

Alexander Seger (1986): "Ethnizität und Politik in Kamerun"

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A SUMMARY OF

ETHNICITY AND POLITICS IN CAMEROON

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to attempt to show the relationship between ethnicity and politics in Black Africa, using Cameroon as an example.

A peculiarity pertinent to Black Africa - and one which distinguishes it even from other regions of the Third World - is that 'tribalism', or 'ethnicity', has been elevated to a scientific paradigm which is seen as sufficient to explain most of the conflicts and undesirable political developments that take place there. In accordance with this 'ethnicistic' point of view, ethnic heterogeneity is simply equated with conflict.

The fact that Cameroon is characterized by an extraordinary stability and continuity - at least up to 1984 - when compared with the rest of Black Africa, even though it is a land of ethnic heterogeneity, seems to be a contradiction.

The question therefore is: Why do 'ethnies' (Fr.)(1) play only a minor role in Cameroon and in what way do ethnicity and politics relate to one another?

(1) 'Ethnie' has no adequate equivalent in English and is used here in the German or French sense. It is more neutral than 'ethnic category' or 'ethnic group', a distinction discussed in the German text.

I. BASIC ELEMENTS AND CONDITIONS OF ETHNICITY

Part I attempts to show that ethnicity has a fluid and dynamic nature, whose political, economic or social significance is determined by the respective context.

As a scientific concept, 'tribalism' has become superfluous because 'the tribe', as a principle of social organisation, rarely exists any more. At the present time, 'tribalism' is used mainly only in its ideological sense.

The concept of 'ethnicity' too has to be applied with much caution, as the cultural category 'ethnie' has all too often likewise been employed to designate a principle of social organisation. The very fact that this is not the case is sufficient to relativise the significance of ethnicity.

In Sections I.B. and I.C. it becomes obvious that, both in 'traditional' societies as well as under 'modern' conditions, ethnicity changes historically, that its significance is determined by situation and that is in no way exclusive versus other identification possibilities.

If ethnicity is relativised in this fundamental way, then the existence of 'ethnies' in Cameroon is not sufficient to explain all political, economic and social developments, a fact which applies to Black Africa as a whole. Thus, also, ethnic heterogeneity does not lead inevitably to political instability.

However, our question has only been partially answered: Why 'ethnies' play a less distinctive political role in Cameroon than in other African countries, still remains to be explained.

II. 'ETHNO-POLITICS' AND 'ETHNO-POLICY'

Part II thus focusses on the political plane in order to identify the special features both of the politics of, as well as of the policy toward, 'ethnies'. It is argued that the political significance of ethnicity in the wake of decolonisation was determined by certain contexts such as the vacuum created by the banning of the UPC, the existence of a clientele state or the interest of the elite. The wide variety of ethnic parties was seen as symptomatic.

As a result of the transcending of the clientele state, as a result of the growing ideology of national integration and as a result of the development towards the 'parti unique' ethno-politics gradually began to lose significance.

In the post-clientele state, 'ethnies' were essentially objects of Ahidjo's 'ethno-policy'. For, although on the surface Ahidjo propagated national integration, his legitimacy actually rested on the fact that he was in control of potentially divided political segments and was thus essential as a 'guarantee of unity' at the hub of the system. This division was able to be perpetuated by an unofficial 'dosage ethnique', through which 'ethnies' continued to be considered as categories of political reference and through which ethnic antagonisms were created or affirmed. This division was kept under control by means of the official criminalisation of ethnicity, which made the elite of the system dependent upon the goodwill of Ahidjo. At the same time, the 'dosage ethnique' gave the people the illusion of participation, thus blocking the path to other political activities.