

Cameroon: Power Politics, Land Conflicts and Controversy over Redistribution in Bafut History

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Abstract

Conflict is a broad term and scholars have advanced different definitions for specific types of conflict. In the Bafut kingdom of North West Cameroon, conflicts have been caused by wanton grabbing and irrational redistribution of land. Within the kingdom's traditional political system, there is a complex network of relations between the leaders and with members of the community. This paper establishes that problems of land and redistribution have bred conflicts in Bafut and deterred cordial relations and coexistence within communities. It has also resulted in collusions, political crisis and strenuous relations between different segments of the society. Through colonial and post-independence administrative documents, assessment reports, local government reports, petitions, government decrees and laws and other published works we conclude that the controversies over land distribution that led to conflicts in Bafut history were a result of interplay of power politics.

Keywords: Power Politics, Conflict, Cameroon, Redistribution.

Introduction

Land and related issues in Africa has been a source of conflict within and between institutions and communities. A recent phenomenon of land grabbing in different parts of Cameroon, especially the grass fields region as well as the expanding agro-industrial sector, has exacerbated land conflicts. Some of these land related conflicts have been caused by a gluttonous self-seeking elite (Simo, 2011). In Bafut, land redistribution or expropriation contributed to protracted

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conflicts in like elsewhere in Cameroon and Africa. Political and economic factors emanating from passionate attachments to territorial location provoked mixed feelings and claims over land. Today, people claim and engage in conflicts over land. The control over land invariably means the control of people. Political leaders, including also the family head, control land and the people under them. The control of land goes with redistribution and the challenges that go with this. In Bafut, land redistribution created a lot of problems between the centralised leadership and leaders of semi-autonomous communities. This is a clear indication of the conflict between traditional leadership and other local sources of power in Anglophone Cameroon (Samah, 1999, 2006; Ngwa, 1999 2002).

Land disputes may lead to struggles for political control in different communities. Lund (1998) has argued that land is a symbol of power. The more control one has over land, the more power s/he exercises over both human and economic resources. Also, van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal (1996) further posits that in the post-colonial era, many African chiefs continue to struggle for control over people and land resources just as they did in the pre-colonial and colonial times. It is thus evident that while we trace the origin of land conflicts and controversies in Bafut, it is a universal issue that should arouse academic curiosity.

Bafut is a composite kingdom made up of eight semi-autonomous chiefdoms. It is situated some twenty kilometres northwest of Bamenda, the capital of the North West Region of Cameroon. It covers an area of some 340 square kilometres with a population of nearly 98000 inhabitants. This population is made up of people from diverse backgrounds settled in three zones. At the centre are the people of *mumalaa* (heart of the country) who trace their dynastic origin to Ndobo or Tikari area, northwest of Fouban in the West Region of Cameroon. To the South and North are the *ntare* (ridge area) and *mbunti* (lowland) people of Widekum origin from the South West Region of Cameroon. Bafut is a polity with a paramount chief (Fon) under whom are sub-chiefs, who administer different ethnic groups of diverse peoples within the *fondom*. The dominant group that wields power are the Tikar and the sub-chiefdoms are mostly of Widekum origin. The sub-chiefs in Bafut claim to have brought their people into Bafut from various places of origin. Thus, the paramount Fon's right to exert local authority or control over their people is not legitimate (Niba, 1999). Such claims have not only threatened the survival or existence of traditional authority in Bafut, but have also incited ethnocentrism and other vices in the *fondom*. Here, the bone of contention was on wanton land grabbing and irrational and illogical redistribution of land in the *fondom*. The uncompromising stand of the Fon, his chiefs and people threatened to tear the *fondom* apart. However, the conflict had its roots from the socio-political arrangements and relations that were established in the area from inception.

Socio-Political Organisation of Bafut Kingdom

Bafut is patrilineal in its kinship relations where descent and succession is traced or claimed through the father. Any son could succeed his father through intestate or testate succession. The smallest unit of the kinship group is the nuclear family (*nji inda*, meaning, bottom of the house). This is synonymous with the smallest territorial unit of the *fondom*, namely, the compound (*ndugu*), which consists of a man, the compound head or *mbong ndugu*, his wife or wives, unmarried sons, daughters, servants and other dependents. The compound head may also be the head of an extended family or a patrilineage (*ngwe'enda*), which comes after the nuclear family. There is also the lineage (*acheu*) which consists of a number of extended families whose members claim descent from a common ancestor. It is headed by the successor of the founder of the lineage (*tacheu*). A number of lineages constitute a village.

The Bafut *fondom* was a heterogeneous polity. It fitted broadly into the class of an African 'incorporative kingdom'. Such kingdoms consisted of conquest which started from a nucleus and the impetus for conquest was given by an immigrant group. At the head of this 'incorporative kingdom' was the Fon or traditional ruler. He was both its political and spiritual head and also exercised both executive and judicial authority over his subjects. His position was re-enforced by the near-sacred nature of his personality (Ritzenthaler & Ritzenthaler, 1962). The Fon had multiple political, judicial, religious, and social duties. He controlled external relations with other peoples, making wars and concluding treaties. Internally, he made laws. All justice was in his name and he was the final court of appeal and had the power of life and death over his subjects as sanctioned by them. As chief priest of the *fondom*, he offered sacrifices to God through his ancestors and interceded with them for the welfare of the people. In summary, the Fon was the visible manifestation or incarnation of the Bafut body politic, so to speak.

As in most African kingdoms, the Fon of Bafut was assisted by some royal relatives namely, *maamfor* (queen Mother), two brother assistants to the Fon, namely, the *ndimfor* (elder brother) and *muma* (younger brother), who also served as advisers. Another brother adviser was *Tabufor* (father of *fons*). He was usually any son of the late Fon who happened to have been born before his father was enthroned as Fon. By the circumstances of his birth therefore, the *Tabufor* had no ambitions for the throne, hence his role as father to the new Fon. However, none of the royal advisers acted as regent when the Fon died or was absent from the palace. The body which shared power with the Fon and acted in his absence was the council of elders or *kwifor*. Literally, *kwifor* means holder or supporter of the Fon. It was an institution common to all the Grassfields kingdoms of Cameroon and was called different names. Thus it was called *nwerong* in Nso, *kwifoyn* in Kom, *nkwifon* in Mankon, *kuiifuai* in the Laimbwe villages of Menchum and Boyo Divisions and *ngumba* in Bali. Some of these have been studied by Chilver

and Kaberry (1960, 1967 and 1970) and Kah (2015). The members who must have reached the *bukum* rank were hierarchically ordered.

The functions of *kwifor* were carried out through different agencies or lodges. One important duty of *kwifor* included the enforcement of rules regarding land utilisation. Apart from *kwifor*, there was another council of elders, this time of princes only, namely, *nda-takumbeng* (house of thunder). It acted, though not always successfully, as a check to the overwhelming powers of *kwifor*. Its *raison d'être* was to protect the interest of princes in the entire territory.

On territorial organisation and administration, Bafut family units lived close to one another. However, some moved further afield, either in search of fertile farmlands or because of some calamity. As already noted above, a number of compounds constituted a ward. A number of wards made up a quarter (*nukuru*), and a group of quarters constituted a village (*nite*). The villages made up the Bafut *fondom* (*Ala'a Bufu*). The number and size of component settlements was determined by population, coupled with spatial limitations such as natural barriers and available farmland and water. According to the reports of Hawkesworth (1926), there were 23 villages in Bafut. A few years later in 1934, R.J. Hook listed 26.¹

Bafut had two types of settlements. First there were the semi-autonomous villages each with its own chief (*atangchuo* – war planner). The villages were linked to the centre under various conditions governing their relationship. According to Hook's list, as mentioned above, seventeen villages fell in this category. They were: Bawum, Mambu, Mankaa, Mankwi, Banji, Akofunguba (south in the *ntare* area), Beno, Buwi, Manta, Tingo, Mbekong, Butang, Bugiri, Aba and Bukabunano (Obang). Most of them were located to the north in the upper Menchum valley. There were Bukari and Buwe which are among the oldest villages in Bafut. These are located to the northeast of the capital of Bafut.

The second type of settlements constituted those villages clustered around the palace, and ruled directly by the Fon. These were: Mbebali, Mbebeli, Manji, Njibujang, Bujong, Njinteh, Niko, Mankaha, and Nchum.² The inhabitants here consisted mostly of the Tikari immigrants, who were closely allied to the Fon. These villages had no chiefs with any hereditary title as such but an appointed head (*tanukuru* – father of the quarter) existed. He was appointed by the Fon among the *bukum* of the village, that was, any one of them whom he deemed competent. In some cases, a prince was appointed. That was

1 See Hawkesworth, Bafut Assessment Report 1926 National Archives Buea (NAB), AB3d, R.J. Hook, An Intelligence Report on the Associated Village Groups Occupying Bafut Native Authority Area of the Bamenda Division of Cameroons Province (Hereafter referred to as Bafut Intelligence Report 1934).

2 See Hook's Intelligence Report.

one way the Fon involved his relations in the administration. The *tanukuru*, along with the other elders of the village constituted a governing council (*butabenukuru*), which met often to deliberate on matters of immediate concern to their village. The matters might be the implementation of the Fon's directives, collecting and transmitting their own tribute to the palace and arranging for community projects. It was also the prerogative of the Fon to create new villages, by appointing heads to new settlements. It was by doing so that he had more villages under his direct control. However this did not imply that the exercise of power on Bafut territory was smooth. There were areas of conflict within the political structure of the kingdom as was noticed in other African kingdoms (Mair, 1977; Rowe, 1975).

We have stated earlier that, the Bafut dynasty claimed origin from Tikar, from which the legends brought the ancestors of the kings just as those of Kom, and Nso (Hawkesworth, 1926; Hook, 1934). As a composite *fondom*, the different component chiefdoms had their own traditions which were at variance with those of the central *fondom*. A typical example was the chiefdom of Bawum whose traditions place their roots of origin from Ala'ante near the present Bamenda Station. Driven by natural disaster, their chief, Ntoh, led them towards Bafut and settled at Mbebeli as guest of Nibachi, the chief.

The origins of a long-standing disagreement and conflict between the Fon of Bafut and Ntoh of Bawum cannot accurately be ascertained. But from available evidence, there appears to be a deliberate effort on the part of Bafut to suppress the fact that the Bawum ruler was around when Filu came, and therefore should not have laid any claim to special treatment. This seems to have been done in order to neutralise a dangerous rival to the Bafut dynasty. These contrasting claims had resulted in conflict between the descendants of the two rulers that have continued even to the present day. According to evidence from both sides, this conflict once led to bloodshed (Chilver & Kaberry 1967).

The Bafut palace and, by implication, the central government of the kingdom remained in Mbebeli for some time. Later, one of Filu's successors moved it from the rocky and hilly location of Mbebeli to its present location at Mumalaa. This has been discussed by Ewusi (1978).³ Traditions attributed the initiative of this transfer to one of the Fon's wives who went fishing with other women in the Nkinsari stream at Mumala. On exploring the surroundings she discovered some level land. Thinking that it would make a suitable site for a palace, she took the idea to the authorities. They readily endorsed it and affected the move. But, soon afterwards, something went wrong. Fearing that the woman might start feeling proud and hence make unacceptable demands for preferential treatment, palace diviners recommended that she should be eliminated. She was thus killed at a nearby square called Nsanimunwi. It is held that a pit trap was

3 The transfer of the palace is treated here. Further evidence of this move can be deduced from the fact that the site of the former palace in Mbebeli is a shrine where sacrifices are offered yearly.

prepared and camouflaged. Over it was placed a ceremonial stool. Lured to the place under the pretext that she was being honoured, the woman sat on the stool and fell into the pit which became her grave. Tradition nicknamed this unfortunate woman Ndiela'ambwe, meaning someone who did something good but was rewarded with evil.⁴ The Ndiela'ambwe issue is an episode deeply embedded in the collective psyche of the Bafut people.

The expansion of the Bafut *fondom* from its new base at Bujong in Mumala'a could be traced to both internal and external factors. The key external factor was the impact of the Bali-Chamba incursion into the Bamenda area at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Jeffreys, 1962; Chilver & Kaberry, 1970). The Chamba incursion apparently affected the balance of power in the area. It brought them into conflict with the bigger chiefdoms and induced the smaller ones to seek refuge under the bigger chiefdoms. After a clash with the Chamba, Bafut became a rallying point for refugees from the south and southwest of the Ngemba area (Tweed, 1926). Some of them eventually returned to their places of origin while others remained. Among them were the chiefdoms of Mambu and Mankanikong, both of whom claimed to have come from the same area, Mberewi (Chilver & Kaberry, 1970). These chiefdoms became tributaries of Bafut through voluntary submission. How voluntary was the submission cannot be ascertained for conflicts and misunderstanding periodically flared between these two chiefdoms and the central authorities.

Another external factor was land hunger which led the Bafut to expand northwards into the Menchum valley around the middle of the nineteenth century. It was also dictated by the desire for tribute. In a series of raids, the Bafut conquered peoples such as the Otang, Buwi, and Bugri. Others such as Mbakong, Manta, and Butang voluntarily submitted (Warnier, 1985). Such expansion was what made Bafut to be a conquest state. Another area which Bafut brought under its control was Njimuya, across the Mezam River, with its rich savannah farming and hunting grounds. Apart from subduing the inhabitants and making them pay tribute, some Bafut people started migrating and settling there. The Fon of Bafut personally offered land and raffia bushes to his well-wishers and strangers in this area.

The migration of Bafut people piecemeal into uninhabited areas in search of fertile land was a key internal factor of conflict. The necessity to expand was due to a population increase from the middle of the nineteenth century resulting from conquest. According to Warnier, quoting from Pavel, the German officer who led expeditions into the Northwest, Bafut, in 1890 had around 25,000 people from diverse origins (Warnier, 1985). This population needed land for sustenance. Bafut people thus started moving and settling in

4 In other translations, this nickname means the one who showed the country and got missing. These interpretations all boil down to describing someone who was good but was rewarded with evil.

the Menchum valley and Njimuya. This trend continued as migrants moved later on into Agyati, Ntabuwe, Akosia, Nforia and very recently Nsoh. As they moved into these new lands the Bafut elements preferred to continue to maintain their allegiance to the Fon of Bafut rather than to the chiefs of the area. That is what gave Bafut the characteristic of an incorporative kingdom, following Vansina's typology (Vansina, 1962). Such an arrangement would sooner or later, breed conflicts, as local rulers found their power being whittled down by the encroaching influence of the central authority.

A question one may ask is how the Bafut indigenous government establishment was sustained. The maintenance of government everywhere requires some allocation of resources and services. These came from the Bafut people themselves. The Fon was the custodian over the land he had overall control of the economy but it was the people who exploited it to maintain the palace. It was incumbent on them to do so without demanding payment in return. Whatever the Fon gave in return was only token appreciation. Though some people considered it a privilege and honour to render gifts and services to the palace, some usually resisted. Sanctions followed any recalcitrant behaviour thus resulting sometimes in conflict. The people in search of land ownership for livelihood also ran into conflicts with the custodian of the land. The Mankwi and Bawum land disputes constitute the peak of such conflicts within the Bafut fondom.

Land Grabbing, Redistribution and Conflict

The Banji- Mankwi Land Dispute

The Mankwi and Banji land problem was the outcome of a leopard skin incident that occurred in 1949. At the end of the crisis in 1954, Fon Achirimbi II did not succeed to recover his customary tributes from Banji. Although the colonial District Officer, Westmacott, expressed satisfaction that the Fon and his sub-chiefs had earnestly declared their intention to seek peace and live happily, the Fon saw the arrangement as a major victory of the sub-chiefs over him and thus a serious setback for him. Following the reunification of Cameroon in 1961, Achirimbi demanded that the issue be revisited. In a letter to the administration he stated *inter alia*:

Even if there was an agreement of that nature signed in 1954 by the colonialists, then, that should not arise now because you know the importance of native laws and custom and should not at all keep such bad decision taken by the colonialists on matters that damage greatly native laws and customs. I will want that decision of 1954 to be revoked (personal communication, 1961).

In fact, Achirimbi had been provoked by the behaviour of some chiefs who interpreted the peace accord as legal and official acknowledgement of their autonomy by the state. For example, the Chief of Banji at the time, Ben Ngwa, was particularly happy with the 1954 accord. He wrote letters to the D.O in Bamenda asking for privileges befitting the

status of an autonomous chiefdom at the time. In one of his letters he wrote:

I want the D.O to put a helping hand on my market. Make it go ahead. I am now digging the main road to my village so that you can be able to reach there too, and I have asked for tools and you have not given them why? Try and give me the work things. Yours most humble petitioner Village Head of Banji (Village Head of Banji, personal communication, July 1955).

In another related letter written in 1959, the same chief stated that the Fon of Bafut for long had imposed undue pressure on him and his people, claiming them as his subjects. In 1954, he and the Fon had agreed to establish permanent and lasting peace. The terms of the peace accord clearly spelt out that village heads in future would be regarded as chiefs and not sub-chiefs. Thus, it was clear that he, the chief of Banji, was an autonomous chief and not a sub-chief under the Fon of Bafut. If Achirimbi, for any reason, desired to change the decision of the peace settlement, he could not do so alone (Village Head of Banji, personal communication, November 10, 1959).

Achirimbi saw in these petitions disobedience and arrogance from a sub-chief. In reaction, he adopted a strategy which effectively clipped off the wings of Chief Ben Ngwa. Achirimbi intensified the allocation of farm land and raffia bushes (*akooh*) to Bafut people and strangers who paid allegiance to him in Banji. Some of these people included Wanki, Ndiforbangong, Lazarus Nche of Mankon, Muchi, Mfocham, Mundaban, Tangoni, Ngonga, Akimawa, Nyambu and Akenji from Mbebali. Predictably, the Fon's decision to allocate land to foreigners in Banji was rejected by the Chief. The feelings of Chief Ben Ngwa were expressed in a remark which he made about one of the persons, Nyambu, settled in Banji. In a petition to the D.O, the Chief of Banji said: "it is this very Nyambu who is used as a tool by the Fon of Bafut" (Village Head of Banji, personal communication, November 3rd, 1955). Encouraged by Chief Ben Ngwa, the Banji people expressed their indignation in a petition written by one Ngwanigha to the District Officer in these words:

Akenji is a person from Manji quarters of Bafut and I am from Banji village. We have problems with the Bafut people over land and raffia bushes. Akenji [...] sprang into my raffia bush without cause. How this man got into my bush is what I cannot understand. It amount to nothing than suppression which has always been the Bafut people's attitude towards us because they style us as their slaves (Ngwanigha of Banji, personal communication, July 26, 1956).

In fact, the allocation of land to Bafut people and strangers in Banji was calculated to achieve two aims: the first was to ensure that the Fon's customary tributes were collected in their entirety and sent directly to the palace. The permanent supply of kola nuts from the Fon's kola nut trees at *akooh* Tumenkeri had to be assured. No tributes destined for the Bafut palace were to pass through the Chief of Banji again. The second aim was to curb the influence and control of the Banji Chief over land and people in the

area. It was thought the powers of the chiefs were going to be reduced keeping them in a position of subservient. One area which suffered and irked the Banji chief was the fall in taxes passing through him. Many Bafut people and foreigners, who settled in Banji by-passed the chief and paid their taxes directly to the Fon of Bafut. This angered the Chief of Banji who wrote a petition to the D.O for Bamenda expressing his discontent.

It was evident, all along, that the Fon of Bafut had been taking advantage of his privileged position as the sole Local Authority in Bafut, to exercise full control over land and the people who settled on it. He also decided how and through whom people paid taxes. But in so doing, he obviously stepped on the toes of the Chief of Banji given that he too was an officially appointed tax collector or agent in his village. The decision of Bafut people and strangers residing in Banji to pay tax directly to the Fon of Bafut did not only create problems of rebate earnings, assessment, accountability and collection of tax for the Chief, but it also challenged the authority of the head of that village. Indeed, many of such challenges over the authority of the Banji Chief were recorded from Bafut people resident in Banji. The question is, how did Mankwi people get entangled in land question and power tussle between Bafut and Banji?

According to the Regent of Banji, Nfordan William Tallah, the leaders of Banji and Mankwi, namely Talah Banji and Talah Mankwi were brothers who settled in the same area. Talah Mankwi settled at Ntahmucho while Talah Banji was at Ntahtita. Ntahmucho was situated at a location where the Bafut-Bamendum boundary was demarcated in 1933 by the British. In this area was found vast stretches of land with wild palm and raffia grooves. They were given various names such as *akoohnfor* (Fon's bush) found in Mughie and *akooh* Tumenkere in Adiemukong. Here, the Fon claimed a good number of kola nut trees and raffia bushes. Most of these resources were controlled by the Mankwi people on behalf of the Fon. With time, the Mankwi left the area and moved up the hill to their present site situated across the River Mezam (Muyaa). While the Mankwi moved out of Njimuyaa, they still maintained their farm lands and raffia bushes (*akooh*) in the old settlement. The Mankwi women continued to work these farms while the men tapped wine from their raffia and palm bushes (Nfordan William Tallah, personal communication, November 8, 2008).

In 1960, the Banji people started to encroach on the Mankwi farm lands and raffia bushes. Resistance to their encroachment was met with force by the Banji people who burnt down houses and seized hoes from Mankwi women (Talah Mankwi, personal communication, September 7, 1960). Rather than meet force with force, the Mankwi chief reported the matter to his superior, the Fon of Bafut. The action of the Chief provoked anger that widened the conflict. This was due to the interpretation given by the Banji people to the action of Chief Talah. To them, the Fon of Bafut was using the Mankwi people to exercise influence or get things (*njooh*) from Banji. This was justified by a

petition written by the Banji people to the administration which read thus:

It can be said that the present land dispute between Banji village and the people of Mankwi quarters is the old quarrel camouflaged: the Fon of Bafut is inciting the Mankwi people against the people of Banji village for the abolition of the customary right of the Fon of Bafut over the Banji as was evidenced by the truce reached before the then District Officer on the 29th November, 1954 (O/M Ogwo Esqr, personal communication, June 12, 1961).

The Banji people thought that way because at a time when their chief championed the course of opposition against the Fon of Bafut, the Chief of Mankwi remained loyal and respectful to the Fon. Gifts of farm produce and palm wine from the bushes around this area were regularly sent to the palace. In reaction to the complaint of the Mankwi people the Fon wrote to the D.O for Bamenda and the police asking them to take serious action against the Banji. On 26 August 1960 he wrote:

Sorry to inform you that, in this morning, people of Mankwi quarter Bafut came and reported to me that all their houses are now burnt by Banji people [...] Mankwi people also informed me that they are now getting ready to fight with Banji. I, being the Fon of Bafut [and First Local Authority-in-Council] told them to wait for you. Therefore I send this letter very soon with my car to you for early action now. If not so, war will be here today (Fon of Bafut, personal communication).

In a follow-up letter, as President of the Bafut Traditional Council, the Fon wrote to the Commissioner of the Cameroons in these words:

Sir [...] see that we had made peace with Banji since 1954. Therefore, we the Council of Bafut without fail report to you the above... should leave Bafut land to Mamfe or anywhere which Commissioner will think fit. The Fon of Bafut has boundaries with Babaji, Bamendum, Mbelifang, Mukuru and others. There are no more boundaries inside Bafut land. Bafut clan is 33,998, population. How can people who are only 100 men want to spoil our good name? If our Fon was not an officer, we would have done what is not good with Banji [...] these people are always giving us much trouble. If you do not take serious action, these people will do more bad than this (Fon's Office Bafut, personal communication, August, 1960).

It is clear from these letters that a farm land dispute had degenerated into war. The Banji people fighting against the Mankwi people were actually fighting the Fon of Bafut. This was evident in many letters written to government in which they described the Fon of Bafut as an "age-old oppressor". This incident resulted in loss of lives and property. Five Banji people were killed while a good number of Mankwi people were wounded. Property was destroyed both in Banji and Mankwi. The reaction of the Southern Cameroons Government on the issue was significant and noteworthy. On 8 May 1961, the D.O. for Bamenda wrote to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Local Government

Buea, stating the position of the administration on the issue.

Banji people are of Widikum origin conquered by Bafut in the past. Although in reality a Quarter of Bafut, Banji is regarded as a village in so far as certain customs are concerned by courtesy of the Fon. The land on which they live is originally by conquest and now by long custom and acceptance by the administration, Bafut land. But all the quarters of Bafut farm widely throughout the area. They do not stick to accurately demarcated enclaves and they have not got boundaries within Bafut. This suits all the quarters except Banji. Banji would like a boundary, but it would be unwise to agree to this for in due course, the Banji would attempt to set-up a separate village with a village head who would want to regard himself as an equal to the Fon (District Officer, personal communication).

Eventually, the position of the administration in Bamenda was endorsed by the West Cameroon Government in October 1961. In a letter written to both parties involved in the conflict, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, Buea said that:

I am directed to inform you that His Honour has received and considered the positions forwarded by you to him on the above subject. His Honour considers that the dispute occurred as a result of misunderstanding. His Honour feels sure that you will resume the friendly and peaceful relations you have enjoyed in recent years (personal communication, October 5, 1961).

From the above, it is clear that the West Cameroon Government, like their colonial predecessors, rejected any centrifugal forces that attempted to balkanise the Bafut *fondom*. They also upheld the position of the Fon of Bafut to the detriment of his Sub-Chiefs. According to the Government, the Fon continued to be the single leader to wield power and authority over the entire Bafut community. It was therefore in the interest of Government that if peace had to prevail, the status quo had to be maintained. The Sub-Chiefs in turn were embittered by government support of the Fon. Some of them reacted by making their voices heard in various ways ranging from civil disobedience to more petition writing and disputes. Such was the case of the Bawum Chief concerning the land issue at Nsoh.

The Bawum Land Problem

Nsoh quarter of Bawum-Bafut became a bone of contention between the Fon of Bafut and the Chief of Bawum, Nicholas Ntoh. The problem had a long history although things came to a head in 1967 when Ntoh was dropped as a tax collector. Worst of all, according to Chief Ntoh during a political party, that is, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) organisation, which was the sole political party in Cameroon at the time, Nsoh was detached and joined to Mambu to constitute a Branch. This move was seen by Ntoh as

dismembering Bawum, over which he was chief. But what was the root cause of the Nsoh problem?

According to Matthias Niba who was a teenager in Bawum in the early 1950s, when he was growing up in Bawum at the time, Nsoh was farm land exploited mainly by Bawum people. Mbebeli people had their farms beyond Nsoh at Swei. In fact, the name Nsoh only applied to the area where the Bamenda Airport is situated today. Other locations went by the names Assissong, Ature Ntoh (Ntoh's hunting grounds), Akooh Chebi, Akooh Ncha and Nibe Mufersi. Today all these places are collectively called Nsoh. At that time, it was also called Afo-Bawum (Bawum farmland). As was the custom, all the villages and quarters in Bafut had their farmlands located some distance from the settlements. Other farmlands, for example, were Agyati for the Mankaha people, Nforya for Niko people and Akosia for Njinteh people. From the late 1950s and early 1960s, Bawum people as well as Bafut people from other villages and quarters started settling, that is building permanent structures, at Nsoh. The trouble centred on who had the overall authority in Nsoh; was it Ntoh Bawum or the Fon of Bafut? The Bawum settlers felt that Nsoh was the extension of their village, Bawum, and so Ntoh had the sovereign authority there.

The other settlers from other parts of Bafut, particularly from Mumala'a, stood their grounds that they had nothing to do with Ntoh. Their sovereign was the Fon of Bafut. Of course some of these non- Bawum people had acquired vast stretches of land at Nsoh. One of them was Pah Numfor, a teacher at Presbyterian School, Nsem. The other was the Rev. Aaron Su, a prominent Presbyterian Pastor. The Fon of Bafut obviously threw his weight behind his own subjects as a way of weakening Ntoh's claims to Nsoh. He started scheming to create Nsoh as a separate quarter detached from Bawum. To concretise these plans, he encouraged one John Mufersi, himself a settler in Bawum from Mambu, to stake his claims as quarter head of Nsoh. Mufersi was to be answerable to the Fon of Bafut rather than to Ntoh Bawum. Actually the name 'Nsoh originated, according to Bawum traditions, from the fact that the people of Nsongwa near Bamenda once settled there for some time before moving to their present site. That was the background to Ntoh's petition in 1967.

In this petition, Ntoh interpreted his being dropped as tax collector and the detachment of Nsoh and being joined to Mambu in the party reorganisation exercise as a move by the West Cameroon Government to drastically reduce his authority and control over Bawum subjects in Nsoh and the quarter as a whole. To Ntoh, he had been deprived of his customary right to control economic resources in Nsoh. Writing to the Premier of West Cameroon, Ntoh argued that Nsoh was inhabited by Bawum people and so they could not be grouped under Mambu as indicated by the CNU registration programme in Bafut West. To Ntoh, Nsoh was "part of Bawum" and must be grouped with it for the registration. If this was not done, no single Bawum inhabitant would register for the elections. Ntoh also complained that another quarter of Bawum, Swie, was taken away

and attached to Mforya, thus causing Bawum to lose two of its quarters. This loss was synonymous with the chief's loss of his customary right of control in these quarters. Chief Ntoh found it difficult to stomach the situation. After sending his petition, he left for Buea, accompanied by one of his close aides, Jerome Ayancho, to see the Premier on this issue (Chief Nicolas Ntoh, personal communication, April 20, 1967).

Earlier in 1965, the Bafut-Ndop Council had sued Ntoh for alleged embezzlement of tax money collected from his village for the 1963-64 fiscal year. This case dragged on to 1968. While it went on, Ntoh was temporarily suspended from his administrative duties of customary court judge and tax collector in Bafut. In the course of these events, John Mufersi appeared from the blues to be made tax collector for Nsoh. Bawum people resident in Nsoh interpreted this as a ploy to undercut their natural leader, Chief Ntoh in the area. In fact the act did not only challenge the authority of the Chief of Bawum but it threatened the status of Bawum people resident at Nsoh. Thus on 27 August, 1968, Bawum people in Nsoh wrote a petition to the D.O for Bamenda Division in which they declared: "Ever since our forefathers left the interior of Bawum and established this extension settlement on their farmland and we their descendants grew up as citizens of Bawum, we do not think and do not wish that anything should ever split us from our fatherland" (Bawum Settlers of Nso-Bawum, personal communication, August 27, 1968). The petitioners complained about John Mufersi, the "official tax collector of Nsoh and assessment officer". They argued that the father of John Mufersi left Mambu and came to Bawum not as a ruler. He was an ordinary villager who paid tribute to Chief Ntoh alongside their fathers. But then the Bafut Traditional Council connived with Mufersi and he was appointed tax collector in Nsoh. To them, the Traditional Council had no right to appoint anybody against their wish to rule them when in reality they had a recognised ruler in the person of Chief Ntoh. Thus, the petition appealed to the West Cameroon Government to instruct John Mufersi to use his nominal roll and other traditional insignia only for his family. He was not their ruler and did not live with them in Nsoh.

From all indication, as proven in the two petitions discussed above, Chief Ntoh and Bawum people pointed accusing fingers at the Bafut Traditional Council for being responsible to what was happening in Nsoh. Chief Ntoh particularly blamed the Council for giving false information to the West Cameroon Government in Buea, especially the D.O. for Bamenda Division to balkanise the Bawum chiefdom. It was therefore on the information provided by the Traditional Council that the D.O. carved out the party registration centres in the area. According to the petitioners the Council also concocted the "game plan" which convinced the administration to appoint Mufersi as tax collector in Nsoh. On 17 September, 1968, John Mufersi, the acolyte of the central palace reacted to Chief Ntoh's petition and that of the Bawum people in Nsoh. In a letter to the Secretary of State for Interior, West Cameron, he stated:

The present Chief Ntoh of Bawum in Bafut West has been trying to make Nsoh Village as a quarter in Bawum village. This has resulted to a quarrel between him-

self and I. This village of Nsoh has been ruled by four great grandfathers, then by my father and now, myself. During their reign none had a case with any of the late chiefs of Bawum. How this trouble of chieftaincy came about now is really above my imagination. Nsoh like any other quarter or village in Bafut was given to my great grandfather by the Fon of Bafut to collect tax before 1919. Since then, there had been no trouble until now (personal communication).

In fact the declaration of John Mufersi raised a number of issues. Firstly, following the prescription of the Direct Taxation Ordinance, since 1917 those who assisted Native Authorities as tax collectors or agents were village heads, quarter heads and some few compound heads. From the colonial to post independence government records, the name of Mufersi appeared nowhere as tax agent, let alone being a tax collector in 1919. Secondly, up to 1963, Nsoh had not fully emerged as a village, quarter or compound (*Ayenda*) within the Bafut political and administrative structure.⁵ Nsoh was still growing under its parental chieftaindom, Bawum, whose inhabitants used the area as their farm lands. Thus, the claim that "Nsoh village" has been ruled by four great grandfathers of John Mufersi was false. Thirdly, the position of a tax agent was not automatically synonymous to being a chief nor was it a step towards the forceful imposition of a chief on a young quarter that had a well-known history of migration, settlement and development. It was against this backdrop that Chief Ntoh wrote back to the State Government to enlighten it on some of the points raised by John Mufersi in his petition.

On 19 September 1968, Chief Ntoh explained that the real biological father of John Mufersi was a tax payer under Bawum. The problem was created in 1947 following confusion which Thomas Asongwed the Administrative Secretary-Treasurer for Bafut Native Authority caused in the area. Asongwed took over from A.M. Kubri in 1946. Before this, Ntachu quarter under its family head Nforba and Yenkamengoh quarter were compiled in one nominal roll under Bawum. They paid their tax under Bawum without problems. But Asongwed came and separated these quarters from Bawum. According to Ntoh, Mufersi and Nforba had no privileged position in Bawum; they were impostors (Chief Ntoh, personal communication, September 19, 1968). Ntoh used history to justify his point. He said John Mufersi's father called Mufersi Nebangwa left Mambu and came to Bawum because of a chieftaincy problem which he had caused there and Chief Wanki expelled him from Mambu. Mufersi then settled in Bawum under Chief Ntoh who later made him a quarter head in Bawum between 1913 and 1914.

In another perspective, Mufersi used tradition and custom to justify his rulership in Nsoh. He asserted that historically, all women who had farms at Nsoh gave food to

5 See list of villages, quarters and compound (*Ayenda*) in R.J. Hook's Intelligence Report on the Associated Village Groups Occupying Bafut Native Authority Area of the Bamenda Division of Cameroons Province.

him to take to the Fon. This was a duty accorded him by Bafut tradition and custom. The question, which he then asked was why tradition did not allow Chief Ntoh to do the collection if really his claim over Nsoh was real or legitimate. Besides, the famous ancestral shrine *nibemufersi*, that is, the waterfall at the Nibe stream was in Nsoh. He and the Fon of Bafut had for years offered sacrifices to the gods just as their forefathers did. In effect, if Ntoh was the rightful authority in Nsoh, he could have been the one to perform this duty. But Ntoh had never gone to the shrine to ask the gods to bless his people. However, the point here was not the argument on who had the traditional right to offer sacrifices to the ancestors and gods of the land. That is why Ntoh made it clear to the D.O. in his petition that his action should not be mistaken for an attempt to abrogate tradition, state law, native customs and practices, or break away from Bafut. To Ntoh, the Bawum were subjected to Bafut and they were simply crying for the right over their land. In other words, they were simply laying claims to their customary rights as Bafut people. Any group of people or individual would do same without necessarily resorting to enmity or conflict. That is why Nicholas Ntoh appealed to the D.O to call Mufersi to reason with the rest of the quarter heads in Bawum. This was to avoid involving the entire Bafut public in a matter that could easily be resolved to “safe faces”. Besides, if the matter was left in the hands of the Bafut Traditional Council, they would worsen the situation rather than bring peace in Bawum. On behalf of all Bawum men, women and children, Chief Ntoh pledged their loyalty to the Government of West Cameroon and wished ‘long life’ to the Fon of Bafut and the entire Government of the Federal Republic.

From the explanation of Chief Ntoh, a new set of questions cropped up. Firstly, Ntoh acknowledged that his father made Mufersi quarter head in 1913 and they lived together, without problems. Secondly, he acknowledged his allegiance to the Fon of Bafut whom he wished ‘long life.’ Where then was the root of the 1967 problem? Was it just the fact that Bawum people in Nsoh were not made to pay taxes through the natural leader, Ntoh? Actually, Chief Ntoh risked losing a sizeable proportion of his own population, that is, Bawum people settled in Nsoh. That would have weakened his authority as a village head. He feared losing half of his chieftom to Mufersi and by extension to the Bafut palace. So the fight was against the Fon of Bafut and his palace hierarchy. Mufersi, being the agent or instrument of the palace in the area, had to bear the brunt of this fight. The main problem centred on the control of land and its resources. The palace authorities and Chief Ntoh both claimed customary rights over land in Nsoh. The remote causes of the problem were rooted in the history of migration and traditional land tenure system in the area. These have already been explained above. In the 1960s, land was gradually gaining value in Bafut. As a result the palace authorities raised a claim that land in Nsoh was conquered by the Bafut from Mankon. According to them, it was ‘crown land’ or royal property. Since then, the palace used conquest as their base of legitimacy to claim ownership over the land. The same authorities insisted that people in Nsoh should regularise their situation with the central palace or quit the land.

The Bawum descendants in Nsoh, as evident in the petition of 27 August 1968 did not mince words in telling the palace authorities that their forefathers had effectively occupied the land which they inherited. By virtue of effective occupation for a long time, they had owned the land. Thus, the issue of the palace claim over the land in Nsoh was out of question. Also the Bawum people in Nsoh were not also interested in any form of traditional administration imposed on them by the central palace. They had their natural leader who was Chief Ntoh. He should be the one to rule them and no other person or institution.

Chief Ntoh argued that *kwifor* and *takumbeng*, palace institutions had never been part of the institutions or structures responsible for the control and administration of land in Bafut. Their singular role was to assist the chiefs restore order on the land and not to rule. In modern parlance, it would be said that the police corps had taken over the duty of the D.Os. Besides, the Federal Government did not recognise *kwifor* and *takumbeng* as any auxiliary arm of territorial administration as was the case with the chiefs. All these power intrigues annoyed Chief Ntoh. In March 1968, he had mobilised the chiefs of Mantah, Mankahnikong, and Obang to write a petition to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon. The petition stated that some traditional measures had been introduced by the Fon of Bafut which would inevitably "stir the Bafut community to unrest". Top on the list was the new creation called *takumbeng*, which embarked on the indiscriminate seizure of land and raffia bushes from the Bafut people without justification (Chiefs of Bafut West, personal communication, March 29, 1968).

Other Bafut communities on their part joined their chiefs to petition against the new traditional arrangement set-up by Achirimbi II in Bafut. The first was the case of the Akofounguba people who openly expressed disgust and accused the Fon of setting up a bad administrative system under the "so-called *takumbeng*". To them, *takumbeng* was designed and particularly assigned the duty of seizing land from Bafut people by force. This was followed by the Mforya people. *Takumbeng* insisted that the bushes belong to the palace and so the occupants had to evacuate them. Unable to bear the threats, the Mforya people appealed to the S.D.O for Bamenda Division complaining about the seizure of property in their village. According to the petitioners, Bafut princes brought 'war' to destroy the Mforya people. Mforya, Akofounguba and Nsoh thus had identical problems with the palace. The treatment which people in one of these areas suffered under *takumbeng* administration was replicated in the other. This had repercussions on the rest of the Bafut *fondom*.

On Wednesday 17 July 1968, the S.D.O for Bamenda Division on the instructions of the Ministry of Local Government in Buea probed into the Bafut problems. The message from Buea instructed the S.D.O to take special note of: "Those matters of traditional ethics that appeared to be getting out of control and thereby developing such dimensions that result into conflicts and increase the social problems in the Bafut Area Administration"

(Permanent Secretary Ministry of Interior, personal communication, June, 1968). At the end of discussions in the meeting of 17 July, the S.D.O. for Mezam, M.G. Nkamsi realised that there was misunderstanding and lack of cooperation in the *fondom*. The Fon and his Traditional Council were held responsible for this unhealthy situation. Consequently, the S.D.O instantly dissolved the Traditional Council and ordered for the formation of a new one that would reflect the various interest groups or shades of opinion in Bafut. The Sub-Chiefs and quarter heads of Bafut were eventually called to assume their positions in the new Traditional Council. The S.D.O further asked *takumbeng* to curb and confine its activities to its proper quarters or lodge in the palace. Regarding tax collection, the S.D.O asked that everybody should pay tax to the recognised tax collector or agent of the quarter or village where he resided. It was only after this arrangement that most of the problems on land were laid to rest in Bafut during the last years of Achirimbi's reign. However, this was short-lived given that within the context of the unitary state, the Cameroon government came up with new land laws which constituted another bone of contention in the Bafut community.

Government Regulations and the Question of Land Rights and Ownership in Bafut

The major problems with the new state regulations revolved around issues of land rights and ownership, authority and control in the community. Land rights and ownership, henceforth, fell under the title national land. All national lands were henceforth to be managed and administered by the State. To this effect, Consultative Commission or boards were created and presided over by administrative authorities (D.Os). Many chiefs of former West Cameroon including those of Bafut found it difficult to accept the fact that the right and ownership of the land on which they settled had been reverted to the state. They despised this notion stipulated by article 14 of the Land Law and continued to claim the right of ownership over community land under their jurisdiction.

Actually, land in pre-colonial Bafut was owned by the people or the community with the chief as the custodian. The land was also owned in usufruct by extended families while the Fon remained the overall custodian. For Bafut especially, in the semi-autonomous villages, the chief (*atangcho*) exercised the custodian right in return for special tributes to the Fon. All 'unoccupied' land was under the control of the Fon, or in the Bafut popular phrase it was *kwifor* land. However, the notion of custodian was an honorary position where the norms and advantages of the office, permitted the chief to enjoy tributes, money and other economic resources. But this was not synonymous to the right of ownership over the land by the chief. But with time, many chiefs interpreted the role or duty of custodian as having given them the right of ownership over the land in their community.

When the colonialists arrived, they claimed the right of ownership of land which could be expropriated from the local people at any time for various purposes or interest. In

French Cameroon, where direct rule was applied, the colonialists completely took over control of the land there. In this way, they claimed to own the land over which they exercised rights of ownership. In this context, traditional leaders derived very little benefits from land transactions. In the British Cameroons, where indirect rule was applied, the British allowed the leaders of some local communities like Bafut to continue with the management of land issues and control. With this arrangement, there was little or no change in what the chief derived as benefits from land in pre-colonial and the colonial periods. In fact, the British did not only permit chiefs like Achirimbi II to reap economic benefits on land but they actually supported his claim over the right of landlord and ownership of the community land under his jurisdiction.⁶ This created the impression in the minds of Bafut chiefs that they were not only custodians of the land under their control but they were real owners with ownership rights.

The West Cameroon government did not change what the colonialists had arranged before. Then there was the unitary government and the 1974 land reform. Here, the government completely decided to get to itself the right of land ownership. As stated in the law, this was to help solve numerous litigations on land and ensure equitable and rational distribution of land to all Cameroonians. This arrangement implied that all other local arrangements on land had to be cancelled. Local leaders or chiefs had to renounce any old claim to land rights and ownership in their communities in favour or support of the State regulations. But this did not still make sense or meaning to traditional leaders in Bafut. Here, the Fon and his sub-chiefs and quarter heads continued to lay claims to rights of land ownership in the community. They despised the government claim of land ownership and sole dispenser of such rights in the local communities, thereby creating problems of varied dimensions in the *fondom*. This was the case in Nsoh Bafut. Here, the question of rights and land ownership resurfaced. In 1972, Mufersi Neba Fuh had succeeded the uncle John Mufersi as “quarter head” in Nsoh. The *kwifor* and Fon of Bafut confirmed his quarter headship in Nsoh. Traditionally, Mufersi was not only made ‘custodian’ of land under his jurisdiction but he inherited extensive lands in the area which he claimed the right of ownership. Such was the case of *ntaà* Mufersi and other pieces of land in the area.

Consequently, four years after the 1974 land law was enacted, Chief Ntoh of Bawum raised a problem of land rights and ownership in Nsoh. In a letter to the S.D.O for Mezam titled “The Fon of Bafut declared war in Bawum”, Chief Ntoh complained that his land was being seized and given to Mufersi Neba Fuh at Nsoh. Besides, Neba Fuh was

6 In the face of the Obang tribute crisis, Achirimbi II claimed the right of landlord to Obang. He insisted that the people must either pay the customary tributes to him or rents on the land where they were settled. Failure to pay the rents, they should quit his land and return to their place of origin in Widekum. Eventually, the British administrators concurred with this claim on grounds that it was not repugnant to natural law and equity.

made quarter head of Nsoh by the Fon of Bafut to administer or control land which he (Ntoh) owned. Ntoh had written several petitions on this matter to the administration in 1973, 1976 and 1980. In all these petitions, he did not mince words in declaring his ownership right over land in Nsoh. In the 1976 complaint, he told the Fon of Bafut and Mezam S.D.O in clear terms that he wanted his land and rights seized by the Bafut Fon and his palace authorities. During the meeting of 1980, Neba Fabs speaking on behalf of Chief Ntoh and all Bawum people in Bafut argued that the British Divisional Officer in Bamenda in 1938 confirmed the right of Chief Ntoh of Bawum over land ownership in Nsoh. That this was done in the presence of Achirimbi II, who confirmed the land in the area as the farm land of the people of Bawum, which Chief Ntoh was head.

This argument simply confirmed our assertion that the British colonial authorities made the leaders of Bafut to feel that they owned the land under their control and on which they exercised rights of ownership. But the question here is, after 1974, should we talk of one leader seizing the land rights of the other? Better still, was it possible for a local chief to openly claim ownership of land in front of state authorities without presenting any legal land title to justify such claims? It was in this light that the Fon of Mankon contended that with the modern trends of development and evolution in the state of Cameroon, such arguments and documents presented by Neba Fabs should no longer be considered. He declared that in the past he too was a big chief but today as an enlightened chief he cannot disobey the administration under which he was an auxiliary or subordinate. In effect, the Fon, Angwafor, was insinuating that those old claims of land rights and ownership rampant among Bafut leaders and the people had to be discarded in modern times. The format and regulations introduced by the Unitary State Government had to be followed. Of course the only way to claim land rights and ownership of land was to procure a legal land title from the state and not only by means of litigations and conflicts.

However, our point here is not to judge which traditional leader in Bafut has ownership right over land in Nsoh. This episode is used here to show how in spite of the existence of the 1974 land law, some conflicts still persisted in Bafut. This meant that the Government's right of ownership over all lands in the national territory was in a sense challenged. The objective of the Unitary State to use the land law to settle old conflicts and litigations over land were therefore compromised in Bafut. In fact, the scenario here was as though the land law had no effect on land disputes and conflicts in the community.

However, one must not lose sight of one thing and it was the fact that the control of land was directly linked to control of people and resources. So, Chief Ntoh's argument over land rights could not be minimised or ignored completely. The control of land in Nsoh was directly linked to the control of people. Land and population were important and inseparable components of power politics and authority in the local communities. If the land in Nsoh were fragmented and given to other quarter heads to control, that was syn-

onymous to fragmenting the authority of Chief Ntoh on land which was under his area of jurisdiction. The bone of contention was even with the Bawum people settled on land at Nsoh. The question was whether these people were willing to accept the control or authority of another traditional leader different from their natural leader, Ntoh. Evidence from past developments revealed that the Bawum people in Nsoh were not prepared to be ruled or controlled by any other traditional authority apart from Chief Ntoh. Hence the issue of land was just a smoke-screen or tip of the iceberg. The main issue at stake was conflict of authority and personal economic interest amongst the Bafut leaders. This phenomenon caused tension and strained relations within the Bafut community. It did not only continue to generate conflicts of varied dimensions but it also became a persistent source of headache to the modern State administration in Bafut even up till date. This was probably not a true representation of the State's intention which was out to protect the local communities and to resolve some conflicts or problems which had rendered life difficult in some local communities. Again, limited knowledge on the part of the local masses and their chiefs about the objectives of government created problems. The local masses and their chiefs were left with the option to interpret the law the way they understood it. This provoked deviant acts against the law.

Besides, the government reforms and administrative arrangements came at a time when the head of local traditional administration – the Fon, left Bafut in September 1971 to resume his studies which had been interrupted when he was installed as Fon. In his absence, the traditional administration was run by a Regency Committee which lasted up to 1982. The five-man Regency Committee was approved by the West Cameroon Government and it consisted of Chief Mbah Wanki, representative of the Bafut sub-chiefs, Prince Che Sama, representative of the princes (*takumbeng*), Suh Bennaà, Che Bonjem and M.C Nimang represented *kwifor*. John M. Nyamboli was designated as Secretary of the Committee. According to Security reports,

[...] government authorities installed a Regency Institution to administer the Bafut people in the absence of the Fon Abumbi who went to school to complete his secondary school education [...] although now a student, he still maintains his full right as Fon and attends the West Cameroon House of chiefs and other big occasions as a fon and not as a student. Other administrative functions have been delegated by him in writing to his kingmakers who are now his regents consisting of the following resident at Bafut: Suh Bunaa, Che Bonjem, Sama Achirimbi, M.C Nimang and William Mbah Wanki.⁷

The Traditional Council also continued to operate as one of the local administrative structure to assist the regency in its task. So, the Regency, the Traditional Council and

7 Service de la Sûreté de Bamenda, Note d'information No. S.4/vol.1/657 sur objet : Fon de Bafut rentre au collège.

the Customary Court were to pilot local administration in Bafut in the absence of the Fon. Each of the local structures put in place had to perform its assigned functions in accordance with state laws, policies and constitution. They were also to uphold the authority of the Fon in all their activities as prescribed by tradition and the State Government.

Although Government reports stated that the choice of regents did not pose a major problem, in reality, there were problems.⁸ The *kwifor* nobles on the regency Council connived with the Traditional Council to establish corrupt by-laws regulating land matters in Bafut. The by-laws eventually annoyed people in the community. Here, the Traditional Council, in pursuit of some financial benefits accruing from land in Bafut, devised means through which they could continue to exercise control over land. These nobles and Traditional Council members came up with a rule which stated that a man having a raffia bush could only cultivate a piece of land within the distance of 100 feet (33 metres) from the bush. The rest of the land was then appropriated and given out to any interested Bafut youths who gave money and food (*njooh*) to the palace. It was in this light that the palace authority seized hectares of land from people in different quarters of Bafut.

Furthermore, the Traditional Council established two Committees within namely the land and Disciplinary Committees respectively. The latter had more powers over the former when it came to decisions and judgements related to land. But, while the Disciplinary Committee held to the view that the distance around some one's bush should be 100 yards (98 metres) so as to allow the owner enough farm land on which to work, the land Committee disapproved and insisted on 100 feet (33 metres). This led to differences amongst the Committees which hindered smooth operations in land matters in Bafut. This was evident in the words of Mulaha Suhlum from Mforya who lamented that "Bafut people who own bushes and land are just left aghast because they don't know what the traditional councillors can decide to do. They had seized several bushes from Bafut people and spoiled cases reported to their council" (Melaha Suhlum, personal communication, June 13, 1974). In a petition to the D.O for Mezam in 1974, Suhlum decried the consequences of the internal by-laws established by the palace authorities on land in Bafut. To him, the laws deprived many Bafut people of their lands which were given to wealthy men by the traditional Council. Besides, the spirit of the Green Revolution campaign launched by the Government was being killed in the Bafut people by these palace authorities who hardly distinguished "their left from right" (Suh Lum, persona communication, June 6, 1974). Clearly therefore, the palace authorities acted in illegality.

8 This was the first precondition given to government by Abumbi that must be fulfilled before he could return to the palace or occupy the Bafut throne again. In 1971, government fulfilled the promise made to the young Fon.

With hindsight the question is how could they have gone away with the act under the noses of government authorities? In other words, how could obnoxious by-laws be made and implemented on land matters in Bafut without administrative intervention? The answer is simple. They were still under the influence of the old notion that land in Bafut belonged to *kwifor* and they could dispose of it with little opposition from whosoever. Secondly, they were still enjoying the freedom granted them by the former West Cameroon government to carry out land transactions in their community with little intervention from state authorities. Thirdly, a vast majority of the rural population, many of whom lived under the authority of the chiefs still had respect for their administration. Thus the central palace authorities in Bafut seized this opportunity to continue to control land unperturbed. This also gave them the freehand to violate procedures of land expropriation laid down by State regulations be it in former West Cameroon or East Cameroon systems. However, it was hoped that the situation would change with the enforcement of the new land ordinances of 1974.

Eventually, these ordinances were enacted in July 1974 but the old practice and customs which were often accompanied by the seizure of land from Bafut people intensified. The excesses of such acts were highly felt in the semi-autonomous chiefdom. The consequences on the political administrative machinery at the central palace were equally enormous. John Shu Fontem painted a picture of the disorder this situation created within the Bafut political structure when he reported on the situation prevailing in Bafut in the absence of the Fon. He observed that a conflict of authority arose between the regency and *kwifor* over land issues. Consequently, many Bafut people completely refused to obey any orders from the palace whether issued by *kwifor*, the regency or the Fon himself when he came home. Internal hatred and disunity set in fast. Even the customary tributes of oil, wood, wine, supplied to the palace by all the villages and quarters in Bafut, dropped considerably. Also, the people turned more and more to the administration. According to Fontem, the people had appreciated the newly formed Traditional Council, a direct arm of the government, more than the rule of either the *kwifor* or the Fon himself. But the administration of the Council was also not the best. At the same time, neighbouring chiefdoms as Mankon and Bambui began encroaching on Bafut lands. All these developments arose, according to Fontem, because of a gap created in the traditional set-up. The absence of a permanent authority was a big problem during this period. Consequently, what was reputed to be the strongest *fondom* in the Grassfields of the former West Cameroon was torn apart by domestic strife (Fontem, 1973). Another factor was that the Fon's power and authority over land control was fast declining in the face of the new land and chieftaincy reforms. The Fon and his traditional aides in the palace were determined to do anything as long as it permitted them to have firm grip or control over land and the Bafut community as a whole. Such attempts were unable to restore peace in Bafut but generate more problems or conflicts.

Another serious issue is the composite nature of the fondom. Bafut is a composite polity with a paramount chief (Fon) under whom are sub-chiefs that administer different ethnic groups of diverse peoples within the fondom. The dominant group in whose hands supreme power resides is the Tikar and the sub-chiefdoms are mostly of Widekum origin. Apparently because power, rather than being rotatory, was held in virtual perpetuity by one group, momentarily, tension will build up and explode. For the fact that in Bafut the control of land was directly linked to control or exercise of power and authority over people, each leader struggled to grab enough land over which he was to exercise authority. The more land a chief and his followers occupied, the more influence and power the leader in question commanded in the area. Thus, conflictual issues, especially the Mankwi, Banji and Bawum land problems were not unconnected to power struggle. Secondly, conflict related to land revolves around 'rights over people'.

The sub-chiefs in Bafut claim to have brought their people into Bafut from various places of origin. Thus, the paramount Fon's right to exert local authority or control over their people is not legitimate. Such claims have not only threatened the survival or existence of traditional authority in Bafut but have also incited ethnocentrism and other vices in the fondom amongst which is land grabbing and the controversy over redistribution. In recent times, the struggle to control land and local populace increased in magnitude. In this the role of government authorities as an instrument of conflict management or conflict resolution surfaced in Bafut. At one point in time, colonialists (administrators) were on the side of the Fon. After independence the plea of the aggrieved chiefs and their people gained the sympathy of government authorities in the area. Here, the bone of contention was on the wanton land grabbing attitude, the irrational and illogical redistribution of land in the fondom. The uncompromising stand of the Fon, his chiefs and people threatened to tear the fondom apart.

Conclusion

We set out to investigate how and why land issues were linked to power politics in Bafut history. We have discussed the controversy over land invasion and redistribution and our findings show that the right over control and access to land and the meaning of these rights have become a source of growing controversy and debate in many communities including the kingdom of Bafut. The use of land as a means of control or exercise of authority over people is an issue of interest. As land became scarce with a commodity value attached to it, conflicts over the control of right of access to and allocation of its use led to tension between the Fon of Bafut and his sub-chiefs. The Mankwi and the Bawum land problems for example manifested a conflict which portrayed a tussle over the control of rights of access and allocation of land between the Fon and his sub-chief. It also portrayed the intrigues of power politics in the community and how the people got entangled by circumstances in the web of such politics. Yet, the general

arrangements made at the level of the political structure were adulterated by strains and stresses that engendered conflicts.

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