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# The Meta Indigenous Politico-Administrative System, Good Governance, and the Modern Republican State in Cameroon

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## Abstract

Traditional or indigenous politico-administrative institutions, as opposed to those of western origin, appear to be regaining their once lost allure in Africa. Yet, it is not enough to simply extol or advocate a return to tradition. There is a need to examine the implicit hypothesis of such advocacy. Are traditional institutions truly capable of making a positive contribution to ongoing efforts to promote good governance and, ultimately, development in Africa? The present study attempts to address this question by analysing the traditional system of Meta, an acephalous polity with a tradition of autonomous chiefdoms and village-centric orientation, in the Northwest Region, Cameroon. A sample of village-level initiatives undertaken within the polity's decentralized indigenous politico-administrative framework, and region-wide development projects under the auspices of centralized modern institutional bodies, are compared. Results show the indigenous systems markedly outperforming their modern counterparts, particularly based on outcome measures of good governance. This provides some empirical justification for recommending the incorporation of traditional institutions in the modern governance process in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general.

## Keywords

Cameroon, chiefdom, chiefs, Meta, Metta, traditional administration

## Introduction

At the twilight of the colonial era in Africa, conventional development wisdom held that to develop, African and other non-western countries needed to modernize (see e.g. [McClelland, 1961](#); [Parsons, 1951, 1967](#); [Rostow, 1960](#)). International agents of development instructed African countries to modernize (read, westernize) speedily. Where the process appeared to be slow, it was feared that a dualistic society comprising 'urban citizens' and 'rural subjects' would emerge ([Mamdani, 1996](#)). In Cameroon, efforts to accelerate the modernization process included institutional reforms designed to re-order customary power relations within traditional politico-administrative and

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socio-cultural structures (Cheka, 2008; Fisiy, 1995; Jua, 1995; Nyamjoh, 2002). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that these efforts have been oblivious to, or discount outright, the utility of indigenous institutions in domestic and international efforts to promote good governance and participatory planning in Africa (cf. Fokwang, 2009). A change appears to be in the horizon as traditional institutions are increasingly regaining their once lost allure throughout the continent (see e.g. Englebert, 2002; Kyed and Burr, 2007; Logan, 2009). Views diverge as to why this change is occurring. While some view it as a reflection of failures on the part of the modern republican state (see e.g. Nugent, 2004; Oomen, 2005; Van Kessel and Oomen, 1997), others see it as simply a return to an era in which indigenous institutions coexisted harmoniously with modern republican state institutions in Africa (Beall and Ngonyama, 2009).

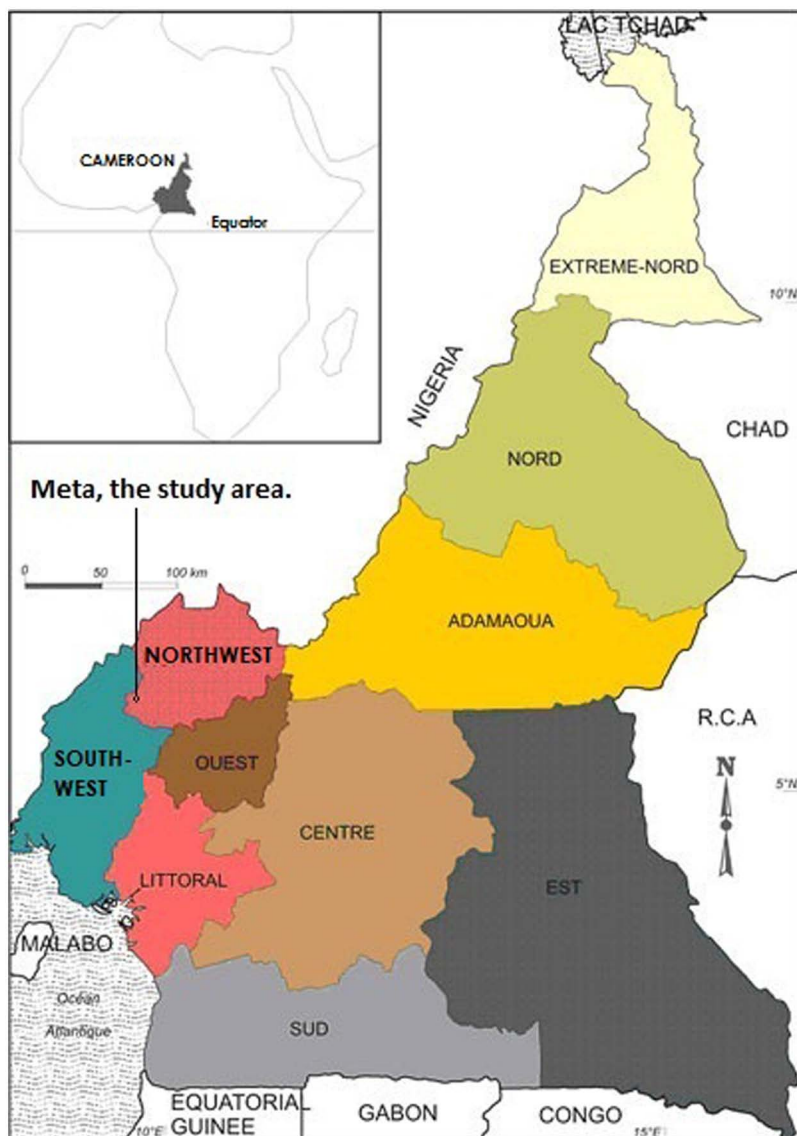
There is a need at this juncture to determine the utility of traditional structures in the modern republican state in Africa. This paper seeks to address this need. It does so by tackling the following question: Is the genre of decentralization associated with some traditional politico-administrative systems better able to attain good governance objectives than the centralized structures associated with bureaucracy and paramount chiefdoms? To address this question, the paper analyses one traditional acephalous polity, namely Meta in the Northwest Region, Cameroon (see Figure 1). In particular, the paper compares projects undertaken within an invented centralized structure with those executed within the polity's traditional decentralized framework. The analysis ultimately seeks to determine the relative ability of the two structures to fulfil the objectives of citizen participation and good governance. The research questions of centrality here are as follows:

- How has the traditional structure of Meta been employed as an element of the modern republican state apparatus in Cameroon?
- How has the traditional Meta system performed vis-à-vis modern systems as an agent of socio-economic development in general and good governance in particular?

It is posited that village-centric socio-economic development projects executed within the indigenous politico-administrative framework of Meta are likely to register more positive outcomes than region-wide equivalents undertaken by centralized modern bureaucratic systems.

## **Decentralization, citizen participation and good governance**

Decentralization comes in at least three forms: de-concentration, delegation, and devolution. Devolution is the form commonly assumed in discussions of politico-administrative structures and is the form characteristic of US public administration. As de Tocqueville (1964) once observed, it makes administrative authority accessible to the citizenry. Other advantages of decentralization include its ability to promote resourcefulness, self-reliance and accountability at the local level (Njoh, 2000; Tommasi and Weinschelbaum, 2007; World Bank, 1999). Yet, decentralization is not without blemish. Some of its negative attributes include the fact that it may lead to the unnecessary duplication of effort. This problem has far-reaching implications in resource-scarce economies such as Cameroon. As the British experience with indirect rule in colonial Africa has demonstrated, decentralization is a weak mechanism for promoting the genre of cultural synthesis necessary to facilitate national integration in culturally pluralist societies (Mazrui, 1983; Njoh, 2000). Where decentralization includes devolving powers from central republican state authorities to traditional institutions, it has been blamed for creating dualistic societies comprising 'urban citizens' and 'rural subjects' (Mamdani, 1996). It has also been considered an obstruction to democratization efforts in sub-Saharan Africa (Beall and Ngonyama, 2009).



**Figure 1.** Map of Cameroon showing the study area, Meta.

Source: FAO (Online) at <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/counprof/cameroon/figure1b.htm>.

However, decentralization's weaknesses pale in comparison to its strengths. This is especially true when decentralization involves the integration of traditional institutions. Here, decentralization serves as the best form of devolution of resource management and service delivery functions from central republican state apparatus to local communities (Chambers, 1983; Kaufmann and Kraay, 2008; Lucas, 1956). For this and other reasons, current thinking in development planning dictates the incorporation of elements of decentralization such as community or citizen participation (CP) as a strategy for promoting good governance.

Despite its increasing popularity, the term good governance remains nebulous and mired in controversy (see e.g. [Tommasi and Weinschelbaum, 2007](#); UNDP, 1997). Yet, as Kaufmann and Kraay (2008) have noted, good governance has existed as a term in the lexicon of administration since 400 BCE. From the outset, the concept of governance identified as its main pillars justice, ethics and anti-autocratic tendencies. It is erroneous to assume that these qualities are exclusively associated with democratic structures. Yet, authorities in Africa have been cowed into subscribing to theories positing democratization and westernization as the singular best way to achieve economic development. Such theories have since been rendered hollow by the paradoxical development records of major Asian economies, particularly the economic success of authoritarian China on the one hand, and the relatively weaker economic performance of democratic India on the other. Western nations have democracy and good governance as common denominators, but differ significantly in terms of their politico-administrative structures.

Alexis de Tocqueville drew attention to the difference between the politico-administrative structures of the United States and France in his classic on *Democracy in America* way back in 1835. While France, especially under Louis XIV, has always had a centralized government and administration, the United States has always been decentralized both administratively and politically (de Tocqueville, 1964: 41–44). One problem that has preoccupied researchers and policy makers during the last decade relates to measuring good governance. Credit for some of the best-known efforts in this connection goes to Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay and Zoido-Lobaton (see Kaufmann et al., 1999), who developed the World Governance Indicators (WGIs).

Gauging the performance of governance structures can be undertaken through two different but overlapping approaches, including rules-based and outcome-based ([Kaufmann and Kraay, 2008](#)). The rules-based approach focuses on the written commitments or pronouncements of governments as articulated in official documents such as mission statements, pieces of legislation, and handbooks. One positive attribute of this approach is the fact that it focuses on clear, straightforward and objective indicators that are easy to measure. An institution either has or does not have a statement prohibiting, for example, corruption. On the negative side, most statements on reprehensible bureaucratic practices such as bribery and corruption, especially in developing countries, are meant for official consumption and never adhered to.

The outcome-based approach focuses on the extent to which governments actually pursue their avowed goals. One important advantage of this approach is that it concentrates on what institutions actually do and not just their intentions, as is the case with the rules-based approach. Yet, the approach is not without its flaws. As [Kaufmann and Kraay \(2008\)](#) have observed, outcome-based measures often prove difficult to link back to policy interventions that might influence the results of governance. This is especially true where the measures are of the general variant. This limitation notwithstanding, the outcome-based approach can prove exceedingly useful for measuring government performance in developing countries such as Cameroon. Here, what the government does often deviates from, and in some cases conflicts with, what it promised to do.

## Traditional Meta polity

The people of Meta (hereafter, the Meta) have been characterized anthropologically as an acephalous group (Dillon, 1990). Strictly speaking, this characterization is inaccurate as Meta society is neither egalitarian nor without recognized heads or leaders. As employed in reference to the Meta, the term acephalous is meant to convey three facts. First, the Meta identify with a common ancestry but different autonomous villages. Second, each of these villages is under the suzerainty of one chief, the Fon. Third, the Fons have, within their ethno-cultural framework, historically seen

themselves as equals without a paramount head. The Meta first began experiencing westernization during the country's tenure as a German colony (1884–1916). Then one of the densest polities in the region, the Meta numbered about 20,000, and were spread over an area of approximately 335 square kilometres (Dillon, 1990: 53; Gregg, 1924). The traditional Meta polity is remarkable for its large size and the degree to which it has remained a decentralized political system (Dillon, 1985). This characteristic sets the Meta apart from some of the major tribal groups of the Northwest Region, such as the Bali, Mankon, Bafut and Nso, who are centralized polities with paramount chiefs. In contrast to other acephalous Cameroonian polities such as those of the coastal region, Meta has always had a tradition of powerful autonomous chiefs. Therefore, contrary to the views of most analysts of Cameroon's politico-administrative institutions (see e.g. [Cheka, 2008](#)), the Northwest Region is not without decentralized indigenous polities.

Currently, Meta has a population of about 80,000 and comprises 29 valley-based villages and seven Mbororo hill-top settlements (MECUDA, 2007). Paradoxically, Meta's 29 villages have 31 chiefdoms (Table 1). Each of these chiefdoms is a powerful entity in its own right, replicating the structure of centralized chiefdoms at a micro-level, the village. Thus, important decisions that are typically made at the clan or regional level (i.e. an assemblage of several villages) in the highly centralized polities are made at the village level in Meta.

Meta's 31 autonomous chiefdoms trace their roots to a common ancestry that migrated from Tarikon (also known as Tadkon or Ntarikon) to Widekum, and later to Zang in their current homeland. However, as the map in Figure 2 suggests, it is unlikely that the Ntarikon, which based on oral historical accounts is the point of origin of the Meta ancestors, is the one located in present-day Bamenda, headquarters of the Northwest Region of which Meta is a part. Although they traced their roots to a common ancestry, the Meta travelled to their homeland in bands of sub-family units. Some of the best-known of these families to whom contemporary Meta people can still trace their lineage include: Mendick, Mettin, Bogwanick, Menong, Ezwezeu, Bonjoh, Borangop, and Mundam. However, all of the contemporary chiefdoms of Meta originated in only three of these families, namely Mundam (two chiefdoms), Bonjoh (six chiefdoms), and Mendick (23 chiefdoms) (See Figure 3). According to oral historical accounts, all of these families made their first stop and sojourned as a group in Metaland at present-day Zang-Tabi. It is here that they laid the Meta ceremonial foundation stone. Only one of the families, the Mendick, stayed in Zang-Tabi long enough to establish a sustainable human settlement. This family had three prominent sons; Tabusah, Teghen-Ticha, and Tembeng; who were born in Tadkon (Dillon, 1990). Two of these, Tabusah and Teghen-Ticha migrated to other parts of Meta. Tembeng, stayed at the site of the Meta ceremonial foundation stone. The eldest of the three brothers, Tabusah, is the ancestral head of the Babossah family and is the founding father of Borsah Village in present-day Bali Sub-Division. Another brother, Teghen-Ticha, is the founding father of the Meta villages in Medig Valley, and replaced his brother Tabusah as the family leader when the latter was found guilty of an undisclosed transgression.

Worth noting is that each Meta chiefdom assumes the form of a pyramid. The chief occupies the zenith of this pyramid. The rung below the Fon is occupied by members of his inner circle of advisors (*Mukum*). These advisors are usually older than the chief and would have most likely participated in his selection and coronation. Family heads (*Etu-Minebi*) occupy the rung below that of the Fon's inner circle of advisors. Following this is another rung occupied by palace pages or errandmen (*Nchindas*). The bottom rung is occupied by the palace entertainers (*Mogwei*). Each of these officials has a specific role or duty to perform, detailed rights, obligations, responsibilities, and scope of authority. In addition, each position in the chieftaincy is filled by individuals who have undergone extended periods of (albeit informal) apprenticeship.

**Table 1.** Villages and Chiefdoms of Meta by Class.<sup>a</sup>

Item	Village	Reigning chief (Fon)
<b>Second class chiefdoms (5)</b>		
01.	GUNEKU	Patrick N. FOMIKI
02.	KAI	Marc AKAM (Dr.)
03.	MBENGWI	Thaddeus T. NJOKOM
04.	NYEN	J.K.N. FOMINYEN
05.	ZANG-TABI	Jacob AGWO TABI
<b>Third class chiefdoms (26)</b>		
06.	BADRAKWE	Peter TEMBU NGWABENG
07.	BESSI-FOMUKONG	
08.	CHENAM	David MUKOM
09.	CHUP	Anthony FOMBAN BUNUNG
10.	FUNAM	Wilfred TARKE FORCHU
11.	GUNDOM	Moses FOREBENG ACHU
12.	KOB	Honore TASSI FOCHO
13.	KOBENYANG	Peter NIAKE FONYAM
14.	KU-BOME	Henry T. FONGU
15.	NJEKWO	Godfred TEBOH MBACHAM
16.	MBEMI	D.B. MBABIT
17.	METUA-BEN	FOMBOU DUMJOH II
18.	MUGHEN-MBO DOM	FONGYEN TUMATU
19.	NGYEN-MBO	David FRUMADANG FONGYEN
20.	NGWOKWONG	FON TABOH AZAH
21.	NJAH-ETUH	Michael S. MBATU
22.	NJIMETU	Peter BAH FONTU
23.	NJINDOM	P.E. FOMBO
24.	NJINIBI	Solomon A. FOMUNYAM
25.	TONEKU	FONBOD
26.	TUANYANG	Edward FONDOM FOBANG
27.	TUDIG	Ernest A. AWAZI
28.	TUGI	MTAKWA
29.	WUMNEBIT	Emmanuel ATANGA
30.	WUMNEBUG	Henock MBACHAM
31.	ZANG-TEMBENG	Samuel FONYAM
<b>Mbororo settlement heads classified as third class chiefs (7)</b>		
32.	ACHA TUGI	MANU NUHU
33.	CHUP	BANU SADOU
34.	GUNEKU	HASSAN BI JIBBO
35.	TUDIG	HARO
36.	TUGI	IBRAHIM BAMBORO
37.	ZANG-TABI	HASSAN BESSAMBO
38.	ZANG-TEMBENG	MANU GIDADO

<sup>a</sup>Meta has no first class chief. The prefix 'Fon' applies to all Meta chiefs. The prefix 'Ardo' applies to all Mbororo chiefs.

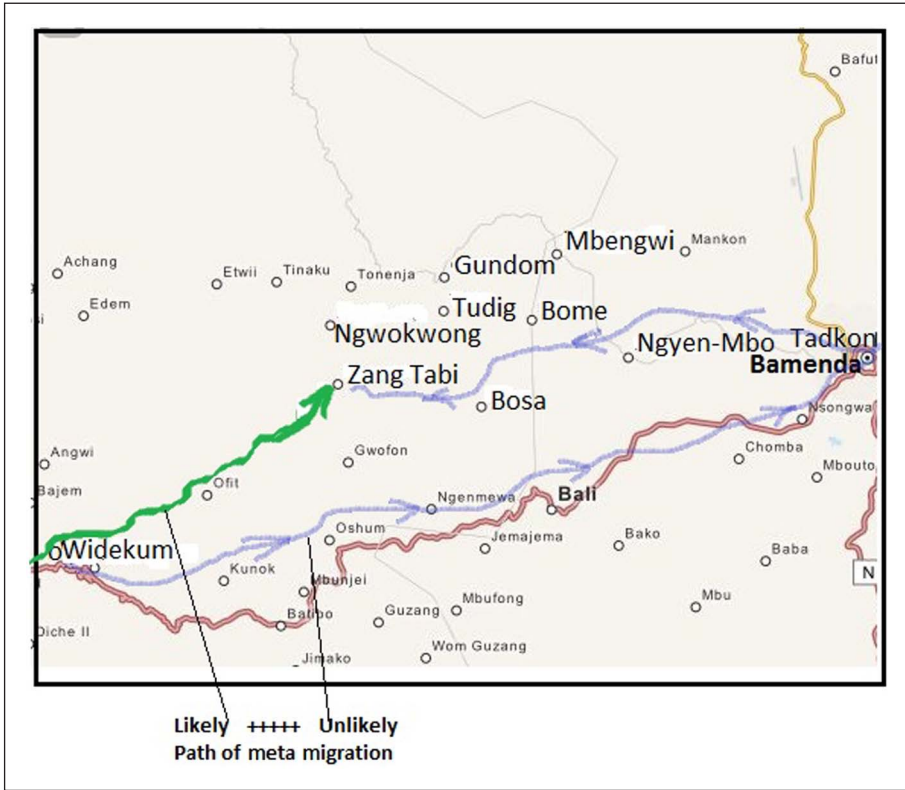


Figure 2. Migration path of Meta ancestors.

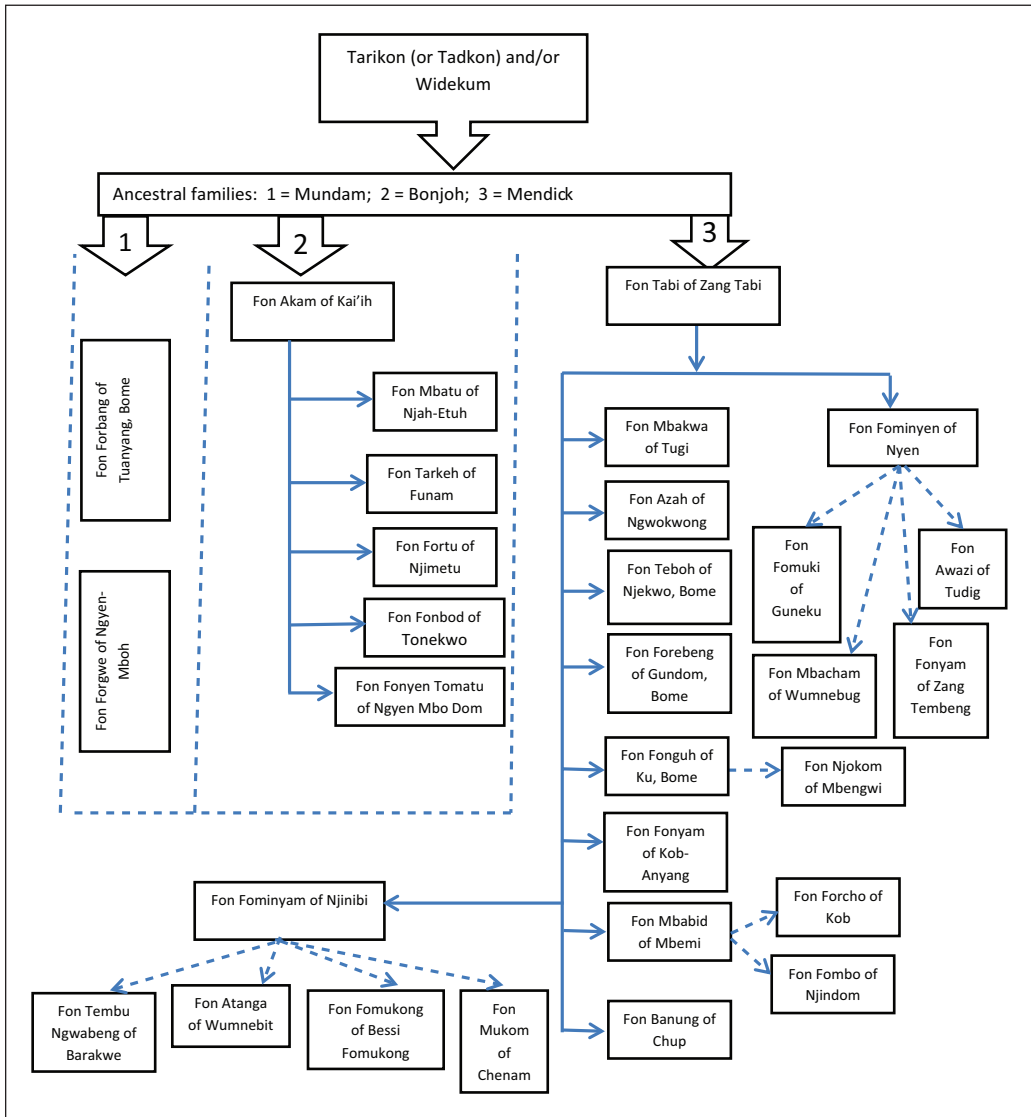
### Meta as an element of the modern state apparatus in Cameroon

Meta history since the German colonial era (circa late 1800s/early 1900s) is replete with activities designed to integrate the society and its traditional institutions into the modern state apparatus. Similar activities have been recorded throughout Africa (see e.g. Hölne, 2007; Kyed and Burr, 2007; Logan, 2009; West and Kloeck-Jenson, 1999). In the Cameroonian context, the most significant of these activities can be discussed under two major eras: colonial and post-colonial.

#### Colonial era

The Germans faced one of the fiercest challenges to their colonial project in Meta, where the inhabitants rejected colonization from the outset. Yet the success of this enterprise, especially with respect to the exploitation of resources, depended on the extent to which the natives could be controlled by the colonial state. Cognizant of this, the Germans used every means at their disposal to subject all members of the native population to colonial control. Accordingly, the German colonial authorities organized and led armed troops from nearby Bali Nyonga on a number of military expeditions into Meta villages. One of these expeditions took place in 1903 and culminated in the conquest of two prominent villages, Bome and Zang-Tabi. Both villages were declared administrative parts of Bali and placed under the suzerainty of the *Fon* of Bali Nyonga. At the same time, the remainder of Meta, particularly the Medig Valley region, was placed under the administrative





**Figure 3.** Meta chiefdom migration and expansion by ancestral family.  
**LEGEND:**  $\Rightarrow$  First wave of migration;  $\rightarrow$  Second wave of migration;  $\cdots\rightarrow$  Third wave of migration.

auspices of the Fon of Nyen. Neither this geo-political administrative schema nor the subsuming of Bome and Zang-Tabi under Bali succeeded in attaining the German objective of subduing the people of Meta. Consequently, in 1905, the Germans led another major military expedition which resulted in the forceful relocation of the inhabitants of Medig and Bome villages to a locale in Bali (some 10km from present-day Bali Town) (Dillon, 1990).

By 1905, all Meta natives were either geographically or administratively under Bali, who were the German colonial government's most ardent supporters in the region at the time. The main objective of spatially concentrating the natives and centralizing colonial administration was to ensure an uninterrupted supply of the labour power necessary for colonial government project

implementation. The German colonial government's concern with labour supply was heightened to the point of necessitating steps to restrict the movement of the natives. To ensure this, the German colonial government restricted the natives from staying out of the territory for periods longer than three months. Payment of a high fee was required to exit the territory (Rudin, 1938: 320). Another effort to ensure the supply of labour in the territory entailed the enactment of a decree on July 1, 1903 that imposed a tax on all adult members of the native population. The actual intention of this decree was not to raise revenue but to obligate the natives to provide badly needed labour power for colonial project execution. Natives had no cash, hence had to work on colonial government public works projects in lieu of paying taxes.

Between 1916 and 1919, the Meta natives who had been forcefully relocated to Bali took advantage of the colonial authorities' pre-occupation with post-World War I negotiations to return to their native lands. By 1916, when Britain assumed control of Southern Cameroons, most Meta people had resettled in their native villages. Here, it is important to note that post-colonial territorial realignments have resulted in enclosing the Meta in Borsah within the frontiers of present-day Bali Sub-Division while most of the Meta natives are in Momo Division. It is important to note the presence of two Meta-speaking groups who migrated and settled in two non-contiguous villages in Banjah and near Bambui in Mezam Division. The exact period of this migration is unclear but may be shortly before the onset of the British colonial era (circa, 1900).

In 1917 British colonial authorities elected to introduce the indirect rule strategy in Southern Cameroons, which was administered through colonial Nigeria (Chem-Langhee, 1983). This decision was driven by a need to meet the growing demands of the colonial project with an increasingly dwindling resource base. For the Governor-General of Nigeria, the British colonial authority on the ground, a more immediate justification for this decision was to: 'rule as much as possible through the Chiefs, and to avoid, as far as is practicable, measures of direct administration' (Chem-Langhee, 1983: 657). It is noteworthy that rather than a means to promote citizen participation in the governance process, indirect rule constituted an efficient strategy to impose British hegemony over regions with extant strong traditional authority and institutions (cf. Jua, 1995). To prepare the foundation for indirect rule, colonial authorities on the ground in Southern Cameroons were assigned the task of investigating local traditional societies and institutions (Vubo and Ngwa, 2001). The objective was to determine the basis on which native administration could be developed.

The inquiry revealed Zang-Tabi as the locale of the ceremonial foundation stone of Meta. On account of this revelation, the British colonial government appointed the Zang-Tabi chief as the Clan Head of Meta. This took effect in 1927 when, as part of the colonial government reorganization effort, Bamenda Division was divided into 15 native areas. One of these was Meta. Other Meta chiefs and their subjects were thenceforth urged to pledge their allegiance to the Chief of Zang-Tabi. One of the chief's assignments as an operative of the colonial government was tax collection in return for a stipend or '*dash*'.

Other Meta chiefdoms, particularly because they had enjoyed high levels of autonomy prior to the colonial era, resisted the colonial government's effort to subsume them under the colonially invented Paramount Chiefdom of Zang-Tabi. In 1930, barely three years after coming into effect, the policy to centralize Meta polity with the Fon of Zang-Tabi as its Paramount Chief was repealed. Consequently, the Meta polity reverted to its pre-colonial structure wherein Meta people identified with a common lineage but functioned as autonomous entities under distinct villages/chiefdoms.

Efforts by British colonial authorities to impose a centralized structure on the traditional decentralized polity of Meta also led to the creation of a native court, the Menemo Customary Court (Dillon, 1990). The Fon of Nyen was appointed President of this court, which had jurisdiction over Metaland in its entirety. The court was staffed by several Meta chiefs and notables, who served on

a rotational basis. Concomitant with this was the designation of the Nyen Chiefdom as the centre of Meta polity. The choice of Nyen was predicated on the fact that the Nyen Chief's palace served as the venue for most important traditional rituals affecting the entire Meta clan or region during the pre-colonial era and for a good while thereafter.

The rituals which had been performed long before the German conquest include the '*Ndan*', believed to cement the bond amongst Meta people, and the '*Ufu*', which is a bi-annual ceremony that is performed at the beginning of the planting and harvesting seasons, among others (Fominyen, 1990). The Nyen Chief is also the custodian of the ceremonial family drinking cup of the entire Meta clan '*Ito'oh Inebi*'. The Nyen Chiefdom also played critical roles in the success of the colonial project in the region. For instance, it hosted the all-important meeting that led to the end of the Bali–Meta skirmishes in 1952. In addition, and more importantly, the Chief of Nyen was instrumental in supplying the forced labour force that constructed the Bamenda–Meta road.

Further efforts on the part of British colonial authorities to impose the centralized politico-administrative structure on Meta culminated in the appointment of the Chief of Nyen as the head and representative of the Meta clan in the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs when this body was created in 1957. In the eyes of the British colonial authorities, highly centralized polities with powerful paramount chiefs were more useful than decentralized chiefdoms for the success of the colonial project. With centralization, it was possible to have a single designated authority, the Paramount Chief, serve as the sole intermediary between the colonial state and the natives within any specific tribal group or clan.

### *Post-colonial era*

In 1961, Southern Cameroons elected through a plebiscite to join with former French Cameroun, which had become independent in 1960, to constitute the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The two parts of this newly constituted federated state were significantly different in many respects. Institutionally, francophone Cameroun, unlike its Anglophone counterpart, had no history of strong traditional chiefs, be it of the centralized or decentralized variety (Fisiy, 1995; Jua, 1995). Harmonizing institutional order for the francophone-dominated authorities meant, among other things, usurping the powers of Anglophone Cameroon's traditional chiefs and other indigenous institutions.

Sidelining traditional authority and institutions sharply deviated from the situation which had obtained during the colonial era. Colonial governments needed traditional chiefs to participate in the governance process, particularly to perform important state tasks that were beyond the ability of colonial governments because of their paltry budgets. In addition, the colonial state needed the participation of traditional chiefs and institutions to legitimize colonial authority. In contrast, the post-colonial political and bureaucratic elite believed that these institutions had outlived their utility and therefore took steps to obliterate them.

Consequently, by a Presidential Order of 1972, the country's founding president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, dissolved the West Cameroon House of Chiefs. Five years later, on 15 July 1977, another presidential decree redefined traditional chiefs simply as auxiliaries of the republican state. The decree effectively bureaucratized traditional institutions and reduced chiefs to the lower rungs of the politico-administrative ladder. Post-colonial authorities have strived not only to subsume traditional authority and institutions under the canopy of the modern republican state but also to rank-order the chiefdoms in a manner that rewards the favoured chiefs but punishes those considered to be recalcitrant. In this regard, Article 2 of the 1977 decree created a three-tier classification system that grouped chiefs into first, second and third Classes (Eyoh, 1998; Jua, 1995). First Class chiefs are defined as those who claim the allegiance of two Second Class chiefs; while Second Class

chiefs have two Third Class chiefs below them; and Third Class chiefs are those whose jurisdiction is restricted to villages or sections of towns or cities (Eyoh, 1998; Jua, 1995).

The financial remuneration packages which chiefs receive from the state assume a pecking order corresponding with these three classes. The lack of an indigenous hierarchical system of chiefs in Meta means that no Meta chief can meaningfully claim the allegiance of any of his peers. Hence, the classification scheme for Meta is purely arbitrary. According to the scheme, no Meta chief belongs to the First Class, five are classified as Second Class while the rest belong to the Third Class. The need to juggle for a place at the dinner table of the modern republican state on the part of traditional chiefs has created significant tensions among some Meta chiefdoms.

The case of the chiefdoms of Nyen and Zang-Tabi, whose majesties had at one point or another headed the colonially invented paramount chiefdom of Meta, is noteworthy. Evidence of the discord between descendants of these two traditional dignitaries can be found in a blatantly livid letter, dated 13 September 1990, from the current Chief of Nyen to the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Momo Division of which Meta is a part (see Box 1). Here, it is important to note that the SDO within the politico-administrative structure of Cameroon is the local incarnation of state power (Eyoh, 1998).

**Box 1.** Excerpt of a letter from the Chief of Nyen to the SDO, Momo.

<p>The Senior Divisional Officer Momo Division Dear Sir,</p> <p><u>REPRESENTATIONS ON THE METTA FONDOMS: THE CASE OF THE NYEN FONDOM</u></p> <p>I am in the obligation, in my capacity as the direct descendant in the lineage of the dynasty, and present helmsman on the throne of the Nyen Fondom to convey to the jurisdiction of your authority that some persons, ill-intentioned, are enterprising to misrepresent facts on the historical descendancy of the Metta Fondom. Their sly ambition is to mislead the decision-making authority particularly as concerns the Nyen Fondom in the relation to the appointment of a 1<sup>st</sup> Class Chiefdom in the area. In writing to you on this matter, I have the honour most respectfully to indent for your timely action both vertical and horizontal, in order to arrest this strife; perhaps by transmission through hierarchy to the final decision-maker of the true facts relevant to this subject.</p> <p>Sir, there is in circulation a false document purported to have been deposited at the Presidency of the Republic and at the Ministry of Territorial Administration by a chief whose names you may already know. By this false document, he schedules the descendancy of the Metta Chieftaincies to suit his own purposes, document which you may need to declare null and void of every effect. On this event, I submit herewith in annexure '1', is the correct schedule; extracted from the National Archives. It merits the attention of His Excellencies as true and relevant to already codified history. . . . . .</p> <p>I have the honour to be Sir, FOMETA Fon NGYA II FOMINYEN MBAMEDIG</p>	<p>Fon Ngya II Fominyen Nyen Traditional Fondom Mbengwi Central Sub-Division Momo Division 13<sup>th</sup> September 1990.</p>
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\*Reproduced with permission from HRM J.N.K. Fominyen, the Fon of Nyen.

Since the 1980s, traditional chiefs in Cameroon have witnessed a significant erosion of their powers within the republican state structure. In what he called *le projet de société*, the President characterized hereditary chieftaincy as undemocratic and forbade traditional chiefs from involvement in the modern political process. However, political expedience dictated a reversal of this

position. Although the President and his ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party had been used to ruling without popular mandate, the resurgence of multiparty politics created a need for them to seek the support of local populations. Some analysts have contended that the re-introduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon transformed traditional chiefs literally into 'vote banks' for the political elite (e.g. Jua, 1995).

The CPDM is on record for co-opting many traditional leaders with the hopes of capturing the support of those under their suzerainty. The chiefs of Mbemi and Guneku are some of the best-known Meta traditional leaders to have been so co-opted. Within the larger Grassfield region, some of the most influential traditional chiefs, such as Paramount Chiefs Angwafof III of Mankon, and Ganyonga III of Bali, were seduced by offers of high level positions within the CPDM (Konings, 1999). The decree dealing with chieftaincy in Cameroon delineated chiefdoms to coincide with formal administrative boundaries of the republican state. This has had far-reaching implications for Meta chiefdoms. One immediate implication has been to administratively place Borsah, a historic Meta village (see above) in present-day Bali Sub-Division. Similarly, the two Meta villages, Banjah and the one near Bambui mentioned earlier, are in Mezam Division, some 40 kilometres from the heart of Meta. Here, I hasten to note that for politico-administrative purposes, mainland Meta is located in Momo Division. At a minimum, this configuration has served to fragment traditional units that have historically been linked by common ancestry, systems of belief, rituals, traditional practices and values. Another effort to undermine Meta tradition and culture on the part of the modern republican state in Cameroon has to do with the invention of chiefdoms. For instance, a recent Divisional Officer (SDO) for Momo Division is on record for entertaining a Munam (or Ngamunam) native's request to be enthroned to the non-existent chieftain of Munam (Achobang, 2013). That the SDO even entertained such a request has attracted fierce criticism from traditional Meta chiefs who contend that chieftaincy in Meta is obtained through heredity and not through appointment by the state or its representative. The fiercest of these criticisms have come from the Fons of Nyen, Njindom, Mbemi and Wumnebug, all of whom consider Munam the shared farmland of their chiefdoms.

The aforementioned case demonstrates a truism about the relationship between Meta Fons and the modern republican state in Cameroon. It is quite complicated. The Fons appear apprehensive and suspicious of any attempt on the part of the state to forge close ties with them. At the same time, they, most certainly individually, are vying for the state's attention as each wants to be elevated to the status of Class One Chief with a commensurate role as the Paramount Head of Metaland. This exemplifies a call for centralization in contradiction to the dictates of indigenous Meta tradition. Some of these calls originate from parties who are simply allured by the centralized structures of neighbouring chiefdoms such as Bafut, Mankon and Nso. The loudest of these calls come from persons with a vested interest in such a politico-administrative set-up. The case for elevating a chieftain to Class One status has often been made by the chief's henchmen as opposed to the chief himself. It is therefore hardly any accident that those clamouring for the elevation of any given Fon to the status of Class One Chief are, more often than not, subjects of that Fon. To be sure, demands for the establishment of a paramount chieftaincy in Meta, hence the centralization of its politico-administrative system, have nothing to do with accomplishing the twin goals of participatory development and good governance.

### **Meta traditional institutions and the 'good governance' question**

The question of centrality here is as follows: Is the decentralized traditional Meta politico-administrative system better able than the centralized model concomitant with paramount chiefdoms to attain good governance objectives? To address this question, it is necessary to ascertain the

capabilities of Meta clan-wide or regional bodies vis-à-vis their village-level counterparts in accomplishing goals such as accountability, administrative effectiveness and corruption control that constitute hallmarks of good governance. It is imprudent to presuppose that one of these systems is intrinsically good or bad as a tool of good governance. The decision to recommend adoption of one or the other of the systems must rest on the extent to which it matters for good governance outcomes. An outcome-based, as opposed to a rule-based, approach is preferred because it measures the actions and not the intentions of development institutions.

### *Meta regional development initiatives*

Since the very brief duration of colonially invented paramount chiefdoms, the Meta politico-administrative system has largely operated in its pre-colonial mode. Non-governmental efforts to establish a regional (or clan-wide) body unifying all of Meta's 29 villages and 31 chiefdoms under one centralized politico-administrative umbrella during the post-colonial era culminated in the creation of the Meta Welfare Association (MWA) in 1963. The MWA evolved to become the Kwem Cultural Association, the forerunner to present-day Meta Cultural and Development Association (MECUDA). The association is structured along the lines of a formal modern organization complete with a motto (Goodwill, Unity, and Development), a constitution, a set of by-laws, a mission statement and a democratically elected executive body that is headed by a chief executive officer, the President General (PG). Its stated goals include the promotion and preservation of Meta culture and the socio-economic development of the Meta clan (see MECUDA, 2009). To meet the first set of goals, the association organizes annual cultural festivals designed to promote Meta culture. With respect to the second set of goals, the association has been involved in activities designed to provide or upgrade roads and other public infrastructure such as community halls, healthcare centres, schools, and pipe borne water.

Incidentally, each of Meta's 29 villages is involved in village-level initiatives aimed at accomplishing some of the same goals as MECUDA. Thus, there is a basis upon which the record of the association as a centralized regional body encompassing all Meta villages and chiefdoms can be compared to those of the individualized villages, which are relatively decentralized units replicating the indigenous politico-administrative structure of Meta. Since its creation, MECUDA has witnessed a series of scandals centred around allegations of misappropriation and outright embezzlement of funds. One of the best-known of these allegations was reported in the local press in Cameroon in December 2009 and confirmed in a recent press interview by the association's current PG (see *Mecuda-net*, 2009). Two specific incidents of governance malfeasance on the part of the MECUDA leadership are worth noting.

The first of these involved funds that were raised for the purpose of grading a local road, the Ngyen-Mbo to Ntar road. The funds were raised by levying Meta people in Cameroon and abroad, including registered and non-registered members of MECUDA, over the course of at least half a decade. These funds, which are rumoured (in personal communications to the author) to be in the millions of francs CFA or thousands of US dollars, were supposed to constitute the (Meta) community's own contribution to the road project, which was largely sponsored by the European Union (EU). However, the EU went ahead and completed the project without requiring the community's contribution. Logically therefore, the funds raised for the project were supposed to remain in the association's coffers and subsequently be used to fund one or more of the myriad badly needed development projects in Meta. This turned out not to be the case as the funds had disappeared without a trace.

The second instance involves the women's wing of the association, known as the Meta Women's Cultural and Development Association (MEWOCUDA) and the repairs of yet another local road,

the Acha Hill to Acha Hospital road. Here, again, millions of francs CFA were raised by levying members and soliciting contributions from local and international friends of Meta. In the end, the Government of Cameroon stepped in to execute the project as part of its rural development initiatives. In principle, therefore, the millions of francs raised for the project were supposed to be in MEWOCUDA's account. However, as was the case in the Ngyen-Mbo–Ntar road project, the funds were nowhere to be found.

MECUDA is involved with yet another region-wide initiative, the construction of a mortuary for Meta. The Association has already organized many fundraising drives for this project, including one at the MECUDA-USA Annual Convention, which was held in Dallas, Texas in July/August 2009, and another in Minnesota, in July/August 2010. Although efforts linked to this project are still at a very rudimentary stage, they are already saddled with familiar governance problems, particularly the lack of transparency. For one thing, information on how much has been collected so far is yet to be made public. For another thing, there has been no attempt to address questions of relevance to the project such as the following: How will it be managed? Who will manage it? How and for what will the proceeds from the mortuary be used?

### *Village-level development initiatives*

As stated above, each of Meta's 29 villages has completed or is currently undertaking a development project of one kind or another. It is necessary to state that a thorough search of the local press in Cameroon revealed no record of embezzlements, mismanagement or misappropriation of funds at the village level in Meta. Instead, press reports and other sources paint a glowing picture of development initiatives involving direct citizen input during local self-help project conception, formulation and implementation phases at this level. A few specific cases are worth mentioning. A local newspaper, *The Sun*, reported in its March 14, 2010 issue that the Village of Ngyen-Mbo just completed a village-wide and locally funded electrification project whose cost is estimated to be 5.5m francs CFA (about US\$11,000) (see *The Sun*, Online). Other recently completed projects in the village include renovations of the Community Hall and the Health Centre. Particularly noteworthy here are the positive comments to the press by the villagers extolling the Village Development Executive Committee for being good stewards of development project funds. It is worth noting that the funds were raised by levying adult natives of Ngyen-Mbo in Meta, other parts of Cameroon and abroad. In addition, all permanent as well as transient residents, particularly school-aged children and youths (university students) in schools away from the village made in-kind contributions in the form of labour input to the projects during holidays.

Another village-level development project in Meta that has attracted not only the attention of the local press in Cameroon but also that of academics and international development agencies is the Nyen water supply scheme (see IRC, Online; [Lammerink, 1998](#); World Bank, 1998). One aspect of this project that has won the praises of many an observer is the degree to which local residents in Nyen were involved in the project. The project was executed under the auspices of the Dutch government-sponsored participatory action research (PAR) programme, which was launched in 1994 (see [Lammerink, 1998](#)). The programme covers communities in six developing countries, including Cameroon, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Colombia and Guatemala. As in the case of Ngyen-Mbo, children and youths participated by providing the manual labour input that was necessary to complete the Nyen water project. More noteworthy is the fact that the project management committee comprises women, men and youths alike.

Neighbouring villages to Nyen, such as Mbemi and Njindom, are also on record for implementing and managing successful self-help development projects, including a bridge linking the two villages, community halls and water supply schemes ([Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2003](#)). Meta

villages with successfully implemented or ongoing self-help development projects that are yet to attract the attention of the press or research community include: Njah-Etuh, and Kai, which are currently implementing village electrification projects; Kob, Gundom (in Bome), and Zang-Tabi, which are in the process of implementing water supply schemes. One of the foregoing local self-help projects, that of Gundom, is almost complete and has received technical and other assistance from the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Engineers Without Borders, and a local NGO, Meta Quality of Life Improvement Foundation (MQLIF) (Hydrosbottle, n.d.). These two NGOs are working in collaboration with members of all demographic groups within the beneficiary community. The local residents are responsible for the manual labour input the project. They are also in charge of the day-to-day logistical issues as members of the water project committee.

## **Analysis and discussion**

As shown above, village-level entities in Meta have registered more positive development policy outcomes than their regionally oriented counterparts. This revelation suggests that a decentralized structure is more likely than a centralized equivalent to accomplish the goals of good governance in Meta. The following four factors go contrary to the dictates of good governance and account for at least a portion of this phenomenon:

- Adoption of an alien governance model;
- Size and lack of commitment by authorities in central bodies;
- Paternalistic posture of central authorities; and
- Exclusivity tendencies of central authorities.

### *Adoption of an alien governance model*

Meta is a decentralized polity that has proved amazingly resilient. The centralized governance model that was imposed on the polity during the colonial era was alien to Meta culture. The model of paramount chiefdom that is currently advocated by a few, mostly overseas-based elements, during the last two years, is also alien. The Meta place a high premium on their respective villages and chiefdoms, however small. While Meta people have a history of living in harmony, the concept of a singular Meta polity appears incomprehensible to many Meta people. It is therefore little wonder that projects with a regional- as opposed to village-centric focus have not been popular, and consequently unsuccessful. The fact that the MECUDA and MEWOCUDA initiatives failed from a good governance perspective can be explained by the absence of a sense of 'region-hood' or 'Meta-hood' among the people of Meta. In contrast, instances of financial irregularities, embezzlement or misappropriation of funds are largely unknown at the village level in Meta. However, this is not to say that the efforts of elements within MECUDA and/or MEWOCUDA cannot be harnessed to effectuate local development projects. In fact, without the influence of some of these elements, major capital-intensive projects such as road building are unlikely to occur in Meta. This is mainly because the locale is geographically situated a long way from the national capital. To illustrate, Figure 4 shows a local road project which came into being thanks to the influence of Meta indigenes with ties to the levers of national politico-administrative power.

The argument here is not that centralized chiefdoms or polities do not work at all. Rather, it is that tradition matters. Region-wide projects have been successfully implemented in societies that have a tradition of highly centralized chiefdoms complete with a Paramount Chief. A case in point is the Kumbo (Nso) self-help water project (see [Njoh, 2006](#)). Elsewhere in Africa, there is the





**Figure 4.** A major road project in Mbengwi, which would have been unlikely without the influence of Meta indigenes with access to the levers of Cameroon's politico-administrative power.

oft-cited case of the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda (see e.g. Hölne, 2007; Kyed and Burr, 2007; Logan, 2009; West and Kloeck-Jenson, 1999). This highly centralized kingdom is well known for its effective institutions, financing mechanisms and policy tools (Englebert, 2002). Yet, as the corpus of my thesis posits, it would be erroneous to consider centralization flawless. In fact, the case of the Nso water project, despite its illustrious record, contains flaws that have attracted their own share of criticisms. For instance, the project has been accused of focusing almost exclusively on Kumbo City, where the Paramount Chief is based, while marginalizing some of the villages comprising the chiefdom (Njoh, 2006).

### *Size and lack of commitment by authorities in central bodies*

Two features distinguish the two centralized bodies, MECUDA and MEWOCUDA, from their village-level counterparts. The first of these is sheer size. At any given time, each of the two centralized entities boasts a membership roster that exceeds the population of any one of Meta's 29 villages. The second distinction is that while members of village-level bodies are likely to directly benefit from the projects they implement, it is common that not all members of centralized organs are direct beneficiaries of theirs. For instance, a community hall in Njindom that is built with the assistance of MECUDA directly benefits residents of this but not other villages in Meta. In contrast, residents of any given village directly benefit from any project in that village. To the extent that this is true, it is safe to conclude that an official on the project committee of any given village is likely to be committed to the project if for no other reason than because he stands to derive direct benefits from the project. However, this cannot be said of officials on regionally focused project committees. Moreover, while all residents of any given village are likely to know each other, the same is not true when talking of Meta people in general. These differences explain, at least partially, the misuse and abuse of power that have been recorded in MECUDA and MEWOCUDA. The recorded transgressions are very likely a function of the same factors that account for the abuse of state and bureaucratic power at the national level in Cameroon as a whole. Here, officials are often motivated by objectives that are unrelated to the common good. This contrasts sharply with

what obtains at the village level, where people are motivated by objectives that are inextricably tied to the common good of the village as a whole, and where face-to-face relations obligate people to each other. Here, as I noted earlier, everyone tends to know everyone else. Personal knowledge and familiarity with each other tend to serve as a natural mechanism for creating the building blocks for good governance, including respect for the rule of law, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equitability and inclusiveness.

### *Paternalistic posture of central authorities*

Regional or clan-wide development projects in Meta tend to be externally induced. For instance, the two road projects with which MECUDA and MEWOCUDA were supposed to be involved, and the ongoing mortuary project, did not result from a systematic survey to determine what people based in Meta villages actually needed. The President General and almost all members of the MECUDA Executive do not reside in any one of Meta's 29 villages. Rather, these officials, who commonly and inexplicably refer to themselves as 'Meta elites', are based in urban centres hundreds of kilometres away from Metaland. As far as spending time in Metaland goes, they are typically able to afford no more than an annual or bi-annual sojourn there. The presence of these sojourners in Metaland is often conspicuous. They are wont to visit in utility vehicles bearing matriculation numbers with prefixes such as LT (for Littoral Region) or CE (for Centre Region). These prefixes are associated respectively with Douala, the national economic hub and Yaounde-based (as per the CE prefix of the vehicle matriculation number), the national capital (see Figure 1). To illustrate, the anonymous owner of the vehicle shown in Figure 5 is a Meta indigene but was only sojourning in Mbengwi when the photograph was taken.

Worth noting is the fact that the projects pursued by the self-proclaimed elites typically reflect their own priorities and preference as opposed to those of the residents of Metaland. These 'elites' generally believe that their formal training, experience and urban exposure endow them with the knowledge and power to determine what their Meta-based counterparts need or deserve. In contrast, there is a degree of egalitarianism present at the village level, where residents tend to conceive and formulate their development projects based on their collectively acknowledged needs. This explains the significant positive outcomes registered by the village-level initiatives discussed above.

### *Exclusivity tendencies of central authorities*

In principle, all demographic groups, including men, women and youths have a role to play in MECUDA. However, in practice, real power within the association has historically been concentrated in the hands of a few. This explains the fact that millions of francs CFA could disappear from the association's coffers without any trace. If the transparency and accountability which exist at the village level existed in the association, someone would have noticed and drawn attention to the problem while it was still at an inchoate state. Moreover, region-wide initiatives in Meta, particularly those of the externally induced variety (see above), tend to be biased in favour of hard issues, particularly finance and physical resources. The casualty here is often the soft issues, particularly the participation of citizens in the decision-making process, community empowerment, and institutional development. Issues such as these, as one observer has noted, constitute a strong attribute of the Nyen Water Scheme, one of the village-level projects mentioned above ([Lammerink, 1998](#)).

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between the republican state and traditional institutions in post-colonial Cameroon has mainly been a reflection of the political climate prevailing at any given time. Currently, and to



**Figure 5.** Evidence of an urban-based 'elite' visiting Meta.

paraphrase Cyprian Fisiy (1995), state power is contested in this era of multiparty politics in Cameroon, thereby leading the state to embark on co-opting traditional chiefs and bureaucratize traditional institutions. The re-emergence of multiparty politics triggered a need for this leadership to depend on traditional authorities as vote banks. This paper envisages a more meaningful and promising role for traditional institutions and authorities in the development process in Cameroon. It employs the case of Meta to demonstrate that efforts to alter traditional African institutions in the name of modernization have been ill-advised. Of course, a modern institution such as MECUDA has a place in development initiatives in Meta. Such an institution can employ its national and international visibility to solicit technical and other assistance for regional development projects that are beyond the competence of individual villages. This study has demonstrated that Meta's traditional politico-administrative system, with its multiple chieftaincies and village-centric orientation, holds much potential for efforts to promote development in general and good governance in particular. Consequently, the preservation of viable and valued traditional structures should be entertained in efforts to design structures for good governance.

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