

Women, Conflict and Peace in the Grassfields of Cameroon

Mark Bolak Funteh*; Jean Gormo**

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1. Introduction

Peace and conflict (war), those contrary conditions of mankind, are, however, alike in one important characteristic - they are both aspects of a society's relations with other societies. They are also linked by an intermediate zone in which the tension caused by the interaction of societies is mitigated towards one end of the scale of their relations by peaceful tendencies while towards the other end it is exacerbated by influences hostile to peace. Though not cherished, war frequently occurred among the people of the Cameroon Grassfields¹. Consequently, conflict prevention and peace-making became unavoidable actions of people, operating on both permanent and impermanent bases to minimise the conflict phenomenon. Despite this effort, the region had the highest rate of intra and inter-communal conflicts in Cameroon. The migratory and implantation trend of the Grassfields chiefdoms was done amidst conflict and so was their expansion. Most conflicts in this region of over 150 independent villages were propelled by competition over the control of resources, land and people. More powerful chiefdoms waged wars to gain control over their neighbours². According to Vansina, wars of conquest were not meant to annihilate enemies; rather, they were means of annexing weak kingdoms. Succession questions, the refusal to pay tributes, non-performance of mortuary rites, the attempt to monopolise trade, the maltreatment of messengers on diplomatic assignment, and, occasionally, the refusal to offer princesses for marriage and poaching sometimes provoked disputes³. These problems were aggravated under the German and British colonial periods when colonial authorities introduced the tax system and some

* Lecturer of History, University of Maroua

** University of Maroua / CEAUP

1 The appellation Grassfields was introduced by the Germans to refer to this region that comprises a multiplicity of linguistically diverse political communities with varying modes of centralisation of powers, which correlated inversely with population densities. Today, the region extends from the highlands of the North-West Province to the West Provinces. While the North-West Province represents what is also known as the Bamenda or Western Grassfields, the West Province represents the Eastern Grassfields (see map).

2 P. N. Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon* (Yaounde: Department of Sociology, University of Yaounde, 1987), p. 6.

3 Jan Vansina, "A Comparison of African Kingdoms" *Africa* 32, 1962, p. 328.

communities were obliged to pay via others, which they sometimes resented. Also, the territorial and administrative division of the region and the classification of chiefs into various categories by the colonial masters added to sources of conflict. It was partly due to colonial policies and partly because of the confusion caused by the nationalisation of all the lands in the country in 1974 and the chieftaincy reorganisation decrees of 1974 and 1977⁴ by the Government of Cameroon that conflicts became common.

More so, the nonchalance of some chiefdoms to respect decrees also accounted for the reoccurrence of these disputes. This was the case between the Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mboh, Bali-Nyonga and Chomba, the Kwashin and Mundali, Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji and so on⁵. Moreover, due to the euphoria that accompanied the dramatic upsurge of political change that resulted in the forceful launching of the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party on 26 May 1990 in Bamenda, and when multi-party politics became official, political victimisation and hatred of chiefdoms that identified with the opposition was institutionalised in the Province. Local government officials, politicians and elites of the Province who continued to identify with the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) used their position in government to fan antagonism and hatred among some chiefdoms. They did so using the long-abandoned land and boundary disputes. An example of such a case was the Bambili versus Babanki-Tungaw conflict.

Generally, the state-civilian conflict mostly manifested itself in the region during the troubled era of 1990-92 in Cameroon with the reintroduction of multiparty politics. Due to the "wind of change", which began to blow in the late 1980s coupled with the severe effects of the economic recession that was already ravaging the continent of Africa, the occurrence of socio-political upheavals became the order of the day in the Province as well as everywhere. The disaffection amongst youths, civil servants, urban workers and students was translated into street protest and demand for change in the political environment. This pressure for political change was irresistible, but not truly welcomed by the incumbent political leadership of the era. Their resistance was manifested by the harsh decisions taken by some administrators of the area, which included the deployment of the forces of law and order on the streets in an attempt to stop these protestors. More often than not, this administrative action led to unadmirable scenes of conflict among the civilians and the state representatives. It also led to the detention of civilians. However, these political leaders of the time were compelled to give in not only as a result of the people's determination for change, but also due to pressure from the Western Donor Community and the Bretton Woods international financial institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – which pined down financial development assistance to African countries upon political liberalisation, the rule of law and good governance⁶.

The Grassfields is composed, mainly, of the Tikar, Bamileke, Bali-Chamba and Tadkon/Widekum in the North-West and West Provinces, who claim diverse origins. With regard to the socio-political organisation, the people lived in a well-structured society, hierarchically stratified. At the apex of this hierarchy was the *fon*, the chief priest of the land, on whom all final decisions concerning crucial issues rested. He ensured stability in the community, settled disputes and promoted reconciliation among his people. He

4 Another decree modifying the 1977 decree was passed in 1982 by the President of the Republic.

5 Patrick Bungfang, "Inter-Chiefdom Conflicts in the North-West Province of Cameroon from 1889-1999. Colonial and Post Colonial Influences", (M.A. dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2000), pp. 56-70.

6 Young Crawford, "Democracy and the Ethnic Question in Africa", *Africa Insight*, January-March 1997, pp. 4-5.

had the prerogative to declare war and/or make peace with his enemies, and his word was law⁷. After the *fon*, came the secret societies or regulatory societies also classed in order of strength and duty, the most supreme being the *kwifon*. This was followed by the notables. Between the notables and the free citizens – men, women and children – were the diviners, and after the free citizens were the slaves, although they formed no social stratum⁸. As a matter of fact, in the face of the hostilities, women, despite their position occupied among the Grassfields, were not often afraid to incite their men to go to war, support them during battle or even stand to fiercely fight for a course they believed was beneficial to the entire community. However, when they cherished peace, they became architects of peace. They often conceived proper and acceptable techniques for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict situations. In certain situations, as the women made themselves more visible in advancing issues of conflict and peace, their men became increasingly invisible. While the fundamental role of women of the patrilineal communities during the migratory wars of the pre-colonial era evolved around the consistent supply of food to the army, for instance, those of the matrilineal societies, fought alongside their male counterparts. The Kom migratory wars from Ndop via Babanki were led by women⁹. However, with their installation at the present site, women gradually transferred leadership responsibilities to men, who led the wars of territorial expansion propelled, in the main, by the insufficiency of fertile land. As earlier highlighted, the issue of land disputes in the region increased during the colonial period following colonial policies and actions, although they also masterminded the peace attempts to the problems. During the post-independent period, with the nationalisation of all the lands and the reorganisation of chieftaincy by the Government of Cameroon, some settled land and chieftaincy disputes resurfaced while others like the farmer-grazier disputes grievously developed. As these conflicts were resurfacing and new ones developing, so did female militia. Women of the patrilineal societies assumed new responsibilities by transforming some associations of theirs into war oriented societies where and when need arose. This was greatly experienced during the turbulent period of the early 1990 decade in Cameroon when intrepid women openly confronted the forces of law and order. In fact, the involvement of women in Cameroon's politics just confirms the evidence of an inevitable role they generally play in the evolution of African states as documented by many authors. Relevant literature on African women in politics, particularly in the domains of conflicts, dispute processing and conflict resolution, for instance, David Lord, Bernard Magubane, William Zartman, Emilia Johnson¹⁰ propose the centre of conflict-handling forums and procedures of disputing typologies such as mediation, negotiation, arbitration, litigation, and avoidance to what they consider as “constructive generous conscience of female participation”.

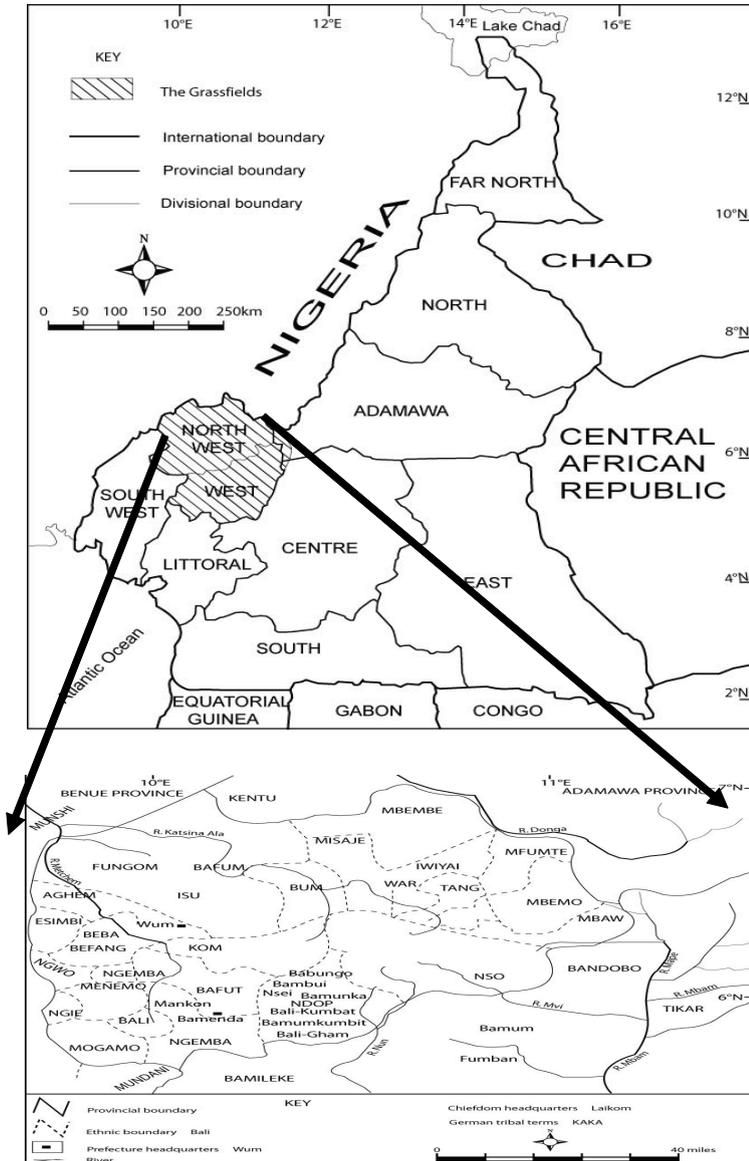
7 E.M. Chilver and P.K. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda, Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields* (Buea: Government Printers, 1966), pp. 16-19; Claude Tardits (ed.), *The Contribution of Ethnographic Research to the History of Cameroon Cultures*, vol. 2 (Paris: CNRS, 1981).

8 Fowler I. African Sacred Kings: Expectations and Performance in Cameroon, 1993, p. 17.

9 Linda Ankiambom Lawyer, “The Role of Women in the Development of Kom since the Pre-colonial Period”, (M.A. dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2005), p. 28.

10 David Lord, *Paying the Price: The Sierra Leone Peace Process* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2000); Bernard Magubane, *Oppression and Resistance in South Africa: Women Dynamism and Force* (Cape Town: Colin Books, 2006); I. William Zartman (ed.), *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts: African Conflicts “Medicine”* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Emilia Johnson (ed.), *Women, Conflicts, and Rights* (Lagos: Maxis Publishers, 2009).

THE GRASSFIELDS REGION OF CAMEROON



Source: MESRES, *The 1992 administrative Map of Cameroon* (Yaounde: Institute of Social Sciences, 1983), p103.

2. Women as Combatants

This part looks at women's involvement in group conflicts, especially the political and economic ones. They got involved as combatants, instigators, service providers, political activists and conflict solvers.

2.1 Women in Chieftaincy Dispute

This fearless spirit of women involving in conflict as combatants was also experienced by the Bafut community. After the disappearance of *Fon* Achirimbi II of Bafut on 14 December 1968, an antagonism about his succession arose. As the princes fought over the throne, women got involved. Even though they were not directly concerned with the escalation of the rift, women occupied the central stage. In the choice of a successor to the throne in Bafut, the character of the successor's mother played a considerable role. She was expected to be a respecter of not only the deceased husband, the *fon*, but also of the entire royal family. She ought to be an embodiment of generosity, humility and fairness in all judgement otherwise the soundness of the *fon* in executing his functions and the cherished unity of the royal family would be in complete jeopardy. Hence, the reigning *fon* carefully studied the character of his wives before deciding who among them was most suited for the *mafor* title¹¹.

Realising, therefore, that the character of John Nforbin's mother (Christina Lum Aboh), Achirimbi's chosen heir, was questionable, constantly accused of selfishness, the princes and princesses of the deceased *fon* were disgruntled. So, when Nforbin was "smuggled" into the *kwifor* and declared *fon* by the kingmakers of Ndakwifor, the majority of the princes and princesses protested. They vowed never to have Nforbin as their ruler. This obviously resulted in an acrimonious succession crisis of 1968. Another cause of the crisis was the fact that Achirimbi's wives hailed from different sub-chiefdoms¹² of Bafut. Some of these groups were believed to have come together at Mbelele to form a union after the death of the indigenous leader, Neba Chi. His throne was declared vacant and was unanimously handed over to the Tikari leaders, who, thus, assumed leadership of the union. Each sub-chief certainly had interest in having the son of their daughter (the *fon*'s wife) become the next *fon*. With this disposition, the conflict was inevitable.

Moreover, the fondom of Bafut was divided geographically into regions: the Upper Bafut constituted the Mambu, Bawum and Mankahnikong (*Bantare*) and the Inner Bafut comprised mainly the Tikars (*Bamumalaa*); the lower region was made up by Mbunti, a tributary chieftom in the Menchum Valley. In the past, the Bafut throne had been occupied by *fons* whose mothers had Tikar backgrounds. This often ignited rivalry between the *Bamumalaa* and the *Bantare*. The latter felt it was time to have a son with their blood to rule. They endorsed George Neba Mankaak's candidacy as the *fon*, while the *Bamumalaa* stood behind John Neba Nforbin, the son to their daughter. While some members of the *kwifor* were for Nforbin, others stood firm behind Mankaak. This division of positions also affected those of the princes, princesses and wives of the deceased *fon*.

¹¹ The *mafor* in the Grassfields was a political position of respect and honour with great responsibility, like to advise the reigning *fon*. Such a responsibility could not be given to any type of woman.

¹² Bafut political structure was made up of small sub-chiefdoms of different ethnic compositions, ministered by sub-chiefs, all answerable to the paramount chief, the *fon*.

Although a majority of *Fon* Achirimbi II's princes, princesses and wives backed Mankaak, the majority of the kingmakers were determined to enthrone Nforbin. Neither side was prepared to compromise its stand on who was to become the next *fon* of Bafut and so got the female folk actively involved in the evolution of the rift. In the face of the troubled atmosphere, the wives and princesses of the late *fon* held a series of meetings at the *ndatakumbeng* and in front of the *ndagereshie*¹³ to draw up strategies for the enthronement of their desired candidate. They decided to kill Nforbin, who had been hiding there. As they stormed the *kwifor* court in an attempt to execute their plan, they met stiff resistance from their opponents. As their sons and brothers were rioting and causing disorder in the palace as a supportive follow-up of the women's action in the evening of 16 December 1968, the princesses became deeply involved in the public demonstrations that followed the next day. They planted placards all over the place, some of which read "Accepting Neba Nforbin means the Fall of Bafut", "Never to see Nforbin on our throne", "No! No! By Sons and Daughters of Achirimbi II"¹⁴.

Since these ladies discovered that their course was supported by a huge number of the Bafut population, they decided to intensify their actions. They decided to multiply the amount of private meetings they held to discuss common action against the kingmakers and to seek the opinion of the other royal family members as to what plan of action to take in order to succeed. These ladies constantly canvassed support for their course from the Bafut populace, got and used it without any fear. The sustaining loud shouts from the crowd caused these courageous princesses to confront with hoes, sticks and stones the government troops dispatched to Bafut to crackdown the princesses' demonstrations and restore peace in the fendom. The princesses and their brothers were dispersed and temporary peace was restored to Bafut palace on 18 December 1968¹⁵.

Considering their method of fight not efficient enough to give them the desired results, the women changed approach. They saw the use of petitions as a better option. But this approach could work well if only the princes got actively involved in the struggle. Calling all the princes of the palace to a meeting on 19 December 1968, they all resolved on addressing petitions to the government. Among the petitions were those of one of the late *fon*'s daughters and some of his wives addressed the Prime Minister of West Cameroon decrying the choice of Nforbin.

As this was going on, another woman caused the conflict to regain force. This was Julian Wanzie. She was struggling to convince them to abandon their conviction and install Mankaak as *fon*. This action of hers further provoked split among the kingmakers, a division that was replicated among the Bafut people. This was a true representation of how women sustained conflict in the Grassfields of Cameroon. At this juncture, the division was gradually transformed into bitter encounters of fighting in the palace. As tension was mounting, the princesses resumed fierce fighting with pro-Nforbin elements. This caused the forces of law and order to intervene, this time subjecting both sides under severe beatings. The pains and wounds these government agents inflicted on the people caused the princesses to launch an attack on the police, leading to serious confrontation

13 *Ndagereshie* is a lodge where all secret societies in the Bafut are kept.

14 NAB, File No. 45/194/4, Rapport sur l'état d'esprit des populations de Bafut après la mort de leur chef, 1968.

15 Security Service Bamenda Archives, file no. NWC 195/113A, Note of information on Bafut chieftaincy dispute, 1968.

between them. The audacious princesses dispossessed some policemen of their guns. This brings to mind Chrysantus Brembena's case¹⁶.

In the face of the situation, the reaction of the police was obvious: mass brutalisation of these Bafut combatants for them to give up the guns they seized and give up their demands. But this only prompted things to take a more serious dimension. The princes and wives of late Achirimbi II joined their princesses to fight back. They were ready to die for a right cause. A right cause to them was the enthronement of Mankaak as their *fon*. To them, it was a prerequisite for peace and for handing over the seized guns to the forces of law and order. Following the brutal confrontation between the princesses and the police on 18 January 1969, the widows, dressed as traditional warriors, joined by the Bafut population, supported the princesses to contain the might of the police. While the women fought with their hoes, knives, sticks and stones, the men came out with cutlasses and spears. As the fight intensified, the police made use of teargases, but the women rapidly adopted a strategy to neutralise their toxic effects. While others were using palm oil and water to neutralise the inhaled gases, others threw sand on the tear-gases before explosion. By this time, the Gendarmeries joined the struggle. Since the government forces were growing in number and many people were being injured, the women changed their fighting tactics. They adopted the hit and run strategy, and caused all their fighters to follow suit. Each time they threw stones and sticks (see figure 1) at their opponents, they retreated to safer places, while restraining from exhausting themselves in the fight. This conflict ensured a lot of casualties on both sides, a situation that impelled the Bafut women to sue for peace.



¹⁶ Security Service Bamenda Archives, Note of information on the subject I, Assault on Police at Bafut, 1969.

2.2 Women in Inter-Tribal Crises

The presence of women in conflicts as combatants was also felt with the escalation of inter-tribal disputes in the region. Most, if not all, the chiefdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields had, at a given period in history, involved in an animosity with a neighbour. Some of such relations recorded violent accounts with a high tool of human lives and property ruin. The involvement of women in such conflicts as combatants was evident during the Kom-Mujang conflict of the 1900s. In their northward expansion, the Kom conquered part of the Mujang territory, Ayang, a village the Mujang considered their traditional capital. In an attempt to regain this territory, the Mujang people reacted by counter-attacking the Kom capturing Alim and Mbam. Following this, the Kom quickly reached an agreement with the Mujang in which they would build a house at the Mujang palace yearly with castor-oil-mixed mud. This agreement was sustained by Kom women, who carried this mud to the Mujang palace. This was a serious task to be sustained by the Kom, and when they decided to stop performing this duty, the Mujang were enraged and refused to assist the Kom in their war with the Din as a result. Instead, they prepared to attack the Kom on their return from Din, a plan which the Kom women came to know from their spies¹⁷.

With this knowledge, they decided to react in their own way, that is, to ambush the Mujang. The courageous *anlu*¹⁸ women collected arms from the *njong*¹⁹ lodge at Laikom, dressed themselves in men clothing and stood at both ends of the Tubeli cliff, through which the Mujang warriors had to pass. When the Mujang warriors were in the middle of the place where they lay in wait, the women on the one end raised an alarm to which those on the other end of the cliff responded, a signal to effect the attack. This frightened the Mujang warriors, who, in their attempt to run back, fell from the cliff and many of them died in the process²⁰. The defeat of the warriors arose the issue of bringing the Mujang to an end, and raised the status of the *anlu* in the area as a courageous and strong female society²¹. In most of the cases, the bone of contention was about farming lands. Since the female folk were the sustenance of farming in the region, they were often found meddling with land usage. The search for fertile farming plots allowed them to stray beyond their farm holdings, and they were unwilling to give up this vital element of survival. In fact, this problem accounted for the Mayo Binka and Binka, Bambili-Babanki, Mbem-Nwa, Bali-Nyonga-Bawock and Bamendankwe-Banjah conflicts, just to name but these few. Women played a role in advancing or sustaining these conflicts, an example being the Bamendankwe-Banjah conflict of 1989.

In 1989, Bamendankwe-Banjah, neighbouring chiefdoms, became involved in a serious conflict over a piece of land on their boarder. It arose when the former village, sandwiched by Bambili and Bamendankwe, accused the latter of encroaching on its land. The Banjah laid claims over the disputed land, arguing that they had occupied the area since the precolonial era. But their enemies claimed they had provided the Banjah with this

17 Blasius Fukachia Kidio, "Political Conflicts in Kom, North West Province of Cameroon 1951-1997: A Political History", (DIPES II dissertation in History, ENS, University of Yaounde I, 1999), pp. 30-31; Lawyer, "Role of Women", p. 28.

18 The *anlu* is a female secret society in Kom that serves as a disciplinarian of recalcitrant persons in the society, especially women.

19 The *njong* lodge is a special room in the Kom palace where war-related elements are kept.

20 According to Lawyer, warriors believed that they were defeated by war mercenaries from Bafmen who used to wear earrings. This was because they saw the Kom women wearing earrings, see *Ibid.*, p. 29. However, this could not be true because Bafmen warriors were at the same time assisting Kom warriors at Din.

21 Paul T. Kiawi, "The Kom-German War 1904-5: The Kom war Tactics", (MA dissertation, University of Buea, 2001), p. 5.

land when they migrated from Santa, hence a Bamendankwi land. The prearrangement to allow the Banjah to own the land was an issue between them and Bambili. With this, Banjah did not exist²². The rejection of such claims and the holding tight of the land by the Banjah plunged both factions into violent confrontation, an incident that experienced the presence of the women.

When the conflict erupted, the *Fon* of Bamendankwe summoned the Queen mother, *Mafor* Awameshie, to rally and prepare the female folk of the village for war. Over a hundred female combatants, mostly postmenopausal women and a good number of pre-menopausal and middle aged women, congregated along the footpath leading to the disputed area. They assembled in various guises with some putting on old clothing, while others were naked, barely covering their genitals with *nika*²³. The younger ones carried with them hoes as the war instrument, but the older ones did not need such since they considered their genitals to be a formidable weapon for the fight. As they progressed to the battle field, they acted as mobilisers. They sang and ululated loudly so as to be heard long before they passed by. As this was happening, they intersected the singing with statements like these: “let’s send Banjah to where they come from”, “our land must be for us”, “Banjah have declared war on us”. The mobilisation by these women got spontaneous responses from the local inhabitants of both villages. Since the men were prohibited from seeing women in such a mood, an incurable taboo, male warriors came out only after the women had passed in file beyond visible distance. The Bamendankwe women armed themselves with charms and led their men to the battle field, and at the battleground they portrayed their strength in a particular manner.

At the battlefield, women used their genitals and the *nika* instruments for combat. They passed the *nika* in between their legs, tilted their naked buttock skywards toward the direction of their enemies, mesmerised certain words and threw it (*nika*) to them (*enemies*). It was generally believed that this procedure empowered the *nika* with extraordinary spiritual forces. The value of the *nika* among the Ngemba women during disputes is compared with the *funya* (a garden-like fruit) used by the *anlu* society in Kom. This is in conformity with Fatton, who says African women have historically displayed their nakedness to show their anger and outrage at both public injustice and private male brutality or discrimination. During hostile situations, they used it with other elements as a means of cursing an enemy. The punishment of seeing such and being shot by these elements ranged from diminishing a person’s physical strength to grievous illness or even death²⁴. So when the Bamendankwe women exposed their sexual organs coupled with the throwing of the *nika* at their opponents during the war, the Banjah warriors, who understood the profound spiritual and mystical powers behind and the cost of seeing these women’s nakedness, got scared off. But the “brave” ones who resisted were stoned with the *nika*, and according to Ndi, many of those died afterwards²⁵. The Bamendankwe victory over the Banjah in 1989 was instrumented by their women.

22 Richard Ndi, “Women in Conflict in Mazam Division of Cameroon”, (MA dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2007), p. 70.

23 The *nika* was an article made from dry plantain leaves, often wrapped to form a ring and used mostly by women to support wood and heavy goods on their heads.

24 R. Fatton, “Africa in the Age of Democratisation: The Civic Limitation of Civil Society”, *African Review*, 382, pp. 67-88.

25 Ndi, “Women in Conflict”, p. 72.

Generally speaking, with the escalation of crisis, female Grasslanders often supported their men, even against their desire, as refusal to do so was believed to be sacrilegious and was punishable by death. So in many cases, the women actively participated in conflicts not only as combatants, but also as cooks for the warriors. At times, the women encouraged their husbands to declare war. The former situation was recorded during hostilities between Bambui and Finge in March 1996, Akum and Chomba and Awing and Baligham from 1996 to 1997, where many people were killed and many more rendered homeless. In these conflicts, women played the role of supporting their warriors at the battle front with food. During the Bambili-Babanki, Bambili-Nkwen and Bambui-Finge conflicts of 1993-94, 1995 and 1996 respectively, their women furnished their warriors with fried groundnuts, mixed with corn flour and wrapped in plantain leaves. This food was believed to have a spiritual force; it was an energiser to keep the men “anew” at the battlefield. Particularly, during the Awing-Baligham conflict, women did not only give their men food during the crisis, but also incited them to commit violent acts, like brutal slaughtering of their enemies, ambushes and the burning down of their enemies’ village. The women of the former chiefdom did so to the extent that they insulted those reluctant to take up arms against the latter village terming them “unmanly”. They were considered weaklings, unable enough to protect the interest of the chiefdom. Some Awing women blew wood ash at men to humiliate them for refusing to fight. The Akum women, on their part during the Akum-Chomba friction often chanted encouragement songs to motivate their warriors to fight and men who ran away from the battlefield were ridiculed for lack of “courage” or “masculinity”²⁶. Considering the fact that men of this section of Cameroon believed so much in respect and reputation and would do all to retain it, the actions of their women were enough motivation to drag them to action. This time not because they truly wanted to fight against their neighbours, but to fight away or wash themselves away from the impression of their women about them. Thus, women were considered to be “invisible combatants”, fighting invisibly through their men.

2.3 Women’s Involvement in Multi-Party Politics

The combatant character of the women in conflict was made manifest in their involvement in multi-party conflicts in Cameroon. Women’s activism during the political instability in the 1990s, in Bamenda, for instance, was championed by the *takumbeng* female traditional institution. Motivated by the introduction of multi-partyism in the Benin Republic, neighbouring Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zaire, (now Democratic Republic of Congo) a Bamenda based businessman forcefully launched and celebrated the birth of an alternative political party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Bamenda on 26 May 1990²⁷. Despite the violent reaction from the state against the idea of multi-partyism, the Biya’s regime formally legalised it in December 1990. The regime also introduced a certain degree of freedom of communication and association including the holding of public meetings and demonstrations. With the reintroduction of multi-partyism, the population of the Grassfields, and, particularly, the Ngemba population became very vociferous and uncompromising in their request for a new political

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

order. As a result, troops were constantly stationed in this part of the country. The SDF led a series of “ghost town” operations and civil disobedience campaigns all over the national territory throughout most of 1991. In an effort to force the government to call a sovereign national conference, which, according to them, would usher in appropriate structures within which multi-party politics could operate, the SDF made the “ghost town” campaigns. This caused all public and private business sites to remain closed and no township taxi circulated throughout the week, Saturdays and Sundays exempted. *Takumbeng* women or *mami takumbeng*, as they were called, intrepidly came out to reinforce the ghost town operation in Bamenda, the headquarters of the radical opposition party, the SDF²⁸.

Like the *anlu* of Kom²⁹, the *takumbeng* was made up of postmenopausal women found in Bafut, Bambili, Nkwen, Bamendankwe and the Ngemba confederacy as a whole. As a political institution, it intervened spiritually and administratively to redress particular issues in the land like physical maltreatment of men, women or children, witchcraft and other issues considered detrimental to the effective development of the society. Such cases were often considered to be above the competence of men to handle, and only the *takumbeng* could intervene. These women were believed to have mystical powers since they were seen as the authors of life. It was also believed that they could use the very instrument of life, sexual organs, to curse or terminate lives. Their vaginas and wombs constituted the natural channel through which man came to the world, and women had the monopoly of this channel. These symbolic parts of their bodies were used as the exclusive weapon to intimidate and discipline their male counterparts. When they exposed their nakedness and pointed their breast at a man, it resulted in impotency, infertility, incurable diseases or even death³⁰.

The *takumbeng* got involved in the “ghost town” operations following the economic hardship, which they believed was prompted by the Biya Government. Generally, this led to growing dissatisfaction and suffering. Village women, thus, began to have conversations about what they perceived as authoritarian rule, corrupt leaders and a government, but their belief was unresponsive to the other citizens. These statements were never voiced in public until the reintroduction of multi-partyism.

The *takumbeng* openly challenged the regime. They converged on the most symbolic and visible public places, defied the ban on public gatherings and claimed a space for themselves and their demand for justice. They invaded the streets and stormed public offices. The *takumbeng* restrained themselves from using violence and aggression in their methods, preferring to use civil disobedience and non-violent protest. They often marched almost naked and grey hair clenched with a large blade of grass gripped in between their lips, symbolizing “no talk but action”. As they marched, the front roll was made up of postmenopausal women with younger and pretty noisy women following from behind. Their passage in the morning indicated that every place had to remain closed and everybody had to desert the streets³¹.

28 Mark Bolak Funteh, “The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Conflict Resolution in the North West of Cameroon, 1990-2004”, (DEA dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2005), pp. 34-35.

29 Nkwi, “The Anlu Factor”, pp. 154-175.

30 Funteh, “Conflict Resolution”, p. 39.

31 S.Y. Awasom, “A critical Survey of the Resuscitation Activation and Adaption of Traditional African Female Political Institution to the Emergencies of Modern Politics in the 1990s: The Case of the Takumbeng Female Society in Cameroon”, CODESRIA 10th General Assembly, Kampala, Uganda, December 2002, p. 5.

In October 1992, the Presidential Election was organised and resulted in violence in Bamenda and the *takumbeng* got involved. The opposition leader, Ni John Fru Ndi, was alleged to have won the election, and even before the Supreme Court declared the results, he proclaimed himself the winner. According to him, this was to pre-empt any fraud as the official proclamation of the result was being awaited. But when the result was finally proclaimed, it was contrary to the anticipation of the masses. The incumbent, Biya, was declared the winner³². With this result, the population of Bamenda was thrown into a state of total chaos. An angry mob burnt down the residences and properties of CPDM militants, accompanied by arsons and looting. Families were displaced and human lives lost. To maintain law and order in the region, the State of Emergency was imposed on Bamenda and Fru Ndi was placed under house arrest. As troops took over the Town of Bamenda, its inhabitants interpreted this as a declaration of war on them by the Biya. In a rather devil-may-care attitude, the *takumbeng* came out in the hostile environment to face the modern army. These women saw the placing of Fru Ndi under arrest as an intolerable act of war, hence decided to protect him believing that they would defeat the army with mystical powers³³.

As expected, the women vigilled all night around the Fru Ndi's premises chanting songs of liberation. Unlike in 1991, they were exclusively of postmenopausal age with nothing to lose and were believed to have mystical powers. They did not put on any pants or breast wears since those areas constituted their weapons for the fight at appropriate moments, as earlier explained. Initially, only twenty of them led by Fru Ndi's mother cast evil spell on the troops and as time went on, many old mothers moved in from neighbouring villages to swell up the number. These included the *fumbuen* women from Bambui and Kedjim-Keku, who moved into Mankon town to protect Fru Ndi. Following the increasing number of women who entered Mankon for this purpose, they reorganised themselves in turns to guard Fru Ndi³⁴. About mid-way into the two-month State of Emergency, rumour circulated around Bamenda that the government troops were making plans to carry Fru Ndi to Yaounde for interrogation and this provoked the women into the offensive. Awasom describes this in his own words:

The *takumbeng* confronted the approaching troops by raising their dresses high into the air and exposing their nudity. To put colour in their fight, they raised their shrill breast towards the direction of the soldiers as if to fire bullets from their breast. The shrill sounds that accompanied their actions sounded like the casting of a magical spell on somebody. It was an awful and demoralising sight and the troops found it difficult to proceed and arrest Fru Ndi³⁵.

The women's resistance persisted for quite some time and when they got news about more troops arriving at Bamenda, they positioned themselves at the strategic entrances of the town, making it impossible for the troops to enter Fru Ndi's house.

32 L. Sindjoun, "La Cour Suprême, la compétition électorale et la continuité Politique au Cameroun : La construction de la démocratisation passive", *Africa Development*, 1994, pp. 21-45.

33 S.Y. Awasom, "Towards a Gendered Development Discourse in Africa: Visible Women, Invisible Men", paper for the 11th CODESRIA General Assembly, Maputo, Mozambique, 2005, p. 6.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

In February 1993, the *takumbeng* led some 700 pro-SDF sympathisers to lay siege at the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer for Bamenda Central for two days on the grounds that the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) had delayed the opening of the voters' registration, which according to the Cameroonian Law was supposed to have been open since 1 January, as carried by the *Cameroon Post*.

The crowd was led by the self imposed defenders of liberties and freedom composed by the old women, the *takumbeng*, as the old nannies were popularly known. They took up a near guard behind the truck load of battle ready police. The crowd broke up, but *takumbeng* voluntarily spent the night on the spot to drive home their messages of disenchantment and distrust government dubiousness over the registration palaver³⁶.

During this demonstration, the women defecated in front of the DO's office and threw grass and other objects into the offices, a symbol of curse in the Grassfields. Despite the women's actions, the state responded with less violence and greater tolerance towards them than it did towards political dissidents in general and certainly towards men. As a matter of fact, the Bamenda local administration was well aware of the force and power these women possessed.

2.4. Women and Farmer-Grazier Conflict

As a matter of fact, the economic sector among the people of the Grassfields witnessed the conflict situations, which also experienced women's militant character. Such economic conflicts mostly concerned antagonism between farmers and graziers. Chilver confirms that conflicts involving female farmers on the one hand and male graziers and land controllers on the other hand were very common in the Grassfields of Cameroon, especially in Bafut and Kedjim-Keku villages of Mazam Division³⁷.

Between 1958 and 2006, female farmers in the region were involved in protracted conflicts with Fulani graziers as well as some indigenous men who took up grazing activities (figure 2 shows an indigenous cattle herd and the herder) and trespassed to destroy crops. The early years of Fulani presence were beneficial to both indigenous men and women. Traditional rulers and colonial administration benefited from taxes paid in cash and kind by Fulani cattle herders. While women farmers benefited from the droppings, which were used as manure on their farms, the cattle Fulani were then an asset to both men and women as they coexisted.

³⁶ "Row over Registration in Bamenda: Demonstrators Besiege DO's Office", *Cameroon Post*, March 3-10, 1993, pp. 1-2.

³⁷ E.M. Chilver, "Women Cultivators, Cows and Cash Crops in Cameroon" in *Persons and Powers in Diverse Cultures*, edited by Ardenes (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992), p. 111.



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One of the causes of conflict between farmers and graziers was the growth of the cattle population. The population of cattle in the Grassfields by 1922 was about 10,000, and was never a problem to the crops. But by 1940, the population of cattle rose to 91,782³⁸. This was as a result of British colonial efforts to improve nutrition and increase agricultural income. The British colonial administration encouraged cattle Fulani, which entered the region in their significant numbers. The cattle tax or *jangali* provided a welcome addition to Native Authority revenues, increased the tax commission of chiefs, and allowed stipends to be paid to more Native Authority employees. Indeed, *jangali* initially provided a high proportion of tax revenue³⁹. By the early 1950s, the Aku with their disease-resistant-and-faster-breeding cattle entered the region from the Joss Plateau. Chilver asserts that over 14,000 Aku herds of cattle arrived in the region between 1956 and 1958⁴⁰. It was very certain from this that the relationship between graziers and farmers would hardly be cordial.

The method of cattle rearing was another reason behind the farmer-grazier friction. The rearing methods in the area were known as transhumance, the short distance and non-transhumance practices. By both practices, the graziers moved their cattle from the hills to the residential quarters, where the animals were fenced at night and released during the day to feed on fallow farms. The Fulani also migrated out of the village during the long dry season with their cattle in search of greener pasture, especially in the lowlands.

38 M.Z. Njeuma and N.F. Awason, "The Fulani and the Political Economy of the Bamenda Grassland 1940-1960", *Paideuma*, 36, 1990, p. 219.

39 Chilver, "Women Cultivators", p. 115.

40 *Ibid.* p. 132.

Cattle underwent transhumance during this season when biological activities were almost halted and pasture ecological resources were scarce. They moved to swamps, rivers and upland watersheds in areas where women gardeners had undertaken extensive vegetable gardening, resulting in heavy crop losses. Between 1995 and 2000, over 11, 8 hectares of vegetable land was destroyed per annum by cattle⁴¹. The immeasurable damage of cattle on the crops ignited grievous dispute between the graziers and farmers. In 1959, there were complaints about cattle damage almost everywhere in the region. In Kedjim-Keku, the feature of the *anlu* of Kom was seen in the diverse of traditional society. The *fumbuin*, a group of exclusively elderly women daubed their faces with wood ash, dressed in old and torn clothing, marched to the palace and protested against crop destruction, in fact not only by cattle, but by domesticated animals in general. As they marched along singing war songs, they cursed the graziers with thorn apples. These women did not remain passive in the face of their crops being destroyed, hence depriving their children from good meals. However, the anger of the women was directed only towards animal owners. Once their demands were made by the chief and the graziers chastened by imprisonment or fines, goats tethered and pigs styled, *fumbuin* rising sub-sided⁴².

In 1982 and 1993, the *fumbuin* of Kedjim-Keku was reversed, motivated by the 1978 and 1979 situations in Wum, where women armed with clubs, white painted faces and some carrying children organised and barricaded the palace of their traditional ruler. A similar incident happened in Nso and Mfe, where women took siege in their fon's palace requesting graziers to be punished. In 1982, women of Kidjem-Keku captured straying cattle and directed them to the *fon*'s palace to be impounded⁴³. In 1992, the *gofack* women came out in their numbers to lay vigil on their farms and slaughtered cattle destroying their crops at night. This was after their complaints against recurrent incidents of crop destruction by cattle to the *fon* yielded no fruits. In fact, this cattle hunt victimized over 200 cattle⁴⁴. In as much as the Grassfields women got involved in conflict as combatants, made manifest in their actions as instigators, service providers, political activists and conflict solvers, they were also behind action that pre-empted the escalation of conflict as well as provoked the return of peace in areas where it had been absent.

41 N.N. Epo, "Farmer-Grazier Conflicts in Aghem 1956-2003: A Historical Study", (DIPES II Dissertation in History, ENS, University of Yaounde I, 2006), pp. 31-2

42 Chilver, "Women Cultivators", p. 121.

43 Awasum, "Critical Survey", p. 3.

44 Funteh, "Missionary Contribution", p. 24-26.

3. Women as Architects of Peace

In an attempt to initiate peace solutions during hostile circumstances, the women of the Grassfields did so in two distinct ways, namely preventive diplomacy and peace-making.

3.1. Preventive Diplomacy

Plano and Olton define diplomacy as the practice of conducting relations between states through official representatives⁴⁵. To Robert S. Smith, diplomacy is the fundamental means by which foreign relations are conducted and foreign policy implemented⁴⁶. It includes all the operational techniques whereby a state pursues its interest beyond its jurisdiction. The Grassfields people, women inclusive, made diplomacy a vital ingredient to regulate relationship amongst themselves. Since the pre-colonial times, it was useful to maintain cordial relations among these peoples. According to Nkwi, deliberate endeavours to promote friendly contacts and maintain a good relation among the Grassfields states were great⁴⁷.

The peaceful coexistence of the people of the Grassfields was greatly sustained by women's efforts following their roles during treaties, alliances or pact-signing sessions. Treaties were signed as a way of winning the friendship of perennially hostile groups, especially to end border disputes, which were a frequent source of conflict. The binding nature of treaties was enforced by the swearing of oaths. Amongst many of the ethnic groups of the Bamenda Grassfields, oaths entailed the annual killing of a slave and/or animal, followed by the preparation of sacred emblems and potions and the mingling and consumption of the blood by both parties as the years evolved. For example, due to the perennially hostile relations between Lus and Ntem, the two rival chiefdoms took a decision to bring to an end the deep-seated hostility between them. This came after prolonged negotiations between the two sovereigns in 1932⁴⁸.

When female triplets were sent to negotiate a non-aggression pact between the two chiefdoms, it was concluded under a fig tree on the Lus-Ntem border, in a place called *tubuin*. This was followed by the performing of rituals and the burial of a live dog and two slaves, one from each party. At the burial spot, chiefs from both chiefdoms swore never to fight each other and promised to live in peace and harmony as brothers. What is important to note about this non-aggression pact is its sacred character. The sacrifices and oath-taking meant that once the treaty had been concluded, it had to be respected by both parties without which a spell or misfortune might befall the violator⁴⁹. This is similar to the Bafut-Mankon pact of 1889⁵⁰. These indicate that alliances were a method

45 Jack C. Plano and Roy Olton, *The International Relations Dictionary* (New York: Holy Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1969), pp. 213-214.

46 Robert Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in the Pre-colonial West Africa* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1976), pp.12-13.

47 Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy*, p. 41.

48 F.A. Ndenge et al. *Focus on Nukwi-nu Fo Ndefru II*, p.78; John Fru Fobizi, "Mankon-Bafut Relations, 1889-1901: From Bitter Enemies to Fraternal Allies", (Long essay in History, University of Buea, 1996), p.22.

49 Mbori John Buinda, "The Socio-Economic and Political Organisation of the Yambas from the Precolonial Period to 1961: A Historical Perspective", (DIPLEG dissertation in History/Geography, ENS, University of Yaounde, 1984), pp. 54-6.

50 For a detailed study on the relationship between the Germans and the Bafut and Mankon, See, E.M. Chilver, *Zintgraff's Explorations in Bamenda, Adamawa and the Benue Lands, 1889-1892* (Buea, Government Printer, 1966); Matthias L. Niba, "The Bafut and

by which chiefdoms sometimes turned their enemies into friends. Such alliances were usually made when one or both parties felt threatened by the other. With such an understanding, even when there was a violation of traditional hunting boundary laws by poachers of one chiefdom, a serious offence at the time, it did not cause war. Instead, the representatives from both chiefdoms and the culprits met at the site of the crime and the matter was settled amicably. The defaulters were asked to pay fines, which were usually in the form of goats and wine⁵¹.

In addition, oral tradition amongst the Mbem and Mfe peoples of Nwa Sub-division holds that immediately after the installation of the Mfe chiefdom in its present site (allowed to them by the Mbem) it sent three princesses to establish friendly relations with the Mbem group. The princesses performed the desired oath-taking with their neighbour, aimed at never fighting each other and standing by each other in times of aggression from a third party. This was already good grounds for the establishment of a sound alliance between both groups⁵². Amongst the Yamba, each chiefdom planted a sacred stone (after a blood pact performed mostly by the chiefs themselves) at the boundary – *licg bulack*. Annually, each village sharing this common boundary made sacrifices on the stone. During such sacrifices the chiefs and their wives promised friendship with each other. This oath-taking mechanism prevented the escalation of war or resolved prevalent conflicts⁵³.

The marriage institution was one of those precious weapons used by the Grassfields people against the issue of war and this revolved around the woman. Since the pre-colonial times, there has been a high frequency in the circulation of women among both royals and commoners. Warnier's 1975 data in this area on 74 genealogies from 8 chiefdoms of the Bamenda area indicated that in a total of 622 women, 188 got married into chiefdoms other than theirs⁵⁴. Chiefs of the Grassfields had established, promoted and cemented their relations through royal marriages. Chiefs, desiring to make or cement friendly relations, usually gave out beautiful princesses in marriage to neighbouring chiefs or princes, for example, the Bafut changed royal wives with Kom, Babungo, Nkwen, Bali-Nyonga and Mankon. Bafut and Kom, Nkwen and Bum, Bambui, Babungo and Bali were also fond of exchanging women among themselves. Nkwi's 1978/80 study on the Kom, Bafut, Babungo and Bambili chiefdoms recorded that of the 150 royal wives, over 14 hailed from chiefdoms other than theirs. The chief of Babungo, for instance, had 14 wives obtained from Nso, Kom, Bum, Bangola, Bamessing, Babanki-Tungo and Mbesinaku⁵⁵. In the Bamileke chiefdom of Bangwa, Latour-Dejean reveals that men of high social status, remarkably chiefs and notables, tended to marry more wives from outside the group. The percentage of foreign wives increased as the number of wives increased in the household. Evidence also shows that the Bamum king took wives from neighbouring groups and he is reported to have taken women from Nso and the Sop chiefdoms on the Nkambe Plateau⁵⁶.

the Germans, 1889-1907" in Bongfen Chem-Langhee and V.G Fanso, *Nso' and Its Neighbours* (Massachusetts: Amherst College, 1996), pp. 86-101.

51 F.W. Carpenter, An Intelligent Report on the Kaka-Ntem Area of the Bamenda Division of Cameroon, AC/5, 1932, N.A.B., pp. 7-8.

52 Mbembe-Ntumba Land Affair Proceedings, AC/5, 1932, National Archives Buea (N.A.B.), p. 3.

53 Funteh, "Missionary Contribution", p. 24-6.

54 J.P. Warnier, *Precolonial Mankon: The Development of Cameroon Chiefdoms in its Regional Setting* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1975), p. 395.

55 Paul Nchoji Nkwi, "Traditional Diplomacy, Trade and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century Western Grassfields", *Science and Technology Review*, vol. 1, no 3-4, 1983, p. 106.

56 C.H. Latour-Dejean, *La parente et la famille dans une chefferie du Nde au Cameroun* (Paris : n.p., 1975), pp. 54-6.

The free circulation of women, notably princesses, among traditional rulers was important in the sense that in the absence of an accredited diplomat, the royal women acted as resident ambassadors of the chiefdoms to which they got married. As such they were the ones to provide hospitality to natives from their chiefdoms who entered the palace. The marital bonds made less likely the occurrence of war between neighbouring chiefdoms. Hardly, therefore, did chiefdoms with marital ties go to war with one another. This practice was also employed within powerful conquest states, where there was a paramount chief and subaltern and often rebellious chiefs. For example, Kom princesses got married to vassal chiefs within the Kom kingdom such as the chiefs of Mejang, Ake, Mbesa and Baicham⁵⁷. This prevented the rebellious chiefdoms from seceding from the kingdom, thus the prevalence of peace. Apart from involving themselves in diplomatic actions as means of pre-empting war, the Grassfields women got actively engaged in peace-making when conflicts escalated among the inhabitants of the region.

3.2. Peace-Making

Women played a key role in management of hostilities amongst the Grassfields people of Cameroon. They were the brain child of the termination of the chieftaincy crisis in Bafut. Just as women played a crucial role in sustaining the crisis, they were equally very instrumental in the resolution of the issue. After the suppression of the riot of the princesses in Bafut, a State of Emergency was declared by the Governor of the North-West Province in Bafut on 18 January 1969. It prohibited people, female and male alike, from moving around with cutlasses, spears, clubs and hoes, all considered harmful to the administration. The sons and daughters of *Fon Achirimbi II* were arrested by the troops in Bafut. A down to dusk curfew was imposed in the Bafut west areas as all persons were restricted to their houses. This, of course, had tremendous impact on the women who depended solely on subsistence agriculture, and were the food providers in their households. Consequently, they felt alienated from the apparent irrationality of the conflict and its destructive influence and, thus, had a strong desire to see the conflict terminated immediately and to witness the return of peace and stability to the chiefdom. These prompted the widows of *Fon Achirimbi II* to openly apologise to the SDO for Mezam on 20 January 1969 during his visiting mission to Bafut. Their apology was a mark of profound regret for the women's actions, which propelled violence during which many elements of the forces of law and order sustained serious injuries. They expressed an unconditional readiness to cooperate with the *kwifor* in the installation of *Fon Achirimbi's* successor, according to his will⁵⁸. Certainly, this was a sure evidence of the women's desire for the return of peace to Bafut.

However, the women appealed to the SDO to revoke the prefectoral order banning them from using their farm tools. They also appeased their children by making them see the reasons why they had to respect their late father's decision. In fact, it was due to this action of the women that the SDO complied with their demand as it supervised the installation of the new *fon*, Nforbin, on 25 January 1969 and coroneted *Fon Achirimbi II*.

⁵⁷ Lawyer, "Role of Women", p. 28.

⁵⁸ Divine F. Ngwa, "The Fon, Chiefs and People of Bafut in Conflict, Pre-colonial Period, 1968", DEA in History, University of Yaounde I, 2002), pp. 13-14.

It was only after this occasion that the women reconciled their children to one another, causing them to live in peace and perfect harmony henceforth⁵⁹.

Another example where women advanced peace-making mechanism was during the Nso-Babungo War of 1906. Due to the devastating nature on Babungo, *Fon* Sake decided to sue for peace. To do this, he sent a delegation to *Fon* Sebum of Nso, headed by Prince Timbufua, with a royal bag containing many precious items. In return, the *Fon* of Nso went beyond material gifts by sending alongside a young girl named Manyam, the daughter of Shey Wo Nkarkur, a Nso notable. She was received into the royal palace and got married to a prince. This situation also prevailed between the Nso and Noni chiefdoms, where the former received women from the latter. Generally, women received as gifts from other chiefs were considered precious by the recipient.

Furthermore, the *mabi*, (mother of twins or triplets) played a fundamental role in the negotiation of peace amongst some Grassfields societies. Amongst the Yamba, for example, the *mabi* occupied a prestigious position within this society, believing to possess supernatural or mystical powers. In situations of conflict, she intervened in the battle ground by holding up high in her left hand the fresh branch of the traditional peace plant, the *nkeng*, a symbol of peace. At this juncture, because of her wailing, hostilities were stopped in order not to anger the ancestors, believed to have found favour with the *mabis*. During hostilities, the battle front experienced the presence of many *mabis*, thus their wailing could easily be heard. The hostilities between the Yang and Mfe, Mbem and Nwa, Gom and Rom of the 1960 decade were ended by the *mabis*⁶⁰.

4. Conclusion

The issues of conflict and conflict resolution since the pre-colonial period among the Grassfields people of Cameroon were not new phenomena. In a region with over 150 independent villages of varying sizes and strengths, conflict was inevitable. During the pre-colonial era, the migratory and implantation trend of the Grassfields chiefdoms was done amidst conflict, and so was their expansion. Most of the conflicts had their roots in competition over control of resources, land and people. From the colonial periods, some of the inter-chiefdom offensive wars reemerged and many new ones occurred, caused, in the main, by controversy over boundaries. This era saw the increasing occurrence of chieftaincy and farmer-grazier disputes. In the last two decades, these situations painted the region as the highest indicator of conflicts in Cameroon, especially with the advent of the state-civilian conflicts, which engulfed the area during the early 1990s following the reintroduction of multi-partyism in the country. In the face of these circumstances, the women did not remain indifferent, rather they got actively involved in fighting (combatants) and/or settling conflicts (peace architects). To effect the former intension, they used female secret societies, *takumbeng*, *anlu*, and the *fumbuin*, as instruments. But when playing the latter role of architects of peace, they employed preventive diplomacy as a conflict pre-emptive measure. But when the situation already escalated into an open conflict, they tried to settle the issue in their own way. They could be seen in battle fronts trying to initiate peace or meet government agents to initiate dialogue and

⁵⁹ Ndi, "Women in Conflict", p. 103.

⁶⁰ Funteh, "Missionary Contribution", p. 54.

establish peace during crises. Their role in quest for long lasting solutions to African crises can also be valuable today if given the opportunity to participate fully in the process. The strength of women's action was verified in South Africa during the Apartheid era, during the peace processes in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Mozambique during the civil bedlams of the 1990s.

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