

A summary of Cameroonian Administrative history

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Abstract Eng

In this paper I consider the reasons why a question about changing patterns of administrative history in Cameroon is easy to ask but hard to answer. Exploring this raises many issues of changing terminology, differences between quasi-colonial and post-colonial administration of the administration of the state (as it were) and decisions that in some cases were superseded before being implemented. A summary table is presented with comments about the limits of reliability of the figures.

Abstract Fr

Dans cet article, j'examine les raisons pour lesquelles une question sur l'évolution de l'histoire administrative au Cameroun est facile à poser mais difficile à répondre. L'exploration de cette question soulève de nombreuses questions d'évolution de la terminologie, de différences entre l'administration quasi-coloniale et post-coloniale de l'administration de l'état (en quelque sorte) et des décisions qui, dans certains cas, ont été remplacées avant d'être appliquées. Un tableau récapitulatif est présenté avec des commentaires sur les limites de la précision des chiffres.

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Notes on a complicated history

The following tables present the results of a protracted piece of archival research driven by a research project.¹ I now know that the question ‘how many subdivisions were there in Cameroon in year X?’ is one of those questions that is deceptively easy to ask, and in practice often very hard to answer with precision. This can be seen as a worked example of what Luise White calls a ‘hodgepodge historiography’ (2015).

To help readers understand why it has proved so difficult to provide a consistent and rigorous set of answers to my supposedly straightforward question, we need to rehearse Cameroon’s complicated history post 1916 and the administrative implications of this history.

After the German colony of Kamerun fell to allied troops between 1914 and 1916 a rough and ready partition between British and French administrations was agreed. This was then ratified in the post WW1 treaties and the territories were administered first as League of Nations Mandated Territories then after WW2 as United Nations Trusteeships. French Cameroun became independent in 1960, joined in 1961 by the southern half of British Cameroon (the northern half joined Nigeria).

The archival implications of that summary are themselves considerable: Let me start with British Cameroon. The Northern and Southern parts were administered very

¹ The research project is on photographic history which has some relevance to the decisions that have been made on inclusion as will be explained below.

different by the British which has the consequence that Northern Cameroon, which joined Nigeria in 1961, ‘vanishes’, not only from Cameroonian history viewed from the vantage of the boundaries of the current nation state, but to a considerable extent before that since the territory of Northern Cameroons (unlike Southern Cameroons) was administered as part of its adjacent Nigerian territories so does not have a large separate or separable archival trace², apart from its regular mention in reports to the League of Nations / United Nations. This is quite different from the Southern Cameroons which *was* administered separately so one can ask about its division into administrative units at different moments in history. On Independence, Southern Cameroons entered the Federal Republic as a single unit then called the Administrative Region of West Cameroon (Cameroun Occidental) not to confused with the West (Ouest) Administrative Region.

Shifting terminologies

Over the decades the terms used for what are broadly the ‘same’ administrative units have changed. This causes problems for comparative historical research since in some cases the same word is used at different periods for units of different scale: region (Fr. *Région*) being the most significant case in point. From 1935 until just before Independence (59/138 du 8 Aout 1959) this was used in the Francophone zone to refer to what are now Departments. However, more recently it was brought back in to rename Provinces (in the Décret n° 2008/376 du 12 Novembre 2008).

The following table does not reflect the German period. The French and British inherited from the Germans various administrative *circonscriptions* - divided into 18

² ‘The Northern Cameroons was never separately administered until 1960s forming, until then, part of three provinces of the Northern Region of Nigeria’ Ardener 1962: 342.

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districts, 6 military stations and 4 residences (see Kouakap Ndjeutcham 2013: 48 and Finken 1996: 27. A listing is given in Appendix1). In effect the table starts with the French reorganization of this in 1921. The concerns of this paper are the first three levels of administrative units.

Table 1. Terminology Shifts for different levels of administrative units

Year/ decree number /Date	First Order	Second Order	Third Order
1921 confirmed in 24/12/33	Fr. Région* (but scarcely used)	Fr. Circonscription	Fr. Subdivision
1935 report p165 8 Av 1935	Nothing used*	Fr. Région	Fr. Subdivision
1949	Eng. Province	Eng. Division	Eng. Subdivision
1959 59/138 8 Aout 1959		Fr. Département	Fr. Arrondissement
1961 61/DF/15 20 Octobre 1961	FR. Région administrative	Fr. Département	Fr. Arrondissement
	Eng. Administrative Region	Eng. Division	Eng. Subdivision
1972 72/349 24/07/72	Fr. Province	Fr. Département	Fr. Arrondissement
	Eng. Province	Eng. Division	Eng. Subdivision
2008 2008/376 12 Novembre 2008	Fr. Région	Fr. Département (préfecture)	Fr. Arrondissement (sous-préfecture)
	Eng. Region	Eng. Division	Eng. Subdivision

*See discussion below, in sum Région existed on paper but was scarcely used: there are only occasional mentions of Région du Nord.

Since Département have as their senior officer a prefect (préfet), a Département may also be called a *préfecture* and below that an Arrondissement whose senior office is a (sous-préfet) may be called a *sous-préfecture*. In English Divisions have Divisional Officers and Subdivisions have Subdivisional Officers.

Legal Terminology

At various points in time the entities we are considering have been created by Decrees/Décrets, Laws/Lois and by Order/Arrêt. I will leave to constitutional lawyers

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to consider the significance (if any) of the differences between these. Since independence most were created by presidential decree. I have not recorded these differences so researchers will have to refer back to the Official Journal of Cameroon to clarify.

Communes vs Arrondissements (Councils vs Subdivisions) – Mayors vs SubDivisional Officers (Maires vs Sous-préfets)

The French and post-independence Francophone reports will sometimes talk of one sometimes the other. As I understand it, the boundaries of a commune are almost always those of an arrondissement but the responsibilities of the staff are different. To be clear (and this is where my particular research interests have influenced this project) I am concerned with subdivisions / arrondissements and their administrative officers, the Sous-Préfets, (not with communes) because unlike Mayors/ Maires, Sous-Préfets could issue identity cards. Some of the material available online (e.g. at <http://www.cvuc.cm/>) is about the communes which means that for the purposes of this paper the dates they give cannot be taken as authoritative: an arrondissement was usually created before a commune.

I note that many sources, including Wikipedia, move between the different administrative structures in ways that I find to be misleading.

For example, we often find statements such as the following

The department is divided administratively into 5 communes and in turn into villages. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donga-Mantung> Accessed 4 Oct 2107

Strictly this should be

The department is divided administratively into 5 subdivisions and in turn into villages.

Or perhaps for completeness

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The department is divided administratively into 5 subdivisions (each with a commune) and in turn into villages.

Scale

Small scale entities. For similar reasons to my neglect of communes I am not considering any administrative units below the Arrondissement, e.g. what have been and are termed *Postes Administratifs*, cantons or districts. In part this is anachronistic since before c 1950 there were no identity cards to issue so the insistence on the ability to issue them (and thereby to determine who was a colonial subject) is an imposition on the past (Gabana 2013 summarizes the general history). Having acknowledged this I am comfortable with the decision since it at least gives clarity and leaves for others to expand on the start made in this paper.

Larger scale entities. Since what are now called Regions and Departments have themselves changed both name and scope over the years it would be anachronistic to simply say e.g. that the Arrondissement of Mbouda was created in the West Region in 1950. In 1950 the region (department) of Bamileke had its centre in Dschang and there was no larger scale entity equivalent to what *after independence* was the Région Administrative de l'Ouest later (1972) the Province de l'Ouest. To avoid complicating anachronisms I list departments separately, and give locations for the places that were their centres. No department (or Provincial/Regional) capital is not also the centre of an arrondissement so giving the locations of the latter locates the former as well (Buea was a partial exception to this rule for many years). The table that follows gives the larger entities and their capitals.

Table 2. 'Regions' and their Capitals

Name / Nom	Capital	Dates (decree number)
Adamawa / Adamaoua	Ngaoundéré	22/8/1983 (83/390)
Centre / Centre	Yaoundé	22/8/1983 (83/390)
Centre-South / Centre -Sud	Yaoundé	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15) * - 22/8/1983
East / Est	Bertoua	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15)
Extreme North / Extrême-Nord	Maroua	22/8/1983 (83/390)
Littoral / Littoral	Douala	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15)
North / Nord	Garoua	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15)
North-West / Nord-Ouest	Bamenda	24/7/1972 (72/349)
Bamenda Province	Bamenda	5/7/1949 renamed 24/7/1972
West / Ouest	Dschang / Bafoussam	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15)
South / Sud	Ebolowa	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15)
Cameroons Province	Buea	1949- renamed 20/10/1961
Cameroon Occidental / West Cameroon	Buea	20/10/1961 (61/DF/15) - 24/7/1972
South-West / Sud-Ouest	Buea	24/7/1972 (72/349)

- The other key decree from the immediate period following independence that established the administrative structure is 62/df/83 of 12/03/1962.

We should also note that under the Germans the capital of Kamerun was shifted several times³ before settling on Yaoundé by the time of the First World War. This status was continued under the French administration. Buea was the capital of West Cameroon during the Federal Republic (1961-1972).

Flux in the records and other complications

In some cases the status of a place has shifted to and fro over the years which means it is difficult to state with clarity *when* it became, for example, the centre of a department (if later it lost that status). Moreover a decree may be issued one year that took effect the following (for example Decree 81/521 of 11/12/1981 reorganizing the North Province states that it would take effect on 1 July 1982). For simplicity I have

³ Between Douala/Duala/Kamerunstadt and Buea before it was fixed at Yaoundé.

followed the year of the decrees. The examples that follow illustrate the range of complications that sometimes obtain.

1. Fouban has had a shifting status (in early years related to the complex history of Sultan Njoya). It briefly became a circonscription between January to October 1923 (it reverted to being a subdivision on 1 October 23). It became the centre of the department of Bamoun in 1943. The name changed to Noun by decree 81/522 of 11/12/81 (but later the name reverted to Bamoun).
2. The circonscription of Fort Foreau was created late 1925, then on 08/05/1926 it was removed, but by 1931 it had been reinstated (it is listed in the annual report for that year). However it was also reported (1933 report p 148) as being reinstated in 1933 (by a decree of 27/03/1933). Fort Foreau was renamed Kousseri in 1960.
3. As recently as 1981 the town of Banyo became the centre for a short lived department called Mbam-et Djerem (Decree 81/521 of 11 Dec 1981). I can find few other traces of this department. It seems that scarcely it could be implemented when was superseded by the decision to make Banyo the centre of a department called Mayo Banyo (Decree 83/392 of 22/08/83) that split Mbam-et Djerem into several new departments as part of the major reorganisation of the administration of the whole country (this followed Decree 83/390 of 22/08/83, the decree that split the North into three provinces).
4. Although, as was said above, in the run up to Independence there were only Régions (Departments) in French Cameroun and nothing equivalent to what later became Provinces the situation is somewhat more complex. The previous statement is partially contradicted by Decret 57-501 du 16 avril 1957

portant statut du Cameroun. This says that Régions administratives *may* (my emp.) be grouped into provinces (see the French 1957 report p.443-448 esp 445). The text continues by mentioning only one such grouping: Province du Nord. However, elsewhere in the report (p63) it is made clear that the implementation of the Decret had been postponed by four years in the light of the financial implication of setting up provincial administrative structures. So in the run up to Independence no provinces were actually established. A further complication is that during the second world war the northern Régions were lumped together as the Région du Nord, in effect a form of Province. The 1950 French administration report to the UN mentions the return to the status quo of 1939 (p 48 Arrete n 214 portant suppression de la region du Nord Cameroon et retablissement de l'organisation territoriale de 1939 dans le nord du Territoire (JOC du 30 Mai 1950)). Some other parallels may be found in the British Cameroons: the Dikwa Lamidate in North Cameroons was sometimes referred to as Dikwa Province, and Southern Cameroons after 1949 was split into Cameroon and Bamenda Provinces. However on independence in 1961 Southern Cameroons became the Administrative Region of Western Cameroon. I have glossed over most of these complications in the summary terminology table above.

5. According to the 1936 annual report (p147) Boubandjidda was made a subdivision. There is no trace of this having been implemented and much of the area subsequently became a game reserve/ national park.
6. Although Momo is now a well established Division in the North-West there is considerable uncertainty about its antecedents in the 1960s. Subdivisions (and

later divisions) were created in Mbengwi and Gwofong and moved between them. Champaud 1983: 89 gives an incomplete summary (lacking dates).

7. As was mentioned above, Buea's status is anomalous. It was capital of the Cameroons Province under the British administration, then on Independence, capital of Western Cameroon, capital of that part of the Federal Republic until 1972. However, during this time it was *not* a Division, and, although capital of the South-West Region, it remains part of Fako Division, whose headquarters were/are in Victoria (Limbe). It only became a subdivision in 1983 (decree 83/363 of 04-Aug-83).

Numbers

First a caution in the light of problems such as those just outlined: printed summary figures may sometimes be wrong. This caution should also be applied to my own figures! The broad patterns are reliable: the point of the exercise in collating the figures was to reduce uncertainty. Rather than roughly estimating on the basis of little secure knowledge we can now produce figures which if wrong are not *very* wrong (e.g. if the years are wrong for one or two subdivisions, the figures may be slightly inaccurate in any one period of five years. This does not affect the overall pattern). An example of published inaccuracy is the 1951 French Annual Report (p 298-299) which talks in the text of 18 regions (divisions, see above) and 52 subdivisions but only *lists* 17 regions and 51 subdivisions.

Table 3. Summary Figures

Year	Regions	Divisions	Subdivisions	Notes
1950	2	23	55	2 anglophone provinces
1955	2	27	61	2 anglophone provinces
1960	2	32	73	
1965	7	39	110	
1970	7	42	130	
1975	7	42	141	

1980	7	42	156	
1985	10	49	182	
1990	10	49	183	
1995	10	58	269	
2000	10	58	269	
2005	10	58	270	
2010	10	58	361	

The data from which this table has been compiled have been made freely available and can be downloaded from ORA-data via the URL <https://doi.org/10.5287/bodleian:j2EBRYqv6>

This provides the opportunity to update tables when new sources become available. I anticipate uploading a new version of the table to ORA-data should the counts change so readers should check there before citing this table. Note that the data have been given a DOI for ease of reference.

Conclusions

The further that this work has progressed the greater has become my sense of uncertainty about the details. I started thinking it would be straightforward to provide reliable figures for the entities in question. As I have progressed the entities themselves have been revealed to be sometimes themselves works in progress and successions of changes have made the state of affairs at any one moment hard to pin down, to say the least. When a decree is issued it may take some time, sometimes years, for it to be implemented. Sometimes other decrees supervene in the meantime. The result is an objective state of uncertainty about the administrative entities in question. There is a degree of uncertainty about when some of the administrative entities actually came into being, even before we start to consider that sometimes an administrative entity may cease to be: being merged with another or demoted in status.

However, it is possible to overstate the problems. The concerns summarized in this article serve as an important caution which needs to be kept in mind. With that

proviso what this article has achieved is a preliminary synthesis of the available data and this sets some limits for the overall figures as they have changed over time.

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See Appendix 2 for further information on sources

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Appendix 1. German administrative units

According to Kouakap Ndjeutcham (2013: 48) the German administrative structure had administrative *circonscriptions* divided into 18 districts, 6 military stations and 4 residences. See also Epale 1985: 13 and Finken 1996: 27.

Districts:

Douala	Dschang
Victoria	Baré
Buea	Yabassi
Johann Albrechtshöhe= Kumba	Edea
Ossidinge = Mamfe	Kribi
Muni	Lomie
Ebolowa	Yokadouma
Yaoundé	Basse-Sangha
Banyo	

Military stations:

Bamenda	Ivindo
Wolen-Ntem	Moyenne_Sangha-Lobaje
Haut-Sangha-Ouham	Haut -Logone

Residences:

Adamaoua (Garoua)	Territoire Allemand du Lac Tchad (Mora)
Ngaoundéré	Rio del Rey

Appendix 2. Notes on Sources

The definitive reference that collects all the statements is the Official Gazette of Cameroon /Journal Officiel du Cameroun (the name has changed over the years eg incorporating Federal, United and so forth). This is not very easily available and has not been retrospectively scanned (as of 2017).

Annual reports by British and French governments on the territories under their administration to the League of Nations (1921-1939), then United Nations 1947-1959. Titles fluctuate somewhat over the years. Samples include:

Report by His Majesty's government to the General Assembly of the United Nations on the administration of the Cameroons

Rapport annuel du gouvernement français sur l'administration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun : [adressé au Conseil de la Société des Nations].

Most of the preWW2 French reports are online in 2017 via Gallica:

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32848053c/date&rk=21459;2>

Other French sources are available from

<http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/geo.php?ir=&lieu=Cameroun>

ORSTOM village dictionaries from 1960s also now available online. Often these lack dates for the creation of administrative entities, but sometimes they are included.

<http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/>

Atangana Eteme Emeran website <http://atangana-eteme-emeran.com/>

This wonderful source by the Cameroonian lawyer Atangana Eteme Emeran gives dates for many but not all the arrondissements and départements. It also has scans of some of the important decrees. However, it should be noted that in some cases I have been able to identify earlier dates than those given by Atangana in his summary text of the history of Cameroonian towns and cities. Note added in November 2017: the original website address now redirects to a new site that seems not to include the same material. An Internet archive version of the original is available: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150130032700/http://atangana-eteme-emeran.com:80/index.php> After discussion with him I hope we can make a new version of his site available in due course.

Lc-doc. <http://lc-doc.com/> This commercial website is run from Douala by a group of lawyers < La Centrale Documentaire-Vulgarisation des Livres de Droit>. They are seeking to make available key texts to students and researchers. In order to cover their costs they do charge to download the pdfs they make available as a service (registration and searching are free). In some cases (e.g. ORSTOM village dictionaries) they will charge to download pdfs which are available for free elsewhere). However, in many cases they have available deeply obscure documents that are not available elsewhere.