, the number must be reduced in order to strengthen the authority of the others. It was a question of regrouping the command and not moving a village (APE, Rapport du conseil des notables, 1938).

#### **3.2. An economic and social function**

The chiefs play a leading role in the economic and social development of their region. In economic terms, the council dealt with agricultural matters, capitation tax, taxes, benefits and public works (roads and tracks).

An agricultural committee was set up within the council of notables. In the Sangmélina subdivision, work is carried out to supply the Europeans and natives of the Sangmélina post with fresh food. There is a market twice a week. The chairman of the council, Martin, gives an update on groundnut cultivation. The local people started planting groundnuts in 1938. Optimum yields should be achieved in 1939. According to reports from 1927, 70 tonnes were supplied (APE, 1938).

Cocoa marketing operations are resisted by farmers, who complain that the distances involved are too great (an average of 5 km), that the poorly adapted pushchairs do not work properly, and that the transport is tiring. Cocoa is sold on the roadsides and in the exporters' shops, as the product can be sold at any time, day or night (APE, 1935). The notables are calling for regular markets to be set up. They felt that it was up to the buyer to come to the producer, who had no means of transport (APE, 1935).

In 1935, at a meeting of the Ntem council of notables, the regional chief announced the creation of approved centres known as periodic markets. The approved centres, known as periodic markets, avoided the long portage to the commercial centres, particularly in Kribi (APE, 1935). The head of the region said: "On these markets, and in a specific location, you can only buy and sell local produce, cocoa, palm nuts, groundnuts, maize, palm oil and foodstuffs, to the exclusion of all other goods" (APE, 1935).

In Boulou and Béti country, traditional markets are virtually unknown. The word for them (mâkit) in Ewondo or Boulou is of European origin. There is a busy, well-stocked market every day in every subdivision capital (Binet, 1955). The institution is well established, but its very location shows that it is linked to the European administration and the urban development that followed it (Binet, 1955).

The chiefs are all in favour of these markets, where products are paid for at the normal price. Periodic markets partly eliminate the need for portage and enable people to find essential items and objects close to their village. During the cocoa season, periodic markets are organised, but in the absence of a traditional substratum, they still only have an artificial existence. The villages of Mélane, Mfem, Endengue and Minko'o in Dja and Lobo were chosen to host the first periodic markets (Binet, 1955).

Some chiefs forbade the purchase of cocoa because false rumours had circulated among the natives. The authorities set the price of cocoa at 2 francs. Traders bought at a lower price. During a meeting, the district chief demonstrated to certain chiefs that these rumours were

false. Traders pay as much as they can. Nationals of all nations pay the same price. It is up to the notables to explain this to the natives of their regions and villages (APE, 1935).

As far as the capitation tax is concerned, circular N<sup>o</sup> 78 of 28 April 1937 from the Commissioner of the Republic asks the regional heads to provide him with all suggestions and indications for the adjustment of certain taxes and in particular the capitation tax, which plays an important role in the tax system. It is necessary for work of general interest: work on the railway, work on the port of Douala, road works, and indigenous medical assistance, the fight against sleeping sickness, educational work, the operation of development services and the maintenance of the European staff who are the only ones capable of ensuring this operation.

The Commissioner of the Republic envisaged an increase in the tax rate for women and a reduction for men. The district chiefs proposed a rate of 25 francs and 23 francs respectively (APE, 1938). The notable Voula of the Sangmélina subdivision states that groundnuts, sheep, cocoa and palm trees are not being sold. Under these conditions, it is difficult to pay taxes (APE, 1932).

On this matter, the council president explains to the members that all expenses are made for the common good. Even those related to projects in other regions, like the Douala port works, have indirect benefits (Binet, 1955). Chief Mboutou Abeng agrees with the president's views. The people of Sangmélina are happy to see the return of the teams from the mission fighting against sleeping sickness in 1929, because they have noticed a decrease in deaths since the last visit. The upkeep of these teams and the medicine they distribute is expensive, but the taxes demanded by the government are very low in comparison to its expenses. He also saw significant amounts of money that the special agent carries each month to pay the road workers (APE, 1929).

The village chiefs collect the money based on numerical rosters created and monitored by the subdivision chiefs. The Sangmélina subdivision is divided into two zones. The first zone includes all residents except for the Boulou from Lomié. Regarding the second area, it is composed only of Boulou people who came from Lomié (APE, 1938).

Regarding the social aspect of the territorial development, the council of elders has been involved in matters related to the development of cocoa tracks, hiring contractors, village development, healthcare, education, civil registration, and sports.

The locals prepare the tracks so that the savings company truck can go through. On this topic, the council puts forth suggestions. Chief Mboutou Atchamelame suggests developing the Ekong-Messok, Ekong-Ngoassé, Mvoutessi-Meyila, and Sangmélina-Ngoulemakong tracks. Also, the completion of the Lobo Bridge and Bengbis road (38 km) should be prioritised. Chief Oyono Azoa requests the development of the Sangmélina-Ntyé track. Meanwhile, Chief Mboutou Abeng requires the construction of a permanent bridge on the Lobo, 6 km from Sangmélina. The regional leader Maurice Bertaut approves of this plan, which he deems completely justified. (APE, 1939).

The issue of roads is important. It is discussed within the council of nobles. Residents improve some parts of their area. However, they cannot do everything on their own. Therefore, leaders request support from the government to motivate and inspire the people. Chief Mboutou Atchamelame requests the assistance of the administration to provide a guard, an indigenous works supervisor, and the use of a contracted workforce to carry out the necessary work. During the session on September 17, 1935, he proposes the development of the Sangmélina trail through Mengbwa (Mvangan) up to the Ebolowa boundary. The people who reside at the Ebolowa border sell their products in Sangmélina, and this trail is of great use to them (Binet, 1955). In 1936, the notables' council debated the development of the runways. The Region's chief approves the proposal in principle, suggesting implementation in 1937 works program (APE, 1939).

As part of the contractor's employment, village leaders are submitting requests to carry out road and village development projects. Mvondo Ekoa suggests developing the Mbalmayo

road. Mboutou Atchamelame requests the development of the Sangmélîma-Ngoassé and Ngoassé-Bengbis roads for palm kernel sales.

Chief Zame Mfenda requests that only one category of indigenous people be authorized to purchase services, and that the purchase rate remains constant. The tax rate is set by the fiscal body in the Sangmélîma subdivision. Men are charged 34 francs and women are charged 25 francs. He proposes that all men pay a tax and that the administration pays those who work on roads or other construction sites. In 1938, Mboutou Abeng claims that the mandatory benefits rate is too high. Regarding the benefits, Mboutou objects to the current system. Mboutou and all the Sangmélîma leaders are happy to provide the men needed for the Mbalmayo route, as they understand it's in their best interest.

The opening of the Bengbis airstrip prompted Chief Enondji to urge payment of the capitation tax at the same rate as the other chiefs of the Sangmélîma groupement. The Bengbis road is open to trade. In 1938, the road brought in around 70,000 francs. With this in mind, Chief Enondji proposed a levy of 34 francs for men and 24 francs for women, as his constituents received a lot of money thanks to the road, which allowed products to be transported quickly and easily (APE, 1938).

In the Djoum subdivision, work on building the tracks was slow in coming. In 1929, Chief Abessolo Nleme of Djoum was unhappy with the work programme. The natives of Djoum are Boulous like those of Sangmélîma and Ebolowa and there is no reason why they should not benefit from the same advantages. For 3 years, the chiefs and inhabitants of Djoum have been asking for a road linking them to Ebolowa or Sangmélîma, and they have still not received satisfaction (APE, 1937).

Djoum Subdivision is connected to Sangmélîma via a road that is around 188 km long. It plays a crucial role in cocoa transportation. In 1932, the leaders of Djoum and Sangmélîma were ordered to improve and laterite the track. They were very pleased with this decision. The president of the council instructed the contractors to construct the Sangmélîma-Djoum route as soon as possible. The road opened for traffic towards the end of 1936, coinciding with the opening of the commercial centre at Djoum (APE, 1936).

The colonial administration instructed the villages to gather together, align them and tidy up their houses. The leaders began to carry out this programme. Chief Abessolo Nleme requested the construction of his village. In 1935, the rebuilding programme for houses in pote-pote style was successfully executed in the subdivisions of Sangmélîma. Lefebvre, the chief of the Ntem region and president of the council of elders, recommends the Djoum elders to follow this example. During the council meeting on November 16th, 1935, the leaders of Sangmélîma, specifically Mboutou Abeng, Mboutou Atchamenlame, Mvondo Ekoa, and Messele Essiane, requested the urban centre of Sangmélîma to be parcelled out. This will allow for similar permanent work to be done as that in Ebolowa. The president is looking into the matter and is pleased with progress (APE, 1935). However, some chiefs have raised concerns and expressed dissatisfaction. Mboutou Abeng stated that the entire Sangmélîma region disagrees with the decision of the administration to suspend the construction of a doctor's residence in Sangmélîma, causing the doctor to resign. Everyone is asking for a doctor because the villages are too far away from Ebolowa or Ayos. All the leaders of the Sangmélîma and Djoum region strongly approve of this position (APE, 1935).

Regarding health matters, the president informs the council that people with leprosy must live in separate facilities called leprosaria. The camps required to accommodate all lepers in the area have been established. Contractors are hired to build the segregation villages. Contractors are hired to build the segregation villages. Village leaders are aware of lepers living in their communities and must report them. The President believes that in 15 years, more people will suffer from leprosy if we don't take necessary measures. He thinks it's a vital issue. A similar approach is taken for sleeping sickness. Enondji Mvomo is asking for a clinic to be built in Bengbis. The President points out that providing them with a nurse isn't essential. It is necessary first to build the road to carry out effective health monitoring (APE, 1935).

The council places particular emphasis on rural and artisanal education. Delisle, head of the educational sector, oversees the Ntem region. The aim of rural education is to equip young people with practical skills, preparing them not only with education but also for life in their families and villages. In the Sangmélina subdivision, artisanal education is producing positive results in training workers and craftspeople (APE, 1935). The head Enondji has requested a second monitor for the Bengbis School. Mfoula Alem also requests a monitor for Messok. Mvondo Ekoa has requested the opening of a school in Meyila.

The schools in Sangmélina are equipped with a collection of tools not only for cultivating the soil, but also for maintaining, improving, complementing, and realizing this equipment. Handling these tools physically develops children and increases their dexterity. However, many children are expelled from schools, even if they are only 10 years old. One cannot accept children over 10 years old; we choose the good subjects that we can educate from a young age. It is indeed pointless to admit children who cannot complete a study cycle. Moreover, the sons of chiefs have priority (APE, 1938).

Regarding the issue of civil status, the Knight, subdivision chief, emphasises the significance of this document and the officers' responsibility for monitoring marriages. The certificate must be established in the presence of both parties; otherwise, it is invalid. Negligent officers may face punishment. Civil status pertains to declarations of births, marriages, deaths, adoptions, and children's acknowledgements. Such documents are drawn up according to local customs. The amount of dowry must be recorded on the contract, along with the payment date or dates agreed upon by both parties. The dowry should not be subject to the decree of 11 February 1935, as this has led to unchecked fraudulent activities. It is customary for the woman's family to provide a much larger dowry amount aside from the one declared on the marriage certificate. Such an act serves as formal evidence in court in the event of a divorce case (APE, 1939).

The issue of divorce is raised by Chief Enondji. He asserts that women often leave their husbands under the guise of converting to Christianity, when in reality it is to remarry more easily or even live in unmarried cohabitation. Mboutou Abeng adds that missions no longer accept such defectors who have quarrels with their husbands and damage the family before a divorce is pronounced. Otherwise, it leads to the degradation of the family. When a divorce is granted, the district civil registrar is notified by the judge who granted the divorce. The divorce pronouncement is immediately added as a note on the marriage certificate. After the divorce is granted, the woman's family is only obligated to refund the portion of the dowry recorded on the civil registry (APE, 1938).

Gambling games such as 'abia' or 'Djambo' have become increasingly common and continue to benefit certain unscrupulous and vagrant individuals at the expense of the masses. In relation to these specific concerns, the division chief is examining the issue of card and gambling games. He urges all natives who engage in these games to be cautioned against responding to charlatans, emphasizing the consequences they face (APE, 1939).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Overall, the council of notables offers a means of decentralising power and enabling chiefs to participate in the economic and social life of the region. It serves as more than just a recording body for decisions and its participating traditional chiefs are regarded as notables and elites, contributing to the local development of the Sangmélina subdivision. They act as intermediaries between the leaders of Circumscriptions and subdivisions and the population of villages. They communicate received instructions to the villagers, ensure their execution, and report incidents of their administration. They have the ability to speak on issues relating to their command.

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