

Border Transgression Among Pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields Dynastic States in the 19th Century

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This paper examines the socio-anthropological and historical forces that shaped territorial mobility, border transgression, and inter-polity relations among pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields societies, with particular attention to the responses of *fondoms* whose territorial sovereignty was challenged. Before the imposition of colonial boundaries following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, the Grassfields region was constituted by a mosaic of autonomous socio-political entities, commonly designated as *fondoms*, whose authority, legitimacy, and spatial control were embedded in indigenous systems of chieftaincy and governance. These polities maintained fluid yet regulated territorial frontiers, often demarcated by natural landmarks such as rivers, forests, and mountain ranges, and governed through locally negotiated norms of land use, allegiance, and citizenship.

The study argues that border management in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields was neither anarchic nor incidental, but rather a structured and institutionalized process involving chiefs, lineage heads, ritual specialists, and military actors. Despite the existence of elaborate mechanisms for territorial regulation and population control, border crossings and encroachments were recurrent features of Grassfields political life. Linguistic, cultural, and ritual homogeneity across neighboring *fondoms* significantly blurred territorial distinctions, complicating the identification of outsiders and rendering pre-colonial notions of citizenship both porous and negotiable. Far from being merely disruptive, border transgression functioned as a central mechanism of state formation, demographic expansion, and political consolidation, enabling certain *fondoms* to enhance their power, legitimacy, and regional influence.

By foregrounding border transgression as a constitutive rather than anomalous process, this study challenges static representations of pre-colonial African polities. It contributes to the historiography of chieftaincy by reconceptualizing Grassfields states as dynamic, adaptive, and historically contingent formations. It further contends that many pre-colonial Grassfields polities emerged precisely through processes of territorial incorporation and negotiated sovereignty. The article situates contemporary intra- and inter-state boundary disputes in Cameroon within the disruptive legacy of colonial boundary-making, arguing that the European fixation of borders—rooted in the logic of the Berlin Conference—disregarded indigenous spatial logics and governance systems, thereby exacerbating tensions and eroding pre-existing frameworks of citizenship and belonging. Methodologically, the study combines ethnohistorical analysis, oral traditions collected from Grassfields rulers, and archival research from the National Archives in Buea and related repositories. By foregrounding border transgression as a constitutive historical process, this article contributes to the historiography of chieftaincy and repositions Grassfields polities as dynamic actors in African state formation.

Keywords: border-transgression, *fondoms*, Cameroon Grassfields, traditional diplomacy

Introduction

Border transgression constituted a defining feature of inter-dynastic relations in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, shaping both the formation and the interaction of political entities in the region. The Cameroon Grassfields, encompassing the Northwest and West regions of contemporary Cameroon, have long been recognized as a dynamic cultural and historical space. Considered by many scholars to be a cradle of Bantu languages and a primary locus of ancient sedentary cultures in Central Africa, the region witnessed the proliferation of numerous states as early as the sixteenth century (Delancey, 2019). The nineteenth century, however, marked a pivotal period in Grassfields state formation, particularly in the wake of migratory movements from the Adamawa region precipitated by the Fulani jihads beginning in 1804 under Uthman Dan Fodio, whose campaigns sought to convert local populations to Islam (Amadou, 2017). These movements profoundly reshaped the demographic and political landscape of the Grassfields, as newly arriving communities established dynastic polities and contested territorial space.

Historically, the dynastic polities of the Grassfields were expansionist by nature, often established through violent conquest, and territorial size functioned as both a strategic and symbolic marker of political power. Before the imposition of colonial boundaries following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, the region comprised a constellation of sovereign socio-political entities—commonly termed *fondoms*—whose frontiers were typically demarcated by natural features such as rivers and mountains. These polities exhibited features analogous to the principles later codified in the 1648 Westphalian treaties, including sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention in domestic affairs, and the pursuit of diplomatic relations through emissaries, marital alliances, and ritualized gift exchange (Nkwi, 1987; Raymond, 2005; Oğurlu, 2019; Kegley, 2002). Like modern states, the legitimacy and stability of each *fondom* depended on its capacity to exercise effective control over its defined territory.

In the pre-colonial Grassfields, states jealously guarded their borders, perceiving encroachment as a direct challenge to their sovereignty, sometimes escalating to conflict. Borders were thus strategic instruments of political security, codifying territorial authority while allowing for regulated mobility and interaction. Nonetheless, despite these mechanisms, border transgression was a recurrent phenomenon. Understanding this paradox requires an exploration of the socio-anthropological and historical determinants that prompted the Grassfields peoples and polities to cross boundaries, as well as the diverse responses of those whose territorial integrity was violated.

This paper is organized into five sections. The first section situates the study within its geographical, socio-political, and cultural context. The second examines the construction and regulation of borders in pre-colonial Grassfields, employing the concepts of hard and soft power diplomacy to interpret territorial demarcation. The third section interrogates the concept of territoriality and its constituent elements in the region. The fourth section analyzes the motivations and mechanisms of border transgression, including demographic, economic, political, and social drivers. The final section considers the transformation and persistence of pre-colonial borders under colonial rule and in the post-independence Cameroonian state, highlighting the historical continuities and disruptions in territorial governance.

Snapshot of the Cameroon Grassfields

The brief presentation of the Cameroon Grassfields here involves aspects such as the selected geographical elements of the study area, the socio-political context, and the cultural features of the study.

Geographical Presentation of the Study Area

The Cameroon Grassfields correspond today administratively to the North-West and West regions of the Republic of Cameroon. It also covers neighboring regions, especially the South-West and the central regions of modern-day Cameroon. Despite the geographical and socio-political uniformity of the area, it is historically quite varied. Briefly speaking, the Cameroon Grassfields is a distinct geographical, political, and socio-cultural entity, which occupies the present-day North-West and West regions of the Republic of Cameroon (see Figure 1).

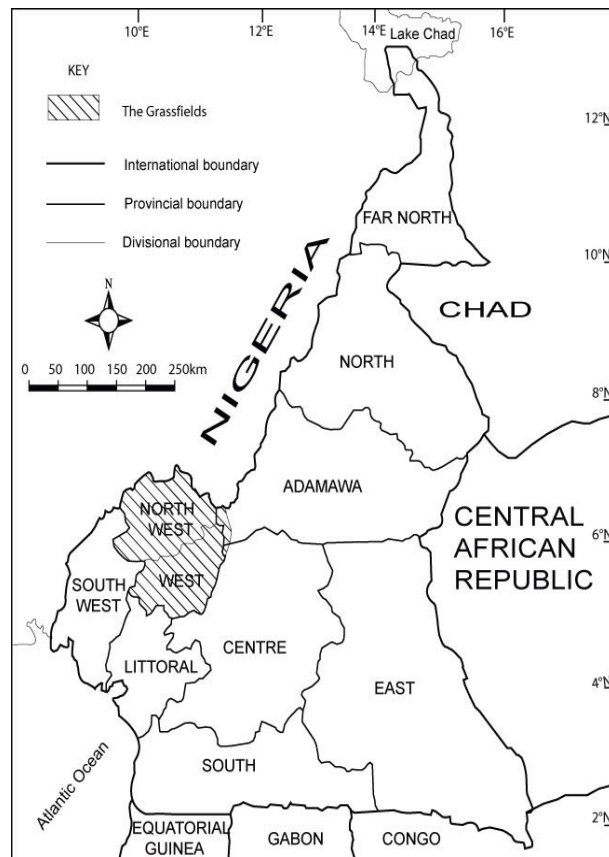


Figure 1. Map showing present day Cameroon Grassfields of Cameroon (map adapted from Neba, 1999).

The term *Grassfields* emerged during the German colonial exploration and subsequent conquest of the region, denoting a portion of the Kamerun hinterland distinguished by its elevated terrain and extensive grassy landscapes. Dankler famously described the Cameroon Grassfields as a “sea of grass which stretches for hundreds of kilometers, providing one of the most magnificent panoramas on earth” (Oğurlu, 2019; Kegley, 2002). While the region is commonly referred to as grassland, its topography is far from uniform, encompassing undulating highlands, volcanic plateaux, isolated forest galleries, and rugged mountains (see Figure 2). Elevations in the area range from approximately 900 meters to just over 3,000 meters above sea level, situated some 200–300 kilometers inland from the Atlantic coast. The highest point is a volcanic chain culminating at Mount Bamboutos (see Figure 3).

The region’s rolling hills and fertile volcanic soils facilitated dense human settlement, making it one of the most populous areas of contemporary Cameroon, with population densities estimated between 30 and 80 individuals per square kilometer (Stallcup, 1980). Though the modern landscape is predominantly savannah, the

region's hot and humid climate is naturally conducive to expansive montane forests (Lavachery, 1998). Long-standing scholarship posits that the current openness of the Grassfields is largely anthropogenic, resulting from centuries of forest clearance to support intensive agriculture and metallurgical activity (Warnier, 1984). These environmental transformations were not merely ecological but also socio-political, shaping patterns of settlement, state formation, and inter-polity interaction in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields.



Figure 2. Typical portrait of the Cameroon Grassfields vegetation landscape (Kaze, 2009, p. 6).



Figure 3. Side view of mount Bamboutos in the Cameroon Grassfields (Kaze, 2009, p. 6).

The Socio-political Features of States in the Cameroon Grassfields

Pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields polities exhibited broadly similar political structures, albeit with localized variations reflecting distinct historical trajectories and experiences (Nkwi, 1987). Central to these societies were two interlinked axes of authority: political and moral. While some polities emphasized the coercive, centralized dimensions of power, particularly in state-organized societies, others privileged the moral, ritual, and spiritual authority of leaders, as was characteristic of decentralized or stateless communities.

The socio-political organization of the Grassfields was a defining feature that both structured and unified the polities within the region. Most pre-colonial *fondoms* operated under a centralized system of governance, characterized by hierarchical authority, administrative machinery, and judicial institutions (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1947), all ultimately concentrated in the person of the indigenous ruler, locally designated as the *Fon* (Jones, 2022). Variations in spelling, *Fon*, *Foyn*, *Fua*, and *Mfon*, appear in historical and ethnographic sources (Kaze, 2020a), though this study adopts *Fon* as the standard designation.

Fons were sacred rulers whose authority combined political, spiritual, and military dimensions. Their legitimacy rested on the perceived ability to mediate and contain potentially disruptive forces, both natural and supernatural. As composite figures, Fons simultaneously served as political administrators, spiritual leaders, military commanders, judges, chief priests, and custodians of ritual knowledge (Forni, 2015; Kaze, 2020b). Their influence extended beyond the immediate confines of their *fondoms*, connecting them to wider networks of regional and long-distance exchange, and embedding them firmly within the social, economic, and spiritual fabric of the Cameroon Grassfields.

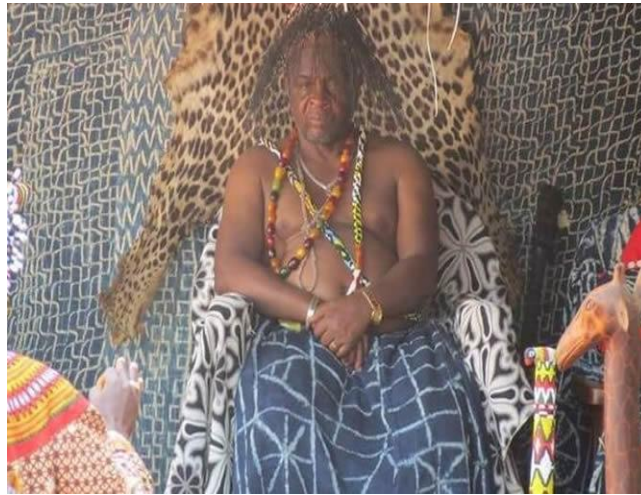


Figure 4. Image of the Fon of Nso fondom in the Cameroon Grassfields (author's photographic collection, September 2022).

The authority of fons in the Cameroon Grassfields was predicated on a mix of biological legitimacy, patrimonial largesse, and military strength (Albrecht, 2017). In turn, popular allegiance to them was tempered by tensions between the ruling and non-ruling houses of powerful lineages, between free men and slaves, and between the advantages of “going it alone” and forming alliances with rival strongmen (Dobler, 2008).

When the German colonialists reached the region at the beginning of the 1900s, they immediately noticed the distinctive visual and material culture that celebrated the power of local kings (locally referred to as fons) and regulatory societies terms (Forni, 2015). The *fon*, who was both a secular and spiritual leader, was the supreme political personality of the *fondom*. All important political activities within the *fondom* revolve around him, and the *fon* in his palace constituted the nucleus of political activities within society (Soh, 1984). The *fon* had extensive power over his people and territory and was the *de jure* owner of all land in the *Fondom*. The king was the sovereign head of government and was the very personification of his Kingdom; the prosperity and misfortunes of the land were attributed to the good or bad rule of the king. The king determined the destiny of his people, and, in addition to being a secular ruler, he was also the spiritual head of the community (Colson, 1969). Describing the *fon* of Kom in the Cameroon Grassfields, Nkwi remarked that “The king personified his Kingdom” (Nkwi, 1976).

Administratively, the *fondoms* of the Cameroon Grassfields were highly organized and hierarchically structured. In the Bamenda Grassfields, each *fondom* was territorially composed of households, compounds, and villages or quarters (Schapera, 1963). In response to the expansionist tendencies of powerful states, *fondoms* further organized their territories into three concentric circles, reflecting both governance and defense imperatives. The innermost circle encompassed the central institutions, most prominently the chief's palace—which served

as the locus of political authority and the guarantor of territorial integrity. The intermediate circle comprised the general population, divided into quarters under the supervision of notables or sub-chiefs, whose role included mobilization in times of threat. The outermost circle consisted of a cadre of nine notables, including the sons of chiefs and distinguished warriors who had either contributed to the founding of the chieftaincy or demonstrated valor in past conflicts (Bah, 1985). This outer circle, positioned at the periphery of the territory, functioned as the first line of defense, monitoring boundaries and securing trenches when they existed.

The trajectory of state formation in the Grassfields, as elsewhere in Africa, varied in timing and contextual specificity, shaped by both social and environmental determinants (Bang & Skaaning, 2010). The prominence of exceptional individuals in founding myths and political genealogies illustrates how charismatic or “mystical” leaders were often attributed superhuman qualities, underscoring the symbolic as well as practical dimensions of authority. Bang and Skaaning (2010) further argue that the emergence of complex political organization was intimately tied to the Neolithic transition—from hunter-gatherer subsistence to agriculture—which catalyzed processes of social centralization and ultimately state formation. The timing and intensity of this transition, in turn, were conditioned by post-glacial climatic and ecological variation, which shaped the distribution of arable land, fauna, and other resources necessary for agricultural production.

In the Cameroon Grassfields, early state formation was similarly contingent upon prehistoric biogeographical conditions that influenced both settlement patterns and the location of political seats. Decisions regarding the placement of the *fondom* palace and surrounding settlements were strategic, reflecting concerns for security, access to fertile land, and the sustainable management of resources. Thus, the organization of territory in the Grassfields exemplifies the interplay between ecological constraints, demographic pressures, and political centralization in the emergence and consolidation of pre-colonial African states.

The Making of Borders in the Precolonial Cameroon Grassfields

The delineation of borders in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields was intrinsically linked to the formation and consolidation of traditional states, locally referred to as *fondoms*. Early states in the region were extensive territorial entities established through both warfare and diplomacy, and the migration and settlement of human communities were often punctuated by inter-state conflicts aimed at controlling trade routes, acquiring land, and accumulating dependent populations, including clients and enslaved persons.

Borders in the Grassfields were thus constituted through a combination of hard and soft power diplomacy. Hard power involved military campaigns by expansionist *fondoms*, with objectives ranging from territorial expansion for agriculture and hunting to the capture of slaves and livestock, the regulation of commerce, and the strategic positioning of the polity. The settlement and consolidation of stronger *fondoms* often involved the subjugation of weaker neighbors, either through incorporation into a larger territorial entity or by maintaining them as vassal states (Kaze, 2020a). A case in point is the Nso *fondom*, whose territorial expansion was achieved primarily through conquest. Upon entering the area, the Nso encountered pre-existing institutions, which they subdued while allowing some to retain semi-autonomy under Nso paramountcy, thereby establishing borders either through negotiation or force in polities such as Oku, Noni, and Nkar.

A parallel process occurred in the West Region with the Bamoun *fondoms*, which displaced several Bamileke groups and absorbed others. The West Cameroon region is geographically heterogeneous, inhabited predominantly by the Bamoun and the Bamileke, with the former settling in lower altitudes (~1,000 m) and the latter occupying higher elevations (~1,400–2,097 m) (Kaze, 2020a). This spatial distribution was shaped by

historical migratory pressures, notably the expansion of the Bamoun, which compelled the Bamiléké to occupy upland areas. Within the Bamiléké *fondoms*, similar dynamics of demographic growth, the pursuit of arable land, and hegemonic ambitions drove inter-polity contestation and shaped internal border configurations, as observed in expansionist *fondoms* such as Banganté, Bandjoun, and Bana (Betga-Djenkwe, 2017).

Soft power diplomacy also played a critical role in border formation. Consensus agreements between *fondoms*—particularly between militarily unequal neighbors, were employed to avoid open conflict. In some instances, weaker *fondoms* were instrumentalized as buffer zones to deter territorial incursions by rival powers, effectively serving as territorial sentinels for more dominant *fondoms*. Thus, the establishment of borders in the Grassfields was a hybrid process, combining coercive domination with negotiated territorial arrangements.

A notable feature of pre-colonial border agreements was their ritualized reinforcement. Annual traditional ceremonies brought neighboring *fondoms* together to pour libations and reaffirm bonds of friendship and mutual respect. These ritual pacts, underpinned by both temporal and spiritual obligations, often ensured the durability of territorial boundaries more effectively than contemporary written treaties in Europe (Betga-Djenkwe, 2017). Nonetheless, it must be recognized that such rituals did not entirely prevent border transgressions; fluidity of movement and contestation remained a recurrent feature of Grassfields inter-polity relations.

Territoriality in Precolonial Cameroon Grassfields

Given the homogeneity in terms of linguistics, culture, and tradition that characterized the Cameroon Grassfields sub-region, scholars had often asked the question as to why the area did not constitute a single political unit. Rather, this area was made up of several centralized, sovereign, and autonomous political entities locally called *fondoms*. Territoriality to precolonial Cameroonian Grassfields states was essentially made up of three fundamental factors, an organized socio-political institution with the capacity to control large territories, a large stretch of wilderness, and finally the capacity to be recognized by other states or neighbors.

Cameroon Grassfields Fondoms as “Early States”

Cameroon Grassfields Fondoms before colonial invasion corresponded to the Montevideo Convention features of modern statehood. These features included well-defined territory, an organized government, a permanent population, and above all, sovereignty (Zounuzy, 2008). As mentioned above, the development of the state was closely linked to the ability to exercise effective control over a defined territory. This was already reflected by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*,¹ and became more important with the increased technical capabilities of border demarcation.

Socio-political entities like those that existed and continue to exist in the Cameroon Grassfields could not survive without well-defined borders. One of the defining characteristics of the contemporary (sovereign) state is its territoriality. This was also the case with African Kingdoms, including those of the Cameroon Grassfields. In the modern geo-political configuration of territories, the state today represents the highest authority within a given territory: Outside that territory, the state is obliged to respect the principle of non-intervention in its relations with other states. This was the same situation in the precolonial Cameroon Grassfields States, where diplomatic relations were entertained through the exchange of gifts among sovereigns, inter-Fondom marriages, and at times with their representatives in other communities.

¹ This phrase means “whose realm, his religion”, meaning that the religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those he ruled. This legal principle was a major development in Western civilization’s collective if not individual freedom of religion.

It is worth noting that the political system that characterized precolonial Cameroon Grassfields States was fundamentally based on their territorial framework. In precolonial Cameroon Grassfields, an administrative unit was a territorial unit, within which political rights and obligations were territorially limited. Fons were administrative and judicial heads of the many territorial entities (fondom). They were often vested with final economic and legal control over all the land within their boundaries. Everybody living within these boundaries was their subject, and the right to live in this area was acquired only by accepting the obligations of a subject. *fons*² in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields were head of state, thus territorial rulers (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1947). Another feature of the political system in the Cameroon Grassfields is the fact that political leadership was hereditary and based on the “tiger skin principle”³.

An encroachment into fondom without prior permission was considered an act of territorial aggression. The evolution of African traditional socio-political polities, as was the case in Cameroon Grassfields fondoms, was closely linked to the ability to exercise effective control over a defined territory.

Cultivated Land and Wilderness Dichotomy as Territorial Fundaments

Drawing from the example of early precolonial Ovambo early states in present-day Namibia, Dobler remarks that early states in Ovamboland were characterized by a landscape of rich agricultural states separated by large stretches of wilderness (Dobler, 2008). Just like in the Cameroon Grassfields, Dobler affirms that the different Ovambo kingdoms in present-day Namibia were well-defined areas surrounded by large stretches of no-man’s land (Dobler, 2008). Oral sources gathered from some Cameroon Grassfields fons and traditional sacerdotal palace dignitaries revealed that Ovamboland was also obtainable in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields. States in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields did not cover the whole land. They were separated by large stretches of wilderness, 100 km wide between micro-fondoms, and much narrower between mega-fondoms. Large and thick forests, vast land, and mountains constituted a vast occupied space in the area. Just like elsewhere in Africa, the wilderness in the Cameroon Grassfields was conceived as the counter-world to the civilized settlement areas, the realm of spirits and wild beasts not subject to human rule (Jackson, 1982).

Within the cultivated areas, the *fon* (or in some polities several rulers that had replaced the king) had very large political, economic, and ritual powers. The powers of the *fon* were linked to the land and extended over his kingdom only. When a new *fon* was chosen after the death of the old one, he made a tour of his lands; after their enthronement, they were ritually forbidden to leave the territory (Dobler, 2008). It was thus impossible for two kings to meet; when they had dealings outside their territory, they sent emissaries who could act in their name. Wars, too, were not waged by the kings themselves, but by war-chiefs nominated ad hoc by the king (Dobler, 2008).

Fons in the Cameroon lived in palaces which were the seat of all powers and the capital of the fondom. The palace was the administrative headquarters in most Grassfields fondoms. All the political, spiritual, economic, and socio-cultural institutions were coordinated from the palace. It was the fountain of authority. The palace and the fon thus occupy the same iconic space formed by collapsing the classificatory rules that functioned more

² In this article, *fon* denotes the indigenous socio-political title of rulers who presided over polities in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, a designation that remains in use today. Colonial intervention, however, denaturalized this indigenous title by subsuming it under the homogenizing category of “chief,” thereby stripping it of its original political, ritual, and institutional substance.

³ By Tiger skin principle, we are referring to a traditional principle of access to power in the Cameroon Grassfields which stipulates that the next fon must have been born when the father became a fon. In other words, children before their father become a fon cannot be made fons in the Cameroon Grassfields fonship institution.

widely to organize social relations in the societies of the Grassfields (Rowlands, 2016). The housing architecture seen on the plate above represents just a tiny segment of the different sections found in the Kom palace. The palace is divided into many departments, and each of these sections has a precise role to play in the internal and external regional hierarchy.

In precolonial Cameroon Grassfields, the territorial component of domination is accentuated by a variety of political and economic influences over the territory by the central power. The *fon* in collaboration with other palace institutions and territorial entities, controlled the movement of travellers within their territory and collected tolls; whoever came into the territory was subject to their jurisdiction and could be evicted. The *fon* had a monopoly over certain commodities, most notably those important for outside trade (leopard, or tiger pelts, to some extent salt). The *fon* was the owner of some animals caught within their territory and in some vassal territories.

Because of the expansionist tendency of powerful states, fondoms organized their territory into three circles. The central circle was that of the institutions (the chief's palace), whose role was to ensure the integrity of the command territory. The middle circle consisted of the population, divided into quarters, each under the authority of either a notable or a sub-chief. The role of the population was to intervene in case of danger. The circle at the end was that of the nine notables, made up of the sons of chiefs, and valiant men who had contributed to the founding of the chieftaincy or who had shown bravery during the wars (Bah, 1985). It should be noted, however, that this circle, which was practically the same as the one at the end of the chieftaincy, was not the only one. It should be noted, however, that this circle, practically at the limits of the territory, constituted the first line of defense and made it possible to guard and secure the trenches when they existed at that location.

Sovereignty as the Essence of Territoriality in the Cameroon Grassfields

In precolonial Cameroon Grassfields, sovereignty was the most essential attribute of states as it consecrated complete self-sufficiency in the frames of defined territories and supremacy in the internal policy and independence in foreign relations with other states. Sovereignty among pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields polities was not solely defined by territorial control, but also by reciprocal recognition among neighboring states and the capacity to enter diplomatic, economic, and ritual relations. Grassfields societies existed in sustained and routinized interaction across political boundaries, engaging in daily forms of exchange, communication, and cooperation that rendered borders permeable and sovereignty relational rather than absolute. Pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields polities were embedded in dense networks of interaction characterized by mutually beneficial trade, the exchange of women, gifts, and diplomatic visits. Far from being amorphous or stateless, *fondoms* functioned as organized political entities within which normative orders and institutionalized forms of authority prevailed. Long before the formal annexation of Cameroon by German colonial power, the Grassfields region was home to well-structured kingdoms headed by sovereign rulers locally designated as *fon*. As autonomous political entities, these kingdoms maintained sustained diplomatic relations with one another, grounded in everyday practices of inter-polity engagement.

Such relations were materialized through inter- and intra-kingdom marriages, gift exchanges, participation in the mortuary rites of fellow rulers, commercial transactions, and the circulation of envoys and visitors. Matrimonial alliances, in particular, constituted a central mechanism of diplomacy and conflict prevention, binding kingdoms into webs of kinship and mutual obligation. Oral testimonies collected during doctoral fieldwork conducted in the Cameroon Grassfields in 2016 indicate that some rulers deliberately contracted

marriages across multiple kingdoms as a strategic means of forestalling hostilities and consolidating regional peace. This pattern is corroborated by Jean-Pierre Warnier's analysis of seventy-four genealogies drawn from diverse Grassfields kingdoms, which identifies 622 women, of whom 188 married into polities other than their natal kingdoms, underscoring the political salience of marriage as an instrument of inter-kingdom diplomacy and statecraft. (Warnier, 1975). Beyond inter-kingdom marriage as a diplomatic instrument, trade—particularly long-distance exchange—constituted a critical mechanism for reinforcing inter-kingdom relations in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields. Following waves of migration and the formation of new political entities during the nineteenth century, settled communities strategically harnessed the ecological and social opportunities afforded by their environment. The Grassfields region supported diversified agricultural production and fostered technological specialization in a range of craft and artistic industries (Takor, 2018). Commodities generated within these economies circulated both at the household level and through local and extra-regional markets, embedding Grassfields polities within wider commercial networks. Among the principal exports from the region were kola nuts, ivory, palm oil and palm kernels, gum, tobacco, and honey, whose exchange not only sustained livelihoods but also underpinned enduring economic interdependence and political cooperation among kingdoms (Takor, 2018). Besides agricultural production in the region, the people were also engaged in craft works. Craft works such as carved stools, plaited mats, pottery, and weaving of baskets reflected the natural endowments and specialized talents of the different parts of the region. Among the works of art produced, smelted iron objects like hoes, hatchets, harpoons, bows and arrows, and knives were considered as objects of high value. These objects were sold by traders out of their kingdoms. The consequence of this is that it promoted polyglotism, extensive matrimonial connections, and the promotion of the gift system among Grassfields fondoms. Fundamentally, inter-fondom trade more often created opportunities for a flux of royal gift exchange. In the Cameroon Grassfields trade in articles like beads, cowries, carved stools, and cloth, most often trickled out of the commercial circuit and ended up as gifts (Takor, 2018). Gift exchange in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields was underpinned by the principle that the acceptance of an initial offering created a binding obligation to reciprocate. The return gift often mirrored, and occasionally exceeded, the magnitude and value of the original, reflecting both social esteem and political intent. This system of reciprocity extended beyond mere material transactions, forming an integral part of broader economic and social networks. Among traditional rulers, the circulation of gifts was particularly pronounced, serving as a critical instrument of diplomacy, alliance-building, and the negotiation of inter-polity relationships across the region.

However, beyond its territorial boundaries, no *fon* could unilaterally guarantee the peace, security, or welfare of subjects without negotiating formal agreements with neighboring polities. The maintenance of regional stability was contingent upon the voluntary engagement of individual *fondoms*, with the choice between inter-polity harmony and conflict resting solely in their hands. As Nkwi (1987) observes, international relations were an inescapable reality for pre-colonial African states, demanding strategic attention and negotiation.

Fondoms in the Cameroon Grassfields actively sought to cultivate amicable relations with their neighbors. Inter-polity diplomacy assumed multiple forms, including inter-*fondom* marriages, the exchange of gifts, participation in the mortuary rites of fellow *fons*, and trade. State dignitaries and emissaries routinely traversed borders, sustaining daily communication and interaction. Yet, the initiation and scope of these diplomatic engagements remained at the discretion of each *fondom*, reflecting both autonomy and agency. Relations were structured along principles of equality or hierarchical superiority and were often rationalized through ideologies of kinship, covenant, and shared spiritual or religious commitments. Warnier (1975) notes that the key

motivations for inter-*fondom* diplomacy encompassed common descent, alliances, and oaths invoking divine sanction.

Territorial Violation in Precolonial Cameroon Grassfields

It is important to underscore that in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, borders primarily demarcated territorial authority rather than restricting the movement of people, the exchange of goods, or property ownership. Individuals were entitled to possess land and resources across political boundaries; for instance, the *fondom* of Bali-Nyonga maintained rights over a sacred river site within the territory of Bawock, a pattern similarly observed in the Nso *fondom*.

Beyond such exceptional arrangements, certain states engaged in sustained and deliberate border transgressions. These incursions were typically the prerogative of expansionist polities seeking to extend influence, extract tribute, or assert dominance over neighboring territories. It is important to distinguish these acts from ordinary cross-border mobility: the free circulation of people between *fondoms*—whether for trade, familial ties, or seasonal migration—did not constitute a transgression, as borders were fluid and permeable.

This regulated openness was undergirded by traditional diplomatic practices. States cultivated inter-polity relations through mechanisms such as marriage alliances, the exchange of ritualized gifts often referred to as “the bags of the palace,” and participation in the mortuary rites of fellow *fons* (Nkwi, 1987). Such practices reinforced peaceful interaction, facilitated economic and social exchange, and legitimized the movement of people and property across *fondom* boundaries, reflecting a sophisticated conception of sovereignty that was relational, negotiated, and institutionally embedded.

Border Management/Control

In the context of the modern state, passports and visas regulate access to foreign territories. But was such formalized control the norm in pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields? As discussed earlier, borders in the Grassfields were fluid, and people moved relatively freely between polities. The identification of individuals crossing these borders relied on a combination of linguistic, economic, and social markers rather than codified documents.

Language played a critical role in signaling identity, as the region was characterized by a mosaic of related and distinct tongues. Equally, the types of goods carried or traded across boundaries helped indicate the origin of travelers, since particular *fondoms* specialized in specific economic productions. For example, the inhabitants of Widikum were renowned for palm oil trade, while communities of the Ndop Plains were distinguished for ironworking and smithing.

Oral testimony indicates that border surveillance was conducted by hunters, decentralized state dignitaries, and local officials, who monitored transgressions and maintained territorial integrity. Violations occurred when one polity forcibly entered another’s territory to assert authority, extract tribute, or harass inhabitants. Motivations for such incursions were diverse and often interlinked, encompassing political ambition, economic gain, and social rivalry.

Determinants of Border Transgression

The factors driving border transgression in pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields were systemic and multifaceted. While it is commonly assumed that raids aimed at capturing slaves or seizing property constituted the principal motivation, this explanation alone fails to capture the complex structural determinants that

underpinned incursions, particularly by more powerful *fondoms*. Among the primary factors were the imperatives of kingdom-building, demographic pressures and modes of subsistence, persecution and banishment, geopolitical calculations, wealth accumulation, refusal to pay royal tribute, late migratory settlements, and dynastic disputes.

Kingdom-building in the nineteenth-century Grassfields was a salient driver of territorial expansion. Political units with organized state structures were generally larger and more cohesive than stateless communities, and population size often translated into political and military strength. Expansionist polities such as Nso, Bamum, and Bali-Nyonga, experiencing rapid demographic growth, were frequently compelled to extend their borders to secure land for settlement and agricultural production.

Population density and distribution were closely tied to ecological conditions, which in turn shaped livelihoods. Most Grassfields *fondoms* were simultaneously agricultural and hunting societies. Demographic expansion heightened demand for arable land and food, leading some states to transgress borders for cultivation or hunting, often precipitating armed conflict with neighboring polities. More broadly, modes of subsistence, mediated by environmental constraints, influenced societal values and significantly shaped patterns of territorial incursion.

Interactions and behavior in the pre-colonial Grassfields were regulated by a sophisticated indigenous legal system. Grassfields communities maintained well-established customary laws that codified ideas of right and wrong, guiding conduct, adjudicating disputes, and legitimizing both cooperation and conflict within and across *fondoms*. These legal and normative frameworks framed border transgressions not as arbitrary acts but as regulated responses to political, demographic, and ecological imperatives⁴. In African states, notably in pre-colonial Cameroon, the Grassfields developed legal concepts that were well thought out, practicable, and immensely useful in the consolidation of peace and harmony both in the fondom and the Grassfields sub-region in general⁵. Laws were designed to fit the economic, polytheistic, and other characteristics of precolonial Cameroon Grassfields society at the time⁶. Like elsewhere in Africa, the interconnected nature of religion and law was evident in fondoms, as Grassfields people were highly religious, and religion formed the basis of culture and government⁷. Religious laws of fondoms were firmly tied to judicial laws, making religious practice inseparable from the law⁸.

It frowned on any improper behavior viewed as being inimical to the legal norms and disrupting the social equilibrium. Crimes in the indigenous African jurisprudence and specifically, the Cameroon Grassfields include murder, witchcraft, incest, assault (minor and serious), theft, Adultery, spousal abuse, arson, evasion of dues, cruelty, etc.⁹ Punishment for transgressing the law varied from fine payment to banishment and death.

Banishment was one of the forms of punishment that forced people to transgress borders into other fondoms in the Cameroon Grassfields. However, some fondoms rather welcomed banished people who used to constitute a stronger state.

Maltreatment was also responsible for constant border transgression in the Cameroon Grassfields. This generally happened when states maltreated citizens from another kingdom with disdain and humiliation. This was the case between the kingdoms of Nso and Bamoun and the sick princess. In reality, a sick Nso princess given in marriage in the Bamoun kingdom was accused of leprosy and killed between the border separating both

⁴ Interview with King Fozao A. Afou, Fon of Fossemondi/Medical Doctor, Bamenda, December 2017.

⁵ Samuel Wolasse, 67, Retired International Translator, Yaounde, January 2018.

⁶ Interview with Professor Emeritus Verkijika Godfrey Fanzo, 72 years, retired professor of History, Yaounde, March 2019.

⁷ Interview with Professor Nol Alembong, 64 years, Vice Chancellor University of Buea, Buea, April 2022.

⁸ Interview with Fon Abumbi II, King of the Bafut Kingdom in the Cameroon Grassfields, September 2015.

⁹ Interview with Tumali Lucia, 71 years, Princesse of Balikumbat fondom, Balikumbat, September 2015.

kingdoms. Nso hunters who had heard the screaming of the princess as she was being killed reported to the king of the Nso kingdom. This incident strained the relationship between the two kingdoms and was one of the remote causes of the inter-fondom conflicts in the 1880s between the two fondoms (Lemven, 2004)¹⁰.

Another source of border transgression was mainly for geopolitical reasons. Political alliances were common among Grassfields fondoms, especially between strong and weak states. In some instances, weaker states were used as buffer zones by stronger states to control the actions and behavior of their potential rivals¹¹. States that refused to play the role of puppets were invaded and engulfed by stronger states.

The might of any strong state is measured by the extent of its wealth. Sources of wealth in precolonial Cameroon included farmland, women, hunting grounds, and slaves. In precolonial Cameroon Grassfields, strong states were generally wealthy states that had accumulated wealth legally or illegally. Historically, rich and powerful states in precolonial Cameroon acquired their wealth by robbing their neighbors. This includes the occupation of farming and hunting land that contributed to the territorial expansion of some states in precolonial Cameroon. The struggle to have access and control of trade routes forced some states in precolonial Cameroon to transgress their borders. This was the case of Bali-kumbat, who raided weak states along the Ndop plain. The slave trade was one of the main sources of wealth that explained constant border transgression in precolonial Cameroon. Stronger fondoms raided weaker fondoms to obtain slaves for social and economic motivations for reproduction or the creation of wealth (Fanso, 1989).

The payment of royal tributes was a common practice in the precolonial Cameroon Grassfields. It essentially involves voluntary or forceful royal tributes. Voluntarily, early states exchange gifts, otherwise known locally as palace bags, to entertain their diplomatic relations¹².

On the contrary, forceful tributes were annual taxes or obligations that vassal conquered states (tributary chiefs) in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields had to pay to the conquest states¹³. These tributes included items like leopard pelts, elephant tusks, and women. They represented symbols of power and authority¹⁴. In precolonial Cameroon Grassfields, all tributary states were required to turn out all power symbols to paramount states or conquest states as a sign of submission and loyalty¹⁵. The retention of such an object was considered an act of declared rebellion. This, of course, forced conquest states to transgress the territory of vassal states to raid women and livestock¹⁶. In some instances, princesses and princes were captured and only returned when the vassal fon had paid tributes¹⁷. War was the last resort after all diplomatic measures had failed.

Migration and occupation of space in the precolonial Cameroon Grassfields by various ethnic entities dates as far back as the 13th century A.D.¹⁸ However, the area witnessed a serious wave of migration into the area in the 19th century that was principally caused by the Jihads of Uthman Dan Fodio. The Jihads caused the southwards movement of several ethnic groups among the Bali-Chambas, who is today one of the most important ethnic groups in the Cameroon Grassfields. They were essentially warriors fighting on horseback. Among the

¹⁰ Oral interview with King Sembum III of nso conducted by chem langee bongfen.

¹¹ Interview with Kinko John, aged 62, Retired Teacher and Local Politician, Bansa, 20th December 2010.

¹² Interview with Professor Emeritus Paul Nchoji Nkwi, Anthropologist and Member of Cameroon's Constitutional Council, Yaounde, December 2021.

¹³ Interview with King Charles Gwan Mbanyamsig III, Fon of Guzang, Cameroon Grassfields, Guzang Palace, September 2017.

¹⁴ Interview with Bonekeh Sabastian, age 74 years, notable Bamunka, 19th August 2015.

¹⁵ Interview with Fonjo Cyprian, age 62 years, Local Politician Old, Bansa, 20th December 2010.

¹⁶ Interview with King Fon Lekunze Andreas III, Fon of Bamumbu Kingdom, Bamumbu Palace, December 2017.

¹⁷ Interview with Amahbo Roland, age 49 years, Teacher and Traditionalist, Bafut, 17th August 2015.

¹⁸ Interviewed Che Gideon, age 62 years, Notable, Yaounde, 14th September 2015.

Bali-Chamba group, one faction known as Bali-Nyonga distinguished itself with expansionist tendencies by robbing existing states of their land¹⁹. The advent of the Bali-Chamba in the area witnessed a new socio-political configuration and affected the pre-existing balance of power in the area before their arrival²⁰. In fact, the creation or origin of the Bali-Nyonga fondom and many others in the Cameroon Grassfields were created by border transgression²¹.

One of the major causes of border transgression in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields traditional societies was the presence of dynastic quarrels, which in turn fostered migration. To illustrate this assertion, according to Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine, it was due to succession disputes that originated from the Tikar royal house at Rifum after the death of the chief. Ambitious princes who were not chosen as successors simply migrated elsewhere to create their kingdoms (Fomine, 2009). Usually, each contestant had personal followers, and most of the time emerged as the leader of a faction. In general, the genesis of the Bamum Kingdom is attributed to the migration of three members of the Tikar royal house, namely Nchare, Nguonso, and Morunta, who broke off from the main group at Rifim (Kimi) after the death of their chief²². The desire to start new settlements away from the parent group provoked this move, but there was also the possible connection with the gradual southward migration of Tikar groups, such as the Chamba and Mbum, under pressure from the Jukun Empire centered around Wukari on the river Benue.

When Nchare, Nguonso, and Morunta arrived in Mbam, they continued in different directions: Nguonso, the youngest, who was a female, went westward, settled with her band of followers at Kovifem, Tavis, and finally at Kumbo headquarters of Nso in the present North-West Province of Cameroon²³. There, she founded the Nso Kingdom or state. In their search for land to settle, secessionist dynasties conquered and subdued early fondoms in Cameroon. This was the case with the Nso and the Bamum²⁴.

Colonial Rule and Border Transgression in the Cameroon Grassfields

Border transgressions were frequent in precolonial Cameroon Grassfields before the advent of colonial administration. The current inter/intra borders in Africa and particularly Cameroon, are the outcome of the Berlin West African Conference that consecrated the partition of the African Continent. Cameroon, as a modern entity, was the outcome of the Berlin West African Conference of November 15, 1884, to February 26, 1885, which gave European powers the “Carte blanche” or the go-ahead to partition and occupied the African territory. It was within this context that the entity known today as Cameroon was carved by the Germans, even though the territory witnessed some border modifications over time.

The first colonial power that signed a protectorate treaty to eventually colonize the whole territory was the Germans. This was followed in 1916 by the partition of Cameroon between Britain and France after the defeat and ousting of the Germans from Cameroon during the First World War.

Consecration of Pre-colonial Borders Under Colonial Rule

Upon their arrival in the Cameroon Grassfields, the Germans discovered several well-organized and functional states. Given the strong influence fons had on their fondoms, the Germans decided to instrumentalize

¹⁹ Interview with Kepu Regina, 86 years, Farmer and Member of Royal Family, *Nyugu* quarter Balikumbat, September 2015.

²⁰ Interview with Bila Wilfred, aged 61, Bucher and Native of Balikumbat, Bamenda, September 2015.

²¹ Interview with Doh Pelu Napoleone, 96 years, Kingmaker, Balikumbat, September 2015.

²² Interview with Njiasse Aboubakar, 61 years, Senior Lecturer and Prince of the Bamum Fondom, Foumban, March 2011.

²³ Interview with Njobam John Fonyuy, 62 years, Retired Head Teacher, Kumbo, December 2010.

²⁴ Idem.

them to attain their colonial objectives. However, the presence of the colonial authorities in precolonial Cameroon contributed to the exacerbation of border transgression, and in some cases, favored the aggression of some fondoms against others.

The Germans arrived on what is today known as the Cameroonian coast in the 19th century (Ndobegang & Samah, 2009). Upon arrival, they found out that other European countries, notably the British and the French, had already established a noticeable commercial influence along the coast of Cameroon. Determined not to be left out of this rich trade in this area and following what Ngoh described as the German coup, Germany successfully outwitted Britain and France by signing secret deals with traditional authorities of the coast and thus became the first European power to claim colonial control over the coastal area of Cameroon (Ngoh, 1989). Before the advent of colonialism in Africa and Cameroon in particular, the socio-political and administrative organization of Cameroonian traditional societies was centered on a well-organized chieftaincy institution with the fon at the helm of each sovereign traditional polity (Owona, 2015).

The orderly nature and functioning of a multitude of autonomous traditional societies, or what Peter Skalnik and Henri J. M. Claessen called the “Early State,” was based fundamentally on what some scholars of African studies later conceptualized as the chieftaincy institution (Skalnik & Claessen, 1978). The Germans, upon annexation, collectively named these “micro-states” Kamerun on the 14th of July 1884, thanks to the diplomatic tactics of the German consul general Nachtigal that culminated with the annexation of Kamerun. This diplomatic action was marked by the signing of the Germano-Douala treaty.

The Germans arrived in the Grassfields in 1889. Upon their arrival in the area, they found out that the area was a distinct region in their exploration series. The kind of human groupings that the Germans found included individual Fondoms ranging in size from 200 to 60,000, often physically bounded by large-scale earthworks and fixed in dynastic time by lengthy fon-lists (Kaze, 2020a). The Germans encountered fons, palaces, elaborate forms of retainership, and secret male associations with political functions. Noticing that traditional rulers had a stronghold on their people, the Germans decided to collaborate with the chiefs by recognizing their authority to subdue the people. Their preference was for those chiefs who could adapt to their laws and could easily be manipulated to accomplish their exploitative ambition²⁵. To be sure of their collaborators, the Germans adopted both hard and soft power techniques.

Hard power consisted of dethroning and hanging chiefs they considered “radicals or recalcitrant” simply because they were not willing to cede their sovereignty and governing authority to the Germans. In some instances, they adopted soft power diplomacy by appointing some chiefs who were purportedly enlightened, loyal, and cooperative, who were later called official, imposed, or warrant chiefs (Crowder, 1978).

The advent and establishment of German colonial rule in Cameroon reduced the recurrence of border transgression in many localities in Cameroon. This explains why, during the period of resistance against German rule in Kamerun, states that were victims of aggression chose to ally with the Germans as a means of seeking protection against aggressive states. It is also important to note that most states that resisted German colonial rule were mostly aggressive or expansionist states. However, for the sake of implementing their rule, the Germans tolerated the expansionist aggressive tendency of some states like Bali-Nyonga, with whom they had signed a peace treaty. This gave the Bali-Nyonga—a state which was essentially created through border transgression to

²⁵ National Archives Buea, IF1919, file No. 186/1919. Divisional Office Bamenda, Njie Appointment of, as Chief of Wei, 1919.

continue aggressing their neighbors, notably around the Widikum area in the present-day North West region of the Republic of Cameroon.

The present-day inter-fondom borders in the Cameroon Grassfields were maintained with the advent of colonial rule in the area. In a bid to contain strong states, the Germans decided to accept the boundaries that they have established through war and diplomacy before their arrival.

Colonial and Post-independent Invented Inter-fondom Borders in the Cameroon Grassfields

The colonial powers contributed in their way in distorting pre-colonial borders and by so doing laid the foundation for some of the inter-fondom conflicts recurrent in the Cameroon Grassfields today. This is the case with fondoms that were invented by colonial authorities for their interest. In fact, where fons or fondoms did not exist, the colonial administrators proceeded in creating new ones who were called warrant chiefs (Geschiere, 1993). This invention could only occur by incurring into territories established during the pre-colonial era. At independence, the post-independent state in Cameroon arrogated the powers to make and unmake precolonial inter-fondoms borders. The multitude of inter-fondom border crises present in the Cameroon Grassfields today is partly due to colonial rule and post-independent state policies.

Conclusion

This study has examined the dynamics of border transgression in the pre-colonial Cameroon Grassfields, situating the phenomenon within its geographical, cultural, and historical context. The Grassfields region, while relatively uniform in terms of linguistic, cultural, and physical characteristics, was composed of autonomous *fondoms* whose territoriality was socially constructed, relational, and embedded in complex systems of diplomacy, law, and customary authority. Understanding border transgression in this setting therefore necessitated a careful analysis of the inter-*fondom* political landscape, the mechanisms of sovereignty, and the contextual meaning of boundaries as conceived and practiced by indigenous polities.

The evidence demonstrates that, despite the existence of formal and ritualized relations among Grassfields states—through inter-polity marriages, gift exchanges, trade, and mortuary rites—border transgressions were a persistent feature of the political landscape. Inviolability of territorial limits was contingent upon the strength, ambitions, and strategic calculations of expansionist *fondoms*, whose incursions into neighboring territories were motivated by demographic pressures, resource needs, dynastic rivalries, and the imperatives of state-building. These findings reveal a sophisticated and historically grounded understanding of pre-colonial sovereignty: it was neither absolute nor static but relational, negotiated, and contingent.

Moreover, the homogeneity of the Grassfields, linguistic, cultural, and ritual, rendered distinctions of citizenship and territorial belonging fluid, thereby facilitating cross-border mobility and occasional appropriation of resources or influence by more powerful states. Some *fondoms* leveraged these dynamics to enhance their demographic, economic, and political standing, illustrating the instrumental role of border transgression in state formation and regional hegemony.

Finally, this study situates pre-colonial practices in dialogue with colonial and post-independence state-making processes. Contemporary intra- and inter-state boundaries in Cameroon, imposed in the spirit of the Berlin Conference, disrupted indigenous spatial logics and erased traditional markers of territorial control, exacerbating patterns of encroachment and undermining pre-existing notions of citizenship. In this sense, European interventions did not merely redraw maps; they reconfigured the political ontology of the region,

subordinating indigenous systems of sovereignty to external logics of territoriality. By foregrounding these continuities and ruptures, the study contributes to a deeper historiographical understanding of border politics, sovereignty, and state formation in the Cameroon Grassfields and, more broadly, in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa.

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