



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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Cameroon: Bassa traditional chiefs (particularly the chief in the village of Ndogkok), including their role, how many wives they can have, and the method for choosing a chief's successor in the event of his death; whether there are consequences for a person who refuses to assume the responsibilities of a traditional chief and, if so, state protection available (2001-Sept. 2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

The following information was provided in correspondence sent on 23 September 2004 by a research teacher at the University of Ngaoundéré in Cameroon, who is currently a doctoral student at the Grenoble Institute of Computer Science and Applied Mathematics (Institut d'informatique en mathématiques appliquées de Grenoble, IMAG) in France. The student indicated that his statements were based on his experience as former leader of the Elog Mpoo Youth (Jeunesse Elog Mpoo). During a 24 September 2004 telephone interview, he explained that the Elog Mpoo, the ethnic group to which he belongs, are related to the Bassa, and that the two groups share the same culture, traditions and customs.

Function and designation process of traditional chiefs

The Bassa-Mpoo (Bassa and Elog Mpoo) have two kinds of leaders, traditional chiefs and patriarchs. Traditional chiefs are [translation] "administrative auxiliaries" or [translation] "representatives of the subprefect." Their responsibilities are limited to administrative duties, such as collecting taxes, taking the census, registering births, and organizing elections.

Patriarchs have [translation] "the true traditional authority and power over other tribe members; they are therefore priests, doctors, protectors, etc."

The research teacher described the designation process of these leaders as follows:

[translation]

When a chief dies, the subprefect whom the village (or township) depends on asks the community to appoint a successor for him (generally a member of the deceased's family). The process can be simple when everyone agrees readily on a successor, or it can be complex, sometimes even leading to disputes when several people want the position, which is becoming increasingly politicized. Pressure to support one candidate or another may even come from very high

up in the nation's political and administrative hierarchy, but this is illegal.

New patriarchs are appointed by the patriarchs themselves, who make their choice according to their own preferences and to the need to elevate someone to that rank. A person must successfully complete the initiation ritual to become a patriarch. It is possible for a patriarch to initiate someone without consulting the others, but his admission to the brotherhood must be validated by the other members. Apart from this limited information, the workings of this group are secret and those who know such details are not allowed to divulge them.

Consequences of refusing the position of chief and available state protection

According to the student, the functions of the chief are administrative and [translation] "the law prohibits forcing someone to work against his or her will." In reality, some pressure groups can force a person to accept the position of traditional chief, although this is illegal and often done for political reasons. However, the student said that he was not aware of any case in which a person had problems because he refused to accept the position of traditional chief in the Bassa territory.

With regard to the protection available to a person who refuses the position of traditional chief, he explained that

[translation]

[t]he law protects everyone from that. However, in the Bassa-Mopo territory, there are two levels of authority: legal authority and traditional authority, which is obscure and imperceptible. If the traditional authorities condemn someone, the law cannot protect him, even if the person can prove that his problems are because of his family.

. . . [T]he functions of the chief and the patriarch are voluntary, and . . . the government of Cameroon guarantees that no person can be forced to accept them. However, in some families, these matters can be so important that people risk their lives. In addition, the methods used are not always understood by outsiders.

An article entitled "Canton Bassa à Douala : succession ouverte," published on 18 June 2003 on the Camer Online Website, reported that, upon the death of [translation] "His Majesty Mbodou Conrad, the patriarch of chiefs in the Wouri township," on 14 June 2003, [translation] "the third level chiefs of the Bassa township, under the leadership of Jérémie Beyissa, their dean," raised the question of succession. In this same article, Beyissa reminded others that he was the [translation] "chief of the village of Lopom, designated by his peers to rule until a new township chief was elected" (Camer Online 18 Sept. 2003). Beyissa also indicated that [translation] "succession among the Bassa has always been an elective process" (ibid.).

In a 30 March 2004 joint declaration by [translation] "the Sawa head chiefs of Wouri," Jérémie Beyissa Eboum was designated [translation] "the representative of the leading Bassa-Wouri township chiefdom" (*Échos du village* 30 Mar. 2004).

With regard to how many wives a traditional chief may have, the Cameroonian student said during a 24 September 2004 telephone interview that polygamy is widespread in Cameroon and added that, although it is not a rule, most Bassa traditional chiefs have several wives.

The Springerin Website also indicated that polygamy is widespread in Cameroon (2002), and a report published on the Website for the French Ministry of Employment and Solidarity classified Cameroon among 50 countries where polygamy is recognized (France n.d.).

No specific information on the chief of the village of Ndogkok could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, an article published on the Camer Online Website reported that the Bassa township is made up of 23 villages (18 June 2003).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Camer Online. 18 June 2003. Jacques Doo Bell. "Canton bassa à Douala : succession ouverte." <<http://camlions.iwebadmin.de/camguide/fr/news.php3?nid=2716>> [Accessed 27 Sept. 2004]

Échos du village [Douala]. 30 March 2004. "Déclaration des chefs supérieurs Sawa du Wouri sur la sauvegarde de l'identité et de la vie urbaine à Douala." <<http://www.chez.com/echosvillage/actualite10.htm>> [Accessed 23 Sept. 2004]

France. n.d. Ministry of Employment and Solidarity et al. "Pour sortir de la polygamie." <<http://www.social.gouv.fr/htm/dossiers/polygamie/1difficultes.htm>> [Accessed 28 Sept. 2004]

Institut d'informatique en mathématiques appliquées de Grenoble (IMAG), Grenoble. 24 September 2004. Telephone interview with a Cameroonian doctoral student who is also a research teacher at the University of Ngaoundéré in Cameroon.

_____. 23 September 2004. Correspondent from a Cameroonian doctoral student who is also a research teacher at the University of Ngaoundéré in Cameroon.

Springerin. 2002. Christian Höller. "Inside Outside Africa: an Interview with the Cameroonian Filmmaker Jean-Marie Téno." <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1398&lang=en> [Accessed 28 Sept. 2004]

Additional Sources Consulted

Three specialists on Cameroonian traditions did not respond to a request for information within the time constraints for this Response.

Publications : *Africa Confidential* , Resource Centre country file.

Internet sites, including : Africa Guide.com, Africatime, AllAfrica, BBC Africa, Cameroun Online, Dialog, *Le Messenger* , ReliefWeb.

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