Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership,1957-1961

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Abstract: The contribution of women in the Bamenda western Grassfields of Cameroon to the struggle for liberation from colonial rule manifested itself in many diverse forms, including mass mobilization, petitions, boycotts, and engagement in overtly hostile acts. The women's revolt in this region was well thought-out and their activities in the different *fondoms* carefully synchronized. This organization was also the upshot of an authoritative and menacing use of symbols that startled men's institutions like *kuiifuai* or *kwifoyn* which out-rightly or tacitly supported the colonial subjugation of women. These were forced into lassitude, and the result was the sovereignty of British Southern Cameroons through reunification with the Republic of Cameroon on 1 October 1961, with the territory renamed the West Cameroon State.[1]

Introduction

The women of the western Grassfields of Cameroon played a cutting edge role in the liberation struggle against colonial rule, as did women throughout the continent. The role of women, however, has unfortunately not achieved the same attention as that of men. The works of Awasom (2002, 2006), Shanklin (1990), Nkwi (1976, 1985), and Diduk (1989, 2004) though focused on women's role have not placed women as a central factor in the liberation struggle in the western Grassfields of Cameroon. Nkwi and Nkwain (1963) have, however, examined some aspects of organization but the focus of the literature on the liberation struggle in Africa has been on the role of male elites.[2] This paper seeks to elevate the role of women from the footnotes of history to which they have been relegated in the official narratives and restore them to their rightful place in securing the reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Republic of Cameroon.

In the colonial era the western Grassfields (see Map 1) formed part of the mandate of the League of Nations (1922 to 1945) and then a trust territory of the United Nations (1946-1961) and was governed on behalf of these international organizations by the British as Southern Cameroons (see Map 2), which they administered through Nigeria but not as part of that colony. It was and remains largely a high northern rural grassland plateau and was initially governed as the Bamenda Division.[3] In 1949, the territory was transformed into the Bamenda

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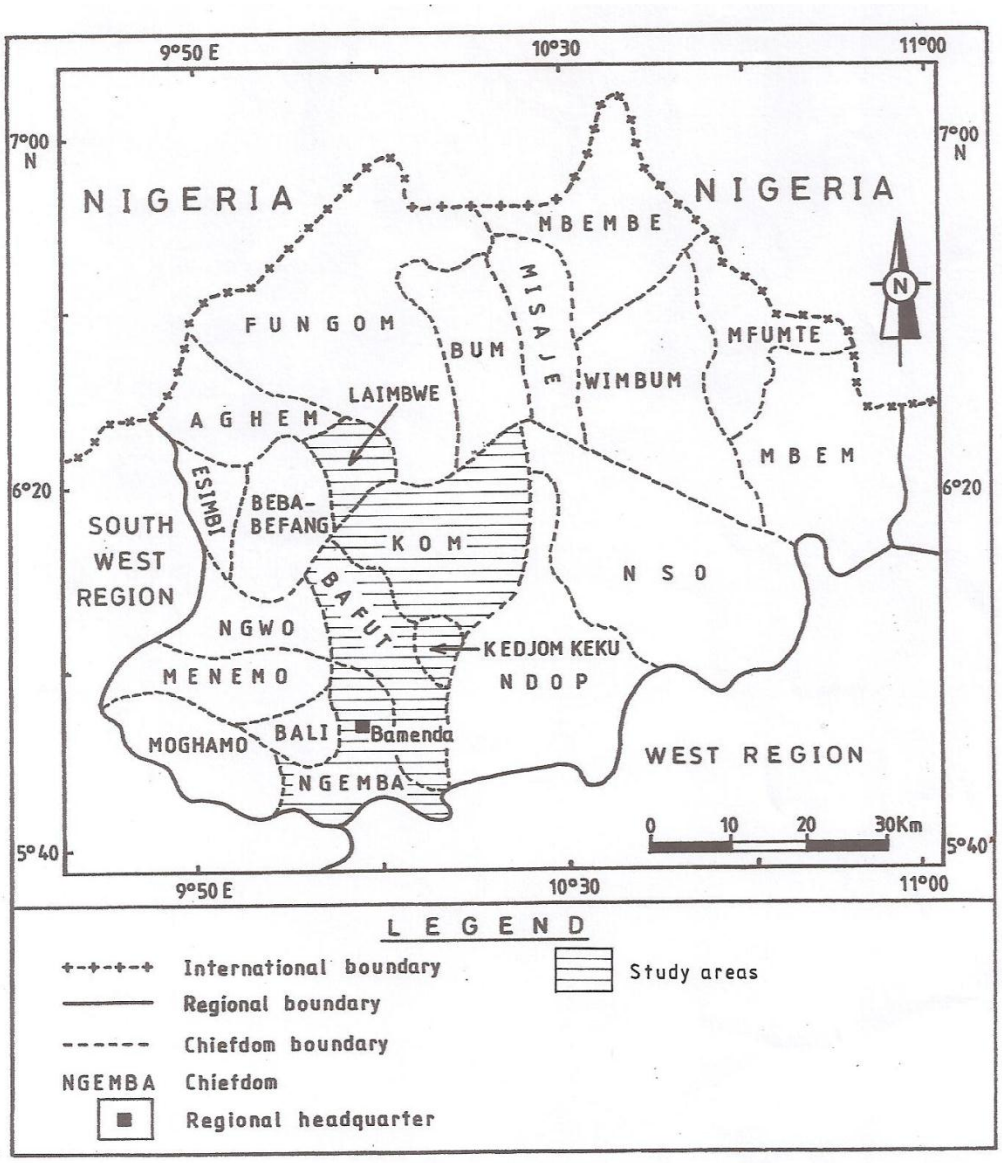
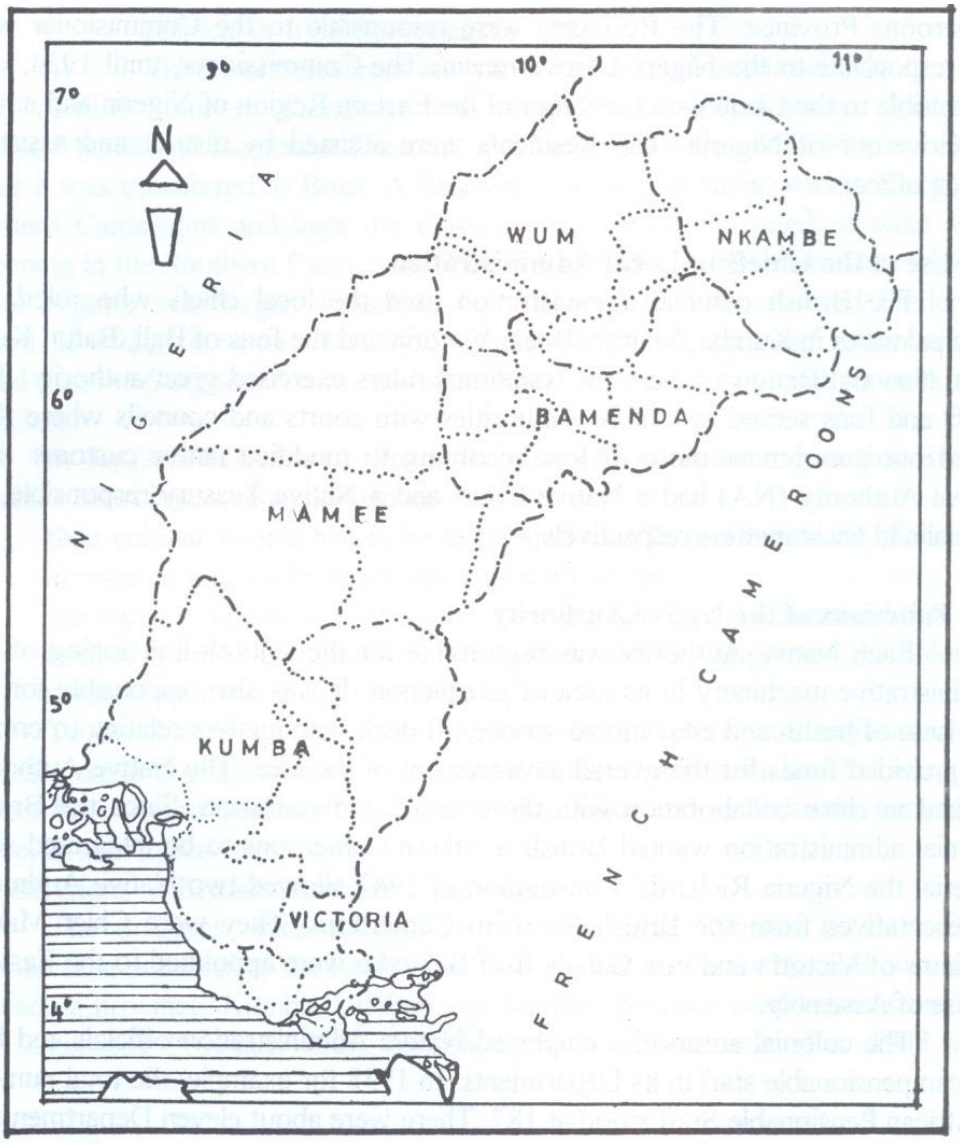
Province, one of two provinces of Southern Cameroons (the other being the Cameroons Province with Buea—formerly Victoria—as its capital). The province consisted of the Bamenda, Wum, and Nkambe Divisions. Upon the independence and reunification of the Cameroons on 1 October 1961, the territory was renamed the North West Province and then re-baptized the North West Region on 12 November 2008 through a presidential decree. It is one of the ten regions of Cameroon and consists of seven divisions, namely Boyo, Bui, Donga Mantung, Menchum, Mezam, Momo, and Ngo Ketunjia. The region is one of the country's most thickly populated regions. According to estimates of 1987, its population of 1,237,348, with a density of 69 inhabitants per km^2, ranked second in the country. Its surface area is 17,812 km^2. According to the 2010 census, the estimated population is 1, 804,695 people.[4]

Map 1 Ethnic Map of the Bamenda (Western) Grassfields



Map 2 British Southern Cameroons



Maps 1 and 2 prepared for author by Forba Cletus, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Buea

In British Southern Cameroons, elite individuals such as Dr. E.M.L. Endeley, John Ngu Foncha, and Nerius Namaso Mbile, as well as chiefs formed parties or otherwise acted militantly to advance the cause of independence.[5] Political pressure groups and tribal associations from the late 1930s created a political consciousness in British Southern Cameroons as well as French Cameroon through the creation of organizations such as the Cameroons Welfare Union (CWU), Cameroons Youth League (CYL), Cameroons National Federation (CNF), Kamerun United National Congress (KUNC), the Kamerun Society, Bakweri Land Committee (BLC), and French Cameroons Welfare Union (FCWU) in the Southern Cameroons and the *Union Camerounaise* (UC), *Jeunesse Camerounaise Francaise* (Jeucafra), and the *Union*

Camerounaise Francaise (Unicafra) in French Cameroon.[6] The politicians of Southern Cameroons went through their apprenticeship in these pressure groups, which prepared them to challenge colonial rule and push for self-government and independence. This was and has remained the case in other parts of Africa.[7]

Accounts of the liberation struggle have not accorded African women the same attention as their male counterparts. In some cases, they are lumped with small shopkeepers and petty traders who did not have the opportunity for wage employment within the colonial enterprise as did their male counterparts.[8] It has been noted that women played a significant role in the women's wings of political parties but after independence, they were underrepresented in the parliaments. There is no gainsaying, however, that women played a cutting edge role in the liberation struggle in the continent. From north to south and east to west they held their own in many different ways against earlier and, eventually, colonial subjugation.[9] This was because colonialism presented African sexuality as demeaning and intimidated people regarding the exploitation of the continent.[10] The colonizers tried to and/or dismantled African social, political, and economic structures and created a European persona out of the African (fe)male. [11] The description of society through the works of ethnographers, male and female, argues Chapman reinforce maleness. This dominance has been described by Chapman as a problem in human history that no revolt has succeeded in undoing.[12]

Women's groups like other voluntary associations in the colonial era served as vehicles for new ideas and a proving ground for political leaders, thus refuting the official narratives that have relegated them to the "footnotes of history." This can be seen, for example, in the 1929 women's uprising in Eastern Nigeria.[13]

Cameroonian women as elsewhere on the continent acted in such a way that they thumb printed their names in the sands of time.[14] Women petty traders from British Southern Cameroons boycotted the Douala market in protest against the imposition of price restrictions by the French colonial administrators.[15] In the Bamenda western Grassfields region, the *anlu* and *kelu* women's organizations became more political and served as the basis for the uprising that was based on women's grievances against suppression and exploitation.[16] During the colonial period, women's contribution to the emancipation of their people, region, and country was substantial. The successful contribution of women as a group poses a challenge to Amadiume's argument that women have greater freedom and choices as individuals but a weaker collective power.[17] The women of the western Grassfields of Cameroon during the last decade of the independence struggle were more militant in their demand for independence as a well-coordinated group from different fondoms including Kom, Kedjom Keku, Baisso, Mughom, Teitengem, Mbengkas, and Bu than as individuals. Although women made individual choices with regards to freedom in their lineages or families, they enjoyed and exercised greater freedom and power when they came together in organized groups. This was facilitated by an adept leadership that successfully opposed and weakened the forces of division epitomized in the British colonial system of administration.

Many examples of contributions have been recorded among various ethnic groups of the western Grassfields region, including the Kom, Kedjom Keku, Aghem, and Laimbwe.[18] Table 1 below shows the Laimbwe fondoms and their satellite settlements as well as the neighboring and some related Tikar fondoms. Other cases include the market women's resistance to border

restrictions between British and French Cameroons and the women's protest in Douala in 1930 against French colonial policies. Such mass mobilization when joined with other forces yielded fruit. The ultimate result was the independence of Southern Cameroons in 1961 and reunification with the Republic of Cameroon, which had obtained its own independence from the French on January 1, 1960.

Table 1 Showing the Laimbwe Fondoms, Satellite Settlements and some Tikar Fondoms

Laimbwe Fondoms	Satellite Settlements	Neighboring and Related Fondoms
Bu	Aguli (Kekuli)	Aghem
Mbengkas	Mughom, Teitengem, Mbueni	Kom
Baisso		Kedjom Keku

Source: Compiled by Author from Field Interviews

In spite of visible signs of women's resistance in the Cameroons, they have not formed a fundamental part of the existing literature on the contribution of women and subalterns to the same extent as for Nigeria and Ghana.[19] While this study focuses on the contribution of women in the western Grassfields during the colonial era, there is need to acknowledge the contribution of women in other parts of Cameroon and for further investigation to enrich the existing literature on Cameroon and more decisively the literature that addresses the liberation struggle mounted by women all over Africa to free their territory from colonial subjugation. The existing literature on the role of women in liberating the western Grassfields from the grip of colonial rule is drawn from different disciplines that include anthropology, sociology, history, literature, and ethnography.[20] This literature has intensely focused on the activities of the women in the different fondoms that are under study. The omitted link is the near absence and/or mediocre examination of the nature and nourishment of cooperation among their movements against continued British rule of Southern Cameroons.

Several scholars who have written about women's revolts in the western Grassfields have focused but on other issues. Nkwain (1963) and Nkwi (1976 and 1985) have examined the origins, organization and activities of *anlu* in the Kom Fondom while Chilver and Kaberry (1967) argue that the *anlu* women's revolt was targeted against Dr E.M.L. Endeley's government in British Southern Cameroons. Writing also about the *anlu* women's revolt in Kom, Konde (1990), O'Neil (1991), Shanklin (1990) and Milne (1999) argue that the revolt exploited the womenfolk to empower men, impacted on the Catholic Mission in Njinikom Kom and also weakened the powers of the Fon of Kom respectively. With regards to the *fuenbwen (fuembuen)*, *takembeng*, and *kelu* women's organizations, Diduk (1989, 2004) examines the importance of symbolism in the *fuenbwen* women's revolt in the fondom of Kedjom Keku but handles it superficially. Jua (1993) discusses *anlu* and *takembeng (takembeng)* as a major force for political change in Cameroon and Awasom (2006) examines the forces behind and results of the *fuenbwen* women's mobilization. The common missing link in these works is the failure to

discuss coordination, organised and efficient leadership as well as symbolism playing crucial roles in the women revolts in the western Grassfields of Cameroon.

Our field investigation has shown that in many instances there were conscious efforts to mobilize women across ethnic groups under a recognized and well-coordinated leadership from the base to the top by means of the effective use of local and other symbols to convey messages that were tacitly assimilated by the local people but not always correctly or rightly interpreted by the colonial officials. The results were often embarrassing to the administration, and it occasionally submitted to the will of the people. Such measures were instrumental in bringing about decolonization in British Cameroons as a whole.[21] In addition, the study surmises that proper organization was an important contributory factor to the success of the women's revolt in the western Grassfields during the evening years of British colonial administration.

Method and Importance of Study

In this study we have combined a number of methods from different disciplines including history, ethnography, linguistics, sociology and anthropology. We conducted interviews in the field with participants in the liberation movement. In the event of the death of some of the key participants, we discussed the uprising against the colonial administration with their contemporaries, family members, and children. We also employed systematic content analysis of some of the published works on women's mobilization efforts in the different fondoms, among them Kom, Kedjom Keku, Aghem, Befang, and the Laimbwe fondoms of Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso and their satellite chiefdoms of Mughom, Teitengem, and Mbongkesso. Among these fondoms however, only Kom and Kedjom Keku, including the Ngemba-speaking fondoms, have received a consistent scholarly consideration, with the latter for the most part due to the re-introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s. Most of the other ethnic groups have either only recently received scholarly attention or none at all. Many of them are still *terra incognita* as far as women's resistance is concerned.

This study also elucidates symbols and other secret messages within their cultural perspective and how these were helpful in mobilizing women against colonial exploitation and also startling some imposing male notables into acquiescence. To achieve this, we consulted works that have examined symbols in different societies and how these shaped civic estimation of newsworthy activities within these societies. Since bodily symbols were an essential weapon of resistance in the fondoms under examination, we also employed literature on the allegory of the body. This literature facilitated our understanding of symbolic action with regards to sexuality when used correctly and/or otherwise depending on a number of variables, which include age group and intent.

From a closer examination and interpretation of these symbols and symbolic acts within colonial history, we have tried to situate the power of symbols in the liberation struggle in this part of Cameroon and Africa more broadly. The very nature of the structure and organization of the women's movements have been interrogated to establish the link between these and the success of the rural women "to pull the rock" from under the colonial officials and some supporting male institutions or individuals of eminence and stature. Leadership within and between ethnic groups was effective and also well-coordinated to the extent that the

combination of symbols and other factors made a serious impact on loosening the attitude of the British towards independence for the British Cameroons.

Framework of Investigation

This study focuses on symbolism to explain how women organized and carefully led the struggle to liberate the Bamenda western Grassfields of Cameroon. Symbols enable people to communicate with one another on issues that embarrass, terrorize, or make it difficult for them to deal with unutterable and other invisible entities.[22] Utilizing the insights of Bernault's study of the symbols of body, power, and sacrifice in Equatorial Africa, the present study argues that symbols were powerful instruments of protest and change among the Laimbwe women of Cameroon and other ethnic regions of the country.[23] Bernault contends that the symbols of body, power, and sacrifice in Equatorial Africa from the 1880s onwards made Europeans and Africans associate them with fetishism that ably manipulates sacred power.[24] It is for this reason that she described bodily configurations as being able to defy criminal acts.[25] Bernault's reflection on the body and power clearly revealed the European hegemonic visions and power tactics which met with African grassroots confrontations, especially their use by women in different parts of Equatorial Africa to harass over-zealous colonial officials into compliance.

Symbolism or symbolic actions allow people to communicate with one another on issues that embarrass, terrorize, or make it knotty for them to deal with unutterable and other invisible entities.[26] In different cultures, the body is the symbol of power through the choreography of authority.[27] Dress is associated with the body, and among the Kuba (Congo), Turkana (Kenya), Igbo (Nigeria), and Frafra (Ghana) dress is used as a form of shared views and experience.[28] In fact, it is important to note that bodies are used for self-expression. People use bodies to become who they would like to be.[29] The female body has proven to be the site of women's "subversive" practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment.[30]

Sharing his views on the symbolism of the body, Frank contends that it is the "constant in a rapidly changing world and has remained the source of fundamental truths about who people are and how society is organized."[31] The body of the African woman was used in response to civic participation in the democratization of the continent. The display of the nakedness of the African woman was and remains her expression of utter anger and outrage at both public injustice and private male viciousness.[32] There is therefore no gainsaying that the women subjected their bodies to various frightful and disturbing acts as a direct affront to debasement from the British colonial "lords" and to challenge indigenous collaborators of colonial exploitation.

In addition, dress is a powerful language that is only comparable to the potency of the spoken word of the most skillful orator and the written word of the most compelling propagandist. It has the power to unify, differentiate, challenge, contest and dominate.[33] Aware of the power of dress, women of the Western Grassfields used it as a potent weapon against the colonial system and the limitation of women's political space. Women wore male dress in a particularly frightful way. The result was very positive because they were able to push the colonial system into reconsidering some of its reforms that affected rural women like the Agricultural Law of 1955. Men were not only flabbergasted by this but acceded to the women's

demands. Sooner rather than later the British colonial officials yielded to pressure, and it quickened the decolonization process in the territory.

In a similar vein, Veit-Wild and Naguschewski describe women's bodies to argue that these are gifted in a variety of ways and arouse great "pleasure, passion, and power. Yet it is at the same time in danger of being hurt, invaded or violated."[34] Such extraordinary use of the body results in the invasion of male space to renegotiate power relations in the society. During the colonial period it was also used to invade the space of colonial leadership to renegotiate or impose a pattern of behavior in the Bamenda western Grassfields. Women would probably have appealed more to the body as a weapon for resistance because in this part of the country the body is also symbolized through the power of the chiefs.[35] It was thus an invasion of this male space to renegotiate power relations not only between the genders but more so to challenge the Victorian philosophy of male dominance which had long defined power relations in English history.

The Women's Revolt

Avenues of Mobilization

The Bamenda western Grassfields of Cameroon has historically witnessed women's mobilization for diverse reasons. In the different fondoms there were/are still found women's societies of reverence, graciousness, and pre-eminence. They often met on Sundays, following the death of one of their husbands or when an emergency demanded tactful handling to forestall a catastrophe or embarrassment within the fondom. These and other avenues facilitated the dissemination of information to other women and the wider community.

In some areas, such as among the Laimbwe people of Wum Division (today Menchum and Boyo Divisions), effective diffusion of messages was the collective responsibility of the women's regulatory society, the *kefa'a*, and its male counterpart, the *kuiifuai*.[36] Other women used their traditional rotating associations to assist one another in the cultivation of crops and other forms of material assistance before the introduction of the money economy in the colonial period. Many other clubs served the purpose of amusement but also helped rally women from different social backgrounds and lineages to have fun together while discussing the problems of their communities on a lighter note.

When a very critical issue was to be deliberated upon, the Queen Mother, known as *nafoyn*, *zhehfuai,* or *mafo* in the Kom, Laimbwe, and Bamileke ethnic groups respectively, would summon the women elders of the different quarters and families to a meeting. During this meeting, they examined the issue and made suggestions for correction or improvement. Following on the heels of the meeting of these women elders there was a general assembly of women to discuss the practical implementation of decisions taken by the elders. Other appropriate channels were used to disseminate information to women in the wards of the villages and lineages or families. Women were generally mobilized from the level of the compound, lineage, quarter, and village to carry out certain projects such as the cleaning of footpaths leading to farms, different quarters, and neighboring villages.

The advent of colonialism and its incapacitating effects transformed many of these women's groups into political associations through which grievances were expressed in various

forms against the ruling authorities. This was the case with the *anlu* of Kom, which initially was meant to sanction the exiling of people who became an irritation to the community. In the Laimbwe fondoms of Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso, the *kelu* served a similar purpose of banishment of culprits but came to play a revolutionary role when it became clear that the policies of the Southern Cameroons government were becoming doubtful to some people.[37] Similarly, among the Kedjom Keku and Ngemba people, the *fuenbwen* (also spelt *fuembuen*) and *takembeng* (also spelt *takumbeng*) took on a more radical political role and were easily used to mobilize women both during the colonial and post-independence periods for political reasons.[38] The *anlu* was easily mobilized by the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) and the *fuenbwen* and *takembeng* by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) after the re-introduction of multiparty politics in 1990s Cameroon.

The Use of Symbols

In a general sense, symbols have been used in history to serve different purposes and occasions. Different people for different reasons give varying interpretations to symbols and in some cases symbolic actions take place but are not fully understood by a majority of onlookers. In the different fondoms of the western Grassfields of Cameroon, women made use of bodily symbols and other environmentally related symbols to control an overzealous colonial administration. The results were positive because it undermined men's power, and the revolt took on a religio-magical dimension never known in the history of colonial rule in this part of the African continent. It was also well coordinated by the leaders.

The symbols women used in their struggle for the liberation of the Grassfields region were not only symbolically powerful but also greatly impacted the people in such a way that it enabled them to achieve victory. Although the British seemed/pretended not to have understood the message through women's symbolic actions, it spoke as powerfully as the greatest word written by a propagandist.[39] Among the different women symbolic actions were those surrounding the power of the body when used correctly to address an anxiously expectant audience. Others included music, dress, and other material of traditional significance like the dry banana leaves and a garden-like egg called *funya* in the Kom and Laimbwe fondoms. Many of these symbols could only be fully appreciated within the socio-cultural cosmological and aesthetic environment of the people.

The Kom and Laimbwe women made use of their bodies as a weapon of revolt against colonial rule. They would threaten to strip naked when men challenged their authority to champion the struggle for political space and the liberation of the territory. The sight of the vagina was an ill omen, and no one was willing to see women display their vaginas in public because the vagina is meant for the private and not public space. No Kom or Laimbwe man in the right frame of mind would stand the sight of the women stripped naked and exposing their vaginas. The symbolic power of the vagina in very difficult circumstances was used by the women of the *takembeng* traditional organization to frighten gun toting military men in Bamenda into submission in the early 1990s following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon.[40] These women not only stripped naked but used their breasts as guns of war. Many of the over-zealous military men could not stand the sight of these women and simply fled for their lives.

Other bodily actions signifying revolt included uttering a shrill high pitched sound at interrupted intervals with four fingers placed on the lips.[41] This was a call to mobilization and war against tyrants and other oppressive forces. The use of the whistle among the Laimbwe women complemented the production of sounds which were indicative of preparation for war. Besides the fear created among the people by such actions, they also thought and believed that it had a miraculous effect of healing its sick members.[42] Women's ululations were followed by dancing, which created an emotional response from the women against acts of the administration considered to be unpardonable. Among these acts were the restricted exploitation of resources in the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve by the indigenous population and the enforcement of cross contour cultivation that challenged the traditional methods of crop cultivation by the rural women. This included the rationale for cultivation along mountain slopes that revolved around the child, bush meat, and an abundance of food. According to the Laimbwe people, the importance of life and the provision of food for the people are linked to a trinity which is symbolized by child, bush meat and abundance of food. The need to work farms is to feed the child with abundance of food and also increase his/her protein intake by giving this child bush meat. This philosophy of life is represented in the drawing of three marks on important shrines to represent the trinity of a child as a gift of God, bush meat and abundance of food as what the parents need to do in order to feed this child and give him/her the necessary care. This bush meat and food can only be obtained in large quantities from the forest and fertile soils. The intermittent ululations successfully mobilized women into a formidable bulwark against what they considered retrogressive forces.

Women also used their bodies to dance and to gather and desecrate compounds of trouble makers in the Laimbwe and Kom territories. Through indiscriminate urination and defecation women rendered such compounds desolate. Those who resisted the women or supported the colonial administration were ostracized from their compounds and prevented from returning to these compounds. The urine in their compounds from women vaginas added to their fears of returning home until a traditional cleansing ritual was performed by leaders of the community. The compound ritual usually set men on their heels in Bu village.[43] In this way, the women's liberation struggle gained currency day by day.

The wearing of regalia of torn male dresses, shirts, trousers, dry banana leaves, fresh creeping plants, and the painting of faces with charcoal and wood ash were all intended to send a message of liberation, although some people saw this as a mere humorous act. One of the reasons for the body adornment and the wearing of dresses of this nature was to ward off men from subjugating women to their whims and caprices during the period of the revolt. The Babanki women consciously disguised themselves in old clothing intentionally mixing bright and often garish colors, necklaces of old bottle tops or wild seeds, and sometimes wearing dried grass tied knots.[44] The combination of different material was not fun but a manifestation of disagreement with the colonial and other negative forces. The women would "go mad" and cause untold harm if their message fell on deaf ears. Their adoption of male dress was a challenge to masculinity epitomized by the male-centered colonial dispensation. Dry banana leaves and fresh creeping plants represented two sides of a coin. Dryness was a protest against British exploitation of their economy, and fresh creeping plants were an indication of renewal and rebirth once the colonialists vacated the territory. The invasion of male space through juju

performance was a call for the renegotiation of gender during the colonial period for mutual benefit of all in the societies that were in revolt.

In Kom, women organized mock burials of leaders of the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) such as Joseph Ndong Nkwain.[45] The women did this because as the local leader of the KNC party, he supported the implementation of new farming rules which the women opposed. Secondly, he defied their instructions to close down the St Anthony's Catholic School at Nijinkom which was ordered by the leadership of *anlu*. Whenever this act was performed in traditional Kom society, it was a mark of seriousness of a resistance or protest against someone or something. The act of mock burial before one dies in the tradition of the western Grassfields region usually sends shock waves down the spine of the victim, family members, and his/her followers and sympathizers. It was partly because of this that the then leading party in British Southern Cameroons, the KNC, lost elections and its platform of integration with Nigeria failed to materialize. The Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) took over and steered the ship of state towards separation from Nigeria and reunification with the Republic of Cameroon through a plebiscite organized and sponsored by the United Nations.

The contest between the KNC and KNDP influenced *anlu* in the sense that Augustine Ngom Jua, one of the leaders of the KNDP from Njinikom-Kom, used the grievances of the women against a KNC-led government to mobilize the Kom women to rise against the party and new farming rules. Besides, political parties with a Southern-based leadership, like the KNC led by Dr Emmanuel Mbella Liffafe Endeley and the Kamerun Peoples' Party (KPP) led by Nerius Namaso Mbile, closed ranks in the build up to the general elections in British Southern Cameroons in 1959. These elections were to determine the destiny of Southern Cameroons following the political polarization in the territory. The KNDP reacted to this KNC-KPP marriage of convenience by creating an alliance with the One Kamerun (OK) party whose leaders, Ndeh Ntumazah and Albert Mukong, were also from the Grassfields region as was John Ngu Foncha of the KNDP. In the face of this dichotomy between politicians of the different regions, some leaders of the KNDP rallied women to support them. These included Josepha Mua, Patrick Mua, Augustine Ngom Jua, Etchi Kinni of Wum Division.

The rift between political parties with a forestland-based leadership like the KNC/KPP (later reunited in May 1960 to form the Cameroon Peoples' National Convention (CPNC)) and those with a leadership from the western Grassfields namely the KNDP and the OK was based on a number of outstanding differences. After the German annexation of Cameroon on July 1884 and the eventual control of British Southern Cameroons by Britain after the defeat of Germany in the First World War, many people were forced to migrate to the coastal region for employment in the plantations set up by German planters. Their continuous influx eventually led to conflict with the receiving ethnic groups of the forest region to the extent that they were derogatorily referred to as *graffi* people, a corrupted word for Grassfields. Even after the independence of Cameroon and the re-introduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s, regional sentiments ran high, and people from the present day North West Region (formerly western Grassfields) were given all kinds of names such as *come-no-goes*.[46] (Rubin 1971: 71-88; Ngoh 2001: 122-144; Kah 2003: 103-125; and Kah Forthcoming). This appellation was a form of criticizing people from the western Grassfields as not willing to return to their region of origin. When John Ngu Foncha and Augustine Ngom Jua left the KNC which was formed in

1953 and formed the KNDP in 1955, and coming from the western Grassfields region, some of the leaders of the KNC argued that the KNDP was a western Grassfields party. This explains the tension that existed between the leaders and their parties during elections.

The differences among the leaders of the political parties were exploited by the KNDP party in 1957 and 1958 when the *anlu* women of Kom rose against the implementation of a agricultural law passed in the Southern Cameroon's House of Assembly in 1955 and enforced in 1957 in Wum Division by the Wum Divisional Native Authority Council (WDNAC). This was at a time that the political parties of Southern Cameroons were gearing up for general elections in January 1959. The KNDP at the time was in the opposition and wanted to win the impending elections of the following year. The party carefully mobilized the women of Kom through Augustine Ngom Jua, one of the founding fathers of the KNDP and Etchi Kinni a local leader of the KNDP party. The visit of Dr E.M.L. Endeley to Wum Division and especially to Njinikom was frustrated by a mass boycott at a critical time that the out-going Premier was out to convince the people to renew their confidence in him. The failure of the KNC to remain a dominant political force in Wum Division after the 1958 uprising was partly due to the "faces behind the mask" of a women revolt in Kom. These faces were Augustine Ngom Jua and Etchi Kinni.

The use of music in the struggle for liberation was a successful weapon. Singing in general represents many things and includes anger, hatred, sorrow and anxiety.[47] Besides, music serves different purposes and includes rituals, healing, group identity and battle.[48] Women used song compositions to express sorrow and anger over the wanton exploitation of their resources, to express disenchantment with local collaborators of the colonial administration, and to press for the liberation of their territory from alien domination. One such song went:

> Ndonyam collaborates with foreigners
> to stop the people from using their God given resources in the forest. He has even colluded with the British administration
> to sell the people's land so that their children may grow up to suffer. We pray that he dies a bad death.[49]

Ndonyam, otherwise known as Joseph Ndong Nkwain, was the local KNC leader in Kom at the time of the outbreak of the women revolts in the western Grassfields in the late 1950s. Since many women of Kom, including those of the Laimbwe villages of Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso had turned their backs to the KNC government in favor of the KNDP leadership, they did not support any one who did you join them and Joseph Ndong Nkwain was one of them. Although Kom was a distance from Bu, the other fondoms of Mbengkas and Baisso had a direct relationship with Kom because they were under the sphere of influence of Kom. A good portion of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve is under Kom. When the colonial authorities demarcated farmland from the reserve restricting farming activities in the reserve, the women accused Ndonyam and other KNC collaborators for a conspiracy against them. Through the propaganda of the KNDP they even thought that land was sold to the Igbos, considered rightly and/or wrongly as ruthless to Cameroonians in their business dealings.

Folksongs were very satirical toward the oppressive system and were also intended to ridicule individuals who set a bad example in the society.[50] Music was used to speak to women

inwardly and also to outwardly manifest a dislike for that which was debasing of women and their communities, namely separation and exploitation of their forest resources.

Coordination/Organization of Activities, and Leadership

The nature, level, and coordination of the women's revolt from bottom to top, top to bottom, village to village, and one geographical region to another and within the same ethnic group contributed immensely to the success of the women's mobilization and criticism of the colonial administration. In many instances, the coordinated activities were either under-estimated or never fully recognized and understood by the colonial authorities. Before long, the activities of these women destabilized the colonial administrative machinery and many of them were disempowered economically.[51] For a better appreciation of a coordinated women's mobilization, we have chosen for analysis two ethnic groups, namely Kom and Laimbwe. The success of coordination in these two ethnic groups produced results that ended with the independence of the British Southern Cameroons—first as a self-governing region within the Federation of Nigeria and then through a UN-organized plebiscite to reunite with the Republic of Cameroon in 1961. Although different terminologies were used to describe the levels of coordination and leadership in these fondoms, both served similar purposes and produced a similar result namely, the independence of the territory from foreign domination.

The efficient mobilization of Kom and Laimbwe women was due to several socio-economic factors. In both territories, especially in Kom, women had started organizing protests from the 1940s against the destruction of food crops from the cattle of Fulani herders.[52] These protests increased with time and forced the women to occasionally stage open demonstrations to publicize their plight. Such were the humble beginnings of an efficient organization strategy in the last four years of British colonial rule in the area. Other long term factors were rumors of the seizure of indigenous land by the Igbos of Nigeria at a time that Southern Cameroons formed an integral part of the Federation of Nigeria.[53] The British establishment of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve in 1951 and restrictions on the exploitation of resources therein as well as the cultivation of food crops within the reserve were some of the most vexing issues to the Laimbwe people located around and within the Forest Reserve.

Still other factors such as the Christian doctrine and other social changes orchestrated by the western-educated elite; contributed to the 1957-1961 revolt in the Bamenda western Grassfields of Cameroon. These changes came with social segregation and attacks on tradition and customs. In addition, the recruitment of labor for the commercial plantations, many of them from Wum Division, was socially destabilizing and gender insensitive. Then came the enforcement of a law enacted in 1955 on cross contour rather than slope wise cultivation in 1957 that acted as a spark to the women's uprising. The women were so embittered beyond control and formed themselves into groups to torpedo the efforts of the colonial officials at introducing new farming rules. The organization of the women's movements was basically at two broad levels, namely internal and external mobilization and coordination. At the level of the fondom, coordination was further streamlined to avoid the conflict of functions. At the inter-ethnic level it took on family-directed mobilization as well as the willingness of women in one region to join forces with those of another region to have their case better presented to the recalcitrant colonial administration for a greater impact. In the Laimbwe and Kom ethnic groups were lineages like

Ejelesong, Ekai and Itinala that were conduits of the dissemination of revolutionary ideas from fondom to fondom.

In the Laimbwe villages of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas as in the Kom fondom, the *zhehfuai* (Queen Mother) for the Laimbwe villages, or *nafoyn* in Kom was the titular head trying to oversee everything as a stationary field commander. Next to her in command and hierarchy in the Laimbwe polities were the *Utuotekpwei* (leaders of the others). In Kom this leader was called the *Na-anlu* (mother of *anlu*). The function of these coordinators was to regulate the activities of all the other women. These leaders were ably assisted by spies called *ugwesii* in Kom and *tekpwei* in Laimbwe. These were usually women of standing and chosen from among noble families or on the basis of their skills in mobilization. Some of the outstanding women in Bu and Mbengkas came from such noble lineages as the Ehzem, Eselemei, Ukwosuuh and Nduokang. They were at the implementation end of the decisions of the women's movement and were assisted by other officials in Laimbwe called the *basinjas* (also *balinjas)*. In all, these layers of coordination were strictly respected and those who disobeyed their instructions were severely punished. The flow of information vertically and horizontally was one of the strongest uniting forces in the women's movement in these fondoms. They reported difficulties encountered in the field to their superiors, and field assistants were deployed or redeployed to sustain the revolt. Other people served as court jesters, creating fun and enlivening the spirit of those who were at the forefront of the struggle for liberation.

At the inter-chiefdom level, the Queen Mothers and other influential noble women were the main crusaders. They contacted their counterparts and family members in neighboring fondoms through special emissaries to convince them to join in the struggle for political space and liberation of their people from colonial subjugation. In the Laimbwe and Kom fondoms, top ranking officers communicated with their counterparts in the other villages. They also systematically sent people to assist their neighbors. The women of Mbengkas for example assisted their Bu counterparts of *kelu* materially (eggs, beans, groundnuts, and meat) and vice versa. In all, the three Laimbwe villages made donations of groundnuts, eggs, maize, and other material items, which were sent to Kom to assist the struggle for independence.

Similarly, the Kom women used their family links with the Kedjom people as well as their very strong sense of organization assisted by a local politician, Augustine Ngom Jua, to pull their Kedjom Keku kindred into the streets. The kedjem lineage is found in both Kom and Kedjom Keku and members of this lineage through kin-group networks mobilized their members towards the opposition to colonial policies. This became visible during the march of the women to Bamenda from Kom which could be likened to the march of the women to Versailles in the 1789 French Revolution. Other Kom villages mobilized and sent material assistance to the women's revolt at Wombong which was the linchpin of the *anlu* women revolt in Kom. In the case of the Laimbwe women, neighboring villages housed those who went to Bamenda to secure the release of their leaders who were arrested in 1959. Such organized mobilization and coordination went a long way to encourage the women to fight on. It is therefore not surprising that during the consultations leading to the independence of Southern Cameroons, these grievances contributed in no small way as the leaders of the women's revolt continued to press for freedom.

Leadership of the Women's Resistance

In as much as a revolt is the collective effort of every participant, it is also a result of a carefully chosen, empowered, and coordinated leadership. For every community, there was a recognized local leader who worked closely with her subordinates. This local leader also worked very closely with other selected leaders from the different wards or quarters of the village and solicited at all times the support of other leaders in neighboring communities. In Mbengkas and Bu fondoms of the Laimbwe ethnic group, these leaders included Njughekai, Esa-ah Fueh Induum, Kebwei Mbonghelesam, and Ngem Ibo-oh of Mbengkas and Kebwei Zei, Fuehlejheh, Musso Mbong, Futele Chou, Sangah Buh, Naiisi, and Ngwo Ndai of Bu.[54] Put together, these local leaders were each responsible to a central leadership and gave an account of their stewardship to a commanding officer at the center. In Bu fondom, the commanding leader to whom others reported was the Queen Mother at the time, Kebwei Zei. The interesting thing to note here is that these bold and enterprising women leaders have not received any scholarly attention in the historiography of the western Grassfields of Cameroon.

In the villages and quarters of Kom and Laimbwe, women leaders provided inspiring leadership for all women to emulate. Their selection often followed a meeting of the women leaders and their field supervisors with the Queen Mother about their activities. This was carefully done, and their commitment to the cause for which they stood and to providing accounts of their stewardship became a source of reinvigorated strength for those women who wanted fairness and justice to be the watchwords of the colonial administration. The meeting of these leaders at regular intervals and the assistance provided by each and every one of them greatly strengthened the women's cause.

Leadership was also in the form of inter-village meetings. Through these meetings, the different delegations were briefed on the developments that unfolded and whether this had an impact on them or not. A glaring example of this was the journey undertaken by the Mbengkas women to Bu in 1957 to officially put in place the same sort of revolutionary *kelu* in the Laimbwe community. The group of three who were led by women of the caliber of Njughekai, , Kebwe Mbonglesam, and Esa-ah Fueh Induum played a momentous role in the spread of the women's revolutionary spirit in the Laimbwe community and by extension the satellites villages of Teitengem, Mughom, and other neighboring villages like Befang. This single act of the Mbengkas women changed the phase of the women's revolutionary activities in Cameroon's western Grassfields, at least in the Laimbwe and related ethnic groups.

The leadership qualities and steadfastness of Fuam and Muana of Kom were also recognized as inspiring other women leaders. These women rose to the pinnacle of the *anlu* women's movement in Kom, and they commanded respect and admiration of other women far afield. On a regular basis, the Laimbwe women leaders of Baisso, Bu, and Mbengkas travelled to Kom, listened to these leaders and implemented some of their suggestions in a bid to sustain the uprising. Upon return, some of these Laimbwe women leaders deified Fuam and made their collaborators believe that she possessed extraordinary powers. The supposed invincibility and invisibility of Fuam was used by the Laimbwe leaders to frighten recalcitrant fellows into submission. Such mobilization using a myth associated with Fuam reached its apogee when the District Officer for Wum Division, Ken Shaddock, visited Bu fondom in 1958. During the visit at the Fon's compound, the women succeeded in presenting themselves as leaders of the

community by threatening to beat him up. Upon returning to the divisional headquarters, he cabled the hierarchy about the seriousness of the matter before police were sent to pick up the ringleaders. The synchronized inter-chiefdom leadership using personalities and mysticism has yet to form part of the literature so far written on this women's movement in the Cameroon's western Grassfields.

The importance of leadership was also seen during the march of women from different chiefdoms to Bamenda to secure the release of their leaders and to make their case to the Resident against the British colonial administration. When the women leaders were picked up and locked up at the German Fort in Bamenda, their subordinates mobilized the rest of the women and trekked to Bamenda to ensure their release. Their presence created panic and caused some elite and traditional rulers such as Jeremiah Chi Kangsen, Thomas Ngong Amaazee, Nyooh Wei Induum, and Chief Ndzeghi of the Aghem, Bu, and Mbengkas respectively to provide bail to secure their release.

Conclusion

This study has shown that three main factors contributed to the liberation of the western Grassfields of Cameroon, namely symbols, a well-coordinated leadership, and the force of its character and charisma. At the end of this paper we have achieved a number of things, namely a new direction in the research on the women's revolt in the Grassfields which has caught the attention of scholars since the 1960s. This new direction was what Awasom, Shanklin, and Diduk superficially talked about but was not as a central factor in their scholarly published papers. Others like Nkwi and Nkwain have mentioned aspects of organization, but the force of a clearly focused leadership has been overlooked by most of the other authors who have written about the women's movement.[55]

This study points out areas of research that should be focused on for a better understanding of the complex implications of the women's revolt in Cameroon's Western Grassfields. It is therefore a new direction for the re-evaluation of the research that has so far been carried out on the women's revolt of the western Grassfields. It also supports the argument that symbols are an unspoken but forceful way of liberating a people from captivity. If the women's revolt eventually gave way it is not that it failed to achieve something. Rather, through their revolt the women proved that they were more organized than it had been thought and that their leadership was grounded in grassroots support and coordination. New directions of research will include an examination of the "faces behind the mask" of women's mobilization in the liberation struggle in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon.

Notes

1. This paper was first presented at a Symposium on "Colonial Enterprise and the Liberation Struggles in Africa" held at Algiers, Algeria, 13-16 July 2009. I am grateful to organizers of the symposium who made it possible for this paper to be presented on my behalf by my colleague Walter Gam Nkwi (who also read through the paper) and the participants who

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2 Nkwain 1958; Nkwi 1976, 1985; Shanklin 1990; Awasom 2002; Gam Nkwi 2003; Diduk 2004.

3 Ardener 1967, p. 290.

4 http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Northwest-Province,-Cameroon; Doh and Binde 2010.

5 Chiabi 1990, pp. 24-41; Chiabi 1989, pp. 170-99; Fo Angwafo 2009, pp. 23-28; Mbile 2000, pp. 47-153.

6 Ngoh 2004; Goodridge 2004, pp. 18-25.

7 Abimbola 2003; Yet, women's groups like others served as vehicles for new ideas and a proving ground for political leaders. This could be seen, for example, in the 1929 women's uprising in Eastern Nigeria. While many other examples could be cited, women to a large extent still unrecognized and in the dust bin of history because official narratives have relegated them to the "footnotes of history." The description of society through the works of ethnographers, male and female, reinforces maleness. Yet many heroines and rural women in different African countries during the colonial period "thumb printed their names in the sands of time."

8 Tordoff 1997, pp. 49, 58, 62-63.

9 Ifeka-Moller 1975, pp. 127-57; Akosua 1977, pp. 1-14; Sweetman 1984; Kanogo 1987; Bohannan and Curtin 1988, pp. 373-74; Chiabi 1989, pp. 170-99; Chiabi 1990, pp. 24-41; Iliffe 1995, p. 212, 229-33; Falola 1995; van Allen 1997; Milne 1999, pp. 379-82; Geiger 1999, p. 331; Sheldon et al 2002, p. 158; Mwangola 2006, pp. 6-7; Odotei 2006, p. 81; Boahen 2008, p. 28.

10 Carton 2006, p. 85.

11 Kisiang'ani 2006, p. 12.

12 Chapman 1989, pp. 187-88.

13 Ifeka-Moller 1975, pp. 127-57; Kanogo 1987; van Allen 1997 and Mahamane 2008.

14 Nkwain 1958; Ritzenthaler 1960; Nkwi 1985; Shanklin 1990; Konde 1990; Jua 1993; Awasom 2002; Gam Nkwi 2003; Kah 2004a; Diduk 2004.

15 Kah 2004b, p. 125.

16 Jua 1993; Kah 2004a and 2008; Gam Nkwi 2003; Diduk 2004.

17 Amadiume 2006, p. 26.

18 Nkwain 1958; Diduk 1989, 2004; Nkwi 1976, 1985; Kah 2004a, 2008; Gam Nkwi 2003; Westerman.

19 Ifeka-Moller 1975, pp. 127-57; AKosua 1977, pp. 1-14; Oduyoye 1979, pp. 9-14; Manuh, pp. 50-66; Boaten 1992, pp. 90-100; van Allen 1997; Bastian 2002, pp. 260-81; Odotei 2006; Fayorsey 2006, pp. 651-62.

20 Nkwain 1958; Ritzenthaler 1960; Nkwi 1976, 1985; Diduk 1989, 2004; Shanklin 1990; Konde 1990; Chilver 1992; Jua 1993; Awasom 2002, 2006; Westerman; Gam Nkwi 2003; Kah 2004a, 2008, forthcoming.

21 It is worth noting that German Kamerun was divided unequally between Britain and France after the defeat of Germany during the First World War. Approximately one-fifth of German Kamerun was taken over by Britain and was administered within the British colony of Nigeria as separate administrative units. While British Northern Cameroons was governed from Northern Nigeria, British Southern Cameroons was administered from Southern and subsequently Eastern Nigeria. Following the UN organized plebiscite of 11 February 1961, the northern portion voted for integration with Nigeria and the southern portion for reunification with the French sphere which had obtained its independence on 1 January 1960 to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

22 Roberts 1997, p. 195.

23 Bernault 2006, p. 210.

24 Bernault 2006, p. 210.

25 Bernault 2006, p. 217.

26 Roberts 1997, p. 195.

27 Connerton 1989, p. 74.

28 Smith 1997, pp. 184-86.

29 Crawford 1984, p. 80; Bordo, 1993; Davis 1997, p. 2.

30 Davis 1997, p. 7.

31 Frank 1990, p. 133.

32 Fatton 1995, p. 86.

33 Allman 2004, p. 2.

34 Veit-Wild and Naguschewski 2005, pp. xiii-xiv.

35 Warnier 1993, pp. 306-07.

36 Personal Communication, January 12, 2009.

37 Personal Communication, January 8, 2009.

38 Chilver 1992; Awasom 2002, 2006; Diduk 2004.

39 Allman 2004, p. 2.

40 Awasom 2002, p. 2. Bamenda occupies an important place in the history of Cameroon. It developed as a trade center and evolved to become the administrative headquarters of the North West Region. It is one of the largest towns in Cameroon. During the colonial period, it became an important town for the party politics that challenged the policy of integration of British Southern Cameroons with Nigeria. In 1985, the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) was born on the ashes of the defunct Cameroon National Union (CNU). Co-incidentally, Bamenda is also the birth place of the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF), which was launched May 26, 1990. Since the re-introduction of

multiparty politics in the 1990s, Bamenda has remained the hotbed of the political opposition, with the *takembeng* women organization playing an important role.

41 Gam Nkwi 2003, pp. 158-59; Kah 2008, p. 15.
42 Personal Communication, January 3, 2009.
43 Personal Communication, March 1, 1997.
44 Diduk 2004, pp. 32-34.
45 Gam Nkwi 2003, p. 163.
46 Rubin 1971: 71-88; Ngoh 2001: 122-44; Kah 2003: 103-25; and Kah forthcoming.
47 Gam Nkwi 2006, p. 65.
48 Olusoji 2007, p. 63.
49 Discussion with Kaifetai, Bu Village, 22 December 2000.
50 Mbunda 2008, p. 23.
51 Through oral interviews in the field, the people argue that if the women revolt lasted that long, it was because the colonial authorities undermined their influence.
52 Awasom 2002, p. 4.
53 Gam Nkwi 2003; Kah 2003.
54 Kah 2004, p. 32.
55 Nkwain 1958; Gam Nkwi, 2003.

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