

Ancient and Post-Colonial Kom Fandom: Continuity, Change, and Transformation in Governance and Cultural Practices, 18th Century-1961

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring legacies of colonialism on governance structures and cultural practices in Kom Fandom, Cameroon, from independence in 1961 to the contemporary period. Using historical and qualitative analysis based on archival sources, oral testimonies, and literature, the study investigates how colonial administrative, political, and cultural systems persisted, transformed, or resisted in post-colonial Kom society. The findings highlight the continuity of traditional authority through the Fonship and palace councils, as well as the integration of customary institutions into the modern state framework. The study also analyzes the long-term influence of Christianity and Western education on cultural practices and social organization. Furthermore, it examines socio-economic structures shaped by colonial rule, including land tenure systems, cash-crop production, and labor patterns, alongside changing gender relations, with particular reference to the Anlu movement as an example of indigenous resistance and social agency. The results reveal a complex interaction of continuity, adaptation, and transformation, demonstrating that colonial legacies remain deeply embedded in the political, social, and cultural life of Kom Fandom.

Keywords: Colonial legacy, Kom Fandom, governance, cultural transformation, traditional authority, post-colonial Cameroon.

Introduction

Kom Fandom, located in the North-West Region of Cameroon, presents a compelling case study for examining the legacies of colonialism. Historically, Kom has been characterized by a centralized traditional system under the Fon, whose authority extended across political, social, and religious domains¹. The pre-colonial Fonship established complex palace institutions, ritualized governance, and mechanisms for dispute resolution. However, German and later British colonial rule introduced new administrative structures, imposed foreign legal systems, and reshaped economic and social hierarchies. During British administration, Kom was subjected

¹ P.N Nkwi. *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon*. Bamenda: CEPER, 1985, p. 33–152.

to the indirect rule system², which sought to govern through existing traditional authorities while simultaneously restructuring them to serve the colonial interests³. These colonial institutions introduced practices, such as fixed territorial jurisdictions, codified succession procedures, and formalized tax collection, which endured well beyond independence. Christianity and Western education, promoted by Catholic and Baptist missions, further transformed the cultural landscape stratification⁴, creating new forms of literacy, moral orientation, and social stratification⁵. This study seeks to understand how colonial legacies persisted, transformed, and interacted with local practices in Kom after 1961. Specifically, it evaluates continuity in traditional governance, adaptation of cultural practices, socio-economic effects, and the evolving role of women in society. The article is organized into three main sections. The first section examines the structure and functions of governance in precolonial Kom society. The second section analyzes the impact of colonial rule on political, cultural, and economic institutions. The third section evaluates continuity, change, and transformation in the post-colonial period. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates how colonialism reshaped but did not completely destroy traditional institutions, resulting in a hybrid system that continues to define governance and cultural identity in Kom today.

Political Organization of Precolonial Kom Society

Precolonial Kom society was structured around a highly centralized monarchical system, where political authority was inseparable from spiritual legitimacy. Governance was hierarchical yet consultative, operating through a combination of the Fon⁶, secret societies, and councils of elders⁷. Authority was legitimized through ancestral and spiritual endorsement⁸, ensuring cohesion and adherence to tradition across the kingdom⁹.

The Role of the Fon

The Fon served as the supreme political, judicial, military, and religious authority. Unlike a purely administrative ruler, he was a sacred king whose legitimacy derived from ancestral blessing¹⁰ and divine approval¹¹. The Fon's enthronement involved complex rituals that transformed him into a symbol of unity and continuity¹², reinforcing his dual function as both temporal leader and spiritual custodian¹³. Power was hereditary within the royal lineage, and the

² F.D. Lugard. *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. London: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1922.

³ Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 37–61, .

⁴ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969, p. 223–245.

⁵ J. Vansina. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 27–45.

⁶ E. Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon: Studies in the History of the Cameroon Coast, 1500–1970*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996, p. 92–119..

⁷ E. M. Chilver and M. P. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields*. Buea: Government Printer, 1967, p. 95–223 .

⁸ J. S., Mbiti., *African Religions*, p. 266–280

⁹ E. Hobsbawm, and R. Terence, (eds). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983,p. 211–240.

¹⁰ P. N. Nkwi. *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields*, p. 33–152.

¹¹ P. Chabal and J.-P. Dazol, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 85–102.

¹² J. Vansina. *Oral Tradition*, p. 27–45.

¹³ R. Clignet, and F. Philip, *Religion and Social Change in Africa*. New York: Anchor Books, 1966, p. 67–92.

Fon's position symbolized stability¹⁴, ensuring that governance, economy, and culture revolved around the palace¹⁵.

Governance and Administration

While centralized, governance in Kom was not despotic. The Fon consulted advisory bodies, including the Kwifoyn, councils of elders, and lineage heads, to make decisions affecting the kingdom¹⁶. This consultative system reflected communal values and historical precedent, balancing authority with collective oversight. The Fon appointed sub-chiefs and palace officials to manage territorial divisions, supervise local administration, and implement palace directives¹⁷. Through this hierarchical structure, the Fon effectively governed an expansive and socially complex society¹⁸.

The Fon also coordinated communal activities, such as festivals, rituals, and public works¹⁹, reinforcing loyalty and linking political authority to cultural cohesion²⁰. Governance was therefore inseparable from social and spiritual life, with the Fon as the custodian of both order and tradition.

Land Tenure and Economic Authority

Control of land was central to the Fon's authority. Land was regarded as communal, with the Fon acting as its ultimate custodian, holding it in trust for ancestors²¹, living subjects, and future generations²². Allocation of land to lineage heads, sub-chiefs, and families was based on population needs, loyalty, and social status. Sacred areas, including forests, shrines, and royal estates, were protected from cultivation to preserve spiritual balance.

By controlling land, the Fon reinforced both social order and political loyalty²³. Land allocation served as a reward mechanism, while withdrawal or denial of land functioned as a deterrent against misconduct. This dual economic and political role made land tenure a key instrument of governance²⁴.

Judicial Authority

Justice in precolonial Kom was deeply integrated with governance and spirituality. The Fon presided as the supreme judicial authority²⁵, especially over serious disputes involving homicide,

¹⁴ H. R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884–1914: A Case Study in Modern Imperialism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p. 201–279.

¹⁵ M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*. London: Hutchinson, 1968, p. 112–135.

¹⁶ E.M Chilver, and M. P Kaberry. *Traditional Bamenda*, p. 95–223.

¹⁷ E. Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon: Studies in the History of the Cameroon Coast, 1500–1970*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996, p. 145–172.

¹⁸ V. G. Fanson, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges, Volume 2: The Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods*. London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 67–205.

¹⁹ P. Geschiere. *Chiefs and Colonial Rule in Cameroon: Inventing Chieftaincy, French and British Style*. London: James Currey, 1993, p. 41–166.

²⁰ B. Tohmuntain. *Religion, Education and Social Change in Kom Fondom*. Bamenda: Patron Publishing House, 2002, p. 45–159.

²¹ J.S. Mbiti., *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 223–245, 266–280.

²² J. Vansina. *Oral Tradition as History*, p. 27–45.

²³ V. G. Fanson, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*, p. 67–205.

²⁴ J.-F. Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: La Politique du Ventre*. Paris: Fayard, 1979, p. 201–228

²⁵ J.S. Mbiti., *African Religions and Philosophy*. p. 223–245, 266–280.

witchcraft, land conflicts, or violations of sacred customs²⁶. Hearings were public, participatory, and often included spiritual rituals such as oath-taking and divination.

The Fon's judicial role emphasized restoration of social harmony rather than punitive retribution. Penalties included fines, compensation, ritual sacrifices, exile, and, in extreme cases, death. Compliance was enforced by both social sanction and belief in ancestral oversight²⁷. The Fon's moral integrity was considered crucial; misjudgment could bring misfortune on the entire kingdom, reinforcing ethical accountability at the highest level of governance²⁸.

Internal security encompassed both physical and social stability. The Fon worked closely with the Kwifoyn²⁹ and other traditional institutions to enforce laws, punish antisocial behavior, and maintain communal peace³⁰. Mechanisms included night patrols, masquerades, and ritual sanctions, with spiritual fear acting as a deterrent against crime. The Fon also mediated disputes between lineages, villages, and individuals, preventing escalation and preserving the integrity of the kingdom. Externally, the Fon served as commander-in-chief of Kom's forces. He mobilized warriors for defense against rival chiefdoms and external threats, often performing pre-battle rituals invoking ancestral protection. Warfare was a communal activity, reinforced by spiritual practice³¹ and moral guidance³². The Fon also conducted diplomacy, forging alliances, negotiating settlements, and safeguarding territorial integrity. His military role consolidated Kom's political autonomy and regional influence.

Spiritual Authority and Cosmic Balance

Underlying all political and judicial functions was the Fon's spiritual authority. As the chief intermediary between the living and ancestors, he ensured the kingdom's wellbeing³³, including fertility, harvests, peace, and protection from calamities³⁴. Rituals and consultations with diviners were performed to restore cosmic balance, linking moral conduct and governance to societal prosperity. This sacralization of leadership ensured obedience, ethical governance, and communal harmony.

The Government of Foyun Yuh Funkuin

Foyun Yuh Funkuin, born circa 1826, emerged as one of Kom's most transformative rulers. Descended from the royal lineage, he initially faced political opposition and exile after plotting against his grand-uncle, Foyun Kimeng, following the death of Foyun Tufoyn in 1855³⁵. Reconciliation with Foyun Kimeng allowed Yuh to reintegrate into Kom society and ultimately ascend the throne in 1865, marking the beginning of a nearly fifty-year reign.

²⁶ R. Clignet and F. Philip, *Religion and Social Change in Africa* p. 67–92.

²⁷ A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity*, p. 305–328.

²⁸ B. Sundkler and S. Christopher, *A History of the Church in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 198–220.

²⁹ P. Chabal, and J.-P. Dazol, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, p. 85–102.

³⁰ P. N. Nkwi, *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields*, p. 33–152.

³¹ H. R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884–1914*, p. 201–279.

³² M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, p. 201–270.

³³ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 223–280.

³⁴ D.W. Phillipson, *African Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 54–78.

³⁵ P. N. Nkwi, *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields*, p. 33–152.

Administrative reforms

Yuh's rule established the Ndo-Funkuin lineage as the dominant royal house. He reformed royal customs, including restrictions on queen mothers marrying within the community, ensuring the symbolic supremacy of Bobe Aboh as royal father. These policies institutionalized hierarchy, formalized succession³⁶, and strengthened the palace's authority over societal governance³⁷.

The institution of the death penalty in kom

To consolidate power, Yuh implemented the "Gvi" system, a lethal judicial ritual involving sasswood poison administered through spiritual ceremonies. Offenses such as rebellion, sexual transgression involving the palace³⁸, and witchcraft were punished through Gvi³⁹. The system exemplified the fusion of political authority and spiritual sanction in precolonial justice.

Cultural Patronage: The Afo-a-Kom

Yuh commissioned the creation of the Afo-a-Kom, a sacred statue embodying Kom identity and spiritual heritage. Carved in 1865, the statue symbolized unity, strength, and continuity of the kingdom. Its later theft and international recovery in 1973⁴⁰ underscored its significance as a cultural and political emblem⁴¹.

Wars of expansion

Under Yuh, Kom expanded territorially and militarily. With the support of loyal commanders like Bobe Njong, Yuh consolidated central authority, repelled external threats, and established the present boundaries of the Fendom. These achievements reinforced political stability and the legitimacy of the Ndo-Funkuin lineage for generations⁴².

Colonial Governance Structures and Their Legacy

Colonial administration fundamentally altered governance structures in Kom. The Germans initially imposed a military and bureaucratic system that subordinated traditional authorities to colonial officers. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the British implemented indirect rule, maintaining the Fon as the intermediary between the colonial administration and the local population⁴³ while reshaping palace authority to conform to colonial goals⁴⁴.

In Post-independence, these colonial legacies persisted. Fons retained political legitimacy in local communities, yet their power was increasingly circumscribed by national legal frameworks. The British-era palace councils, originally designed to implement colonial directives, evolved into advisory and cultural institutions that mediated between the state and the population⁴⁵. Administrative boundaries established under colonial rule continued to define electoral districts,

³⁶ P. N. Nkwi and J.-P. Warnier. *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé Press, 1982, p. 52–187.

³⁷ B. Tohmuntain. *Religion, Education and Social Change in Kom Fendom*, p. 45–159.

³⁸ E. Ardener, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon*, p. 145–172.

³⁹ E. M. Chilver and Kaberry M.P, *Traditional Bamenda*: p. 95–223.

⁴⁰ B. Tohmuntain. *Religion, Education and Social Change in Kom Fendom*, p. 45–159.

⁴¹ J.-P. Warnier, *The Mountain and the City: From Pre-Colonial Metropolis to Colonial Regional Capital in the Grassfields of Cameroon*. Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1993, p. 89–134.

⁴² H. R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884–1914*., p. 201–279.

⁴³ P.N Nkwi, and Warnier J.-P. *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, p. 52–187.

⁴⁴ E. M. Chilver, and M. P. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*., p. 95–223.

⁴⁵ Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*., p. 109–137.

land jurisdiction, and local governance mechanisms, demonstrating continuity in institutional geography⁴⁶.

Nonetheless, colonial legacies also introduced bureaucratic challenges. The dual authority of traditional leaders and state-appointed officials created friction, particularly in areas such as tax collection, dispute resolution, and resource allocation. While colonial structures provided a foundation for governance⁴⁷, they simultaneously introduced rigidity that complicated post-independence administrative reforms⁴⁸.

Continuity and Transformation of Traditional Authority

The Fonship in Kom illustrates remarkable continuity despite colonial and post-colonial transformations. Fòyn Ndzi, ascending the throne after the death of Fòyn Ngam in 1926, exemplified reconciliation and reform within the royal family, restoring palace unity and mediating tensions with missionary institutions⁴⁹. Fòyn Alo-oh, his successor, continued this legacy, integrating Western education initiatives and facilitating denominational land agreements, thereby preserving the Fonship's relevance⁵⁰.

Traditional councils and palace officials maintained important roles in ritual, dispute resolution, and community coordination, demonstrating a blend of continuity and adaptation. Their authority coexisted with the national state bureaucracy⁵¹, highlighting the dual governance system typical of many post-colonial African societies⁵². While absolute power declined, Fons continued to shape local politics, social norms, and cultural identity, ensuring that traditional structures remained central to communal life⁵³.

Cultural Practices and Transformations

Colonialism profoundly reshaped Kom's cultural practices. Missionary activities introduced Christianity, fostering moral reorientation and literacy⁵⁴, while Western education produced a new social elite aligned with colonial and post-colonial governance systems⁵⁵. Rituals, festivals, and ceremonies were modified, often incorporating Christian elements or adjusting to accommodate formal schooling schedules. Traditional justice mechanisms survived but were increasingly mediated through state courts and missionary influence.

Despite these changes, key cultural symbols endured. The Kom language remained a vital medium of oral history, palace communication, and identity preservation⁵⁶. Traditional dress, regalia, and palace ceremonies persisted, illustrating selective adaptation that allowed the community to navigate the pressures of colonialism and modernization simultaneously.

⁴⁶F. D. Lugard. *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, p. 203–215.

⁴⁷ Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*, p. 289–301.

⁴⁸ W. Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972, p. 165–284.

⁴⁹ B. Tohmuntain. *Religion, Education and Social Change in Kom Fondom*, p. 45–159.

⁵⁰ P. N. Nkwi, *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields*, p. 33–152.

⁵¹ Mahmood, Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*, p. 37–61, 109–137, 289–301.

⁵² E. M. Chilver and M.P. Kaberry *Traditional Bamenda*, p. 95–223.

⁵³ P.N Nkwi. *Tradition, Culture and Society in the Western Grassfields*, p. 33–152.

⁵⁴ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 223–245, 266–280.

⁵⁵D. A. Phillipson, *African Archaeology*, p. 54–78.

⁵⁶J. Vansin. *Oral Tradition as History*. p. 27–45.

Socio-Economic Legacies

Colonial economic policies shaped post-independence livelihoods. Cash-crop production, introduced by German and British administrators, became the backbone of local economies⁵⁷, while land tenure reforms disrupted communal landholding patterns⁵⁸. Labor systems, including forced and seasonal labor, created long-term hierarchies and economic dependencies.

These structures persisted after 1961, constraining local development and reinforcing inequalities. Although state-led reforms attempted to redistribute resources and expand market access, colonial economic patterns left enduring socio-economic stratification and dependency on external markets⁵⁹.

Gender, Resistance, and Social Movements

Colonialism reinforced patriarchal authority, marginalizing women from governance and economic control. Nevertheless, women exercised agency through resistance movements, most notably the Anlu movement of 1958, which challenged male-dominated authority⁶⁰, colonial agricultural policies, and unjust taxation⁶¹.

Women's organized resistance demonstrated the resilience of cultural agency and its capacity to influence both local and regional politics. In post-independence, women increasingly participated in governance, education, and community development, reflecting partial transformation while retaining continuity with historical forms of female activism⁶².

Challenges of Modern Governance

The post-colonial period in Kom was marked by tensions between traditional authority and the modern state. Land disputes, succession crises, and youth disengagement from palace institutions created governance challenges⁶³. Globalization and urbanization further strained the continuity of cultural and political practices, leading to shifts in social behavior and expectations. Traditional and modern institutions coexist in a complex, negotiated system, reflecting the enduring influence of colonial legacies on administrative and social organization⁶⁴.

Assessment of Continuity, Change, and Transformation

The analysis reveals areas of strong continuity, such as the Fonship, palace councils, language, and key rituals. Partial transformations include the integration of traditional governance into state bureaucracy, adoption of Western education, and Christianization of society. Major changes occurred in gender relations, political mobilization, and economic structures. Overall, colonialism left a durable imprint on Kom society, shaping governance, culture⁶⁵ and social hierarchies in ways that persist to present day⁶⁶.

⁵⁷A. R. Austen, *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency*. London: Heinemann, 1984, p. 92–119.

⁵⁸J.-F. Bayart, *L'État en Afrique*, p. 201–228.

⁵⁹W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 165–284.

⁶⁰P. N. Nkwi, *Tradition, Culture and Society*, p. 33–152.

⁶¹N. J. Hafkin and E. Bay, *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, p. 41–59.

⁶²B. Tohmuntain. *Religion, Education and Social Change in Kom Fondom*, p. 45–159.

⁶³P. Konings, and B. N. Francis, *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon*. Leiden: Brill, 2003, p. 25–67.

⁶⁴J.-P. Warnier, *The Mountain and the City*, p. 89–134.

⁶⁵Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*, p. 37–61, 109–137, 289–301.

⁶⁶F. D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, p. 203–215.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that colonialism in Kom was neither wholly destructive nor entirely transformative. Traditional governance, cultural identity, and social structures adapted, persisted, and sometimes merged with modern state systems. Christianity and Western education introduced new norms, while economic patterns and administrative frameworks created structural dependencies. Women's activism, exemplified by Anlu, highlighted the capacity of marginalized groups to assert agency within these transformed. The legacy of colonialism in Kom underscores the complex interplay between continuity, change, and adaptation. These insights are vital for contemporary governance, policy-making, and cultural preservation, offering lessons for other post-colonial African societies navigating the challenges of modernization while maintaining historical identity.

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