



The question of legitimacy and legality in traditional leadership: The case of Kedjom-Keku (Big Babanki) in the North West Region of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Chieftaincy plays a vital role in the maintenance of peace, social harmony and cohesion among communities in Cameroon. This is made possible through the legitimacy traditional leaders enjoy among their people. With the coming of colonialism and later post independent modern states, the issue of legality also became an important requirement in the status and recognition of traditional leaders. In the Cameroon modern state, this feat gained momentum in 1977 following the Chieftaincy Decree issued by government. Here, the legal status (recognition) of traditional leaders was accorded by the state or government. Conversely, in the North West Region, the legitimacy of traditional rulers was derived from the customs and traditions of the people. Their legal status was vested in the people whose consent was sort in the procedure of making a king or leader. With the rebirth of multi-party democracy in 1990, several communities in the North West rose against their traditional rulers, many of whom only survived due to government recognition and backing. This paper examines the case of Fon Simon Vugah II of Kedjom-Keku, an oppressive leader who lost all legitimacy after defying customs and traditions and turned against his own people, inflicting agony and suffering on his chieftom. Counting on government support and the backing of allies in the ruling party, he clung on the Kedjom-Keku royal throne, but not for too long as the people finally took their revenge on him. He was dethroned and subsequently lynched. The act was horrific and thus provoked the question of legitimacy and legality in traditional leadership. We adopted a chronological approach to the historical narrative here and from primary and secondary sources, we concluded that the legitimacy and legality of traditional leadership rest in the people and their customs and traditions. Any contrary structure or opposition to it, generates conflict with grievous repercussions on the local community.

Keywords: Legality, Legitimacy, Traditional Leadership, Cameroon

I. INTRODUCTION

Kedjom-Keku also called Big Babanki is a second Class chieftom in Mezam Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It is situated some 25 kilometers from the regional headquarters, Bamenda. Kedjom-Keku is located in a region where traditional leadership is still very strong and manned by Tikar migrant groups such as Bafut, Kom, Oku, Nso and Ndop. Kedjom-Keku speaks a language common to those of Kom, Nso, Oku and Babungo. The neighbouring chieftoms close to Kedjom-Keku include Bafut, Kedjom- Ketingoh (Small Babanki or Babanki Tungo), Bambili, Bambui, Nkwen and Mendankwe (Ngwa, 2011). Due to their close ancestral origin the British colonial administration decided to regroup them under one native administration. The people of Kedjom- Keku settled in North West in the 18th century. They resisted attempts of conquest from powerful invaders such as Kom, Bafut and Bali. Thus evolved as an independent polity until the advent of German colonial rule.

The social and political organisation of Kedjom-Keku reveals a vertical hierarchy composed of the king, nobility and commoners. (Yenshu & Ngwa, 2001: 163-190). The traditional rulers here play an important role in governance and administration of the people. Their source of power, acceptance and right to rule is founded in the traditions and customs of the people. Before colonial rule, Kedjom-Keku presented a small sovereign state with the *fon* (chief) at its helm. According to tradition, the *fon* was enthroned to rule for life (ibid).

The primary responsibility of any *fon* or chief was to serve his people and be the custodian of tradition. The *Fon* ensured peace in the village by resolving petit litigations and conflicts that endanger harmonious living in his community (Alawadi & Samah, n.d.). Once enthroned, the *Fon* rules for life and his strength lies in his ability to adapt to changing circumstances as well as the ability to articulate and pursue group or collective interest. The *Fon* rules in collaboration with the *Kwifor* and other power holders in the political system. With a natural aura of respect; the

people see the position of a *fon* as sacred (Ngwa, 2011). Hence, they respect and support their *fon* and his legitimacy is upheld and ensured.

Under British rule, Kedjom-Keku was part of the Bafut Native Authority Area. Following the independence of British Southern Cameroons and Reunification with *la République du Cameroun* in 1961, Kedjom-Keku fell under the jurisdiction of the Bafut-Tubah Sub-division of Mezam Division in the North West Region (Ndifor, 2007). In 1977 a chieftaincy law was introduced in Cameroon. It was a revised version of the French chieftaincy law of 1933. This brought to an end the chieftaincy leadership system which the English speaking Cameroonians inherited from their British Colonial masters and to an extent mutilated some leadership traditions and customs of the people of the North West (Mutations, 2004). The issue of legitimacy as perceived by the Bamenda people was one of them. It created problems for chieftaincies given that the people were not accustomed to having state administration dictate or impress on their traditional rulers.

Under the new chieftaincy frame, the state made traditional rulers to operate more like administrative auxiliaries than the true representatives of their people. Consequently, the people began to withdraw their loyalty to the chief (*fon*) and his legitimacy eventually suffered. This marked the beginning of a crises era, characterised by the devaluation of chieftaincy and attempts by the modern state to conquer traditional authority (Samah, 2006). The advent of multiparty politics, especially in the 1990s worsened the situation due to politicisation of the role of traditional rulers.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAME

In this work, we consider legitimacy to be the ability to rule without any recourse to physical violence or other forms of coercion (Miller & King, 2005). Also, legitimacy symbolizes voluntary acceptance of procedures or norms that inherently necessitate obedience, loyalty, cooperation or acquiescence. Politically, legitimacy endorses the right and acceptance of an authority by the governed (Oomen, 2003). As Weber puts it, legitimacy is the way people think, speak and justify the organizational arrangements which individuals or institutions use to obtain their authority (ibid.). Legitimacy is therefore crucial in the maintenance of peace and the exertion of political power. To cause popular consent, acceptance, support, compliance; loyalty and obedience in a community, legitimacy is an unavoidable component glued on voluntarism and cooperation from the governed (people) (ibid.).

Legality in our context is when government administration gives the official recognition to a leader. Such a leader could be chosen by his people or not. The notion of legality of traditional rulers was introduced in African communities by the colonial master. For example, in Cameroon, the German colonial masters appeared as new overlords. They gave legal recognition only to traditional rulers who cooperated and collaborated with the German colonial administration and did not hesitate to dethrone and even imprison those that did not work according to their dictates (Samah, 2006). In some cases, they gave legal recognition to some traditional leaders without bordering to know if they were chosen and accepted by their people or not. This was the base of the creation of warrant chiefs in the African traditional leadership structure (Ngwa, 2023: 1-23).

The British on their part, while implementing the warrant-chief syndrome in its colonial policy of native administration (Indirect Rule), also paid attention to the question of legitimacy within traditional leadership. In the North West Region of Cameroon, legitimacy or political power (authority) is based on the tradition and customs of the people. Power is inherited and not appointed or designated. This is done within the context of an organised and well-tailored hereditary kingship. Any one aspiring to the throne of power must be of royal blood and has to follow laid down principles or procedures spelt out by the tradition of the people.

At independence, the traditional leadership system was thus a blend of legality and legitimacy. Such sandwich constituted the hob of controversy that ignited conflict in many local communities. Here, the post-colonial state continued with the practice of making traditional rulers auxiliaries of the administration and further expanded on the bureaucratization of their role (Jua, 1995). Hence, after the designation and enthronement of a chief by the people, he was supposed to be recognised, gazetted and classified by the government.

Given the new dispensation, in the North West communities, a chief was thus expected to be both legitimate in the eyes of tradition and his people and legal in the eyes of the government administration. However, in as much as both concepts were important, the situation of any chief who loses his legitimacy was eventually untenable. That is how Fon Vugah of Kedjom-Keku became a victim in the 1990s.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an ethnographic research approach to critically examine the question of legitimacy and legality in traditional leadership within Kedjom-Keku. Primary data were collected through extensive fieldwork,

including semi-structured interviews with elders, members of the royal family, community leaders, and ordinary villagers. Participant observation allowed the researcher to immerse in the community's daily life, cultural practices, and traditional ceremonies, providing deeper insight into local perceptions of leadership. Secondary sources such as archival materials, government documents, scholarly articles, and historical texts were consulted to provide historical context. A chronological and thematic analysis was applied to trace the evolution of the conflict, focusing on the people's role in conferring legitimacy versus government-imposed legality.

IV. THE CHIEFTAINCY ENTANGLEMENT IN KEDJOM-KEKU

Fon Vugah was officially installed in 1979, two years after the chieftaincy decree was promulgated. He ruled for 26 years and his period of rule was mockingly described as a reign of terror. He acceded to the throne after his father (Fon Vubangsi, 1936-1979) as the 7th ruler of Kedjom-Keku. The atrocities Fon Vugah committed against his people, raised their wrath and made more enemies for him. He seized and sold farm lands on which the people depended for livelihood. He sold community land to big cattle herders like Aladji Dampullo of Ndawara and Aladji Yossifu (*Kwifor Society*, 2004). They often allowed their cattle to graze into farmland thus provoking bitterness in the women who constituted the majority of farmers in the village.

Fon Vugah was accused of selling traditional artifacts and antiquities considered as symbols of the people's civilisation. (*The Post* N° 0733, 2006: 2-5). He forcefully married teenage girls without the consent of their parents. Albert Mukong's Bamenda-based Human Rights Defense Group (HRDG), reported the story of a 10 years-old girl who was forced to marry the Fon. When she tried to escape from the palace, she was arrested by the Fon's thugs and locked up in a private cell for three days without food and water (HRDG, 2002: 2).

The Fon was involved in incestuous relationships with his sisters and cousins; forcefully seized and married the wives of other men. For instance, he was accused for seizing the wife of Christopher Awankem and the pregnant wife of his brother Henry Temeka, to whom he addressed a bitter letter on 7 October, 1992 (Vugah II, Personal Communication, October 7, 1992). The Fon encouraged promiscuity amongst young girls as he indiscriminately had an affair with them (W. Samah, Personal Communication, November 17, 2022). This was a serious breach of tradition which made the Fon a sacred personage and recommended that his wives be taken in their puberty as virgins and groomed in the palace until they are ripe for marriage.

The issue of Fon Vugah messing up indiscriminately with women and prostitutes, did not only attract criticism within the traditional circles in Kedjom-Keku, but it also caused confusion on the question of legitimacy within the tradition. First, the tradition recommended that the fon's wives be taken in their puberty as virgins and groomed in the palace until they are ripe for marriage. This was considered legitimate in the eyes of the people. Vugah Simon grew in the palace as a young prince and was well educated in this tradition up to when he was made *fon* in 1979. At this point, a number of questions arose as to who conscripted the teenage girls for the *fon* and what was the procedure. Were the girls conscripted when Vugah Simon was made *Fon*? Besides, how did Vugah's conscription of teenage girls as wives become illegitimate per the perception of the people of Kedjom?

From our observation of the tradition of Kedjom-Keku, the people conscripted the teenage girls. That is, they offered their daughters into the palace and made the follow-up until they attained maturity. This made the procedure legitimate in their eyes. The Fon was restricted from having any intimate relationship with these young girls until they attained puberty. However, the problem which tradition seemed not to have addressed was how the people were to treat or handle the Fon's emotions while waiting for his teenage wives to attain puberty.

Given that this aspect was not handled, the Fon was caught in the web of tradition and personal interest. He finally opted to launch a man hunt for the teenage girls which he dragged into the palace to satisfy his feelings. It was quite a stressful option to the Fon who became more aggressive in the search for wives indiscriminately. His alleged intimate relations with sisters, cousins, wives of his brothers and prostitutes could explain the frustration in the Fon. The more he got into this, the people saw it as a breach of tradition that watered down his legitimacy in their eyes. In fact, in the North West *fondoms*, once a leader lost legitimacy in the eyes of the people, destitution followed. A number of cases were abound in the North West where Fon's allowed their emotions to overrule them and it generated problems within the traditional political system.

In Bafut for instance, Fon, Abumbi II, was enthroned in the month of December 1968 at the age of eighteen (18). Given the crisis that followed thereafter, the late father's wives he legitimately inherited upon succession, deserted the palace and tagged the Fon a child (small boy) who could not satisfy them (Ngwa, 1999). The Bafut tradition recommended that the people should furnish the palace with wives for the Fon. In 1970, due to the 1968 succession crisis, the Bafut people deserted the palace and neglected their traditional duty of providing wives for the Fon. While growing in the palace as a young prince, Abumbi understood that it was his legitimate right to have free wives from his people according to tradition. When they were not forthcoming, he decided to marry a wife of his

choice and worst still, a non-Bafutian from Wum. The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon complicated matters when they gave their blessings to the marriage (ibid). Once again, tradition was caught in the web of legitimacy and legality.

First, failure to provide wives for the young Fon (a legitimate right) made him to allow his emotions to overrule him in a leadership position. He was entangled in a difficult situation with the traditionalists in Bafut who interpreted the Fon's action as gross violation of tradition. To marry a foreigner as first wife and to solemnise the marriage in church meant that he had adopted monogamy against the Bafut polygamous institution of marriage. The church marriage also meant that the Fon was entitled to only one wife in life and by implication, his successor to the throne of Bafut, in whose hands the Bafut people and political system was to be entrusted, will be a foreigner from Wum origin. Besides, the Bafut people believed that royal blood and affinity descended the entire community through the many children the Fon gave birth to with many wives. Thus unable to situate the action of the young Fon within the context of legitimacy in Bafut tradition, the traditionalists in their vocal criticism, pushed the Fon to abdicate the throne in 1970 (ibid.).

During the reign of Achirimbi II, a Bafut man called Chesoh from Mbeali accused and challenged the Fon in a law suit for seizing his young daughter for a wife. Chesoh did not consider that it was traditionally legitimate for the Fon to have his daughter for a wife. The bone of contention here was on who violated tradition; was it Achirimbi or Chesoh. Or could it be the approach used by the Fon to conscript the wife into the palace. It is worth mentioning that the tradition of the North West people was elastic on the procedure of conscription of wives for a *fon*. It could take any approach, depending on the whims and caprices of the *fon*. In 1981 therefore, Fon Vugah had a similar impression that the tradition did not tie him down to a particular procedure or protocol to get a wife.

However, Chesoh's challenge to the Fon of Bafut in court was a lesson to say that legitimacy is obtained through procedures that must be followed even within the context of tradition. Any authority or leader who failed to follow procedures, jeopardized his legitimacy in the eyes of the people. This generated conflict of varied magnitude and form. Emotions eventually served as carriers of such conflict in leadership position. In the case of Fon Vugah, he failed to control his feelings even when he had the legitimate right. His procedure caused problems with his people just as it happened to the Bafut leaders.

Actually, a legitimate solution to the problem of Fon Vugah was the father's wives he inherited. While waiting for his own wives to attain puberty, the late father's wives were available for him as legitimately accorded by tradition. Fortunately or unfortunately, as soon as Vugah acceded the throne, he chased out the late father's wives describing them as dirty, old and unproductive women. This was the contrary of what happened in Bafut in 1970 where it was rather the wives of late Achirimbi who deserted the palace describing the Young Fon, Abumbi II, as a small boy who could not satisfy them.

In addition, Fon Vugah extorted money up to CFA 100000 from family members when one of them died and had to be buried in the village. He usurped the powers of *Kwifor*, sub-chiefs and kingmakers and imposed a dictatorial regime characterised by personalisation of power. He desecrated the palace and traditional shrines for financial benefits. This according to the people, led to poor harvests, famine, diseases and infertility in the land (The *Kwifor* & People of Kedjom-Keku [Petition], n.d.).

Fon Vugah was in essence a questionable character that eventually pushed his people to question his legitimacy. He was accused for dishonesty, theft and fraud; for creating an atmosphere of terror and insecurity in the village by beating villagers, his wives and children, indiscriminately. Such acts were considered an abomination in traditional setting (*Kwifor* Society of Kedjom-Keku, 2004). For instance, Fon Vugah was said to have beaten his own mother, Mama Ngwe Bih and forced her to fill a drum of water using a spoon. Fon Vugah operated a gang of thugs which he used to sponsor arm robbery, commit atrocities and crimes as well as eliminate his opponents and enemies (ibid). According to W. Samah, , one of the gang members, Fonghong Toh, is quoted to have confessed on his dead bed that he assisted in the elimination of a dozen people on instructions from Fon Vugah Simon. (Personal Communication, November 17, 2022).

Fon Vugah in the course of inflicting torture on his people, was embolden by the examples of political acolytes such as Fon Doh of Bali Kumbat, and the Lamido of Rey Bouba. These rulers were big barons of the ruling party, the CPDM, who benefitted immensely from state administrative machinery that protected and shield them of atrocities committed against their people. The Lamido of Rey Bouba ruled as though he was a state within the state of Cameroon. Backed by the CPDM and the regime in power, he perpetrated the worst crimes and violence against his people. He incarcerated all those who opposed him in a dreadful prison in his palace. His private army, the *dougourou*, detected and tracked down dissenting voices, raided villages that opposed him and sacked their traditional rulers (F. Yakadam, Personal Communication, April 13, 2025). It was the case of Mbang Rey in 1993.

Here, the attack on the village caused the death of ten villagers and several wounded. Their traditional ruler was dethroned by the Lamido. He ordered his *dougourou* to batter the UNDP Member of Parliament for Mayo Rey, Adama Daouda who finally died on 18 February 1996 (Ngwa, 2004). In fact, the violence and human right record of

the Lamido against his people was red but the state remained silent and gave the impression that it supported and validated all what the Lamido inflicted on his people as pain. In other words, the Lamido had lost legitimacy in the eyes of his people but remained strong and legal in the eyes of government administration. Its machinery backed up the Lamido and his atrocities against the people. His example was emulated by Fon Vugah Simon in Kedjom-Keku.

Fon Vugah in copying the example of the Lamido, was assured of government administrative back up which embolden him in the atrocities against his people. The way government administrators in the North West handled the complaints of the people against Fon Vugah gave evidence that the authorities were in support of the Fon. While the people vomited their Fon on bases of expired legitimacy, government administrators stayed glued to legality in favour of him. This attitude was an embarrassment to the Kedjom people who questioned as to whether government appointed the Fon to rule them or they made the Fon their leader according to tradition. What finally happened to Fon Vugah drew a lesson to everyone that to force a leader on a people on the bases of legality is a serious vector of conflict within a traditional setting.

Next was Fon Doh, the closest regional model of Fon Vugah Simon. Doh Gah Gwanyim III of Bali-Kumbad was the lone ruling CPDM member of Parliament in the North West in the 1990s, a seat he obtained by soiling his hands in blood. Doh was an admirer of the Lamido of Rey Bouba and nicknamed his dominion the 'Rey Bouba of the North West Region.' He also owned a private military which he used to oppress his people and political opponents. He owned a gun which he used to frighten his opponents and in one of those occasions he killed one villager. He slapped his own mother in the face for protesting against his atrocities. He ordered his thugs to assassinate John Kohtem, the SDF District Chairman for Ngo-Ketunjia (Manyong, 2006). This was the worst of Doh's atrocities that brought him down.

In the face of national and international criticisms, his political acolytes of the CPDM and government administrative machinery could not continue to impress his legitimacy and legality on the people. He was sentenced to jail in 2006 and it went down into history as 'Freedom Day for the people of Bali-Kumbad and other neighbours.' For close to three decades, Fon Doh's reign was described as the reign of terror (ibid.). This was the closest example and model to Fon Vugah whose actions in Kedjom- Keku left no one indifferent that he was a replica of Fon Doh Gwanyim.

For instance, three years after Fon Vugah took over (1981), he sent away the queens, princes and princesses of his late father and forced them to pay money to him before burying any of their deceased in the palace. It was alleged he had a private jail in his palace where he tortured and locked up those who opposed his reign. There was however no official investigation to confirm this allegation. But such an accusation came from his own people and particularly from the highest law-making body of Kedjom- Keku, the *Kwifor* (*Kwifor* Society, 2004).

Fon Vugah ran an off-license (bar) that allegedly functioned like a nightclub attracting prostitutes, alcoholics and played music at very high sound that disturbed the peace of the villagers. Royal wives served as tenders in the bar, serving commoners. This was another serious breach of tradition. Realising the danger this was causing, the *Kwifor* ordered for its closure but the Fon ignored the order and went ahead with his business normally. These actions against the Kedjom tradition were substantial to cause Fon Vugah to lose legitimacy before his people. The loss of legitimacy in North West tradition was synonymous to destitution of the leader by *Kwifor*, (the legitimate representative of the people in the traditional political system). Government administrators ignored this important role of *Kwifor* in the traditional setting and went ahead to impose a leader they no longer needed, on the bases of legality.

A possible option was for government authorities in the area to investigate on the authenticity of the accusations within the context of tradition in Kedjom-Keku. In fact, the accusations levied against Vugah were vices that defiled the traditional political values, norms and etiquettes of African societies, especially the centralised states of the North West Region. In the northern part of Cameroon for instance, the wife of a *Lamido* cannot be seen in public talk less of selling in a public bar. Government authorities in Cameroon were aware that this tradition exist in the centralised states. Thus, the result of an investigation into the tradition of the Kedjom people was necessary in the appeasement process of the parties in conflict. Insisting on legality in favour of the Fon was not only interpreted by the people as absolute dictatorship and oppression but also as a threat and slight to their traditional values. Faced with this pressure from Vugah and the state administrators in the area, the Kedjom people resorted to an action which finally took away the life of the Fon.

Fon Vugah in his actions against the people, failed to interpret or understand the political atmosphere in which he was operating at the time. We were in the 1990s in Cameroon where the rebirth of multiparty politics instigated conflict between traditional rulers and their people. According to North West tradition, a traditional leader was father to all children irrespective of their birth, origin, political alignments and differences (Samah, 2006). He was supposed to be receptive to all without discrimination. This made the position or status of a North West traditional leader apolitical. It was to enable him avoid confrontation and political wrangles with his subjects who see him as a father and sacred personage (Miaffo, 1993).

For a traditional leader to openly militate in a political party automatically placed him in opposition to his subjects in other parties (with different political ideas, itinerary and philosophy). This made development in a village or community difficult because when the people's political ideas were different from that of the Fon, conflicts emanated (ibid). Political aggressiveness, insults, violence and fisting set in. Many questions arose as to how the personality of the Fon can be washed down by his own subjects because of party politics and differences.

This issue placed many traditional leaders in the North West at a very difficult position with their people in the 1990s, especially those who militated in the ruling party or were backed and supported by the government administrators and state machinery. They lost respect and legitimacy before their people given that they were transformed by the political situation at the time to oppressive instruments to their people (Kaptue, 1999). Many *fons* who militated in the ruling party, assisted government administrators and soldiers to brutalise and torture people because of politics (ibid.). Hence, those leaders who militated in political parties saw their sacred personage demeaned and rubble before their people. They became nothing short of stooges and mere commoners in their communities. The things that normally happened to ordinary people in society were bound to happen to them indiscriminately. It was within this background that the people of Kedjom-Keku reacted against their Fon.

V. THE PEOPLES' REACTION

Fon Vugah's actions had eroded his legitimacy to the point that he had no authority within his chiefdom. There was the general agreement that he had outlived his usefulness to the people. In the end, the people concluded that, Fon Vugah was more of a curse to the village than a blessing. The administration had received many petitions from the people, including the women, *kwifor* and individuals, complaining about the various abuses of the Fon and seeking protection from the state. For instance, in 1987, the Fumbwen Women's group (FWG) wrote to the Tubah administration asking for intervention to rescue them from an awful situation in the hands of Fon Vugah (FWG, 1987).

Efforts by the administration to resolve the problem failed. With no concrete action taken, the Fumbwen Women's Group addressed a stronger petition to the Tubah District administration which they titled "Brutality, Unrest and Insecurity in Kedjom- Keku." Here, the women decried the destruction of their farms by cattle owners and accused the Fon of rape, incest, disrespect of traditional norms and beating of a pregnant woman. To them, the situation had become so unbearable that they can no longer live in Kedjom-Keku (ibid.).

In 1994, the Fumbwen women led another march to the Governor's Office in Bamenda to protest the sale of land by the Fon. Following this general outcry of the women, the SDO of Mezam intervened to calm down tempers but did not solve the root causes of the dispute. Little surprise therefore that in December 2003, Fumbwen women in a further attempt to curb the excesses of the Fon, staged another protest march along the streets of Kedjom-Keku (see Kwifor Society, 2004:2). The women argued that they have the:

...right to ask the powers that be to guarantee our security and safety as well as the defense of our traditions ...No more trust to the Fon who respects neither the citizens nor the culture and tradition. Sir, may we appeal to your good offices, that your reply to us this time should be solving. We are greatly worried through the tortures of the Fon. We are crying, we have been crying and will continue to cry in sufferings till our problems are solved. Our tears are almost finished, so we really rely on you to give us the best reply and a comforting solution. We are in bondage. (Fumbwen Women's Group, Personal Communication, December 18, 2003)

The Fumbwen protest against the Fon continued in 2004. Here, the people described him as an arrogant leader, criminal, assassin, arm robber, usurper and rapist. They went further to qualify his reign as 'a reign of terror.' The protest created factions in the village thus forcing the SDO of Mezam to intervene. By 2004, the situation had become so bad and traditional government was near collapse in Kedjom (Ndifor, 2007). The DO of Tubah created a commission to carry out an investigation and to write a report. The Commission was formed in December 2004 with a mandate to investigate and make proposals for a revived traditional government that will reconcile factions, persons and institutions in Kedjom-Keku (see Kwifor Society, 2004). Fon Vugah rejected the Commission's recommendation which proposed concerted action and reconciliation. He even threatened to send members of the Commission on exile from the village.

The *Kwifor* and Kingmakers, as custodians of the people and institutions that enthrone the Fon, took upon themselves the duty to bring about peace, and to oversee or ensure the return to order. The unruly nature of Vugah made life so difficult and frustrating to the villagers. Hence, with their support, the *Kwifor* and other kingmakers, decided in 1995 to form a Village Traditional Council to assist in the administration of the village. Yet, the Council's mission was shattered by the Fon who continued to arrogate powers to himself forcing the village council to collapse



in 2002 (*Kwifor & People of Kedjom-Keku*, n.d). The DO for Tubah tried again to reorganise the traditional village council but the embittered *Kwifor* and people remained on their decision that Vugah could no longer be their Fon.

Also, the people had lost trust in the administration to protect them from what they called ‘Vugah’s reign of terror.’ They accused the DO of Tubah for conspiracy and fence-sitting approach in handling the chieftaincy imbroglio. This time, the people decided to make life uncomfortable to the Fon by singing songs of bad luck in the palace and giving him sleepless nights (Samah, Personal Communication, November 17, 2022). The Fon was forced to abdicate the throne and seek refuge first in Nkwen and later in Mankon.

VI. SETTING NEW PRECEDENTS IN NORTH WEST TRADITION

When *Kwifor* (the law-making body of Kedjom Keku) received its copy of the Fon’s resignation, it immediately installed his step-brother, Benjamin Vutsbwong Vubangsi, as the new ruler. This was a strange phenomenon in the North West given that the people’s tradition did not prescribe the installation of a new *fon* when his predecessor was still alive.

The installation was followed by an inventory of lost or stolen artifacts in the palace, conducted by the kingmakers and *kwifor*. The result revealed that several valuable treasures, antiquities and palace paraphernalia were missing namely, 8 royal masks, 4 royal caps, 5 royal bangles made of ivory and brass, 20 royal stools, a royal cane pot; the German flag, Bible, effigy of German Kaiser and two leopard skins. (Kingmakers, Kedjom-Keku, Personal Communication, June 6, 2004)

The stolen royal artifacts intensified the tension in the Kedjom-Keku chieftaincy crisis. This can be explained within the context of power politics in traditional North West setting. The stolen or missing items mentioned, constitute the embodiment of royal power symbols in Kedjom-Keku. Until a prince was handed these items during his enthronement rites, he could not claim to have been made *fon*. His legitimacy in the eyes of the people was thus questionable. Fon Vugah Simon knew that no *fon* can be made in Kedjom-Keku behind him without these power attributes; for he will have no legality nor legitimacy.

Also, Fon Vugah understood that his possession of these royal antiquities still gave him the legitimacy to act as the Fon of Kedjom-Keku and to represent the people as their leader wherever he found himself. In this case, even on self-exile, as long as Fon Vugah was still in possession of the royal power symbols, he could still use them to pose as Fon of Kedjom because the aura of royalty and the legitimacy of his *fonship* were in the power symbols that he still possessed. Thus for Vugah to say that he had resigned and still carried along the power symbols and royal paraphernalia, indicated that the resignation was not genuine. He could use them anywhere and anytime to pose as the Fon and leader of Kedjom and he will still be legitimate. In North West tradition, power symbols and attributes were handed to a leader during his installation after the death of his predecessor and upon succession (Alawadi & Samah, n.d.). It was not possible for a new *fon* to be installed while his predecessor was still alive and in possession of the royal paraphernalia and power symbols. For this to occur, a new precedent had to be set in tradition.

Actually, in the North West communities, theft of royal paraphernalia and power symbols was a common phenomenon amongst power contenders for the throne. In the case of Bafut, the 1968 succession conflict also led to the theft of royal paraphernalia in the palace. *Kwifor* concluded that the items were stolen by the prince-contenders with the intention of setting a rival power and political structure elsewhere (Ngwa, 1999). To stop this from happening, *kwifor* decided to destroy (spoil) the items traditionally and to curse anybody who dared to do such a thing in Bafut. In the act, *kwifor* incantations made it clear that anybody who saw the items (just with the eyes) and did not report had to die. *Kwifor* was bent on erasing any trace of power rivalry on Bafut land even for generations to come. It was in this context that many Bafut families linked to power politicking in the central palace died and their generations affected till date (ibid.).

In the case of Kedjom-Keku, the stolen or missing royal power symbols (artifacts) were not destroyed traditionally thus giving the holder or person in possession, the legitimacy to pose as Fon of Kedjom-Keku wherever he was. He was also embolden to act continuously as leader and representative of the Kedjom-Keku people even in front of government administrators. The inability of the Kedjom-Keku *Kwifor* and kingmakers to retrieve the power symbols from Vugah Simon or destroy them traditionally, sustained his legitimacy both traditionally and in the eyes of the state administration. Reason why despite the resignation of Fon Vugah Simon, the state did not withdraw its recognition or legality from him. For such to occur (in extreme cases), legitimacy has to precede legality or better still, illegitimacy must activate illegality.

Fon Vugah aware of the stakes and the dilemma in which he has put the Kedjom- Keku traditional authorities (by caring away the royal paraphernalia and power symbols), defied his resignation and continued to act in his position as Fon of Kedjom-Keku. Little wonder then that while operating in exile in Mankon, Vugah Simon accused Fon Benjamin Vubangsi for usurpation of his power and authority (S. Vugah, Personal Communication, February 2,

2004). He continued to parade himself as Chief of Kedjom- Keku, representing the village at official meetings with the administration. Meanwhile, after installing the new Fon, the people urged the administration to accelerate steps to recognise the new Fon as the legitimate ruler. But the government administrators remained loyal in their support and recognition of Vugah Simon as the rightful occupant of the Kedjom-Keku royal throne, thus causing a stalemate. Yet, both the people of Kedjom and government authorities needed a solution so that peace can return to the village.

VII. THE DRIVE FOR PEACE AND THE ASSASSINATION OF FON VUGAH SIMON

As mentioned earlier, the North West *fons* were enthroned to rule for life. But a *fon* needed to work hard and positively to earn legitimacy in the eyes of his people. Failure to do so, it could lead to his destitution at any time by *kwifor*, the people's representative within the hob of traditional politics at the Fon's palace. In Bafut for instance, the Fon is called *mookwifor* (child of *kwifor*) because of the control authority and power *kwifor* has on the activities of the Fon. In fact, *kwifor* is the legitimate body responsible for checks and balances on royal excesses.

However, in the eyes of state administration, legitimacy and legality were both complements needed to maintain a *fon* on his throne for life. But legality to state authorities superseded legitimacy and that alone was enough to maintain a leader on his position (throne). In the same way, where the dethronement of a *fon* was compelling, legality took precedence over legitimacy and the final decision should come from state administrators and not from the traditional authorities in the Fon's palace. It was within this controversial atmosphere that the peace drive was initiated in the Kedjom-Kekeu chieftaincy entanglement.

In a bid to resolve the stalemate therefore, the Divisional Officer (DO) for Tubah convened a meeting on 24 February 2004, attended by the *Kwifor* representatives and Fon Vugah (Divisional Officer, Tubah, Personal Communication, February 24, 2004). In the meeting, *Kwifor* representatives made it clear that after abandoning the palace for several weeks, Fon Vugah could not by tradition be allowed to regain the throne. The meeting ended in a deadlock, as the parties in conflict could not reach an agreement. The failure of the DO of Tubah to resolve the dispute, necessitated the intervention of the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Mezam.

On 16 March 2004, the *Kwifor* forwarded a letter to the SDO for Mezam, Robertson Tardo, titled the "Misdeeds of Fon Vugah II". According to *Kwifor*, "Simon Vugah had long outlived his usefulness to the people and ashamed to be disgraced by *Kwifor*, he resorted to the only logical option of abdication, because he had long been vomited by the same people he pretended to rule." (*Kwifor* Society, 2004:7). In conclusion, *Kwifor* called on the govern administrators to recognise the new Fon, Benjamin V. Vubangsi as the new ruler of Kedjom-Keku.

In spite of the letter, the government administrators did not recognise the new Fon. On the contrary, in a press release dated 8 June 2004, the SDO for Mezam stated that the designation of the new Fon Benjamin V. Vubangsi was null and void. Two weeks after, the SDO warned that Fon Benjamin Vubangsi would be arrested as an impostor and a criminal proceeding opened against him, if he passes before the administration as the Fon of Kedjom-Keku (SDO, Mezam, Personal Communication, June 8, 2004).

On 24 June 2005, the SDO invited the dethroned *Fon*, *Kwifor*, kingmakers, sub-chiefs, quarter-heads and internal and external elite of Kedjom-Keku to a meeting aimed at finding a lasting solution to the dispute (SDO, Mezam, Personal Communication, June 24, 2005). Also in attendance were Fon Angwafor III of Mankon, Fon Ngufor of Nkwen and the *Fons* of Bambui and Baba II. During the meeting, the *Kwifor* and kingmakers gave an avalanche of reasons which led to the resignation of Fon Vugah Simon and the enthronement of Benjamin V. Vubansi as the new ruler. The meeting again failed to resolve the differences between Fon Vugah Simon and the people of Kedjom-Keku. As to the way forward, the SDO advised the people of Kedjom-Keku to follow the procedure governing chieftaincy in Cameroon as laid down in the 15 July 1977 Chieftaincy Law (*ibid.*).

This in effect was a polite way to say that the tradition of Kedjom-Keku was not competent enough in present dispensation to dethrone their leader on counts of illegitimacy perceived by his people. The state instrument as referred to in the 1977 chieftaincy law was the sole legitimate and legal procedure to follow. In other words, only the state administrators according to the Cameroon chieftaincy law had the power to destitute a traditional ruler (chief). No community was authorised to dethrone their leader (chief) on the bases of tradition. The question then arose as to whether the Fon of Kedjom-Keku was made by the people and their tradition or by the state administration. This sounds ridiculous for a question but it justifies the extreme positions taken and glued to by the state authorities on the one hand and the Kedjom-Keku people and traditionalists on another.

The challenge of the Kedjom-Keku tradition in the matter of dethroning their Fon was not only an embarrassment to the traditional authorities but also a new hinge on the tradition of the North West people as a whole (Fisiy, 1995: 49-62). In the North West, it was a common rule, generally accepted that the people chose their leader according to their tradition. That is, the procedure of making (installing) a chief was strictly traditional as prescribed by the tradition of the people. Until the people chose their leader and the traditional rites of installation performed,



government administrators or better still, the chieftaincy law could not recognise the leader in question. The procedure of making a chief in the North West communities was legitimate and legal both for the local people and government administrators. The ratification and application of this traditional procedure did not require any official written document or law. Besides, it had never constituted a subject for law in government circles. This suggest that government administrators recognised the application of tradition as tacit consent within communities in the North West Region.

What was also evident was the fact that while tradition clearly spelt out the procedure of installing a leader (*fon*), it did not do same for cases of destitution. The North West tradition states that a *fon* is enthroned for life until death separates him from his people (Samah, 2006). Hence, the dethronement of Fon Vugah Simon alive was not only a new setting in North West tradition but also an embarrassment to the people and government administrators. They saw the act as illegitimate in the context of tradition and illegal by law. It was within this background that when the SDO could not negotiate peace between Fon Vugah Simon and his people to accept him back on the throne, he used the Chieftaincy law to technically reinstate the Fon on his throne. Traditional legitimacy was therefore put to question or challenged by legal instruments.

The Kedjom people retorted by taking the Chieftaincy law to task as well. First, the law did not provide procedures or directives for the choosing and installation of a *fon* in the North West communities. It remained purely an internal traditional affair of the people who used their customs and traditional practices to choose and install their leader. Second, the Chieftaincy law did not create provision for government administrators to participate in the procedures leading to the choosing and installation of a *fon* in the North West communities (*ibid.*). They could only be invited to take part in the general celebration of the installation at the palace plaza on a fixed date. Thus when the SDO made reference to the 1977 Chieftaincy law, the Kedjom people immediately understood that he was in support of Fon Vugah Simon. This gave the people the opportunity to expose the weaknesses of this law through their actions thereafter.

At the end of the meeting with the SDO, the people were not convinced by his intervention nor the legal instrument that was quoted to them. The Kedjom people ignored or discarded the law in their determination against Vugah Simon given that the Chieftaincy Decree of 1977 did not install or choose a *fon* for them. Similarly, the law could not uphold or reinstate a *fon* they had dethroned (in line with tradition). Besides, using this law as a base for threats to arrest the new *fon* that the people had chosen and enthroned legitimately, was a serious blow on Kedjom tradition. Convinced that they were coerced by government administrators, the Kedjom people resorted to other means and strategies in their fight against Fon Vugah Simon. The question of legitimacy against legality reached its apex.

The fact that the administration sided with Fon Vugah Simon and threatened to arrest Benjamin Vubangsi, emboldened the dethroned Fon to continue to pose as the legitimate traditional ruler of Kedjom-Keku. In addition, Fon Vugah Simon also enjoyed the support and backing of the North West Fon's Association (NOWEFU) which considered his alleged dethronement and expulsion from the palace and village as illegal (NOWEFU, Personal Communication, February 21, 2006). Besides, Fon Vugah was still in possession of the royal paraphernalia and power symbols which he used to parade himself around the region as Fon of Kedjom-Kekeu. All these left no one indifferent that Fon Vugah was still the legitimate and legal Fon of Kedjom, in spite his fugitive refugee status in the area.

Hence, on 19 January 2006, convinced of the protection and confidence bestowed on him by the administration and his sympathisers in the Region, Vugah Simon decided to return to Kedjom-Keku to reclaim the throne. Fon Vugah sneaked into the palace late at night but was quickly identified, arrested and tortured by the population. By the time the DO and the forces of law and order arrived at the scene the following day, Fon Vugah Simon had been lynched. The people took revenge on their Fon.

VIII. THE AFTERMATH OF FON VUGAH'S ASSASSINATION

The brutal killing of Fon Vugah shocked the entire nation when his incinerated body was shown on television screens across the country. Reporting on this macabre incident, the Post Newspaper wrote:

His former subjects escorted him down to the Bamenda-Babanki-Fundong highway and gave him a thorough beating. Women, men, children, using clubs, destroyed the former Fon's residence and forced out one of his wives who accompanied him to Babanki. Together, they were thrashed until the Fon almost gave up the ghost midway to the border. Half dead, the Fon was wheeled in a cart to the Fembvent Bridge that separated Babanki and Bambui. In a pyre of grass, Fon Vugah was set ablaze as if to confirm his death (The Post N° 0733, 2006).

On 21 February 2006, traditional rulers of the Northwest under the banner of The North West Fons Union (NOWEFU), issued a communique to Governor Koumpa Issa in which they blamed government for the delay in resolving the dispute between Vugah and his people, which led to the death of their colleague (NOWEFU, 2006).

However, the blame could also be attributed to Fon Vugah given that he failed to read the signs of time and chose a wrong period to toy with the feelings of his people. In the past, the *Fon* could commit atrocities against his people and go free for no subject was authorised to raise his head against his leader (the *Fon*) who was a demi-god and sacred personage in the eyes of the people. Vugah acted at a time when the rebirth of multipartism and political elections in Cameroon in the 1990s had created a different mindset in the people (Fokwang, 2002).

The role played by some traditional rulers (*fons*) in the pain that government administrators and military inflicted on the people made them to ignore the sacred nature of their leaders (*fons*) and took revenge on them for the pains their reign inflicted on them, with government backing. The *Fon* of Mankon was the first victim to face the wrath of the people as they burnt down his modern palace (Hotel Resort 84) at Nchubu in Bamenda town (N. Ambe, Personal Communication, April 14, 2025). Vugah was short sighted as he allowed himself to be carried away by his political ideology and support from political allies and sympathisers. The reality of things on the ground were different from what he estimated, simplified or minimised. The sanction emitted on Fon Vugah by his people was referentially a sanction on the Cameroon government in one way or the other.

The entanglement of North West *fons* in the chieftaincy decree of 1977 and their involvement in partisan politics; worst still, militating in the CPDM Party, revolted the people and their mentality as to how they perceived their leader (the *fon*) (Fisiy, 1995: 49-62). The behaviour of *fons* made their legitimacy to be questioned not only in Kedjom-Keku but also in the entire North West Region. Fon Doh of Balikumbat was the worst example of a traditional leader recorded in the North West at the time (see Ngwa, 2024). No community wanted their *fon* or leader to emulate the example of Fon Doh. Vugah Simon in his attempt to rule like Doh, fell into temptation and paid the prize in the hands of his own subjects.

Following the death of Fon Vugah, tension continued unabated in Kedjom-Keku due to a feud that erupted between the village people and Fon Vugah's family members in relation to where his corpse were to be buried. Fon Vugah's family wanted his mortal remains to be buried in the palace beside the grave of his predecessor, late Fon Vubangsi Philip. (The Royal Family of Fon Vugah, Personal Communication, January 23, 2006). The people on their part saw this as an abomination and were not prepared to see this happen and insisted that the corpse be buried outside the village, somewhere on the boundary between Babanki and Bambui (Bansi, 2006). Tension heightened when rumour broke out that the administration wanted to use force to bury the corpse in the palace. In response, the people threatened to dig the corpse and bury out of the village, if that were to happen.

However, through a peace deal arranged by a Catholic Priest and some elite, the opposing camps agreed to revise their positions. Fon Vugah Simon had acquired a piece of land in the village where he built a private home before being enthroned as *fon*. Thus on 21 February 2006, the corpse of the dethroned *Fon* was buried there in the presence of heavy armed security. No traditional rites associated with the death of a *Fon* in Kedjom were performed during the burial of Vugah Simon.

Here, another precedent was set in North West tradition. Nowhere had it occurred in the region that a *fon* died and his traditional funeral rites were not performed. This act had enormous religious implications within the traditional setting. The people did not only refuse to grant the opportunity for the late *Fon*'s soul to be received by his ancestors in their midst but they also refused to edify him as a sacred-divine personage in Kedjom-Keku. It was a sign of the withdrawal of legitimacy from the leader by his people even after death. It also meant that the spirit of the late *Fon* was not called nor accepted into the ranks of the sacred ancestral *fons* of Kedjom. In the context of traditional religion, Vugah's predecessors were worshipped and edified as sacred beings. This was manifested through the annual libations and sacrifices the people made on their tombs in their honour.

The pouring of libation was also a sign of remembrance of the good works of the *fon* to his people when he was alive. Libation and sacrifices made on the grave of a late *fon* was a mark that portrayed how the people remember his reign with nostalgia and thus he deserved their worship and edification as a sacred divinity. The refusal to perform traditional funeral rites for late Fon Vugah (after 26 years of leadership in Kedjom) implied therefore that the people refused to make him one of the sacred-divine ancestors of the village. His name and generation could not be quoted anywhere in Kedjom. He was dead and gone both physically and spiritually. Legitimacy was withdrawn from him even in the religious and spiritual context (Fisiy, 1995).

As mentioned earlier, after the burial of Fon Vugah, NOWEFU issued a communique calling on the administration to demonstrate that Cameroon was a state of law by bringing the murderers of Fon Vugah to book. Under this pressure from NOWEFU, government administrators ordered for the arrest of all those suspected of participating in the assassination of Fon Vugah, in what became known as 'Operation Kedjom-Keku' (Cameroon

Tribune, N° 1, 2006: 9). This led to fierce confrontation between security forces and the irate population, resulting in the death of a gendarme officer and four others injured (Bansi, 2006; Mbunwe & Mbori, 2006).

In another tactless move, the government arrested and detained the new chief, Fon Benjamin Vutsibwong, causing social unrest in the village. Many newspapers reported that security forces embarked on a wave of revenge, extorting money, beating up people and forcing them to roll in mud. Arbitrary arrest and detention and other forms of injustices were enforced (*Eden*, N° 060, 2006: 1-2). To escape the violence, many villagers were forced to flee to the bushes and hills, leaving behind only children, women and the elderly. In a letter to the Minister of Territorial Administration, Marafa Ahmidou Yaya, the elite of Kedjom-Keku warned the administration about the deteriorating social peace and break down of socio-economic activities in the village (*ibid.*). The actions that followed thereafter, constitute another topic for subsequent research.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study centred on the question of legitimacy and legality in traditional leadership. In our conclusion, we asked the following questions. First, are the concepts of legitimacy and legality complementary or parallel? Second, why a simple entanglement could not be resolved in time and was allowed to escalate with such immense magnitude and impact. An attempt to provide answers gave us the following observations. First, the dethroned Fon was obstinate and felt that the throne rightfully belonged to him given that he continued to enjoy government legality. This caused him to minimise the role of legitimacy which rested with the people who made him *fon*. Embolden by government legality, he embarked on a journey to recuperate or regain his throne.

Here, we asked another question: Should a traditional leader who enjoys government legality keep his throne even when he completely lost legitimacy in the eyes of his people? Fon Vugah wanted to continue to administer a population that no longer had loyalty in him and by implication he had lost legitimacy in their eyes. Any attempt to derail the people from their stand point was interpreted as cruel and despotic rule. To show their determination against the Fon, the people planned to confiscate the symbols of power and force him on exile. It was clear that without the traditional power symbols, the Fon would become illegitimate in the eyes of the people.

Unfortunately, many of these power symbols were declared missing thus giving an upper hand for government legality enjoyed by the Fon to triumph. Protected by state security and administrators, Fon Vugah went on to impose himself on the Kedjom chiefdom, forgetting that the people who made him Fon had the last word. They had vomited him out and no longer wanted him on their throne of leadership. Failing to understand the intricacies underpinning the chieftaincy system in the North West, government mismanaged the crisis, leading to the worse outcome - the brutal killing of the traditional leader. This was a lesson which made us to understand that legitimacy and legality though complementary can become parallel.

Besides the lukewarm attitude of state administrators to the plight of the people escalated the situation. The Kedjom *Kwifor* blamed the administration for not reacting to their numerous complaints against Fon Vugah. They had always briefed the Administration on the “deeds and misdeeds” of Vugah Simon. Perhaps the state administrators in the area were hypnotised by the example of Fon Doh Gah Gwanyim III of Bali-Kumbad who enjoyed government support and emitted violence against his people and even killed some; yet no serious action was taken.

Clearly therefore, the people of the North West could reject the authority of a chief who commands government recognition or legality but fails to show loyalty and legitimacy before his people. For such traditional rulers, their powers rest on government’s appointments and not on the traditional office inherited from their ancestors (Bayart et al., 1999). The repercussion of such deviance was immense and could even extent to lose of lives.

It was the case with the demise of Fon Vugah Simon who emulated the examples of his political allies and inflicted pain on the Kedjom people. The failure of the state to protect its citizens from despotic monarchs, forced them to commit what was customarily considered a sacrilege (the brutal killing and incineration of their own chief). It was also synonymous to saying that the people took the laws of the state into their hands out of desperation and frustration with such a predator state. (see *The Post*, N° 0733, 2006: 2).

The loopholes of the 1977 Chieftaincy law on its part, created severe problems in traditional leadership in the North West Region. Reason why today many are of the opinion that some of the problems should be addressed or resolved by granting a special status to the Region with the traditional rulers taking an active role in the local administration and governance of their people to whom they are responsible. Causing the *fons* or chiefs to know that their loyalty is bestowed in their people who make them rulers than any other political party, ally or instrument, will change the mindset of the people as to how they perceive the personage of their leader in present times.



The demise of Fon Vugah Simon remains a historical pointer to the conflict between tradition and modernism in present day leadership. In this, the question of legitimacy and legality continue to animate traditional politics and local governance in our local communities in the North West. Here, the rule is for the traditional rulers to handle the two concepts with caution for they are compatibly interwoven just as they can become incompatible given the circumstances at stake. The presence of peace in our local communities necessitates a deep insight of the two concepts as applied in local governance and context. A clash of the two, generate tension with immense consequences on the community.

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