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Contested Authority and Humanitarian Governance

Chieftaincy, Refugees and the Polycephaly of Power in Eastern Cameroon

Abstract: This article examines how forced displacement and international aid reshape local authority, focusing on the role of customary leaders in refugee-hosting areas. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, it analyses how chiefs navigate increasingly plural governance landscapes shaped by state officials, aid organisations and refugee-led institutions. Mobilising the concept of polycephaly of power, the article argues that authority in displacement contexts is not eroded but rather reconfigured through negotiation and brokerage. Forced migration reveals both the resilience and the fragility of customary institutions, while aid interventions simultaneously reshape local hierarchies and reinforce state authority. Polycephaly constitutes a mode of governance shaped by symbolic capital, negotiation and overlapping claims to legitimacy. Forced displacement becomes a site of political reconfiguration where authority is enacted, contested and continuously reassembled.

Keywords: brokerage, Cameroon, customary authority, hybrid governance, refugee

Late afternoon in Gado-Badzere, home to Cameroon's largest refugee camp. I am speaking with a Mbororo notable, who has worked with NGOs for over a decade, about recent transformations in the region:

> In some localities, the presence of refugees has strengthened the authority of certain traditional chiefs and their chieftaincies. Take villages such as Lolo or Mbile: these were marginal chiefs, with little standing or influence. But the arrival of refugees has elevated their status and given them new opportunities. [. . .] They have gained power and resources by acting as intermediaries for UNHCR and INGOs, transforming their position and standing in a very real way.[1]

Building on such observations, this article investigates how forced displacement and international aid reshape local governance in eastern Cameroon by reconfiguring the authority, legitimacy and visibility of customary chiefs. It focuses on refugee-hosting areas to examine how chiefs navigate institutional pluralism, mediate between overlapping actors and deploy strategies of brokerage and adaptation to maintain or renegotiate their position. In doing so, the article contributes to anthropological debates on governance, authority and intermediaries in displacement contexts.

While transborder movements and the presence of refugees in eastern Cameroon are long-standing phenomena, traceable to the precolonial period and sustained

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under colonial and post-independence administrations (Cordell 2002; Seignobos 2008; Lefort-Rieu and Minfegue, 2021), their scale has increased significantly over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2014, over 120,000 refugees fled conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) to Cameroon, with UNHCR registering up to 7,000 new arrivals per week at the crisis' peak. This prompted the creation of seven formal refugee sites in the East and Adamawa regions by UNHCR and the Cameroonian government. However, most displaced persons relied on family and religious networks to settle in or near sparsely populated rural villages (Gambo 2014; INS 2020; Wangyang and Ngouyamsa 2022). As of August 2025, 278,656 CAR refugees were officially registered in Cameroon, with thirty percent residing in official sites and seventy percent in 'self-settled' (*auto-installés*) arrangements.[2]

These arrivals and the related international aid have profoundly reshaped local governance, authority and legitimacy (Gambo 2014; Keen 2018; Lansky 2014; Minfegue 2023), especially for customary authorities. As the opening vignette illustrates, demographic growth and international aid have opened new avenues for some chiefs to (re)assert themselves – while simultaneously exposing them to contestation, marginalisation or instrumentalisation. To conceptualise these dynamics, I draw on the notion of 'polycephaly of power', applied at two interrelated levels: at the actor level, to analyse the hybrid and negotiated roles of chiefs across overlapping power systems; and at the systemic level, to capture the broader pluralisation of governance through the coexistence of customary, state, humanitarian and refugee-led authorities. The article explores how chiefs navigate this institutional complexity by mediating between diverse actors and deploying strategies of brokerage, redistribution and symbolic positioning to sustain or reconfigure their legitimacy.

Such transformations must also be situated within the longer history of chieftaincy in Cameroon, where traditional authority has long operated at the intersection of overlapping political and institutional orders. Under colonial rule, chiefs served as intermediaries, implementing colonial directives while maintaining local order (Geschiere 1993; Mamdani 1996). After independence, this intermediary role was formalised through their designation as 'auxiliaries of the administration' (Niep 1986). While this status anchored them within the state apparatus, it often curtailed their autonomy and made them reliant on political patronage (Fisiy 1995; Mouiche 2006).

These historical dynamics remain relevant today, particularly in refugee-hosting areas where customary leaders must contend with a range of new actors – refugee representatives, displaced populations, aid organisations – who may challenge, bypass or reinforce their authority. Indeed, as in other Sub-Saharan contexts, chieftaincy continues to serve as a central interface between state administrations, international organisations and local populations (Olivier de Sardan 2011b). Building on the Manchester School tradition (Balandier 1967; Gluckman 1949) and the socio-anthropology of development (Blundo and Le Meur 2008; Olivier de Sardan 2009), the article conceptualises chieftaincy as both a political institution and a dynamic governance mechanism. It explores how chiefs navigate transformations in legitimacy amid refugee arrivals and the expansion of aid governance (Agier 2011; Pincock et al 2020). It asks how these overlapping dynamics reshape their roles, status and authority within increasingly pluralistic local governance landscapes.

The article makes three contributions. First, it documents how forced migration and international aid reconfigure notability – understood as the capacity to mobilise networks, gain recognition and access resources (Mattina 2004). Second, it contributes to anthropological debates on hybrid governance by showing how customary authority adapts to shifting institutional configurations. Third, it revisits the notion of a 'chiefly mode of governance' (Olivier de Sardan 2009, 2011b), arguing that the Cameroonian case – marked by state centralisation, humanitarian intervention and local political competition – offers new insights into the pluralisation of authority in displacement settings.

Methods

This article draws on two years of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cameroon across two distinct periods (2017–2018 and 2020–2021), while I was working with an international non-governmental organisation (INGO).[3] This dual position as both a researcher and a practitioner privileged access to formal institutional arenas – coordination meetings, project planning sessions, state-aid consultations – as well as to informal interactions and everyday negotiations. Fieldwork involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with a wide range of stakeholders: UN and NGO staff, customary leaders, refugee representatives, and members of both displaced and host populations. This approach enabled a fine-grained analysis of how various actors interpret, contest or accommodate shifting configurations of authority and legitimacy.

This dual role also raised ethical and epistemological challenges. Although my status was known to colleagues, supervisors, local authorities and research participants, in many day-to-day interactions my INGO identity tended to take precedence over that of ethnographer. I could not always, for example, announce at each meeting that exchanges might inform academic work (see Deligne 2018: 234). These constraints required continuous reflexivity. I drew on literature by other scholar-practitioners (Brabant 2013; Fresia and Lavigne-Delville 2018; Mosse 2005, 2011; Schattner-Ornan 2024) to guide my approach. Interviewees were reminded of my dual role, and informed consent was systematically obtained. All participants' names have been anonymised and identifying details have been modified where needed. In particularly sensitive cases – especially where individuals held identifiable positions such as chiefs or refugee representatives – I anonymised the material as fully as possible or chose not to include certain observations when I judged that the risks of exposure or harm could not be adequately mitigated. In a limited number of instances where specific individuals were readily recognisable, I obtained their explicit consent to be included in the academic analysis. These individuals were informed of the nature and purpose of the research and agreed to the inclusion of relevant material. While I acknowledge that power imbalances in displacement contexts can rarely be entirely resolved, I aimed to reduce these asymmetries as much as possible through transparency, caution and critical self-reflection.

Navigating this dual positioning also meant balancing anthropological critique with operational pragmatism. The 'triangular relationships' between ethnographer,

aid institutions and displaced populations shaped both research and professional duties (Baujard 2005). My recruitment by the INGO was partly due to my anthropological training, reflecting a growing interest in ethnographic insights to improve programme design (Enten 2021; Olivier de Sardan 2011a). My stance aligned with what Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2021: 393) describes as 'critical reformism': a civic commitment to rigorous, independent research that can inform more grounded practices.

Qualitative data were analysed through iterative, thematic coding, combining inductive insights with theoretical literature on authority, brokerage and hybrid governance. Close readings of fieldnotes and transcripts, alongside cross-case comparisons, revealed recurring patterns and broader implications for understanding the reconfiguration of customary authority in displacement settings.

This article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the conceptual framework, drawing on scholarship on customary authority, hybrid governance and forced migration. The empirical core comprises three main sections. The first examines how chiefs act as humanitarian intermediaries, focusing on brokerage, clientelism and symbolic strategies. The second explores aid redistribution and the pluralisation of political arenas, including the emergence of refugee leadership. The third analyses how chiefs collectively mobilise and leverage administrative ties to reassert their authority within overlapping governance systems. The conclusion reflects on how displacement reshapes authority within polycentric governance landscapes and how chiefs navigate these transformations.

The Dynamics of Customary Authority: Legitimacy, Governance and Aid Intermediation

Customary authority in Cameroon – as in other Sub-Saharan contexts – is inherently dynamic, shaped by ongoing negotiations over legitimacy and power within shifting political, social and institutional conditions. These dynamics form the basis of the article's main inquiry into how customary authority is negotiated and reconfigured in the context of displacement and humanitarian governance. Chiefs occupy a distinctive intermediary position, navigating between local communities, state authorities and external actors. Their authority is therefore fluid: simultaneously constructed, contested and redefined through structural constraints and individual agency (Lund 2006; Quinn 2014). This section situates Cameroonian chieftaincy in its historical, political and socio-economic context, while connecting it to broader debates on migration governance and brokerage.

Historical Trajectories of Customary Authority in Cameroon

As noted in the introduction, colonial rule in Cameroon positioned chiefs as key intermediaries for implementing colonial policies (Geschiere 1993). Post-independence, this role was formalised through a three-tier chieftaincy structure, which expanded the state's territorial reach but increased chief's dependency on political elites, limiting autonomy (Fisiy 1995; Niep 1986).

Today, Cameroonian chieftaincy operates within a highly centralised, authoritarian system where decentralisation remains largely uncomplete (Mfewou 2022; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998). Chiefs' alignment with ruling elites provides them access to resources but also reproduces patrimonial logics and constrains autonomous governance (Mouiche 2006; Ngwa 2025). Despite their formal role as 'auxiliaries of the administration', many chiefs retain strong local legitimacy, often seen as advocates for community interests rather than mere extensions of state power (Bopda 1993; Mback 2000).

Through land oversight, dispute mediation and development initiatives, chiefs exercise governance that may complement or challenge state power (Nyamnjoh 2014; Zelao 2017). Recent scholarship highlights the adaptability of chieftaincy, revealing how emerging elites leverage ethnic and cultural symbolism to consolidate influence – both within state apparatus and locally, where access to land, labour and symbolic capital remains central (Mfewou 2022; Ngwa 2025). These dynamics reaffirm that chieftaincy is a site of negotiated legitimacy shaped by historical legacies and contemporary demands.

Customary Authority, Humanitarian Governance and the Politics of Brokerage

Forced migration governance introduces new challenges for customary authorities, especially in refugee-hosting areas. Though under-studied in Cameroon, African cases show that chiefs increasingly act as humanitarian brokers, mediating between aid agencies, state actors and local populations. Early West African studies established brokerage as deeply embedded in local political orders, countering views of brokers as merely opportunistic (Bierschenk et al 2002; Boissevain 1969; Lewis and Mosse 2006). Recent research shows how chiefs adapt to the logics of contemporary aid systems, acting as gatekeepers, mediators and facilitators between refugees, hosts and international actors. Their legitimacy often relies on both customary anchoring and administrative recognition (Beresford 2015; Bourblanc and Ducrot 2018).

This dual position requires balancing 'upward' accountability to state and aid institutions, and 'downward' legitimacy to local communities (Buur and Kyed 2007; Mapedza 2007). Drawing on the concept of extraversion (Bayart and Ellis 2000), some scholars show how chiefs appropriate aid strategically to reinforce their material and symbolic power (Komujuni and Büscher 2020). Prolonged humanitarian interventions can also shift the foundations of chiefly legitimacy, from community recognition to international alignment (Komujuni 2019).

These insights align with broader literature on migration and humanitarian intermediaries – from 'fixers' and 'connection men' (Alpes 2019; Piot 2019) to street-level bureaucrats in refugee governance (Gatter 2023; Riva and Hoffstaedter 2021; Saltsman 2014). While these actors are often transient or informally embedded (McKeown 2012; Richter 2019), chiefs are institutionally anchored and territorially mandated. Their rootedness enables them to operate across multiple dimensions of governance, both vertical (state-aid hierarchies) and horizontal (community-refugee leadership). As such, they offer a productive lens to examine how authority is enacted, negotiated and contested in hybrid governance landscapes.

Hybridity, Plural Governance and the Polycephaly of Power

Drawing on the previous discussion of brokerage and customary authority, this article builds on Olivier de Sardan's (2009, 2011b) concept of the 'chiefly mode of local governance' to examine how chiefs in Cameroon combine administrative roles, customary legitimacy and informal practices to maintain relevance amid governance transformations. At the heart of this mode lies the ability to convert material resources into symbolic and social capital through redistribution and reciprocity, a process central to the ongoing negotiation of chiefly legitimacy. Chieftaincy, far from static, evolves in response to broader socio-political and economic changes (Hyden 2008; Verweijen and Van Bockhaven 2020).

Extending this perspective, I argue that chieftaincy in Cameroon embodies a hybrid, polycephalous governance model. Hybridity here refers to the interplay of traditional, state and aid governance systems (Albrecht 2017; Clark 2007; Goodfellow and Lindemann 2013). Chiefs' legitimacy emerges through interactions not only with local populations and administrative authorities, but also with aid actors (Ibreck and Pendle 2016; Lentz 1998; Van Dijk and Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1999). In displacement contexts, this dynamic is further complicated by the rise of refugee leadership structures, whose legitimacy derives from distinct constituencies. The result is a landscape of jurisdictional ambiguity and competing claims to authority (Djiga 2009).

These competing and overlapping structures exemplify what Olivier de Sardan (2009: 15) describes as the 'polycephaly of power': the coexistence of multiple, often rival centres of authority within the same governance space. This article mobilises the concept analytically at two interrelated levels: the micro level, where authority is negotiated among diverse actors in local governance arrangements, and the macro level, where broader patterns of governance pluralisation involve customary, state and aid actors. Chiefs do not simply coexist with other institutions; they strategically negotiate their position within an evolving and contested institutional landscape.

By tracing how customary leaders assert, adapt and sometimes recalibrate their authority in displacement-affected areas, the analysis contributes to debates on hybrid governance, authority and brokerage. It connects classic anthropological work on chieftaincy with broader research on aid and migration politics, offering new insights into how authority is enacted, challenged and transformed within plural governance environments.

Chiefs as Brokers of Humanitarian Aid: Using Aid to Bolster Notability

While the role of customary chiefs in humanitarian settings varies across displacement contexts, in eastern Cameroon aid interventions have positioned them as critical intermediaries – though not without ambivalence. As analysed below, international aid can reshape chiefly authority by amplifying its brokerage function, offering opportunities to access resources and enhance their notability (Mattina 2004). This section examines these dynamics using the case of the chief of Gado-Badzere and his strategic engagement with aid actors.

Negotiating Aid: Brokerage and Gatekeeping in Practice

In 2014, UNHCR established Cameroon's largest refugee settlement in Gado-Badzere, hosting nearly 25,870 individuals.[4] This transformed the village into an aid hub (Minfegue 2019; Lefort-Rieu and Minfegue 2026) and opened new opportunities for the local chief to reposition himself within changing governance dynamics. When I met him in February 2020 with INGO colleagues, he described his locality as:

> A small village, now transformed into a large locality thanks to the arrival of refugees fleeing the Central African Republic. It's true that these influxes have created tensions with the host populations [. . .] for example, over access to natural resources. But what can we do? They [the refugees] have nothing, and we cannot say no to them when they have nothing.[5]

While evoking compassion and solidarity, his discourse was tailored to its audience – representatives of an INGO exploring new programmes. By highlighting both hospitality and hardship, the chief portrayed his community as a morally upright and deserving of aid. This narrative of hospitality functioned as a political resource: it reinforced his legitimacy as an interlocutor and positioned his village to receive prioritised assistance.

This strategic positioning became particularly visible during negotiations with the INGO to establish a vocational training centre for marginalised refugees. Initially, the chief proposed an unused building constructed by UNHCR. However, several weeks later, he claimed that the municipal council had requisitioned the facility and instead offered an alternative site – his own private property, which required substantial repairs. Despite this clear conflict of interest, the INGO, constrained by time and logistics, accepted the proposal and signed a memorandum of understanding.

The episode illustrates the chief's ability to channel aid towards spaces under his control. While the UNHCR-built facility was more neutral and cost-effective, it lacked the symbolic advantage of the chief's direct involvement. By redirecting the centre to his own premises, he recast the aid relationship: no longer a passive recipient, he positioned himself as a central architect of its implementation. Though the centre remained INGO-financed and administrated, it became symbolically associated with him: many residents of Gado-Badzere referred to it as 'the chief's house',[6] reinforcing his local prestige and symbolic capital.

These dynamics show how intermediaries shape both the social meanings and political effects of aid. The centre's perceived association with the chief embedded international assistance within local legitimacy structures. Rather than simply co-opting aid, he re-inscribed it within local political economies and moral frameworks. Echoing the 'chiefly mode of local governance', the chief blurred the boundaries between public service provision and personal authority, leveraging aid to consolidate his status.

Hybridity in Governance: Balancing Competing Expectations

The use of the chief's building as a training centre sparked unease. While no overt contestation was observed, a local NGO worker noted:

> There was a lot of whispering in the community, especially about the fact that the centre was set up in the chief's building [. . .] and the interests at stake. People said that the centre and everything that came with it – the equipment and so on – would end up in the chief's hands, and that the community wouldn't benefit from what had been put in place.[7]

This perception – that humanitarian resources would be absorbed into chiefly structures and diverted from their intended beneficiaries – undermined the NGO's credibility. It illustrates how chiefly authority can recast aid initiatives as instruments of personal power. In contexts shaped by the chiefly mode of local governance, brokerage strategies may reframe external interventions in ways that compromise their claims to neutrality and inclusiveness, thereby reinforcing rather than mitigating existing hierarchies.

The chief's actions exemplify his hybrid governance role: blending customary authority, administrative responsibilities and humanitarian brokerage. This episode illustrates the interplay between brokerage and gatekeeping, whereby chiefs act simultaneously as facilitators of external interventions and as guardians of local interests (Bourblanc and Ducrot 2018).

The chief's effectiveness in this role was shaped by both structural and personal factors. Gado-Badzere's status as Cameroon's largest refugee settlement created a crowded aid landscape, with multiple actors competing for visibility and influence. This environment afforded local authorities opportunities to act strategically, selectively aligning with specific initiatives or organisations (Minfegue 2019). The chief's background was also central. A retired military officer who had recently inherited the chieftaincy following his father's death, he combined institutional literacy with a commanding presence. His military career enabled him to assert authority with state and aid actors, while his recent accession lent him a sense of modernity that resonated with international actors seeking efficient and progressive interlocutors.

Within this hybrid governance field, chiefs mediate between overlapping systems of power. Their adaptability is key to navigating fragmented authority, but it also reveals the broader implications of governance pluralisation in displacement settings. While aid may elevate customary leadership, it also introduces new dependencies and constraints, compelling chiefs to constantly reconfigure their roles in response to shifting institutional landscapes.

Notability Reconfigurations and Pluralisation of Local Political Arenas

The dynamics observed in Gado-Badzéré are not isolated. Across eastern Cameroon, the arrival of Central African refugees and international aid have reshaped local authority structures more broadly. These shifts have not only increased the visibility of certain customary chiefs but have also enabled the emergence of new figures – such as refugee leaders and UNHCR-instituted 'refugee presidents' – thereby unsettling existing hierarchies and requiring new modes of negotiation. In this respect, Cameroon reflects patterns observed elsewhere, where humanitarian interventions foster institutional pluralism by introducing alternative forms of authority that intersect, compete or collaborate with pre-existing structures (Agier 2011; Landau 2002; Pincock et al 2020).

Building on humanitarian governance literature, which highlights how refugee regimes generate parallel chains of legitimacy and accountability, this section explores how customary chiefs interact with refugee leaders and state representatives in their efforts to retain or redefine notability. Through micro-political processes such as conflict, alliance-building and resource negotiation, it examines how customary authority is continuously reconfigured within political arenas characterised by demographic pressure, aid presence and overlapping claims to legitimacy.

Territorial Authority vs Kinship-Based Legitimacy

A core tension arises from divergent foundations of legitimacy among host and forced displaced authorities. In eastern Cameroon, most refugees originate from the CAR, where customary leadership – particularly among pastoralist groups like the Mbororo – is anchored in kinship and clan-based organisation. Many refugees maintained ties to their leaders after displacement, enabling them to continue exerting authority despite crossing international borders.

By contrast, Cameroonian chiefs derive legitimacy primarily from territorial jurisdiction, claiming authority over all residents within their official chieftaincy, regardless of origin (Gambo 2014). This divergence creates frictions: kinship-based legitimacy may challenge territorial claims, especially when refugee leaders continue to exert influence in host communities. As one Mbororo chief in Kette explained:

> Some refugees came with their own chiefs, whom they call *ardo'en*.[8] [. . .] These *ardo'en* sometimes forget that they're no longer in CAR. Their authority should end at the border, but they keep acting as *ardo'en* in Cameroonian territory. [. . .] This creates problems because they sometimes overstep their bounds, addressing issues that involve Cameroonians – like land or agro-pastoral conflicts – that are ours to manage.[9]

This quote captures a prevalent concern among Cameroonian chiefs: that Central African leaders' continued authority constitutes an encroachment on their jurisdiction. While many local chiefs voiced unease about this in interviews, some also acknowledged the practical value of refugee leaders in maintaining order within their own communities. Tensions arise when refugee authorities intervene in matters that span or affect multiple groups – particularly land disputes, agro-pastoral conflicts or inter-community tensions. These situations reveal deeper jurisdictional ambiguities. Refugee leaders – especially among the Mbororo – frequently act in domains that blur the boundaries between host and displaced populations, such as intermarriages or disputes over farmland and grazing areas. Their involvement in issues that Cameroonian chiefs consider their exclusive domain compels the latter to reassert territorial authority in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.

Strategic Alliances in Fragmented Political Landscapes

While tensions over legitimacy and jurisdiction are significant, they do not fully define the relationships between Cameroonian and Central African customary leaders. Authority in displacement settings unfolds along a continuum – from friction to stra-

tegic cooperation – as actors adapt pragmatically to shared and competitive political arenas.

In Ndokayo, for instance, Cameroonian *ardo* Moussa and refugee *ardo* Oumarou forged an alliance that strengthened both their positions. Oumarou pledged allegiance to Moussa, granting him privileged access to his substantial cattle holdings. In return, Moussa publicly acknowledged Oumarou's authority over the refugee population, thus conferring formal legitimacy on a figure whose authority remains otherwise contested.

This alliance blurred the refugee–host divide and drew on Mbororo kinship structures and clan-based organisation, where divergent settlement histories and leadership trajectories shape intra-clan dynamics (Barry and Gasperoni 2008). Both Moussa and Oumarou hail from historically influential Mbororo clans – the Aku and Jaafun – which have long held leadership roles in the region (Pelican 2006, 2011; Seignobos 2009). Their collaboration stood in contrast to rival refugee *ardo'en*, Djalo and Daoré, members of the more recently sedentary Wodaabe clan. These leaders, leveraging their wealth as prominent cattle owners, secured the sub-prefect's endorsement as official refugee representatives to the UNHCR, thereby sidelining Moussa and Oumarou.

This rivalry illustrates the growing fragmentation of local political arenas, where the proliferation of leadership figures and competing recognition regimes intensifies competition. Aid organisations – often unfamiliar with the historical and sociopolitical complexities of local leadership – become key governance actors, inadvertently amplifying divisions by creating new avenues for institutional recognition. Such dynamics reflect the broader pluralisation of governance in displacement settings: authority is neither fixed nor singular, but continuously negotiated at the intersection of customary norms, administrative hierarchies and aid logics. Strategic alliances like that between Moussa and Oumarou highlight the malleability of legitimacy, while ongoing rivalries underscore the fragility and volatility of these reconfigurations.

Aid Actors and the Emergence of New Authority Figures

In Eastern Cameroon, the introduction of 'refugee presidents' (*président des réfugiés*) by UNHCR has added complexity to already pluralised local governance. Established under the principle of community participation, these elected representatives act as liaisons between aid agencies and refugee populations – relaying grievances, facilitating communication and implement aid directives (Minfegue 2019). Yet rather than complementing existing structures, refugee presidents often emerge as distinct authority figures, valued more for their programmatic utility and proximity to aid actors than for customary legitimacy. This reflects the hybridisation of governance in displacement settings, where administrative, humanitarian and customary logics intersect and at times compete.

Aid organisations often bypass traditional chiefs, engaging directly with refugee presidents and thereby enhancing their visibility. As a local Mbororo notable remarked,

> When UNHCR vehicles arrive, they go straight to the president without notifying the local chief. [. . .] Even when aid agencies need to get a message to the local Gbaya chief, they use the president. [. . .] This is changing how power is perceived.[10]

Such practices redistribute symbolic capital and create overlapping claims to representation. Refugee presidents gain prominence and logistical control, while chiefs may find themselves marginalised – especially where refugee leaders operate within their jurisdictions, disrupting established hierarchies. Presidents emerge as alternative power centres, able to negotiate directly with external actors while sidestepping the territorial authority of customary figures.

Unlike chiefs, refugee presidents are elected for fixed terms, and their legitimacy rests on both internal recognition and external validation. Their selection often reflects aid-driven criteria – French fluency, assertiveness, familiarity with NGO procedures – rather than kinship-based norms. In Timangolo camp, for instance, the first president, a senior community leader, was replaced by a younger man with entrepreneurial experience in gold mining and retail. He was perceived as better equipped to engage with aid actors and advocate for refugee interests. As one NGO worker noted, 'in meetings with aid partners, he spoke clearly, defended refugee rights, and addressed their needs in ways the former president could not'.[11]

Yet elected figures are not immune to the 'chiefly mode of local governance' nor to the dynamics aid actors seek to mitigate. In Béthanie, a refugee settlement near Kette, the first president – also a Central African *ardo* – was criticised for reproducing kin-based clientelism, appointing relatives as food distributors and privileging his own clan. As a local NGO worker explained, 'Six of the ten distribution agents were from his family. People were prioritised based on connections . . . We saw it. He wasn't equitable, that's why he lost the election'.[12] After his defeat, authority became split between the traditional *ardo* and a new elected president from another clan, perceived as more impartial. Yet the transition proved fraught. Aid actors continued to engage the former president, unaware he had been removed. He did not correct the misperception – holding meetings, signing documents – while his successor struggled to assert his role, even interrupting gatherings held at his predecessor's compound.

This case underscores how refugee presidents and customary chiefs inhabit overlapping and contested authority spaces. Aid actors must navigate competing imperatives: ensuring representativeness and maintaining operational pragmatism. In doing so, they inevitably become entangled in local political dynamics, reinforcing certain claims while undermining others.

The Cameroonian state further complicates this picture. Although refugee presidents were created by UNHCR, their elections are supervised by sub-prefects, who increasingly treat them as actual 'auxiliaries of the administration' – relying on them for dispute resolution, refugee registration and coordination of aid activities. In a highly centralised polity with a long history of bureaucratic territorialisation (Bayart 1979), this reflects a broader state strategy to reassert control over displaced populations. Faced with the proliferation of Central African customary chiefs who lie outside the Cameroonian administrative hierarchy, sub-prefects use refugee presidents as interlocutors the state can co-opt and control. Originally designed for participatory aid governance, these figures are thus reappropriated as tools of state oversight.

This dynamic reflects a broader paradox of humanitarian governance: in Cameroon, aid pluralises authority even as it enables state reinforcement. Yet these processes are strategic and negotiated. Refugee presidents may align with or oppose customary

chiefs; aid workers navigate shifting alliances; and, as the next section explores, chiefs mobilise administrative ties to resist marginalisation. Governance here is not simply layered but polycephalous: composed of overlapping, interacting and contested centres of authorities.

Resistance and Accommodation: Traditional Chieftaincy Facing Aid Dynamics

Faced with forced displacement and international aid that challenge their authority, chiefs deploy strategies to assert visibility and maintain relevance. This section explores how such tactics unfold in practice, focusing on the brokerage, clientelist and symbolic manoeuvres through which chiefs resist marginalisation and reinsert themselves into shifting governance hierarchies.

From Retaliation to Negotiated Recognition

Some customary leaders assert control over local resources to pressure aid actors and reaffirm their importance. In Kette, a Cameroonian chief protested the exclusion of host communities from aid initiatives by banning refugees from harvesting bamboo – an essential material for latrine construction. Unable to proceed, the INGO was compelled to negotiate. During the talks, the chief questioned the prioritisation of refugees over local residents. He eventually lifted the ban after receiving assurances that future sanitation projects would include host populations. This episode illustrates how territorial control can be used as leverage, enacting a pragmatic politics of brokerage grounded in strategic disruption and negotiated compromise.

Beyond material leverage, symbolic strategies also serve to secure recognition. In Timangolo, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) mediated between customary authorities and aid actors to demand greater consultation. Their advocacy led UNHCR to fund the construction of concrete pavilions (*hangars*) for local chieftaincies. Built at village entrances, these structures became material anchors of chiefly authority. As a Mbororo notable explained:

> These pavilions are very important: in terms of visibility and leadership, they restore the chief's position [. . .] They materialise the seat of local traditional authority in a permanent structure, while straw or wooden structures can be blown away. With these pavilions, chiefs prove they too can attract international aid.[13]

These interventions demonstrate how chiefs mobilise visual and spatial registers of legitimacy. In contrast to the deliberately ephemeral infrastructure often built for refugees, these concrete pavilions signal permanence, rootedness and public authority. By embedding themselves in the physical landscape, chiefs not only reaffirm their role as humanitarian intermediaries but also convert aid into symbols of sovereign presence.

Such strategies blend brokerage, clientelism and symbolic politics. By securing material benefits, chiefs fulfil social expectations, reinforce their prestige and consol-

idate their political relevance. Yet these tactics are not uniformly available. In Timangolo, success hinged on the backing of MBOSCUDA – a well-established Mbororo association with longstanding ties to administrative authorities and a strong lobbying track record (Pelican 2012; Yaya and Issa 2021; Lefort-Rieu 2022). MBOSCUDA's capacity to articulate claims in bureaucratically legible terms and navigate relationships with international actors was instrumental in converting customary claims into tangible outcomes.

These practices reflect the 'chiefly mode of local governance', wherein authority is sustained through the continuous conversion of material and symbolic capital, strategic redistribution and visibility. Chiefs are expected to 'hold rank' by displaying generosity and securing external recognition, making leadership both materially grounded and socially validated (Olivier de Sardan 2009: 20). Their engagement with aid actors is not only opportunistic but part of a long-standing logic of adaptation to changing institutional configurations.

However, such strategies can also reproduce exclusion. Chiefs often redistribute aid through patronage networks, privileging allies, relatives or dependents while marginalising others – as seen in Béthanie. Their legitimacy relies less on accountability than on performance and strategic generosity (Olivier de Sardan 2011b). These dynamics, rooted in historical forms of leadership (Nyamnjoh 2014), are further reshaped by interactions with state and humanitarian actors. As the following section shows, administrative authorities often exploit intra-elite rivalries to reassert control and extract informal revenues; revealing how aid-driven visibility not only strengthens chiefly power but also exposes it to new forms of co-optation.

Redistribution and Social Embeddedness in Aid Dynamics

Beyond strategic positioning and symbolic practices, chiefs engage in redistributive acts that demonstrate the embedded nature of their authority and their capacity to act as brokers, patrons and negotiators of legitimacy. Through these practices, customary leaders sustain cooperation by blending obligation and reciprocity, maintaining their status within networks reshaped by aid interventions. Redistribution functions both as a material transaction and as a symbolic performance of leadership.

In Ngaoui, for instance, a third-degree chief mitigated tensions with the *lamido* of Djohong by regularly sharing aid-derived benefits. His visits bearing money and gifts – including a vehicle – reinforced deference and stabilised a hierarchy unsettled by the influx of aid resources. Here, redistribution functions as both a political technology and a performative assertion of power.

Redistribution also mediates host–refugee relations. In Kette's Bozizé neighbourhood, refugees – without aid workers' knowledge – pooled rations (rice, seeds, etc.) and offered them to the local *chef de quartier.*[14] These gestures echo the redistributive performances associated with the chiefly mode of local governance but depart from kinship-based obligations and, instead, emerge from strategic positioning in a fragmented institutional landscape.

In sum, redistribution reveals how aid is absorbed into local value systems, extending – but also reshaping – the chiefly mode of local governance. It gives rise to new

forms of transactional legitimacy grounded in symbolic capital, negotiated reciprocity and embedded social relationships.

Leveraging Administrative Authorities to Reassert Authority

Alongside redistribution, chiefs also engage administrative authorities – particularly sub-prefects – to assert jurisdiction and contest exclusion from aid governance. In fragmented institutional settings, they mobilise their dual role as customary figures and 'auxiliaries of the administration' to negotiate visibility and influence.

In Kette, a refugee leader attempted to mediate a dispute involving a Cameroonian – an action the local chief saw as encroaching on his authority. As he recounted:

> I called the person involved and told him: 'You must come to me – not to the refugee leader, because you're Cameroonian and he has no say in this. [. . .] As far as we are concerned, the decision he made is ineffective.' I also told [the refugee leader]: 'When it's a matter between refugees, that's fine. But if it involves a national from my community or jurisdiction, you must not proceed like this.' [. . .] And I warned him that if the sub-prefect were to hear of this, he could get into serious trouble.[15]

This illustrates how chiefs use the threat of administrative sanctions to reassert territorial control. They may also mobilise alliances with state authorities to challenge marginalisation. In Timangolo, for example, the local chief drew on his ties with the sub-prefect to halt the construction of a UNHCR Covid-19 quarantine centre, which had been initiated without his consultation – despite his formal authority over land use. This intervention demonstrates how customary authorities can strategically invoke state allies and hierarchy to resist bypassing by international actors and renegotiate their role in refugee governance.

Yet these administrative alliances are not without complications. While they provide leverage, they also expose chiefs to co-optation and opportunism. As one Mbororo notable explained:

> Administrative authorities have an interest in there being clashes, tensions between different leaders, because [. . .] they struggle to govern the populations [. . .]. So it suits them when there are leadership confrontations [among customary chiefs], because in the end, they gain from it. For example, when a sub-prefect summons chiefs [. . .], he uses the opportunity to collect 10,000, 20,000 or even 50,000 [FCFA] depending on means.[16]

These dynamics reveal how local administrators may exploit intra-elite rivalries for personal or bureaucratic gain. While such practices complicate alliances between customary and state authorities, as they erode trust and restrict chiefly autonomy, chiefs often maintain these strategic relationships out of necessity, recognising that administrative support remains crucial for mediating their status in plural governance settings.

Together, these examples show how chiefs leverage jurisdictional claims and administrative ties to remain central in evolving governance fields. Their authority is enacted not only through formal mandates but through ongoing negotiations, visibility and performance. These strategies reveal both the possibilities and the vulnerabilities

of governing displacement through customary authority in a context of institutional fragmentation.

Conclusion: Polycephaly and the Contestation of Authority in Hybrid Governance

Taken together, these dynamics highlight how displacement governance unfolds through complex, locally embedded negotiations. By examining the case of Central African refugees in eastern Cameroon, and drawing together micro-level interactions and macro-institutional dynamics, this article has analysed how forced displacement and international aid reconfigure authority and governance. Customary chiefs, once rooted in kinship and territorial legitimacy, now operate within plural systems shaped by state actors, humanitarian frameworks and refugee leadership. Mobilising the concept of 'polycephaly of power' – applied at both the actor level (chiefs' hybrid roles) and the systemic level (governance pluralism) – the article argues that authority is not fixed, but continuously assembled, negotiated and reworked. Far from signalling institutional breakdown, polycephaly constitutes a governance mode of its own: relational, distributed and strategically navigated.

Chiefs respond to this fragmentation through brokerage, administrative engagement and symbolic negotiation. Their authority is not guaranteed but contingent: it must be enacted, made visible and reaffirmed through redistribution, performance and alliances. While some successfully convert aid into political capital, they remain exposed to bypassing by aid actors, contestation by refugee leaders and instrumentalisation by state officials.

These findings resonate with Olivier de Sardan's (2009, 2011b) notion of the 'chiefly mode of local governance', where legitimacy lies at the interplay of material redistribution, symbolic performance and social embeddedness. In the Cameroonian case, this mode is recalibrated by both humanitarian and state intervention. Chiefs use humanitarian infrastructure as a source of legitimacy; refugee institutions challenge established hierarchies; and administrative authorities appropriate aid frameworks to extend state control. A central paradox emerges: aid simultaneously pluralises authority and reinforces state centralisation. Sub-prefects exploit displacement contexts to extract rents and consolidate bureaucratic reach, navigating elite rivalries to their advantage. But this process is neither linear nor unidirectional: both chiefs and refugee leaders harness these ambiguities to assert influence and recalibrate power.

Theoretically, this article contributes to debates on intermediaries, hybrid governance and migration politics in Africa. Bridging classic studies of chieftaincy with research on migration governance and humanitarian regimes, it reframes the chief as a structurally embedded intermediary whose authority is anchored in both customary legitimacy and formal administrative hierarchies – unlike brokers such as visa 'fixers' (Piot 2019), informal migration agents (Alpes 2019; Richter 2019) or NGO 'street-level bureaucrats' (Gatter 2023; Riva and Hoffstaedter 2021). In doing so, it brings renewed attention to the durability and adaptability of chieftaincy as an institution shaped by, and responsive to, evolving governance fields.

Additionally, this article refines the notion of polycephaly of power by applying it across both micro-political positionalities and macro-institutional constellations. This dual application underscores that fragmentation is not a source of disorder, but a generative field of negotiation, rivalry and strategic positioning. This contributes to analyses on institutional multiplicity and state formation in Africa (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo and Le Meur 2008; Lund 2006), demonstrating how forced migration intensifies these dynamics by introducing new actors, resources and claims. Polycephaly thus offers a conceptual lens to analyse how authority is simultaneously multi-scalar, relational and dynamically reconfigured. It highlights how governance emerges from the interplay of multiple, partially overlapping regimes of legitimacy that actors navigate and recompose in pursuit of recognition, resources or influence.

This perspective also contributes to the anthropology of the state by analysing how refugee governance reconfigures authority in peripheral regions. In Cameroon's centralised polity, aid becomes a tool of bureaucratic expansion (Lefort, 2020). Yet this reassertion of state control remains uneven, shaped by local manoeuvres, aid logics, institutional frictions and contestation from below. Refugee governance becomes a site not only of crisis management, but of state-making and political adaptation through negotiated forms of sovereignty and recognition.

Finally, this article opens up a research agenda attentive to the long-term recomposition of authority in displacement contexts. If aid and migration reconfigure local hierarchies, they do so through logics that are historically sedimented and institutionally hybrid. Rather than temporary disruptions, such dynamics signal more enduring transformations in the architecture of local governance and the conditions of political legitimacy.

Methodologically, the article underscores the value of ethnography in capturing how governance unfolds in practice: through informal exchanges, spatial symbols and mundane interactions. From pavilion-building to aid redistribution, it shows how legitimacy is enacted, disputed, made legible and reconfigured in everyday interactions. Attending to these micro-political dynamics enriches our understanding of governance not as a static institutional design, but as an evolving field of social negotiation and political practice – one that reveals how authority is continuously reassembled, contested and repurposed in humanitarian settings, with lasting implications for both state-building and local legitimacy.

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Notes

1. Interview, 15 December 2021 (my translation).
2. UNHCR Data Portal – Cameroon: https://data.unhcr.org/fr/country/cmr (accessed 30 September 2025).
3. Any opinions and views expressed in this text are my own and do not represent the views or attitudes of the organisation, missions or projects with which I was associated.
4. UNHCR, *Cameroun: Profil de site – Gado Badzere (juin 2020)*: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77688 (accessed 17 December 2024).
5. Interview, 26 February 2020 (my translation).
6. Observation, December 2020.
7. Interview, 15 June 2021 (my translation).
8. From the Fulani *ar'do* (plural *ar'do'en*): comes from *ardaago*, 'to walk forward'; refers to a Mbororo chief (Seignobos 2017).
9. Interview, 15 December 2021 (my translation).
10. Interview, 9 December 2020 (my translation).
11. Interview, 15 December 2021 (my translation).
12. Interview, 15 December 2021 (my translation).
13. Interview, 9 December 2020 (my translation).
14. Observation, Kette, April 2018.
15. Interview, 15 December 2021 (my translation).
16. Interview, 9 December 2020 (my translation).

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L'autorité contestée et la gouvernance humanitaire

La souveraineté de chefs, les réfugiés, et le pouvoir polycéphale au Cameroun oriental

Claire Lefort-Rieu

Résumé : Cet article examine comment le déplacement forcé et l'aide humanitaire façonnent l'autorité locale, en focalisant sur le rôle de chefs coutumiers dans les territoires qui accueillent les réfugiés. En s'appuyant sur deux années de recherches ethnographiques sur le terrain, nous analysons comment les chefs naviguent de nombreuses formes de gouvernance façonnées par les fonctionnaires, les organismes d'aide humanitaire et les institutions dirigées par les réfugiés. En mobilisant le concept du pouvoir polycéphale, nous arguons que, dans les contextes de déplacement forcé, l'autorité n'est pas diminuée mais plutôt reconfigurée au travers la négociation et le courtage. La migration forcée révèle à la fois la résilience et la fragilité des institutions coutumières, tandis que les interventions d'aide façonnent les hiérarchies locales et renforcent l'autorité d'état simultanément. Le pouvoir polycéphale constitue une forme de gouvernance façonnée par le capital symbolique, la négociation et les réclamations superposées à la légitimité. Le déplacement forcé devient un site de reconfiguration politique où l'autorité est performée, contestée et réorganisée en continu.

Mots-clés : autorité coutumière, Cameroun, courtage, gouvernance hybride, réfugié