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# Wikipedia everywhere?

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It started quite innocently. One of those small questions that I now know is easy to ask and all too hard to answer. As part of continuing work on the history of photography in Cameroon I found myself asking ‘How many administrative units were there in Cameroon in 1955?’ (When ID cards with photographs were first introduced). How many in 1965 (and so on)? To try and collate an answer I spent far, far too long over a two year period looking for copies of Cameroonian presidential decrees and tracking down relevant secondary sources.

In the course of doing this I have found multiple versions or copies of the relevant Wikipedia pages, mostly without acknowledgement of the source. The effect of this is to give a misleading impression of consensus. It might seem there are, say, five consistent sources but actually only one and if they are not exactly wrong then the key Wikipedia entries are at best misleading. My university had a wonderfully titled ‘wikipedian in residence’ and I have had discussions with him what should be and what can be done about this. To complicate matters further, the pages I have been consulting are on both French and English language versions of Wikipedia (which have differing amounts of detail). The differences reflect Cameroon’s odd history since WW1, split between British and French administration under the auspices of first the League of Nations then the United Nations. These have repercussions to this day especially in the framing of the political unrest current in the anglophone parts of Cameroon.

Matters are not helped by conflict between some official publications (once made these statements continue and then they just get copied). Is the centre of Koung-Khi department the town of Bayangam or Bandjoun? According to the Annual

summaries published in 2013 and 2011 by the *Cameroonian National Institute of Statistics* it is one but according to another official body, the *United Councils and Cities of Cameroon* it is the other. I think it is Bandjoun despite what the NIS say (the original Presidential decree confirms this). These were not the judgments that I expected to be making when I started this small adjunct piece of research.

Slightly more interesting have been some quirky stories that have come up as sources of uncertainty or 'noise' about the lists of divisions and subdivisions as they have changed over time. For example, according to the 1936 annual report of the French administration to the League of Nations (p147) Boubandjidda was made a subdivision. There is no trace of this having been implemented and much of the area subsequently became a game reserve (a national park). This raises the question of whether I should count it or not, and if so for how long?

Furthermore a series of renaming and reorganizations means that having documentary evidence for the 'creation' of a unit on one particular date, does not prove conclusively that it (or a very similarly named entity) had not previously been created, so as much as possible I have tried to work from the earliest sources to the latest, but, of course, earlier documents are harder to obtain, and as we have just seen the announcement of what I could gloss as the *intention* to create a subdivision does not mean that it was actually realized. I have had to tack backwards and forwards across time and try and make sense of the conflicting records. Such is the stuff of research.

The research was not helped by shifts in the terminology used to talk about administrative units and their subunits. Not only did *provinces* become *regions* but *circonscriptions* only became *départements* after themselves having been *regions* !

Terminology Shifts (mapped onto the contemporary structures)

Current (2017) terms:	Fr. Région Eng. <u>Region</u>	Département Division	Arrondissement Subdivision
Date			
1921 confirmed in 24/12/1933	Fr. <u>Région</u> (but scarcely used: only occasional mentions of Region du Nord)	Fr. circonscription	Fr. subdivision
1935 p165 8 Av 1935	Nothing used	Fr Region	Fr. subdivision
61/DF/15 du 20 octobre <a href="#">1961</a>	<u>régions administratives</u>	Département	Arrondissement
Décret n° 72/349 du 24/07/72	Fr. Province	Département	Arrondissement
Décret n° 2008/376 du 12 Novembre 2008	<u>Region</u>	Department	Arrondissement
Current (2017) terms:	Fr. Région Eng. <u>Region</u>	Département Division	Arrondissement Subdivision

Terminology Shifts (mapped onto the contemporary structures)

This ignores Districts (a smaller break of Subdivisions) many of which were promoted into Arrondissements in 2008

Part of the reason for mapping it like this is that Départements have Prefets, Arrondissements have Sousprefets which seems to fit with the roles of circonscription officers. These dont don't seem to have had titles though Prefet & Department are used occasionally in 1930s reports.

Also there's a weight of numbers argument: In 1950s there were c. 17 Regions and 50 subdivisions. This maps well onto later Departments and Arrondissements but not onto the 7 régions administratives or Provinces.

All this leads to a caution in the light of problems that I encountered: printed summary figures may be wrong. This caution of course also applies to my own figures! The broad patterns are reliable: the point of the exercise in collating the figures was to reduce uncertainty. Rather than roughly estimating on the basis of little secure knowledge we can now produce figures which if wrong are not *very* wrong (e.g. if the years are wrong for one or two subdivisions, the figures may be slightly inaccurate in any one period of five years. This does not affect the overall pattern). Now I have finished I am conscious that it is possible to overstate the

problems. The worries about the numbers serve as an important caution about the details. With that proviso I have achieved a preliminary synthesis of the available data and this shows have the overall figures have changed over time. Boring but important for the work yet to come.

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The article with the figures in question appeared in 2018 in the open access journal 'Vestiges: Traces of Record' which I run with colleagues from Cameroon.

Zeitlyn, David 2018 A summary of Cameroonian Administrative history. Vestiges: Traces of Record 4:1–13. [http://www.vestiges-journal.info/2018/pdf/zeitlyn\\_2018.pdf](http://www.vestiges-journal.info/2018/pdf/zeitlyn_2018.pdf)

And for the record, I was then able to use these figures to help estimate likely numbers of photographers working in Cameroon

Zeitlyn, David 2019 'Photo History by Numbers: Charting the Rise and Fall of Commercial Photography in Cameroon' *Visual Anthropology* 32:3–4, 309–342. DOI: 10.1080/08949468.2019.1637683

## Sources

[Departments of Cameroon – Wikipedia](#)

**Departments of Cameroon.** The Regions of **Cameroon** are divided into 58 divisions or **departments**. The divisions are further sub-divided into sub-divisions ...

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Departments\\_of\\_Cameroon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Departments_of_Cameroon)

[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Départements\\_du\\_Cameroun](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Départements_du_Cameroun)

[Cameroon Departments – Statoids www.statoids.com/ycm.html](http://www.statoids.com/ycm.html)

My figures differ from this in the period 1985–1995. When I have checked the sources I find earlier dates. Note: this has been an influential source on the main Wikipedia pages.



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