BAKUNDU TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY SYSTEM. AN EPITOME OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: This article examines the precolonial Bakundu traditional authority system as a distinctive expression of African democracy. It argues that Bakundu political organisation was based on collective deliberation, moral accountability and a participatory ethos that anticipated many of the principles associated with modern democratic governance. Drawing from archival sources, oral interviews and scholarly interpretations, the study analyses the institutional structure of the Bakundu polity made up of the *Mowele Mboka* (village head), *Janea ra Mboka* (traditional council), and *Bekali* (secret societies) – to reveal how they functioned as instruments of justice, conflict resolution, and community cohesion. Far from being autocratic or primitive, Bakundu governance represented a dynamic system of checks and balances rooted in the people's collective will. The article concludes that the Bakundu model exemplifies the participatory, consultative and moral foundations of African democracy before colonial disruptions.

Keywords: Bakundu, traditional, democracy, African, authority

INTRODUCTION: TRADITION, AUTHORITY, AND THE DEMOCRATIC IDEA IN AFRICA

The notion of democracy in Africa has long been obscured by Eurocentric theories that equate civilisation and democratic culture with Western political evolution. Yet, before the imposition of colonial rule, African societies, including Bakundu of the forest belt of Cameroon, had a well-developed system of governance grounded in popular participation and

moral legitimacy. The Bakundu Traditional Authority System, which thrived before European contact, demonstrates that democracy in Africa was not imported; it was indigenous, organic, and deeply embedded in the social fabric of communities.

Tradition, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, denotes a mode of thought or behaviour followed by a people continuously from generation to generation (2000, 121). It encompasses beliefs, customs, and institutions transmitted through time. Authority, by contrast, is the recognised power to command or determine (Raz 1990, 125), while a system implies a coherent network of interrelated institutions. Thus, traditional authority system may be understood as a culturally inherited network of institutions and practices that regulate power and ensure order in a given community (Musima 2025, 18).

The Bakundu, like many African peoples, had their own concepts of government. As Casely Hayford famously remarked, "Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government" (Rodney 1982, 33). These ideas were not anarchic but organised around moral codes and collective decision-making. Through the centuries, Africans shaped societies whose vitality testified to their "historical genius" (Khapoya 1998, 21). In this sense, the Bakundu political system illustrates a decentralised democracy that fused religion, law, and politics into a single moral order.

This study, grounded in archival and ethnographic evidence, explores the structure, values, and functions of Bakundu traditional authority as an expression of African democracy. It first situates the Bakundu within the broader typology of African political systems, then analyses the *Mowele Mboka*, *Janea ra Mboka*, and *Bekali* as democratic institutions. Finally, it reflects on the enduring relevance of Bakundu governance principles of contemporary African political thought.

I. Historical Foundation of the Bakundu Traditional Governance

Precolonial African political systems fell into two categories: centralised or state systems and decentralised or "stateless" systems (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1967, 5, 75). Centralised states were hierarchically organised with bureaucracies and clear class distinctions. Stateless systems, by contrast, operated through kinship, lineage, and age-grade associations rather than formal bureaucracies (Khapoya 1988, 61). The Bakundu belonged to the latter category—an acephalous or segmented polity where authority was diffused among elders and councils rather than concentrated in a monarch.

British colonial reports on the Kumba and Ossindinge districts confirm this characterisation when it states that "Hereditary and legal chiefs of tribal traditions would appear unknown to the primitive village communities in times prior to European intervention. The village elders exercised authority in communal matters (…) one would tend to dominate the others through personality, prowess in war and seniority" (NAB, file no. 48.1a/1920/3). This description captures the consensual nature of Bakundu governance—rule by elders, not despots.

Anthropologists such as Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard later classified African societies into "category A" (centralised) and "category B" (non-centralised) systems. The Bakundu clearly fit category B: a democratic community where power emanated from the people and was mediated by lineage heads and councils (1970, 75). According to oral tradition, Bakundu governance originated with Ngoe, the legendary ancestor who ruled as patriarch over his household. His ruling on all matters was accepted without mistrust and always as the best that could be. Things started becoming complicated when the children of Ngoe started to get married and form their own families. Each of Ngoe's grandsons looked at their immediate father as their head, who ruled over their private and community life, making him their immediate authority while they venerated Ngoe as "grandfather" (Ejedepang-Koge 1986, 74).

Since the family was growing larger, Ngoe had to teach his children how to solve problems and make decisions in concert, which was hitherto taken solely by him without consultation. This led his children, it is purported to discover a method of arriving at decisions by a gradual process of contribution and elimination of facts and evidence without bitterness, taking into consideration the significance and views of each member of the family. As his descendants multiplied, authority evolved from personal rule to collective deliberation, a shift from patriarchal dominance to representative consent.

Ngoe instructed his children in deliberative decision-making: they learned to analyse issues through contribution and elimination of facts "without bitterness" (Ejedepang-Koge 1986, 75). Thus, consensus rather than coercion became the foundation of authority. Leadership derived not from hereditary privilege but from wisdom, seniority, and moral integrity—qualities that formed the basis of indigenous democracy.

II. The *Mowele Mboka*: Moral Authority and the People's Mandate

At the apex of village leadership stood the *mowele mboka*—literally "owner of the village". This title denoted responsibility rather than absolute power. Among the Bakiundu, age and experience commanded respect; authority was a burden of service. When families migrated to found new settlements, the eldest or most respected member was chosen as *mowele mboka*, often for his wisdom, generosity, and participation in the secret societies (Ekoe 2019).

The *mowele mboka* embodies both secular and spiritual leadership. He was the highest in the rungs of the traditional authority, having numerous political functions and royal prerogatives, which included, among others, guaranteeing the socio-cultural well-being of the community, the settlement and the imposition of traditional

injunction orders (Nakomo 2020). He guaranteed peace, safeguarded the land, and served as custodian of custom and law. His role was not autocratic but paternal. As Dieudeonne Miaffo observed, to be chief is "to invest oneself in the service of the inhabitants of one's village and its interests" (1993, 25). The *mowele mboka* was thus a public servant in the truest sense, bound by moral obligation to his people.

Spiritually, he acted as chief priest—the intermediary between the living and the ancestors. Tatah Mbuy defines such institutions as moral bodies created by culture and collective choice; their authority transcends the individual occupant (2021, 26). The *mowele mboka* performed rituals, offered sacrifices to the "living-dead", and mediated between human society and divine order. Through these rites, he reinforced social harmony and legitimacy (Sakwe 2019). As an institution, its mission was to ensure and safeguard the sacredness and dignity of the human being. The identity of each person, including the *mowele mboka,* got its proper meaning from the manner in which he integrated into the community and his adherence to culture, which is understood here as the standard of morality.

The *mowele mboka* stood as a symbol of unity for his people, and his priority was clearly the common good of his people, which made him a father of the polity and a spiritual watchdog of the village. As such, the *mowele mboka* stood as that force that bound the people together, united and protected them, sealed the land from malevolent forces and poured out life-giving substances like breath, cam-wood, saliva, semen, and assured continuity (Lenya 2019). This was evident as he was a member of all the juju societies, which gave his office and personality a mystical connotation.

The *mowele mboka* was said to be present in the water as well as on land, which gained him the name *neyo o mariba*, *ne yo o mokondo*, meaning being somebody who lived in water and on land, and was able to control malevolent forces that could be dangerous to the lives of his kinsmen whilst bringing benevolent forces from the water. This was evident as all Bakundu villages were endowed with

rivers of different magnitudes. He also forestalled the malevolent forces that could be dangerous on land. These mystical powers of the *mowele mboka* made him the chief priest of the polity, which was his greatest responsibility to his community. All these attributes made the *mowele mboka* a divine institution, a moral body, a high priest whose authority was paramount and at the service of all his subjects (Itoe 2019).

This office was sustained by symbols of power, notably the *njongolo*—a sacred staff with mystical potency. Only the *mowele mboka* could wield it, using it to bless newborns, curse wrongdoing, or protect the community from malevolent forces. In ceremonies marking a child's birth, he would declare that the infant "belongs to the entire village", embodying the collectivist ethic that "I am because we are" (Mogobe 2003, 230). Such acts illustrate Ubuntu philosophy as practised in Bakundu life—individual identity subsumed in communal belonging.

Succession to the office was not hereditary but merit-based, which made the post never to be contested in the clan. Before "travelling to the world of the ancestors", the *mowele mboka* designated a worthy successor, often outside his own lineage, and symbolically handed the *mbonde*, a wooden cup representing the welfare of the entire village. The handing over ceremony by the *mowele mboka* was usually at the initiative of the passing *mowele mboka* personally, when he knew he was about to travel to the world of the ancestors.

Any *mowele mboka* who failed to perform this important ceremony before his death was considered as having died an abominable death, and his heirs were obliged to pay a fine intended to cleanse the village from the wrongs of the deceased, which was known as *etambu mboka* (Nakomo 2020). The transfer was ratified by elders and sealed through ritual oaths of mutual obligation between ruler and ruled. This principle that leadership is a trust subject to public consent reflects a democratic ideal of accountability.

In the pre-colonial Bakundu tradition, the *mowele mboka* never died but was euphemistically said to be missing or have travelled,

which signifies that he was just temporarily absent from public life (Nakeli 2019). The day his travelling was made public, there was a seven-day ceremony where representatives from other polities were invited, and on the last day of the ceremony, the new *mowele mboka* was presented to the public. The celebration venue also changes as it continued at the palace of the new *mowele mboka*. The change of venue from that of the passing *mowele mboka* to the new one on the seventh day of the celebration of the deceased *mowele mboka* was because this day was like a coronation ceremony for the new *mowele mboka*.

Before this day, the new *mowele mboka* had passed under different ritual instructions and purifications in order to prepare him both as a secular and spiritual leader of his people. This means that in pre-colonial Bakundu, palaces changed as *mowele mboka* also changed. This is because traditional authority in Bakundu is not hereditary, as Garson confirms this when he says that the transfer of power and authority from the passing away *mowele mboka* is to "any man of age and wealth, maybe chosen and upon his death it passes to another suitable candidate" (1932, 15).

III. The *Janea ra Mboka*: The Council of Elders and Collective Governance

Pre-colonial Bakundu society, as has been noted earlier, was an acephalous society in which power was not concentrated in a single institution. This type of society was one in which power was shared and diffused (Khapoya 1998, 61). This goes to indicate that it was a representative type of administration which falls in the whims of modern democracy. Ngoe, the legendary ancestor of the Bakundu and related clans, led his children to discover a form of administration where power moved from the concentrated patriarchal stage, in which Ngoe was the patriarch, to one of representative or shared authority through consent. He led them to discover a method of arriving at decisions by a gradual process of

contribution and elimination of facts and evidence without bitterness (Ejedepang-Koge 1986, 75). Through this, the elders sat together to discuss their common affairs, to settle disputes between their members or offences against the society as a whole.

If the *mowele mboka* represented unity, the *janea ra mboka* embodied participation. It was more of a legislative body, but also had limited judicial and executive powers. It ensured that no single person wielded unchecked power. The council consisted of *batobakoli* (elders) drawn from every lineage, each representing his extended family. Their deliberations were held in the *etana,* which was a sacred, mystical house situated at the centre of the village. It was the centre of peace and a protective force for the village. It formed the heartbeat of village democracy. Tovey notes that "all executive and legislative meetings were held in this meeting house, which was situated in the middle of the village street. It was erected and maintained by communal labour, and the village gongs (provided by the secret societies but public property) were kept there" (Tovey 1937, 2).

Decisions were reached through open debate and consensus. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard noted that the African government rested on "a balance between power and authority on one side and obligation and responsibility on the other" (1970). The Bakundu council exemplified this balance: it could challenge or advise the *mowele mboka*, propose laws, and adjudicate disputes. As Tovey's report observed, "village laws were formulated at private meetings of the council and announced to the public by the oldest man or speaker" (1931, 5). The council's functions extended to organising communal labour, maintaining public order, and fixing dates for purification rites or festivals. The jurisdiction of the traditional council or council of elders, to an extent, included judicial functions to try cases and inflict sanctions where necessary. According to A.D Garson, "the settling of disputes of a trivial nature was probably done in the village by the village elders" (1931, 28).

Women and children were not allowed into the *etana* and did not participate in its activities. Women, on the other hand, participated

indirectly through the *diyara ya barana*. The *diyara ya barana* was a council for and of women, which assisted the traditional council in handling feminine cases whose final verdict was to be communicated to the *janea ra mboka* by the *iyamba* (Balemba 2020). The *diyara ya barana* was a legislative but more of a judicial council. The *iyamba* was the only woman who could enter the *etana* and who voiced women's perspectives to the main council. The *iyamba* was an elderly woman who was considered as intelligent as the men. She was capable of contributing greatly to the socio-cultural development of the polity and a respectable member of the *ngoa maloba* secret society. This is a society by women and for women only. This gendered representation, though mediated, underscores the inclusive ethos of Bakundu political life.

Other males who were not council members of the council but were allowed into the *etana* were those considered as intelligent adults or *meriki ma mikenji* or *bato basise* (Tovey 1937, 3). While in the *etana,* they could not partake in the deliberations inside the *etana*, nor were they allowed to sit or given seats, since all the elders had their folding stools known as *katta*. This stool was made of animal skin and special wood from the forest. These elders go to the *etana*, each with his *katta,* and so those who were not elders could not have seats (Njiboli,2020). While in the *etana,* they listened to the deliberations in which their contributions were heard by the village head in his palace. This set of men was those whom the community, through the elders, regarded as being able to contribute to the development of the polity through their intelligence (Lenya 2019).

Importantly, the council was accountable to the people. Its members were lineage heads, not royal appointees, and could not be dismissed by the *mowele mboka*. This system prevented personal dictatorship and institutionalised collective responsibility. The *etana* itself symbolised transparency: situated at the centre, it was accessible to all adult men, while the town crier (*mwengele lenga*) announced decisions publicly. Regional cooperation further deepened democratic practice. Councils from different Bakundu villages convened joint assemblies to standardise laws and resolve

inter-village disputes. Offenders against these laws were tried by combined councils, emphasising equality before communal norms. In all cases, justice sought reconciliation, not retribution—a moral democracy aimed at restoring harmony within the community.

IV. The *Bekali*: Secret Societies as Instruments of Justice and Moral Regulation

Alongside the council operated the *bekali*-secret or "juju" societies that reinforced law and morality. Carr states in his report that "in the days before European occupation, the judicial system was controlled by the Juju clubs, or in certain cases by decisions of the whole village" (1922, 31). Although shrouded in ritual secrecy, these societies were integral to governance, serving as courts, police and moral educators. Carr continues by saying that "the elders are said to have had certain judicial powers, but where this began and ended, it is impossible to define. In any case, it appears their jurisdiction, or at any rate the enforcing of their decisions, was ruled by the juju clubs, and so it is primarily with the latter that one must deal in discussing the judicial system (Carr 1922, 31). Garson corroborates by stating that "the settling of civil disputes of a trivial nature was probably done in the village by the village elders, but anything of serious nature was done by the juju societies" (1932, 28). The authority of these societies derived from spiritual power symbolised in masks and rituals that personified the invisible world.

Secret societies were purportedly linked to various spirits, which gave them a double nature. Members of these clubs were both humans but also had other souls in animals in the forests or in the rivers, depending on the type of secret society to which one belonged. For example, members of the *malle* society were said to have "bush souls" in elephants, the Ngoa Maloba having theirs in red river hog, also known as bush pigs. That is why in their apparel and dance, they would always want to present things in resemblance to the animals to which they were attributed. To join a secret society, one had to meet certain criteria and subject oneself to a series of

sometimes lengthy initiation rituals. As the name of the organisation suggests, one must swear to absolute secrecy on the society's belief codes and rituals.

Owing to this double nature of the members of these societies, they were forced to be part of the Bakundu traditional authority system. They were instruments of peace and order in the villages (Moki 2020). These were not theoretical but practical matters in the traditional society, as evidenced in the role they played in the judiciary. Secret societies in their judicial functions helped in settling disputes between lineages, sometimes ordering punishments and seeing them carried out by their junior members wearing masks to conceal their identity, which Bohannan and Curtin say was to emphasise the spiritual basis of their authority (1998, 152). These instruments evolved through trials and errors, through evolution. The establishment of such bodies took time, patience, the desire and the will to develop in order to have something better. Consequently, the development of such institutions was a long process and a corporate responsibility of all members of the society. These societies were developed from old and were maintained as part and parcel of their tradition. The Bakundu people put great importance and attachment to tradition because they felt tradition was a sign of their virtue, a symbol of their oneness and the epitome of what they were (Itoe 2019).

Among prominent societies were *nganya, malle, mudimi, nyakpe, bassongo,* and *Balemba*. Each performed specialised functions: *nyakpe* handled civil and criminal disputes, *mudimi* punished theft, Kori dealt with adultery and debt, while *ngoa maloba* served as a women's association defending female interests. These organisations enforced decisions through fines, public shaming, or spiritual sanctions rather than physical coercion. The *nyakpe* society, in particular, exemplified indigenous justice. It adjudicated cases publicly, imposed restitution, and required reconciliation between disputants. Those who defied its verdicts faced spiritual penalties—ostracism or illness believed to originate from supernatural forces. This belief system ensured compliance without standing armies or

prisons. These societies were out to maintain morality and decency, especially in the manner in which they treated cases of theft and adultery. The severe manner through which these secret societies dealt with stealing made Carr, in his report, conclude by saying "with such drastic measures, it is not surprising that it was often said stealing was practically unknown among the Bakundu" (1922, 31).

One of the most important Juju clubs that contributed greatly to the pre-colonial judiciary of the Bakundu society was the *Nyankpe*. "In pre-European days, *Nyankpe* was the medium through which cases and disputes were generally settled. Matters entirely concerning another society and between members of that society could be heard by its head and elders, but all other cases, criminal and civil, were heard by *Nyankpe*" (Goodliffe 1931, 17-18). The *Nyankpe* Juju tried both criminal and civil cases, mostly cases on debt and adultery. When the offender was found guilty, he was fined. Failing to comply, the culprit was flogged by a smaller Juju called *mukongo*. Should this have no effect, the members took matters into their hands and killed a number of goats far in excess of the original fine. This process was said to enforce payments, as a man fearing further reprisals had to pay the fine (Carr 1922, 32). The goats or animals killed were just an addition to the original fine he had to pay to those whose animals were killed. In cases where the offender was a pauper, a wealthy man might pay for him and receive in exchange the offender's wife or daughter, or might accept the services of his debtor. It was as a result of this that it is said, "*Nyankpe* was very powerful in pre-European days, and very few persons were sufficiently headstrong or brave to withstand its influence. Persons who refused to comply with any order of *Nyankpe* were forbidden to enter their houses or farms until they had done so" (Goodliffe 1931, 19).

Through initiation rites, secret societies also educated youth in moral conduct and civic duty. Initiates were admonished to "avoid crimes, prevent others from becoming criminals, and watch over the observance of laws" (Ekondo 2019). They were reminded that all humans share a common ancestry and must not shed the blood of

their brothers. This moral pedagogy cultivated social responsibility and strengthened democratic citizenship long before the concept entered Western discourse. The *Bekali,* therefore, functioned as moral guardians of the polity. The activities of the secret societies are summarised by this writer when he states, "the authority of the secret societies was visible in their establishment of peace and justice, in sorcery, initiation, dance and the veneration of ancestors and the spirits" (Dah 1983, 182). By mediating between the visible and invisible orders, they sustained a sacred foundation for justice and legitimacy. As Khapoya notes, African governance integrated religion and politics into a holistic moral universe where law derived from both ancestral authority and communal consent (1998, 32).

V. Governance, Consensus, and the Democratic Ethos

The Bakundu traditional system illustrates what contemporary scholars term "consensual democracy". Leadership was legitimised through consultation, and authority was constantly checked by councils, kinship networks, and spiritual institutions. As Fortes and Evans-Pritchard emphasised, African rulers "governed by consent", and subjects could exert pressure to make them discharge their duties.

Three democratic principles underpinned Bakundu governance. First was participatory representation: every lineage and gender had a voice, either directly or through delegates. Second was accountability: rulers and councillors were judged by their service to the common good, and neglect of duty attracted moral sanctions. Third was collective decision-making: policies emerged from deliberation aimed at consensus, not majority rule- a form of participatory democracy suited to small, cohesive communities.

Moreover, Bakundu democracy was moral and spiritual. Authority was sacred because it was exercised for the preservation of life, peace, and fertility—the community's highest values. Justice sought restoration rather than punishment, echoing John Mbiti's

notion that African religion and ethics permeate all aspects of life (1990, 2). The *mowele mboka*, council and secret societies operated as interdependent organs of a single democratic organism in which power flowed from the people upward.

VI. Continuity, Change, and Colonial Disruption

The advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth century profoundly altered Bakundu governance. European administrators, misunderstanding the consensual and spiritual nature of traditional authority, imposed a hierarchical system of chiefs that contradicted the indigenous practice. Offices once earned by merit became hereditary, and power that had been shared became centralised.

Colonial rule thus dismantled the intricate balance between ruler, council, and people. As A. Njiasse-Njoya observed, colonial governments "invented chiefs for their own ends" (2003, 308), transforming spiritual custodians into political agents. The colonial distortion undermined communal accountability and introduced authoritarian tendencies alien to the Bakundu ethos.

Yet, elements of the old system endured. Even under colonial and post-colonial pressures, the moral authority of elders and councils persisted, and the language of communal consensus continued to guide village governance. In the contemporary quest for democracy in Africa, the Bakundu model offers valuable lessons: democracy is not a Western import but a restoration of indigenous traditions of participation, moral leadership, and social justice.

Conclusion

The Bakundu traditional authority system is a compelling illustration of African democracy rooted in community, consensus, and moral legitimacy. Its institutions—*Mowele mboka, janea ra mboka*, and

bekali—embodied a division of powers that ensured both accountability and cohesion. Authority was earned through service, decisions were reached through consultation, and justice aimed at reconciliation.

In Bakundu's thought, leadership was a sacred trust, society a moral organism, and democracy a lived practice of mutual respect. Long before the colonial encounter, the Bakundu governed themselves through structures that balanced individual rights with collective welfare. Recognising and valuing such indigenous systems not only challenges colonial narratives of African political inferiority but also provides inspiration for reconstructing democratic governance in Africa today. The Bakundu model—participatory, spiritual and human-centred—remains an enduring epitome of African democracy.

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