Endogenous Norms, Local Powers and Social Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Customary Justice among the Bamoun and Manguissa

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comparative analysis of the Bamoun and Manguissa customary justice systems in order to understand how endogenous norms, local powers and legitimation logics structure conflict resolution in two Cameroonian societies. Within the framework of legal pluralism, the study shows that these communities mobilise deeply rooted customary mechanisms based on palaver, mediation, ordeals, narratives and rituals to maintain social cohesion and restore relational balance. Based on an ethnographic survey conducted between Foumban and Ebebda, the results reveal two contrasting models: a highly institutionalised Bamoun justice system, inherited from monarchical centralisation and Islamo-colonial hybridisation, and a segmented, flexible Manguisa justice system based on oral tradition. Despite these structural differences, the two systems converge in their restorative function and their vocation to preserve lineages and stabilise social relations. The article also highlights how actors navigate between customary law, state law and religious norms in a context of legal pluralism. These findings invite us to reconsider customary systems as relevant resources for thinking about local governance, restorative justice and endogenous peace mechanisms in Africa.

Keywords: customary justice; endogenous norms; local authorities; legal pluralism; conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

The legal landscape in Cameroon is marked by pluralism stemming from the country's colonial history and cultural diversity, where positive state law coexists with deeply rooted customary systems. As Merry (1988) and Griffiths (1986) point out, post-colonial societies are characterised by forms of legal pluralism in which different normative orders intersect, sometimes in tension. In Cameroon, customary justice, often referred to as 'ethno-justice' or endogenous justice, continues to play an essential role in social regulation, particularly in rural areas, where it is perceived as more accessible, more legitimate and better suited to local realities (Mbonda, 2017). In the Bamoun and Manguissa communities, these mechanisms remain central to pacifying social relations, preventing tensions and restoring community balance.

The literature on contemporary conflicts shows that, despite institutional advances, social tensions persist in various forms: armed conflicts, political crises, but also local antagonisms and everyday disputes (Boege, Brown, Clements & Nolan, 2009). As Woodhouse and Ramsbotham (2016) point out, societies facing multifaceted crises develop complex responses combining formal institutions and local pacification mechanisms. In this context, legal anthropology offers a relevant framework for analysing how African communities are reinventing or updating their normative practices. The Bamoun and Manguissa examples show that local societies mobilise their own legal resources – beliefs, values, procedures and institutions – to give meaning to, prevent and resolve conflicts rooted in their daily lives.

While modern courts apply universal norms, customary justice is based on a restorative logic, oriented towards repairing social ties rather than punishing the offender. Many authors point out that state legal systems often create distance and exclusion (Chanock, 1985; Roberts, 1979), while traditional courts promote negotiation,

consensus and reintegration (Zartman, 2000). This article thus examines a central issue: how do endogenous norms, forms of local power and processes of legitimisation structure customary justice among the Bamoun and Manguissa, and what do they reveal about the contradictions between state law and customary law? This structural tension, noted by authors such as Comaroff & Comaroff (2016), is a major challenge for understanding local governance and the dynamics of social cohesion.

In both groups studied, the rules governing land ownership, inheritance, marriage and beliefs are based on inherited norms that are constantly being reinterpreted (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Horton, 1993). Endogenous normativity is performed by actors invested with recognised authority: chiefs, notables, mediators, etc., whose legitimacy, to quote Weber (1971), stems as much from tradition as from charisma and practical effectiveness. These "peacemakers", to use the term documented in numerous African studies (Boege, 2006), embody local forms of power in which authority derives from social utility and the ability to bring about reconciliation. The study of the Bamoun and Manguissa thus provides insight into how these norms and powers construct an alternative legal order, centred on restoring community balance.

Comparing the two customary systems highlights structural similarities (palaver, family authority, mediation, trials by ordeal, symbolic sanctions) as well as differences linked to political history, territorial configuration and ritual practices specific to each group (Geschiere, 1995; Mbembe, 2000). This comparative approach is part of the anthropological tradition that values the study of cultural variations in law (Nader, 1965; Moore, 1978). By analysing the foundations of decision-making legitimacy, the article shows that, although the Bamoun and Manguissa use similar tools, the ways in which they are implemented differ, revealing distinct but complementary cosmologies and conceptions of the social in the understanding of endogenous legal dynamics.

This research contributes to legal anthropology by analysing the internal logics of customary justice and by highlighting the relevance of endogenous mechanisms for contemporary governance and peacebuilding. The study thus shows that the promotion of endogenous norms and local powers is not a nostalgia, but a serious avenue for rethinking justice and peace policies in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

1. Type of study

This research adopts a qualitative approach, in line with the requirements of legal anthropology, which aims to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the actors and in their natural context. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) point out, the qualitative approach allows us to grasp the complexity of cultural practices and normative systems by focusing on contextualised observation and interpretative analysis. The study is based on an ethnographic approach, as defined by Burawoy (2003), to understand customary mechanisms as they unfold in the Bamoun and Manguissa social worlds. This approach made it possible to examine endogenous norms, local powers and forms of legitimacy based on daily interactions and concrete conflict resolution situations.

2. Study sites and participants

The survey was conducted in two sociocultural contexts in Cameroon: Foumban, the centre of the Bamoun kingdom, and Ebebda, the territory of the Manguissa, both characterised by the presence of structured customary institutions and local authority figures. Participants were selected using contrastive sampling (Bertaux, 1997) in order to reflect the diversity of social positions involved in conflict management. The study thus included traditional chiefs, notables, customary mediators and litigants involved in family, land or matrimonial disputes. Theoretical saturation, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), determined when data collection was stopped, once the information gathered no longer produced new analytical categories.

3. Data collection methods

Data collection was based on a combination of complementary qualitative techniques. Direct and indirect observation, as described by Spradley (1980), enabled the analysis of interactions, rituals and mechanisms used during customary hearings, as well as the symbolic dynamics that structure them. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted according to the principles of Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) in order to gather representations of justice, decision-making logic and interpretations from the actors involved in the resolution- cesses. Life stories, inspired by the work of Bertaux (1981), made it possible to place individual trajectories in a collective framework, showing how personal experiences shape relationships to conflict. Finally, several focus groups (Morgan, 1997) were organised to highlight shared norms and differences in perception within communities.

4. Methods of data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis was based on a thematic approach according to Braun and Clarke (2006), aiming to identify categories relating to customary norms, the legitimacy of local authorities and conflict resolution mechanisms. Visual material (photographs, videos) was subjected to iconographic analysis to identify the symbolic elements used in customary procedures.

This comparative analysis of the Bamoun and Manguissa legal systems falls within the field of comparative customary law, which, as shown by Glenn (2014) and Rouland (1991), is an area of comparative law specifically oriented towards oral, flexible and socially situated norms. This theoretical framework considers custom as a *living*, evolving and relational *law*, whose validity is based on community recognition, social memory and contextual adjustment. From this perspective, comparing two customary legal systems is not a matter of juxtaposing explicit rules, but of analysing legal logics, i.e. distinct ways of producing norms, conceiving authority, seeking truth and regulating tensions (Allott, 1960; Woodman, 1996; Menski, 2006). This approach is essential for understanding systems that operate on the basis of plurality of institutions, oral tradition, variability of norms and the strong interconnection between law, kinship, territory and beliefs. The approach adopted also pays attention to legal pluralism, a concept developed by Griffiths (1986) and Merry (1988), which emphasises the coexistence of several normative orders (customary, religious, state) within the same social spaces. This plurality makes it possible to understand how, in the Bamoun and Manguissa worlds, actors navigate between different registers of legitimacy to resolve conflicts, negotiate rights and adapt customary practices to contemporary transformations.

In addition to this comparative perspective, legal anthropology makes a key contribution. Three approaches are used here. The functionalist approach, inherited from Malinowski (1926) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952), interprets customary institutions as mechanisms designed to preserve social cohesion, ensure the reproduction of lineages and stabilise family relationships. It sheds light on the convergences observed between the two societies, despite their divergent political structures. The historical-evolutionary approach, inspired by Moore (1978), Kopytoff (1987) and Geschiere (1993), shows that current forms of normativity stem from distinct historical trajectories: centralised monarchy, Islamisation and legal formalisation among the Bamoun; segmental organisation, horizontal authority and lineage continuity among the Manguissa. Finally, the culturalist approach, in line with Geertz (1983) and Comaroff & Roberts (1981), allows us to understand law as a symbolic language rooted in representations of power, the individual, the community and the sacred. It reveals that Bamoun justice and Manguissa justice re based on different cosmological universes, producing distinct conceptions of conflict (litigation to be settled versus relationships to be repaired), authority (vertical versus horizontal) and legitimacy. Together, these three perspectives allow us to understand comparative customary law as a dynamic field, where norms, practices and values are reconfigured at the intersection of history, culture and social functions.

RESULTS

Legal structures: centralised monarchy versus segmentary organisation

A comparative analysis of legal structures reveals a clear contrast between the Bamoun model, based on a centralised monarchy, and that of the Manguissa, structured according to a segmentary organisation. Bamoun society has a hierarchical political and legal system, where authority is concentrated around the sultan and highly institutionalised customary institutions such as chiefdoms, customary courts and specialised palace bodies. This configuration corresponds to the model of centralised political systems described by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), in which power is embodied by a sovereign figure and exercised through a chain of formal authorities. Bamoun history, marked by monarchical consolidation, the introduction of Islam and colonial hybridisation, has contributed to reinforcing this centralisation, giving customary law a structured, codified and sometimes written

dimension (Chilver, 1967; Geary, 1988; Geschiere, 1993). In this context, conflict is conceived as a dispute to be settled, falling within the jurisdiction of a higher authority whose legitimacy is political, religious and symbolic.

Conversely, the Manguissa system is similar to the segmentary societies described by Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Middleton and Tait (1958), where authority is distributed among lineages, elders and heads of families, without a unified political centre. The absence of a centralised chiefdom or formal judicial institutions means that justice is administered horizontally, through negotiation, collective deliberation and the mobilisation of lineage solidarity. In this model, power derives less from institutional status than from reputation, age, wisdom or position within the lineage, confirming Kopytoff's (1987) analyses of diffusely organised Bantu societies. Conflict is understood as a relational disruption to be repaired, rather than a fault to be judged. This segmentary structure produces a flexible, adaptive and highly contextualised customary law, in which speech and consensus occupy a central place. Thus, the opposition between the centralised Bamoun monarchy and the segmentary Mangissa organisation highlights two distinct African models of authority and law production.

Resolution practices: hierarchical judgement vs. community deliberation

Among the Bamoun, conflict resolution practices are based on a hierarchical and institutionalised model, where disputes are treated as legal and administrative matters to be investigated and then decided. This model is part of a long tradition of centralised monarchy, where the sultan and subordinate customary authorities (chiefdoms, notables, customary courts) exercise structured judicial power. Resolution procedures are characterised by the organisation of hearings, the collection of testimony, the analysis of the morality of the actors and the use of precedents, sometimes recorded in registers or written documents; a legacy of the shü-mom writi , Islam and colonial administration (Chilver, 1967; Geary, 1988; Geschiere, 1993). The judgement is the culmination of a vertical process in which the decision, issued by a legitimate authority, aims not only to settle the dispute between the parties but also to reaffirm the social and symbolic order. This verticality of decision-making confirms the analyses of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) on centralised African systems, as well as those of Moore (1978), who describes these institutions as "semi-autonomous social fields" capable of producing their own norms while articulating with external legal systems.

The Manguissa mobilise a model based on community deliberation, characteristic of segmentary societies where authority is distributed among lineages and elders. Here, conflict resolution is based on palaver, collective negotiation and the search for consensus, a process in which speech, reputation, lineage memory and narratives play a central role. Conflict is not perceived as a fault to be punished by a higher authority, but as a relational disruption requiring redress (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Middleton & Tait, 1958). The elders, recognised moral figures, orchestrate the discussions without imposing a verdict, but by facilitating a decision that is acceptable to all. This model perfectly reflects the analyses of Gluckman (1955), for whom African legal mechanisms aim above all to restore harmony rather than to punish. Unlike the Bamoun system, the decision derives its legitimacy not from the institutional position of the person who makes it, but from the collective agreement of the participants. Manguissa justice thus appears as a space for normative co-construction that is flexible and adaptive, confirming Kopytoff's (1987) observations on Bantu lineage societies where law is intrinsically negotiated.

Normativity: formalisation vs contextual orality

A comparison of the Bamoun and Manguissa normative systems highlights two profoundly different ways of producing, transmitting and applying customary law. In both societies, norms are an essential tool for social cohesion, managing tensions and preserving family ties. However, the historical, political and institutional conditions in which these norms emerged have shaped two contrasting models: a formalised, institutional and hierarchical model among the Bamoun, and an oral, flexible and contextualised model among the Manguissa. Building on these structural differences, the following sections analyse how normativity and historical trajectories further shape customary justice.

Among the Bamoun, normativity is highly formalised, a direct consequence of monarchical centralisation, gradual Islamisation and colonial administrative influence. The introduction of Shu-Mom script and the use of

customary documents have helped to stabilise certain rules, codify procedures and institutionalise customary courts with an internal hierarchy (Chilver, 1967; Geary, 1988; Geschiere, 1993). Bamoun norms thus function as prescriptive references mobilised by authorities vested with political and ritual power. This formalisation makes Bamoun customary law a relatively structured system, akin to what Moore (1978) describes as *a semi-autonomous social field*. Conflict is dealt with within a stable normative framework, where decisions are the result of a controlled and hierarchical application of norms.

Among the Manguissa, on the contrary, normativity is based on contextual orality, characteristic of segmentary societies where rules are not codified but embodied in daily practices, the memory of lineage and the moral authority of elders. Norms are adjusted according to circumstances, the quality of social relations and the history of the protagonists, which gives customary law considerable flexibility (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Middleton & Tait, 1958). Unlike the Bamoun, the norm does not exist as a stabilised text but as an *interpreted practice*, updated through discussions and palaver. This plasticity is consistent with Woodman's analysis (1996), which emphasises that African customary law is based more on relational principles than on abstract rules. Among the Manguissa, speech, reputation and the search for consensus are the main vectors of normativity, reflecting a model in which law is always situated, negotiated and deeply embedded in the social fabric.

Historical trajectories: institutionalisation vs. lineage continuity

The historical trajectories of the Bamoun and Manguissa societies have profoundly shaped the nature and organisation of their legal systems, largely explaining the differences observed today between formalisation and orality, verticality and horizontality, judgement and negotiation. While the Bamoun experienced monarchical centralisation supported by major political, religious and administrative developments, the Manguissa retained a segmentary organisation rooted in kinship and community deliberation. This historical divergence is consistent with the analyses of Moore (1978) and Kopytoff (1987), for whom African legal systems are the product of "differentiated political histories" and cannot be understood without placing their evolution in their socio-cultural contexts. Thus, current legal systems are not immutable structures, but the result of dynamics of transformation, hybridisation and historical continuities specific to each group.

Among the Bamoun, the historical trajectory is characterised by a continuous process of institutionalisation of customary law, driven by the political centralisation of the kingdom and consolidated by religious and colonial influence. From the pre-colonial period onwards, the monarchy absorbed and hierarchised local regulatory systems, giving rise to specialised judicial bodies such as chiefdoms, customary courts and the sultan's palatine courts (Chilver, 1967). The introduction of Islam, followed by the reign of Sultan Njoya, played a fundamental role in structuring the law, particularly through the shü-mom script and the recording of customary decisions (Geary, 1988). German and then French colonisation reinforced this dynamic by integrating the sultanate into the judicial system, producing what Geschiere (1993) describes as a 'legal hybrid' combining local custom and colonial bureaucracy. As a result, the Bamoun system has moved towards increasing formalisation, which places conflict resolution within an administrative, hierarchical and documented framework.

The historical trajectory of the Manguissa follows a segmentary model based on kinship, oral tradition and community mediation. Having experienced no political centralisation comparable to that of the Bamoun, the Manguissa have preserved a system in which authority is distributed among lineages and where conflict resolution mechanisms remain largely uninstitutionalised, flexible and contextual (Middleton & Tait, 1958). The absence of centralised monarchical power or a structured judicial body has fostered the persistence of horizontal, dialogical and collective justice, in line with Evans-Pritchard's (1940) observations on African acephalous societies. Unlike the Bamoun, colonisation did not produce a marked judicial structure: local authorities continued to manage conflicts through speech, memory and community precedents. This continuity of lineage shows that, among the Manguissa, customary justice remains a deeply relational system, shaped by group cohesion rather than institutional authority.

The role of the symbolic and the sacred: centralised ritualisation vs. community cohesion

The role of the sacred and ritual practices in the production and legitimisation of law is an essential element of African legal systems, where justice is never strictly secular. In Bamoun and Manguissa societies, beliefs, rites and interventions from the invisible world contribute to the construction of truth, the resolution of conflicts and the restoration of social balance. However, their mobilisation obeys distinct institutional and cosmological logics. While among the Bamoun ritual reinforces the centralised authority of monarchical power, among the Manguissa it acts primarily as a community mechanism for cohesion and moral regulation. These differences are consistent with the analyses of Turner (1969) and Geertz (1983), according to whom customary law cannot be understood without an understanding of the symbolic universes that underpin it.

Among the Bamoun, the sacred occupies a structuring place within a system where judicial power is closely linked to royal power and monarchical cosmology. The sultan embodies a political-religious figure, a mediator between the living, the ancestors and spiritual forces, which gives his decisions a transcendent dimension (Chilver, 1967; Geary, 1988). Certain rituals, such as invoking ancestors, divination practices and purification rituals, are incorporated into procedures or used in serious disputes, reinforcing the legitimacy of the verdict by placing it within a broader cosmological order (Geschiere, 1993). This centralisation of the sacred corresponds to the model described by Evans-Pritchard (1937), in which religious authority consolidates political and legal authority. Bamoun ritualisation thus contributes to institutionalising customary justice by giving decisions an unquestionable character based on a hierarchical sacredness.

Among the Manguissa, the sacred fulfils a different function: it is less an instrument of centralised authority than a community support for cohesion and reparation. The rites used in dispute resolution serve to restore disturbed harmony rather than to assert a sovereign truth (Middleton & Tait, 1958). This mobilisation of the sacred reinforces the idea that, in segmentary societies, justice is based more on relational balance than on institutional judgement, echoing the observations of Bohannan (1957) and Comaroff & Roberts (1981). Ritual functions as a shared moral language, a means of reaffirming collective norms and ensuring the group's adherence to the decision. Thus, among the Manguissa, the sacred is a horizontal, distributed mechanism that supports cohesion rather than establishing authority.

Legal pluralism and contemporary transformations: state articulation vs. pragmatic adjustments

The contemporary legal context of Bamoun and Manguissa societies is marked by a strong dynamic of legal pluralism, understood as the coexistence and interaction of several normative orders: customary law, state law, religious norms and sometimes transnational norms (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988). In this context, actors navigate between different sources of authority according to their needs and the issues at stake in the conflict, producing strategies of hybridisation, adjustment or normative circumvention. This pluralism does not weaken customary law: on the contrary, it contributes to its recomposition, revealing its capacity to adapt to social transformations linked to urbanisation, schooling, mobility and individualisation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). However, the modalities of this adaptation vary greatly between the Bamoun and the Manguissa, as they depend on the political structure, the degree of institutionalisation and the nature of local authorities.

Among the Bamoun, legal pluralism is reflected in an institutional articulation between custom and state law. Customary courts, chiefdoms and palace bodies often work in conjunction with administrative or civil courts, allowing norms to circulate between the two systems. This close relationship is the result of a long historical process during which the Bamoun monarchy was integrated and then recognised as a judicial auxiliary by the colonial administration, producing a hybrid system combining local custom and bureaucratic models (Geschiere, 1993). Thus, actors have a range of remedies at their disposal, which they mobilise according to the nature of the conflict and the desired strategy.

Among the Manguissa, legal pluralism manifests itself more through pragmatic adjustments made on a daily basis, without any formal institutional link to the state. Actors combine, filter or negotiate customary, religious and administrative norms according to the specific configuration of the conflict, a dynamic observed by Woodman (1996) and Allott (1960). The absence of structured customary jurisdictions places conflict resolution in a fluid space where norms are selected according to opportunities, lineage alliances, power relations and available resources: a phenomenon that Comaroff and Roberts (1981) describe as a "normative strategy" specific to decentralised systems. This pragmatic pluralism allows for great adaptability, but it can also create

contradictions or inequalities, particularly in urban areas where lineage solidarity is weakened. Thus, while the Bamoun institutionally articulate pluralism, the Manguissa experience it as a flexible, contextual and essentially relational process.

Functional convergences: cohesion, stabilisation, social reproduction

These convergences reflect what functionalist anthropologists, notably Malinowski (1926), Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Fortes (1969), have described as the central function of law in African societies: maintaining group balance and preventing social breakdown. In both contexts studied, customary regulation is less about defining abstract individual rights than about protecting fundamental social structures, whether family, kinship, marriage alliances or relationship to the territory. This functional orientation contributes to the resilience of both systems in an environment marked by economic, social and political transformations.

Among the Bamoun, social cohesion is ensured by a hierarchical customary judicial system that aims to settle disputes while preserving the monarchical order and the unity of the group in general. Land, inheritance and matrimonial disputes are interpreted as threats to the stability of lineages and, by extension, to the Bamoun social order. The function of the judgement handed down by the customary authorities is to restore a disturbed balance while reaffirming the legitimacy of central power (Chilver, 1967; Geary, 1988). Even when punitive, decisions are primarily aimed at reintegrating the offender into the community, in line with Gluckman's analysis (1955), for whom African justice seeks to avoid lasting exclusion. Thus, the main function of Bamoun justice is to maintain a hierarchical social order, guarantee the continuity of lineages and prevent fragmentation.

Among the Manguissa, social cohesion relies more on negotiation and collective deliberation, which corresponds to the stabilising function observed in many segmentary African societies (Middleton & Tait, 1958; Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Conflict resolution aims above all to restore relational harmony, as any disagreement is perceived as a risk of rupture within the lineage or village. The mechanisms mobilised serve to ease tensions, rebuild relationships and ensure the continuity of family ties. This restorative dimension, described by Comaroff and Roberts (1981), emphasises that conflict is not an individual matter, but a collective imbalance involving the entire community. In this sense, Manguissa justice plays an essential role in social reproduction, not by imposing a verdict, but by building an agreement that rebuilds the fabric of relationships and reinforces shared social norms.

DISCUSSION

Beyond their descriptive contrast, the Bamoun and Manguissa cases challenge classical readings of customary law by showing that legitimacy is not derived from institutional form alone, but from historically embedded practices and cosmologies. This echoes the arguments of Comaroff and Roberts (1981), who emphasise that customary law should be understood as a structured system of meaning rather than a simple mechanical response to social tensions ( ).

A second issue discussed in this research concerns the degree of formalisation of customary law. Among the Bamoun, the high level of institutionalisation observed is in line with the work of Geschiere (1993) and Geary (1988), who show how the Bamoun monarchy has integrated and transformed its religious, colonial and local references to produce a hierarchical and hybrid legal system. Conversely, Mangussa normativity, based on orality and contextual flexibility, illustrates the segmentary model described by Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Middleton & Tait (1958). However, our findings refine these theories by showing that orality is not synonymous with normative fragility: on the contrary, it is a tool for dynamic adaptation, capable of responding to changing contexts, as suggested by Woodman (1996).

Finally, the issue of legal pluralism appears to be a major area for discussion. The results confirm the analyses of Griffiths (1986) and Merry (1988) that the coexistence of several legal orders does not necessarily weaken customary law: on the contrary, it creates hybrid regimes in which actors strategically navigate between different sources of legitimacy. However, our findings suggest that this hybridisation is not neutral: it redefines local hierarchies, shifts forms of authority and transforms conflict resolution mechanisms. Thus, the discussion highlights that customary rights are neither fixed nor residual; they participate fully in contemporary legal

recompositions, demonstrating an adaptability that challenges classical theories opposing modern law and traditional law.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how customary justice among the Bamoun and the Manguissa is structured through endogenous norms, local power configurations and socially embedded forms of legitimacy. By adopting a comparative legal-anthropological approach, the study demonstrates that customary justice cannot be understood as a homogeneous or residual system, but rather as a set of historically situated legal orders shaped by distinct political structures, cosmologies and modes of authority. The contrast between a highly institutionalised, monarchically centralised Bamoun system and a segmentary, deliberative Manguissa system highlights how different legal forms emerge from differentiated social and historical trajectories.

Beyond description, the findings contribute to ongoing debates in legal anthropology and legal pluralism by challenging the assumption that legitimacy primarily derives from institutional formalisation or codification. Instead, the analysis shows that legitimacy in customary justice is produced through socially recognised practices, ritualised procedures and collective processes of validation. In this sense, the Bamoun and Manguissa cases refine functionalist interpretations of African legal systems by demonstrating that social cohesion and restorative outcomes are not automatic effects of legal form, but the result of negotiated and context-specific normative processes.

Finally, this study has implications for contemporary discussions on governance, mediation and restorative justice in Africa. In contexts where state judicial institutions often remain distant from local realities, customary justice systems continue to function as accessible and meaningful arenas for conflict resolution. Recognising these systems not as alternatives to state law but as complementary normative orders invites a rethinking of legal pluralism that foregrounds local legitimacy, social embeddedness and historical depth. While the findings are grounded in specific ethnographic contexts and therefore do not claim universal generalisability, they point to the analytical and practical value of endogenous justice mechanisms in informing debates on legal reform, local governance and peacebuilding in plural legal environments.

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