

Introduction

Cameroon, October 1997. Conflict emerges over the obligation to abstain from wearing caps or headscarves during the investiture ceremonies of a new Grassfields chief. While starting off as a minor disagreement over religious and cultural difference, the issue soon evolves into a near-violent clash that threatens to undermine the social coexistence of Grassfielders, Mbororo and Hausa. Two factions face each other in a symbolic stand-off with staffs, masks and guns to hand. Imminent violence is obviated by the intervention of state authority; the crisis is diffused. Eventually, the parties reconcile and agree to ignore the matter.

July 2001. The decapitated body of a local Grassfielder is found by a riverbank. Circumstantial evidence regarding the culprit points to an influential and wealthy Mbororo man, whose relationship with the local Grassfields community has been coloured by competition over access to land. While legal prosecution takes its course, the local Grassfielders' elite association takes up the issue and elevates it from an individual to an ethnic conflict. Their attempts to mobilize Grassfielders against Mbororo and to influence legal procedure through political lobbying both fail. Eventually, the case is put off without judgement, and social relations gradually revert to normal.

The two incidents above constitute the vertices of this book. They both occurred in Misaje, a small town in the anglophone northwest of Cameroon – also known as the Cameroon Grassfields – and took place just four years apart. What is remarkable about them? First, both incidents were perceived as conflicts over religious and cultural difference, and framed in ethnic terms. Second, while the first conflict had a rather confrontational, nearly violent character, the actors in the later conflict opted for procedural approaches, namely litigation and lobbying. Both conflicts are representative of their time. The 1990s represent the heyday of Cameroon's democratization, which was accompanied by an increased propensity for militancy and violence, both on the part of the population and the government. Concurrently, the country's economy dwindled owing to structural adjustment programmes and the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994. The subsequent decade witnessed the rise

of global discourses of human and minority rights, with a significant impact on people's self-understanding and political strategies. During both decades, emphasis was placed on ethnic over national identity, thus engendering an ethnicization of national and local politics.

This book investigates the role of ethnicity in conflict situations, and considers the mechanisms that promote peaceful cohabitation and integration in an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous environment. It looks at transformations in conflict strategies, placing individual and group strategies in the context of national and international political discourse.

Philip Burnham opens his book *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon* (1996) with a description of two incidents of ethnic violence in Meiganga that took place in the early 1990s and culminated in some hundred dead. He places these events in the context of the country's political transition, and points out that compared to the large-scale massacres in Rwanda, Somalia and Liberia – or more recently in Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and Congo-Kinshasa – they were rather unremarkable. However, less impressed by numbers than by the unexpected nature of these events, Burnham engages with interethnic relations in north central Cameroon and the social processes and cultural logics that may contribute to ethnic conflict. He concludes with a rather gloomy projection of increasing political instability, disorder and violence – a scenario that, luckily, has not materialized. This study tries to answer the question of why Burnham's prediction has been vitiated by recent history, and to delineate the factors that account for integration and the avoidance of ethnic violence in a political environment that nonetheless accentuates ethnic and cultural difference.

In a topical book, Peter Geschiere (2009) investigates the current salience of discourses of autochthony in various parts of Africa and Europe. He places the growing obsession with local belonging in the context of globalization, and argues that, in Africa, democratization and decentralization have contributed to the emergence of a politics of belonging, thus undermining national citizenship in favour of ethnic and regional identities. This book takes up Geschiere's suggestions, and explores the ways in which individuals and collectives in northwest Cameroon apply and experiment with concepts of ethnicity, autochthony, indigeneity and similar notions of belonging in order to substantiate their claims vis-à-vis each other, the state and international organizations. While this study acknowledges variation and creativity in the use of these concepts, it also considers the limits of their applicability, as illustrated in the failed mobilization of Grassfielders against Mbororo in the above-mentioned murder conflict. In studying multiple ethnic categories and changing political strategies, it asks: Do all ethnicities entail the same potential for political mobilization? And if not, how can we account for variation?

This leads us to another aspect of identity and belonging, namely its emotional capacity and visceral quality which, as Geschiere rightly points out, cannot fully be explained by historical deconstruction. We may thus draw on the work of Nicolas Argenti (2007), who analyses the embodiment of historical memory in the Cameroon Grassfields. With his focus on ritual, performance and masking as sites of contention between youths and elders, women and men, Argenti illustrates how the historical experience of marginalization, subjection and enslavement is embodied, relived and subverted. Taking into account the discursive silence regarding slavery and forced labour in Cameroon, Argenti's findings are even more compelling. In a similar vein, this book engages with both the performative and discursive sides of ethnicity. The performative and embodied dimensions of belonging are exemplified in the symbolic stand-off between Grassfields masks and Mbororo staffs in the investiture conflict, introduced above. In retrospect, interlocutors expressed bewilderment and discomfort with the confrontational character of ethnic coexistence at that time. We thus ask: How do we account for the social energy in performance? What are the conditions and mechanisms that trigger the emotional capacity of ethnicity?

On the discursive side, the book examines ethnic stereotypes, their historical roots and the conditions of their perpetuation. Here, tacit knowledge resulting from accumulated group histories and vestigial memories is a crucial factor in shaping social interaction and the perception of conflict. In this regard, we will question why farmer–herder conflict – a long-standing and pertinent issue widely addressed in research and policy across West Africa – continues to be perceived and framed in ethnic terms, despite economic diversification and alternative lines of conflict.

Starting off with the analysis of a near-violent altercation over cultural difference and political rivalry, and closing with a law case over occult murder and land issues, this book investigates both confrontational and integrative dimensions of ethnic and social coexistence, as well as collective histories in the Cameroon Grassfields. It does so by focusing on a particular political moment in history – Cameroon's democratic transition – that was shaped by a virulent politics of belonging and the subsequent traction of global rights discourse. In this sense, ethnicity is here highlighted as a salient feature of inclusion and exclusion whose particular momentum is contingent upon historical and political circumstances. Concurrently, this book argues against an easy correlation of ethnicity and conflict, and advocates thorough ethnographic and historically informed analyses of specific conflict situations.

The book takes as a case study a small town in the Cameroon Grassfields, a region that since the colonial period has enjoyed considerable attention by historians and anthropologists. Much of the literature has concentrated on the

political and economic organization of Grassfields societies, with a focus on the formation and development of Grassfields polities and their interrelations. Leading scholars in this field, such as Igor Kopytoff and Jean-Pierre Warnier, have long emphasized the heterogeneous and composite nature of Grassfields societies, as reflected, for example, in Kopytoff's classical essay on 'the internal African frontier' (Kopytoff 1987). Recently, Warnier (2007) has outlined the ways in which, in the Mankon chiefdom, territorialization and locality were produced by a governmentality of containers. That is, both the chief and the chiefdom were treated as fragile containers whose bounds needed to be secured against leaking their precious contents, namely, ancestral substances and viable subjects. Conversely, unwanted social elements – Warnier figuratively calls them 'the royal excrement' – were expelled via the slave trade. Moreover, loyalty and adherence to the chiefdom were generated via control over sexuality and reproduction, a political technique internalized by means of strict moral standards. Eventually, the governmentality of containers crumbled in the first half of the twentieth century due to the chiefdom's opening up to external influences; these included the adoption of Christian ideas about love and marriage, the migration of young men to cities, their unrestrained access to commodity resources as well as the disintegration of sexuality and social reproduction. Today, the power of Grassfields chiefs no longer rests on their intrinsic connection with ancestral substances but on having access to state resources, procuring development projects and guiding cultural associations.

Following the arguments of Kopytoff and Warnier, I maintain that, up to today, territorialization and the production of locality are central to notions of ethnicity and belonging in the Grassfields. Furthermore, I argue that Grassfields societies have the capacity and techniques to accommodate not only Grassfields 'others' but outsiders in general, both historically and contemporarily. The very presence of Mbororo and Hausa throughout the Cameroon Grassfields is demonstrative of this capacity, and a feature generally understudied.

As I will demonstrate in detail, Mbororo compliance with the political authority of Grassfields chiefdoms has long supported their regional integration. It is only in the wake of Cameroon's political liberalization and the subsequent traction of international rights discourses that Mbororo individuals openly questioned their marginal position in the local and national power hierarchy. They thus initiated a vivid and ongoing debate over Mbororo identity and struggles for political recognition. As I will argue, the Mbororo case in particular illustrates the potential of ethnicity as a political resource, a discursive space and a source of social transformation.

Hausa presence in the Grassfields is a subject largely neglected in the scholarship on the region. This book argues that, while having historical roots in long-distance trade between northern Nigeria and Cameroon, today's Hausa

population may be understood as a residual category composed of individuals who for structural or personal reasons have opted out of their original community, be it as a result of migration, intermarriage or religious conversion. It includes Muslim migrants from northern Cameroon and Nigeria, as well as Grassfielders who converted to Islam and settled Mbororo, all of whom congregate in specific neighbourhoods and assume a sedentary Muslim identity. The Hausa category thus serves as an example illustrating the composite, contextual and flexible character of ethnic identities in the Grassfields, as well as the complex and multiple liabilities that come with it. By integrating Grassfields societies, Mbororo and Hausa in the same study, this is the first book to focus on their very coexistence and identity politics in this region.

Naming and Claiming Identities

This study contends that in the Cameroon Grassfields ethnic awareness and the recognition of cultural difference are critical factors that shape the self-understanding of individuals and collectives, as well as their interaction with each other and the state. Ethnicity or ethnicities are here understood very broadly as instances of identity and difference. Furthermore, ethnicity is seen as essentially relational and processual.

In considering ethnicities in the Grassfields, this book takes a historical approach as promoted, among others, by John Comaroff (1995) and Carola Lentz (1998). Both authors convincingly argue that a single, abstract theory of ethnicity is impracticable, as processes leading to the creation of ethnicities are historically and regionally specific. Moreover, a historical perspective helps to avoid the fruitless controversy between primordialist and constructionist approaches, and shows that ethnic identities are neither fixed nor wholly invented.

Fredrik Barth is often seen as the leading figure of modern theories of ethnicity. In a frequently cited piece, Barth (1969) suggests focusing on group boundaries as the primary locus of defining ethnic identities and difference. Furthermore, he interprets ethnicity as a specific form of social identity, constructed under particular historical and political circumstances, and based on self-ascriptions and ascriptions by others. In a later contribution, Barth (1994) recommends modelling processes of ethnic identification on three interpenetrating levels: the micro level of individual action and experience; the median level of entrepreneurship, leadership and rhetoric; and the macro level of state policies.

In line with Barth's propositions, this book examines the emergence, transformation and political articulation of ethnic identities in the Cameroon Grassfields by focusing on historical and contemporary encounters with

political or cultural ‘others’, as well as with colonial and postcolonial governments. It pays special attention to gendered perspectives on collective histories, and inquires if the individuals and collectives under study hold distinct emic conceptions of ethnicity, and how this affects inter-group relations. Inspired by the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), the study engages with the question of the extent to which ethnic identities in the Grassfields are colonial constructs. Hobsbawm and Ranger’s approach has been taken further by Adam Kuper (2003, 2005), who suggests that recent policies of the United Nations that involve classifying selected groups as ‘indigenous peoples’ has led to the creation of ‘neo-colonial’ categories and identities. The interplay of global discourses, national policies and local strategies of identification and representation is a central theme explored throughout this book.

Another take on ethnicity vital to this study is the instrumentalist approach of Abner Cohen (1969, 1974). In his work on immigrant Hausa communities in southern Nigeria, Cohen shows that, in the multi-ethnic and urban environment of Ibadan, ethnicity constitutes an important form of political and economic capital, and is the key condition to individuals’ participation in trading activities. Furthermore, among Hausa immigrants in Ibadan, internal status differences are largely ignored, and ethnic boundaries are kept flexible and permeable. It is on the basis of these and related findings that Cohen understands ethnicity as essentially political and instrumental.

Cohen’s findings are instructive for my analysis of strategies of inclusion and exclusion among Hausa and Mbororo. While both count as immigrant and minority groups in the Cameroon Grassfields, they differ considerably in their ethnic self-understanding and degree of political mobilization. How can this be explained? Here we may do well to consider circumstantial factors, such as group size. As Günther Schlee (2008) has argued, the economies of group size and social position are crucial in determining strategies of inclusion and exclusion. For example, whereas for members of small, marginal groups it can be advantageous to integrate strangers and bond with others so as to gain political weight, leaders of larger, economically powerful groups generally benefit from excluding newcomers in order to limit the sharing of profits. This book will investigate if these and similar considerations account for different strategies of inclusion and exclusion among the groups under study.

Moreover, in examining instances of political mobilization, this study draws on the radically constructionist perspective of Roger Brubaker. Brubaker (2004) outlines the pitfalls of ‘groupism’; that is, the tendency to treat ethnic groups as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed. Rather, he argues, we should disentangle ‘ethnicity’ and ‘groups’, and study both as instances of social processes and perspectives on the world. Moreover, he calls on analysts to recognize organizations and individuals as the protagonists

of conflict, and to be sensitive to acts of framing and narrative encoding that not only interpret but constitute conflict as ethnic. Similarly, this book argues for paying attention to the possibility of different and changing degrees of 'groupness', and to the role of individual and collective actors in the politicization of ethnicity.

Integration and Conflict: A Two-Way Street

I take as a starting point the Cameroon Grassfields as the overarching unit that all inhabitants and population groups consider themselves part of. The way individuals and collectives relate to each other can take varying forms, which depend on the different rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion used at different moments in time, in different situations or concurrently. Moreover, these relations are seen as embedded in and shaped by the interplay of integration and conflict. Integration is here defined as a process whereby individuals or collectives become part of an overarching unit or systemic connection (Schlee 2003). Conflict, on the other hand, is conceived in Georg Elwert's terms as 'an action based upon the perception of partially incompatible interests or intentions between two or more persons' (Elwert 2001: 2542), an action that does not necessarily involve violence.

In popular understanding, integration and conflict are perceived as two opposite poles of social relations. Integration is often associated with sameness or coherence, while conflict is associated with difference. As Schlee (2008) and other anthropologists have argued, this view is far too simple. There are many ways for individuals and collectives to be integrated into overarching units, be it through assimilation to a dominant culture, the coexistence of distinct groups or via antagonistic relations. Furthermore, as many recent and past conflicts have proved, a low level of difference does not guarantee peaceful coexistence.

The situation examined in this book may provide a case in support of Schlee's model of integration through difference (Schlee 2001). While the different population groups have occupied quite separate but complementary economic and ecological niches, current trends towards political engagement and economic diversification have led them to emerge from their niches. The study thus investigates the effect of economic transformation on the socio-political fabric of the Grassfields. It considers whether economic diversification promotes mutual understanding and social integration, or rather engenders competition and conflict. Placing these developments in a national perspective, it asks to what extent the country's economic crisis has advanced an ethnicization of competition.

Similarly, as sameness and integration do not necessarily correspond, conflict cannot be seen as an entirely negative force. This approach was put forward

by scholars of the Manchester School, who perceived conflict as part and parcel of social relations. As Max Gluckman (1955) argued, actors are embedded in a web of individual and group allegiances that, on the one hand, promote minor confrontations while, on the other, reducing the potential for violent conflict. Furthermore, such minor confrontations are seen as contributing to social cohesion. Victor Turner (1967, 1974) further elaborated on Gluckman's approach by focusing on the processual and performative dimensions of conflict. He introduced the model of the social drama to study the phases and symbolism of conflict.

Building on Gluckman and Turner, this book critically examines the way in which the two conflicts introduced at the beginning may be interpreted as part of an uneven integration process. It also asks how bloodshed may have impacted on social coexistence, drawing on earlier experiences. And what are the symbolic meanings of the masks and staffs exerted in the investiture conflict? Complementary to the two major altercations mentioned above are minor and less dramatic events, which, as shall be shown, are equally significant in understanding interethnic relations and social cohesion in the Cameroon Grassfields.

As I stated earlier with regard to Burnham's thesis, this book aims at delineating the factors that promote integration and the avoidance of violence. While difference and conflict have been outlined as possibly integrative factors, we will also consider relations that transcend or challenge ethnic boundaries. A classical and controversially discussed example is the concept of cross-cutting ties. It was introduced by Gluckman (1955) to denote allegiances that unite individuals across 'tribal' or social units. Drawing examples from Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), Gluckman came to the conclusion that cross-cutting ties contribute to social cohesion because they inhibit violent conflict and the destruction of the wider social order. His thesis of the de-escalating propensity of cross-cutting ties was criticized by later scholars, whose studies did not support Gluckman's argument. In his study of violent conflict within Tauade society in Papua New Guinea, Hallpike (1977) came to the conclusion that cross-cutting ties do not necessarily contribute to social cohesion, but may serve as channels of vengeance and evasion. Meanwhile, Schlee (1997, 2000, 2004) has examined clan relations among pastoral groups in northern Kenya. In his reading there is no correlation between the existence of cross-cutting ties and the prevention or escalation of conflict. However, he found that interethnic clan relations help to overcome the consequences of violent conflict. As these divergent findings suggest, cross-cutting ties in themselves have no general effect, but used as raw material for political rhetoric, they may promote either social cohesion or violent conflict.

This study picks up on this debate and examines the relevance of cross-cutting ties in view of ethnic coexistence in the Grassfields. More specifically, it looks at economic allegiances as well as social and religious ties that result from intermarriage and religious conversion. In the Cameroon Grassfields, conversion from local African religions and/or Christianity to Islam is relatively infrequent, but it is a common feature in northern Cameroon, where religious conversion also entails ethnic conversion. Several authors have analysed the correlation of these processes, as well as converts' individual motivations. It is the aim of this book to extend this discussion to the Cameroon Grassfields, and to consider the factors that may account for different outcomes in the country's two regions.

Give and Take in Conflict Strategies

Current anthropological conflict theory builds on the findings of the Manchester School but takes a more differentiated approach, distinguishing different types of conflict with different impacts on social relations. Elwert (2001, 2004, 2005), for example, orders the multitude of concepts used to describe conflict in a field defined by four poles: destruction, warring, procedure and avoidance. These poles differ from one another in that they are characterized by greater or lesser degrees of violence, and stronger or weaker degrees of embedding. Elwert defines embedding as follows: 'the ensemble of moral values, proper norms, and institutional arrangements which set limits to a specific type of action and make simultaneously the outcome of these actions calculable' (Elwert 2001: 2543).

In his model, it is the degree of embedding in social action, rather than violence, that determines the integrative or dissociative propensity of conflict. Elwert's conflict theory is useful to analyse local approaches to conflict management as studied in this book. While procedure in his model – as the most embedded and least violent strategy – seems most effective and integrative, the situation on the ground may prove otherwise. In the murder conflict, for example, procedure – in this case litigation and lobbying – produced no satisfactory solution, but aggravated existing resentments. We may ask: What are the necessary conditions for a successful outcome of procedure? Are they attainable under Cameroon's current political and legal framework? And how effective are local applications of global concepts, such as human, minority and indigenous rights?

In the same way as this book critically engages with Elwert's category of procedure, it also pays attention to the strategy he terms 'avoidance'. In his model, avoidance is characterized by weak social embedding and a low potential for violence, while being prone to relapse into destruction. Yet avoidance

strategies may be more common and stable than Elwert suggests. In the African context, several authors have reported conflict strategies that could be grouped under the heading of avoidance.

This study suggests looking at avoidance in terms of functional indifference. By functional indifference, I refer to a strategy that opts for overlooking difference and rivalry for the sake of continued coexistence. For example, in the case of the investiture conflict, the opposing parties eventually resorted to leaving the issue of wearing caps or headscarves unresolved and consciously ignored the possibility of near-violent escalation.

Finally, this book highlights compromise as part and parcel of conflict resolution. In Elwert's model, compromise, understood as a process of negotiation that involves mutual concession, may fall under the heading of procedure. I argue, however, that probably all forms of conflict resolution, with the exception of the total annihilation of one or more of the rival parties, entail a certain degree of give and take. Thus, while procedure with its focus on negotiation seems to encourage reconciliation, it may also go hand in hand with avoidance. This study aims at determining the role of compromise in conflict strategies in the Cameroon Grassfields, while taking into account political discourses that may, in fact, promote confrontation.

Ethnicity – Conflict – Compromise: The Book's Central Arguments

This study considers the phenomenon of ethnicity, its individual histories, meanings and instrumentalities, its role in conflict and most importantly its scope for compromise. It provides a case in support of the model of integration through difference developed by Schlee (2001). The locale of the study is limited quite strictly to the Cameroon Grassfields, but it also considers the issue of ethnicity within a national and, indeed, global context.

Here, difference is broadly understood in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion, but also embraces the distinctions of gender, age and class. The book examines how difference is sustained and amplified, and in which situations it may be minimized. It argues that ethnic distinctions do not evolve exclusively from competition and conflict over local resources. In turn, it contends that difference is politicized and validated by government initiative, and the interventions of the global development establishment.

The book shows that, at this particular moment in history and in a particular place, conflict is generally perceived in ethnic terms. How can this ethnization of conflict be explained? As I argue, there are both instrumental and emotive dimensions. Moreover, one should not underestimate the effect of accumulated group histories, reflected in popular stereotypes and embodied practice. The book argues that, under conditions of stress, historical memory – however

vestigial – may contribute to a hardening of ethnic lines of conflict where in fact few exist in everyday conduct and affairs. Conversely, individual and collective actors may seek to exacerbate and enhance ethnic distinctions in pursuit of economic and political self-interest.

Finally, the book engages with strategies of local conflict management that are inspired by national and international political discourses. It highlights the transition from more confrontational to more processual solutions, and argues that while the latter promise a decline of violence, they also engender new potential for conflict. The possibility of recourse to conflict mediation via superordinate frameworks reduces incentives for locally negotiated understanding and integration.

Research Methodology

This book is based on nearly five years of residence in northwest Cameroon, carried out between 1991 and 2014. While the main bulk of the material was collected during fourteen months of fieldwork from 2000 to 2002, subsequent revisits confirmed the continuing relevance of my findings and their theoretical validity.

My interest in the Grassfields goes back to the early 1990s, when I first came to Cameroon to teach in a secondary school. My stay took place in a period of political instability and civil unrest, set off by the country's democratization and economic crisis. When I returned in 1996 – this time to carry out anthropological fieldwork – the situation had calmed down somewhat, and Cameroonian politics had taken a new turn. This was the heyday of the politics of belonging and the sudden growth of ethnic and regional elite associations. My third, lengthy stay in Cameroon took place from 2000 to 2002. At this time, local activities were governed by the latest trends in international development policy, in particular the discourse on human and minority rights. A few years later, the United Nations concept of 'indigenous peoples' gained ground in Cameroon, with the Mbororo – along with other population groups – achieving international recognition. Since 2007, I have been following these developments and have also paid attention to new forms of social and physical mobility. This book attempts to make sense of the transformations in the lives of individuals and collectives that I have witnessed and closely followed over the past two decades.

During my main fieldwork from 2000 to 2002, I was assisted by a group of young women and men of Grassfields, Mbororo and Hausa background. They contributed their own ideas and initiatives, making my research an interactive endeavour. What is more, they made it fun. As my focus was on both the discursive and performative dimensions of ethnicity, much information

was gained from informal conversations and local gossip, as well as formal interviews.¹ In addition to standard methods of ethnographic research, we applied approaches drawn from visual and theatre anthropology, such as video documentation and the analysis of locally performed role playing.²

In this study, varying methods of representation are used. In describing and analysing the two major conflicts introduced above, I have applied the extended case method of the Manchester School. Other procedures, such as the reconstruction of group histories and the analysis of relations transcending ethnic boundaries, cannot be carried out with reference to a single case study; they are better approached from multiple angles. In general, the book aims at integrating both narrative and visual data, and pursuing a multivocal approach.

The Field Site

The book's regional focus is on the anglophone northwest of Cameroon, which, together with the francophone West Region, constitutes the Cameroon Grassfields. The country looks back on a triple colonial history: initially administered by the Germans, it was split in 1919 and placed under the mandate of the French and British colonial powers. At independence (1960/61), the two parts reunited to form contemporary Cameroon, which comprises eight francophone and two anglophone administrative regions.³

The Cameroon Grassfields form both a geographical and cultural unit. They are located in the Western Highlands, at an altitude of 1,000 to 3,000 metres. The landscape is varied and includes mountain ranges, grass-covered plateaus, wooded valleys, plains, volcanic lakes and numerous rivers. Thanks to their high altitude, the Grassfields have a relatively pleasant climate, with an annual rainfall of 2,000 millimetres and a moderate dry season of four to five months (November to March). The soil is fertile, owing partly to its volcanic origins, and supports both agriculture and animal husbandry.

Today, as in the past, the Grassfields are renowned for their chiefdoms, masquerades, linguistic diversity and agricultural production, features that have been widely explored in the scholarship on the region. Grassfields societies are predominantly Christian or adherents of local African religions. They engage in subsistence agriculture and complementary activities, such as small-scale animal husbandry and the sale of food and cash crops. Furthermore, the region has been characterized by a high degree of mobility. In the pre-colonial period, mobility was promoted by inter-chiefdom relations and individuals' participation in a complex system of short- and long-distance trade (Nkwi 1987; Warnier 1985). During the colonial and postcolonial period, labour migration to coastal plantations and urban centres in the country's

south became common practice (Ardener et al. 1960; Warnier 1993). Another factor that contributed to the region's ethnic diversification was the arrival of Mbororo and Hausa in the early twentieth century. While the Mbororo are agro-pastoralists and entered the area in the 1910s in search of fresh pastures for their cattle, the first Hausa immigrants were traders involved in long-distance commerce between the Cameroon Grassfields and urban centres in northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Both Mbororo and Hausa are generally Muslims and differ in their economic and socio-political organization from their Grassfields neighbours.

At the heart of this study is Misaje, a small town and its environs at the northern fringes of the Cameroon Grassfields. The toponym Misaje refers to the town as well as the administrative unit of Misaje Sub-Division; both are covered in this study. Its inhabitants identify themselves with reference to an array of ethnic and cultural categories, detailed in the figure below (Figure I.1). This is a working model; its purpose is to provide the reader with an overview of the ethnonyms central to this study. As an abstraction, it is necessarily static and reductionist, and it cannot fully account for the flexible and overlapping ways in which informants identify themselves and others. Alternative models will be introduced in subsequent chapters.⁴

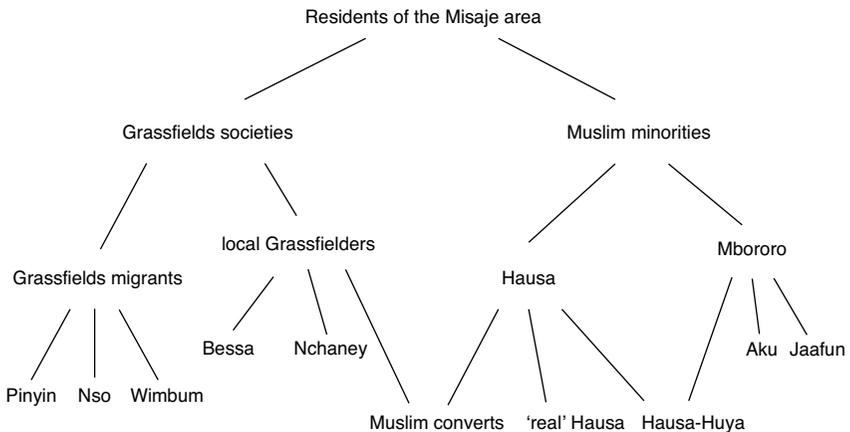


Figure I.1: A working model of ethnic and cultural categories relevant for this study. Source: Author's fieldwork.

The Misaje Area and Misaje Town

The North West Region is divided administratively into seven divisions. The Misaje area is part of the Donga-Mantung Division in the northeast of the region, which shares an international border with Nigeria (see Figure I.2).

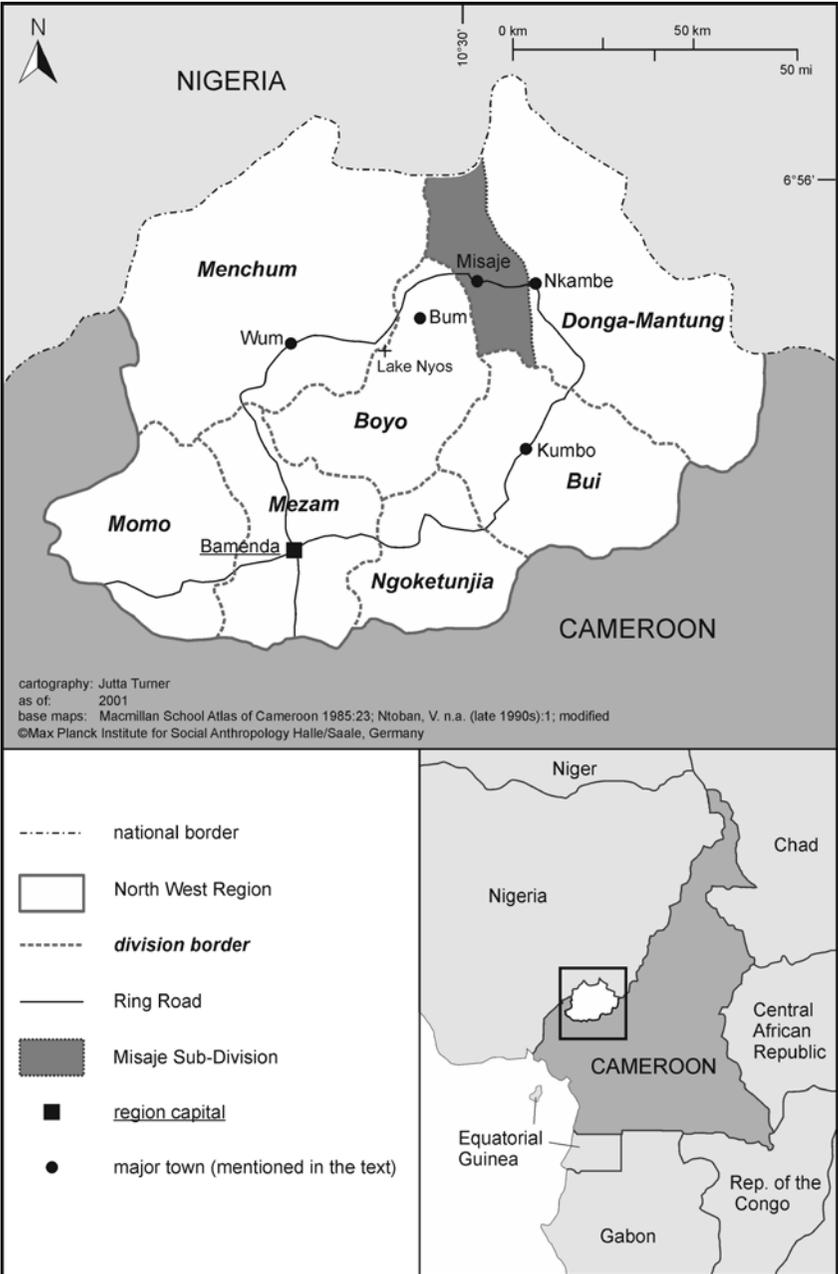


Figure I.2: Administrative structure of the North West Region. Reproduced by kind permission of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle.

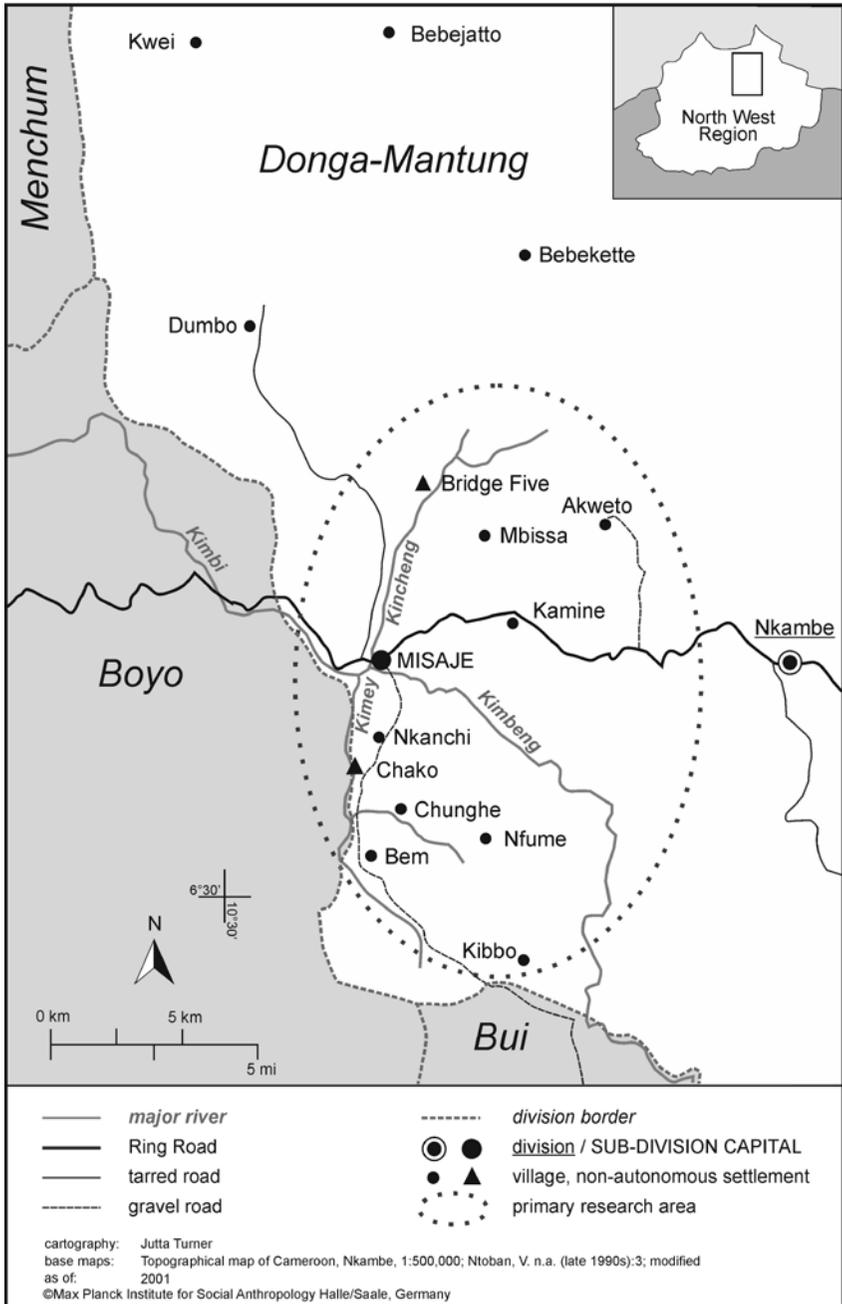


Figure I.3: Research area. Reproduced by kind permission of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle.

Table I.1: Population statistics, Misaje Sub-Division, 1999/2000. Source: Divisional Office, Misaje, 2001.

Local Grassfields Groups	Villages	Population
Nchaney	Nkanchi	10,887
	Bem	1,378
	Kibbo	935
	Chunghe	818
	Nfume	2,489
Bessa	Mbissa	1,502
	Kamine	3,179
	Akweto	3,420
Kemezung	Dumbo	4,976
	Kwei	524
Bebe	Bebekette	1,384
	Bebejatto	1,760
Total		33,252

The divisional capital is Nkambe, the nearest large town, located to the east of Misaje. In 1993, the Misaje area was made a sub-division of the Donga-Mantung Division. By 2000, it measured 750 square kilometres and had an estimated population of slightly more than 33,000 (see Table I.1).

The Misaje Sub-Division contains a total of twelve villages (see Figure I.3). Each village is headed by a chief or sub-chief, known by the Grassfields term *fon*, who is in charge of the village territory and its inhabitants.⁵ The twelve villages belong to four independent polities that constitute distinct Grassfields societies. In addition, there are a number of non-autonomous settlements that count as quarters of the main villages. For historical reasons, Misaje town counts as a quarter of Nkanchi, the head village of the Nchaney ethnic group.

Population statistics in Cameroon generally omit ethnicity as a valid category of distinction. Hence, it is difficult to assess the numbers associated with different ethnic categories. I would estimate, however, that local Grassfields societies account for at least 60 per cent of Misaje Sub-Division's inhabitants, while Mbororo pastoralists may amount to 25 per cent, and Hausa and migrants from within the Grassfields to 5 to 10 per cent. Compared to averages in the North West Region of 5 to 15 per cent for Mbororo and less than 1 per cent for Hausa (Boutrais 1996: 548, 636), the proportion of Mbororo, Hausa and Grassfields migrants in Misaje Sub-Division is relatively high. This is partly due to the attraction of Misaje town and Dumbo as centres of commerce and cattle trade.

During my research I focused on the southern half of Misaje Sub-Division, equivalent to the territory of the Nchaney and Bessa chiefdoms. Special attention was paid to Misaje town and its immediate surroundings (Figure I.4).

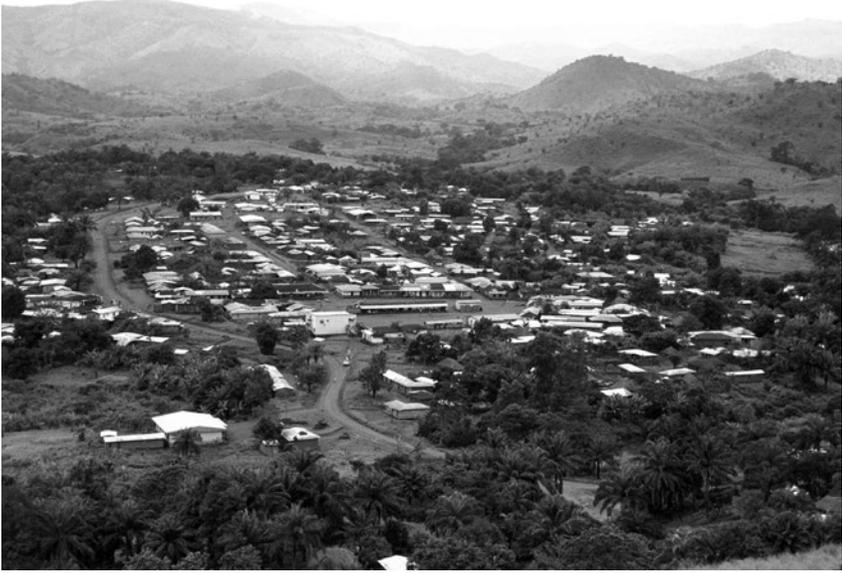


Figure I.4: The central area of Misaje town. Photograph by Michaela Pelican, 2001.

Misaje town is not a ‘traditional village’ with a long-standing history; it is a place of contested claims and multiple origins, dating back only as far as the colonial period. It is located near the Nigerian border and along the Ring Road, the main infrastructural axis of the North West Region. In 2000 its population amounted to approximately 7,000 people; it is an agglomeration of various ethnic and occupational groups, mainly attracted by economic opportunities.

From the very start, Misaje has had a multi-ethnic character. In the nineteenth century, the area now occupied by Misaje town was used as a hunting ground by inhabitants of nearby villages. The first families to take up residence and cultivate farms in the area were from Nkanchi. In the 1920s, Mbororo pastoralists began to settle in the nearby highlands. Most probably, they were responsible for coining the name Misaje, which eventually became the established toponym. According to current folk etymology, Misaje is a derivative of *mai saje*, a Hausa term meaning ‘master of the beard’. This nickname is said to have been given to a prominent Bessa businessman who operated a rest house for traders and travellers. His business was frequented by Hausa traders and Mbororo herdsmen, and soon the hamlet was popularly known as ‘the place of *mai saje*’ – in short, Misaje.⁶

During the 1930s, the British colonial administration decided to set up a customary court and a native authority area of the same dimensions as the

current Misaje Sub-Division.⁷ A few years later, they asked early Hausa settlers, first established at Nkanchi, to transfer to Misaje town. More settlers were to join in the course of the construction of the Ring Road in the late 1940s and 1950s. Workers were recruited from surrounding villages and throughout the Grassfields; some took up permanent residence and engaged in farming and business activities. Around the same period, a second group of Mbororo pastoralists entered the region and were encouraged by the British administration to settle in the grassy lowlands of the Misaje Native Authority Area. Consequently, the cattle business flourished and attracted Hausa and Grassfields traders. The people of Pinyin, a village in the southwest of the North West Region, were particularly involved in cattle trade, and a few established themselves in Misaje.

All these developments turned Misaje town into a conglomeration of people from inside and outside the region and supported its economic growth. In the early 1970s, Fon Michael, then chief of Nkanchi, transferred his palace to Misaje. In 1975, the Société de Développement et d'Exploitation des Productions Animales (SODEPA), a major parastatal enterprise that produces breeding stock and beef for the national market, was opened in Dumbo (Boutrais 1990: 82–87). While its establishment caused the displacement of many Mbororo families, the ranch attracted technicians and business people from all over Cameroon and contributed to improving the region's economy and infrastructure.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Misaje had developed into a small town with a flourishing economy. Conversely, the area experienced a major downturn in the second half of the 1980s. In 1986, Lake Nyos – a volcanic lake to the west of Misaje – produced an eruption of toxic gas, after which approximately 1,700 people and thousands of cattle died (Leenhardt 1995; Shanklin 1988). While the emissions did not reach as far as Misaje town, the incident seriously affected business operations in the northern part of the North West Region. Many migrants and business people decided to return to their home areas, due to the loss of capital and customers, or in fear of further deadly eruptions.⁸ In the late 1980s the town's economic stagnation and the decrease in population were further reinforced by the nationwide economic depression.

In the 1990s, Misaje town, like most places in the North West Region, experienced vicious party-political struggles and the divisive effects of the politics of belonging. At the same time, it benefited from administrative changes, in particular the creation of Misaje Sub-Division in 1993, which resulted in gradual improvement in the town's infrastructure. Further developments characterizing Misaje in the 1990s and 2000s will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Book Outline

The vertices of this book are the two conflicts sketched at the beginning of this chapter. The people involved in these conflicts will be introduced in a series of chapters focusing on their collective histories and emic conceptions of ethnicity. Two further chapters will be concerned with ethnic coexistence and the negotiation of ethnic boundaries.

Chapter 1 opens with the case study of the critical altercation that occurred in 1997 during the investiture ceremonies of a local Grassfields chief, and which resulted in a polarization of Misaje's population along lines of ethnic and cultural difference. The chapter analyses the conflict in its socio-political context and symbolic dimensions, and provides insight into local strategies of conflict management pertinent in the 1990s.

Chapter 2 recounts the emergence and expansion of the Nchaney chiefdom on the basis of local and colonial accounts. It outlines historical transformations in Nchaney self-understanding in the context of encounters with Grassfields and cultural 'others', as well as the colonial and postcolonial government. The Nchaney here typify Grassfields societies in general, with whom they share similarities in their historical development and socio-political organization.

Chapter 3 describes the establishment of Mbororo pastoralists in the Grassfields, specifically in the Misaje area. It focuses on alterations in their self-understanding in the course of their historical migration and subsequent sedentarization. It also sheds light on the recent politicization of Mbororo identity in response to Cameroon's political liberalization and global rights discourse.

Chapter 4 focuses on the complementary and competitive potentials of economic relations between Nchaney and Mbororo. It describes the effects of economic diversification on intra-ethnic and interethnic relations, and addresses two issues of public contention: farmer–herder conflict and cattle theft.

Chapter 5 engages with the historical origins of the Hausa ethnic category in the Cameroon Grassfields, and the factors that have contributed to its lasting consolidation in this region. It pays attention to gendered and sub-ethnic perspectives, and highlights interrelations between Hausa, Mbororo and Grassfields societies, which also impact on Hausa strategies of political participation and representation vis-à-vis the government.

Chapter 6 focuses on the processes of religious and ethnic conversion in the Grassfields, and relates them to similar phenomena in northern Cameroon. Furthermore, it conveys individual perspectives on managing multiple identities and liabilities, and examines the circumstances under

which ensuing cross-cutting ties may be used to support or undermine social cohesion in Misaje.

Chapter 7 describes the conflict resulting from the murder in 2001, briefly sketched above. The case brings together issues of occult aggression and conflicting land claims. Furthermore, the chapter analyses the arguments of the prosecutor and defendant, and highlights the process of ethnic framing. It also illustrates current approaches to conflict resolution, and considers individual and collective strategies of managing Cameroon's plural legal system.

The Epilogue provides an update on recent developments in Mbororo identity politics. It concludes by qualifying the potential of ethnicity for political mobilization, and anticipates possible transformations in conflict idioms.

Notes

- 1 With the exception of historical and public figures (politicians, community leaders, eminent elders), the names of interlocutors have been changed. All quotations from interviews have been translated into English; only key terms are indicated in their original language.
- 2 Two short videos of role playing with reference to farmer–herder conflict and milk sales are accessible via the virtual archive of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale. These are: M. Pelican. 2002. *Farmer–Herder Conflict: Role Play of the Ballotiral Staff* (Nkambe, 29 January 2001). Video clip, 2.46 mins, with English subtitles. File name: Conflict_RolePlay.mpeg; and M. Pelican. 2002. *Sippoygo (Selling Milk): Role Play of the Mbororo Women's Group of Chako* (Chako, 8 April 2001). Video clip, 4.27 mins, with English subtitles. File name: MilkSales_RolePlay.mpeg.
- 3 Until recently, these administrative units were named provinces. In 2008, the government changed the terminology from provinces to regions as part of its decentralization measures.
- 4 It is important to note that I treat ethnic groups and identities as ideal types in Max Weber's sense (Weber 1949). I am aware of the difficulties entailed in deriving ideal types from ethnographic material. Hence, when I write of 'the Nchaney', 'the Bessa', 'the Mbororo' or 'the Hausa', it signifies an abstraction for the sake of comparison of ideal types. It should not be mistaken for a naive interpretation of the Misaje community as being composed of distinct ethnic groups; rather, such terms refer to groupings of individuals whose identities are practical constructs (Bourdieu 1990) and modelled in interaction with each other.
- 5 *Fon* (also spelled *foyn* or *mfon*) is the generic term and title for 'chief' in most Grassfields languages and dialects. It has entered Pidgin English and administrative English, and occasionally Grassfields chiefdoms are referred to as 'fondoms'. The term *fon* is also common in academic writings on the Cameroon Grassfields.
- 6 A concurrent version to this etymology was reported to M.D.W. Jeffreys during his administrative tour in the late 1930s (Jeffreys 1951: 112).
- 7 The court was first installed at Bridge Five, a place in Bessa territory that was considered a central location between Dumbo, Nkanchi and Akweto, the three major settlements of the planned native authority area. The British later realized that the place was too

- remote and relocated the court to Misaje, which at that time was still a minor settlement. Consequently, Misaje became the centre of the area and attracted more settlers.
- 8 In 2001, an international scientific project was set up to 'de-gas' the lake, and today Lake Nyoos it is under steady surveillance (Jones 2010).