

The Wear and Tear of Bafanji-Balikumbat Wars, 1990-2000

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Abstract

Boundary conflicts between communities have made headline news in Cameroon since the dawn of multipartyism. Balikumbat and Bafanji villages in the Ndop plain, which are neighbours, have been the epicenter of such crises. While Balikumbat shares borders with Bamali in the north, Bamunkumbit in the west, Bambalang in the east and Bafanji in the south, Bafanji is bordered in the north by Bagam, south by Balikumbat, west by Bamunkumbit and east by Bambalang. Prior to colonisation, these villages hunted, fished, tapped and farmed across land limits that were mostly determined by natural features such as rivers, deep valleys, forests and swamps. Claim of sovereignty over a territorial piece was absent and occupation of a parcel of land was more temporary due to the practice of shifting cultivation. However, with colonialism, the Germans established formal boundary between Bafanji and Balikumbat in 1910, later traced and demarcated by the British in 1933, and confirmed with slight modifications by the post-colonial administration in 1969. Obviously, demographic explosion rendered land an issue of contention between these communities hence land usage changed from *need* to *greed*. This new paradigm in land custom resulted in border crises whose politicization with the advent of multipartyism produced two cataclysms between both villages in the 1990s. This paper intends to argue that these wars between Balikumbat and Bafanji brought perils and ruins to the area and peoples. Primary, secondary and oral sources were used to get the data while chronological and analytic methods were used to weave the findings.

Keywords: Land, Conflict, Politicization, Wear, Tear

Introduction

Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji are independent polities in the Balikumbat Sub-Division, Ngoketunja Division, and North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. But for their geographical proximity, they have different historical and cultural backgrounds. Being neighbors for centuries, relations between them were often

peaceful despite interludes of strife. Indeed, animosity between them was the fallout of contentious boundaries established during the colonial era. This conflict, a spillover of boundaries trespasses was exacerbated by the advent of multipartyism in the country and the politicization of boundary issues. In fact, the politicization of the boundary problems ignited a volatile situation that was under hibernation. This resulted in the two seismic wars between both villages in the 1990s which not only perforated development but were viral to peace between both villages. Really, these cataclysms linked to land conflict between these villages in the 1990s led to wear and tear on the belligerent and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding theory in the paper was the Malthusian theory of war which emphasizes that population pressure and scarce resources are sources par excellence of war. In fact, with the advent of new concept of boundaries imposed by the colonial masters between both villages, sensitivity toward land ownership intensified, aggravated by increasing population pressure and scarce resources. Land was thus needed more for *greed* than *need* hence engendering unbridled quest for land by the belligerent villages which led to conflicts whose politicization led to wars.

Balikumbat-Bafanji Land Conflicts, 1990-2000

The fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union as a one party state hence rekindling the spirit of multiparty politics in Africa. The changing international climate was described as *a wind of change* which left no state indifferent. Besides the linking of aids by western donors and Breton Wood institutions. [IMF and World Bank] to the practice of good governance and rule of law, militated for democracy and multiparty politics. Finally, the 1980s was characterized by economic recession which engendered generalized discontent, leading to strikes and demonstration in Cameroon. All these made the 1990s very significant as Cameroon grappled with the changing dynamics of multipartyism. Many political parties sprang up alongside the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Among parties styled opposition political parties, was the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which was not only the dominant opposition party but had its fief in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Indeed, in early multiparty parliamentary and municipal elections held in 1992, as Hongie ^[1 p.79] maintains "[...]. The opposition SDF swept 95% of the twenty seats

and 80% of the Councils in the region." These results not only singled out the area as the opposition bastion but a threat to the ruling CPDM party. With this new political dispensation, the ruling party devised strategies to reverse the tides. The desperation with which the ruling party attempted to do this was captured by Ngah [2] in his article entitled "CPDM Maps out Strategies to Capture North West". Noteworthy was the fact that among the twenty available parliamentary seats in the 1992 election in the region, the ruling party had only one. This lone seat was Balikumbat Special Constituency, with Fon Gagwanyin III of Balikumbat, as the parliamentarian. Balikumbat was thus the lone fief of the ruling party in the entire region, with her Fon as their lone parliamentarian.

Paradoxically, Bafanji under this Balikumbat Special Constituency like other neighbours gave a landslide victory to SDF in the same election. Indeed, the victory of the CPDM in the Constituency was thanks to the comparatively populous nature of Bali-Kumbat and the rigging machinery of Fon Doh Gagwanyin III. Gagwanyin even went as far as lynching the SDF representative John Kontem for daring to defy his rigging machinery. The victory of the CPDM in the region was thus not only attributed to Bali-Kumbat but the overbearing attitude of their Fon who was the parliamentary candidate. This victory of the ruling party in Bali-Kumbat and the part played by Gagwanyin III never went unrewarded by the government. This was in line with the then Prime Minister, Simon Achidi Achu's maxim, *scratch my back, I scratch your own*. In fact, the significance of the lone seat gotten by the ruling party was highlighted by Hongie [1 p. 68].

[...], the return of multiparty politics in Cameroon by the 1990 was the principal factor that influenced traditional or inter-village diplomacy during this period. Bali-Kumbat supported the ruling party and the victory of this party in this area both in the 1992 parliamentary and Councils were pointers to reckon with. The other villages compromised their own positions by aligning to the opposition, SDF.

One major spillover of Bali-Kumbat's political choice was the creation of the Bali-Kumbat Sub-Division by Presidential Decree No 92/156/231 of September, 1992. Bali-Kumbat Sub-Division had its headquarters at Balikumbat village and regrouped other four villages: Bafanji, Bamumkumbit, Bali-Gashu and Bali-Gangsin., supporters of SDF following results of the 1992 elections. The creation of the Bali-Kumbat Sub-Division, regrouping these opposition-oriented villages rationalized attempts

by the ruling CPDM government to consolidate her hold on the region. Balikumbat thus became a strategic outpost for the ruling CPDM expansion in the entire region. Fon Gagwanyin III, being the lone ruling party parliamentarian wielded arbitrary and excessive powers with the complicity of top government and CPDM officials. Being the lone CPDM parliamentarian, a position he cumulated with that of a mayor, he decided to use such preponderance to settle scores with neighboring villages with which he had border conflicts. This was the rationale of the Balikumbat attack on Bafanji in 1995 that started a war.

The Balikumbat-Bafanji Confrontation, 1995

As already indicated, these villages shared a common border established by the Germans in 1910 and later confirmed by the British in 1933. With independence in 1961, conflicts emanating from the said boundary led to the post-colonial administration intervention in the matter. Consequently, in a Supreme Court Judgment in 1969, the colonial boundary was confirmed with slight modification in favor of Bafanji. Really, problems erupted from the boundary because Bafanji felt cheated by the colonial masters, whom they accused of conniving with Bali-Kumbat to confiscate their land. Such finger-pointing stemmed from the fact that the Bali-Kumbat was the first to have contact with the Whiteman in the region. With this first contact, Bali-Kumbat was recognized as a center of Tax and Corvee Unit. This entailed the chief, head of the unit was charged with collecting taxes and recruiting labor in his village and its environ in return for a rebate, usually 10% of what was collected.

The abuse of this power by the Bali Fon, Gabani according to Nganyewo [3 p.8], especially in villages that contested her regional hegemony, resulted in constant conflicts. It was the discovery of the double standards of the Bali-Kumbat according to Chilver and Kaberry ^[4 p.23] that the Germans in 1908 changed her policy in the region. Thenceforth, the German recognized more chiefs and dealt with them directly. It was thanks to this policy that Bafanji was recognized in 1908. The recognition of these villages irritated Balikumbat which saw her power cowed resorted to frequent incursions in these villages. It was due to these wars that the Germans initiated the idea of formal boundaries among them hence the establishment of boundary between Bafanji and Bali-Kumbat in 1910.

Having known the German first, Galabi used his influence to tilt things to her favor during the boundary demarcation. This left many neighbours including Bafanji with

little cultivable land. Problems emanating from the non-respect of this boundary led to many clashes between both villages. This prompted the British to retrace the boundary, using cairns and pillars in 1933. With the boundary demarcated and in line with western concept, trespass was tantamount to a violation of sovereignty which was justiceable. Left with little cultivable land and faced with growing population, the Bafanji constantly encroached into Balikumbat land claiming that they were just doing farming without secondary motive for permanent occupation. Such thoughts as Hongie ^[5 p.890] argues might have been born of the traditional land tenure which hitherto focused on communality (need) not individuality (greed) as dictated by the colonial boundary. This misconception resulted in many clashes and the post-colonial administration could not be indifferent. The Federal Government in 1962 passed an Ordinance, Inter-Community Boundary Settlement law to handle such matters. It was in line with this that a Boundary Tribunal was set up to probe into the frontier problems between Balikumbat and Bafanji in 1962. The Tribunal after thorough enquiry recommended that the boundary be modified in favor of Bafanji. The recommendation went into force in 1969.

This decision of the Land Tribunal was contested by Balikumbat, claiming that Bafanji elite; Honorable Peter Nkwenti might have used his power to influence the recommendation of the Land Tribunal. It was with this reasoning that the Balikumbat Fon Gagwanyin III, through his solicitor, P.D.Koti, sued Bafanji and the then West Cameroon to the Buea High Court. The President of the Court, S.D.L Endeley, in a judgment on January 22, 1971, dismissed the case, on grounds it was misconceived. Balikumbat was therefore fined the sum of 50.000 frs CFA. Though Balikumbat lost the case, they later appealed to the Yaoundé Supreme Court, whose verdict simply confirmed the ruling of previous Court. Balikumbat judicial failure was an eyesore in the village and Hongie ^[1 p. 61] vividly put it "Balikumbat did not take the court decision fairly as relations between both villages deteriorated in an unprecedented scale thereafter."

From the above analysis, it was thus obvious that relations between both villages were not only sour but volatile and just a spark could set the situation ablaze. Consequently, when Gagwanyin III climbed the political ladder in the 1990s, he thought time had come to settle score with Bafanji. Indeed, as the lone parliamentarian for the ruling CPDM, with his village the administrative headquarters, he attempted to undo the 1969 boundary. It was in this light that he sent thugs to dismantle pillars planted on the boundary in 1993. The removal of

these pillars caused consternation in Bafanji and they mobilized to defend the boundary. Some youths were sent to share farmland near the area but Balikumbat's response was an invasion of the village. This resulted in the 1995 war between both villages that almost took Bafanji to extermination. Nganyewo ^[3 p.9] estimated death toll as five for Balikumbat and eighteen for Bafanji. Prominent among the victims in Bafanji were Joseph Nokenfe and Nogoh Thaddeus. The *Nta-Ngumba*, the Balikumbat lead fighter was purportedly captured and later beheaded by Bafanji. The Mbagang, Njanung and part of Ekwo quarters of Bafanji were reduced to ashes by invading Balikumbat warriors. Portable items were looted while plants and animal suffered unprecedented annihilation. In fact, the magnitude of the destruction caused on Bafanji raised eyebrows as many accused the government of complicity, as punitive measure for her pro-opposition stance. Nformi [6] was of this judgment in his article entitled "SDO Accused of Fanning the Bafanji-Bali-Kumbat Conflict" while the magnitude of the destruction could be deduced from the Chris ^[7] in an article captioned "Balikumbat Wipes out Bafanji"

The 1998 War

The 1995 war almost took Bafanji to extinction for lives were lost and property worth hundred of millions destroyed. The predicament of the Bafanji was aggravated by the government apathy in post-war situation. This confirmed the feelings among the Bafanji of government complicity with Balikumbat in handling the boundary crisis. Frustrated, a Bafanji business magnate, Peter Ngufor, according suit no HCB/04/1995 ^[8 p.2] decided to sue Gagwanyin III and four others for the singular destruction of his property, claiming the sum of 550.000.000 francs CFA. In a judgment passed by the Bamenda High Court in 1997, Gagwanyin III and his cohorts were slammed the sum of 172.000.000 Francs CFA. This verdict was greeted with jubilation in Bafanji who thought; at least Balikumbat had been sanctioned for the destruction of their village.

However, things capsized when Gagwanyin III won the second parliamentary ticket under the ruling party same year following the legislative election in the country in 1997. This entailed the enjoyment of parliamentary immunity that had been removed before his previous prosecution. With the renewed parliamentary immunity, the previous verdict that Gagwanyin III had appealed was halted pending termination of the 5-year tenure. This infuriated the Bafanji who saw their last attempt to have Gagwanyin pay for the destruction of Bafanji ending in fiasco. This, coupled with the feeling of government connivance with Balikumbat, prompted

the Bafanji to launch an attack on Balikumbat in 1998. This attack boomeranged as the Bali-Kumbat reprisal was hideous, reducing Bafanji to refugees in neighboring villages.

The Havocs and Horrors of Balikumbat-Bafanji wars, 1990-2000

Though the rationalist theory of war emphasizes the rationality of belligerents in declaring war and the just theory insists on the morality of a war, there is no peace, no matter how unjust it is that is not preferable to the most just war. This is because the morality or rationality of a war does not eliminate its disastrous consequences both to the aggressor and the aggressed. Generally, war is a mass discharge of an accumulated rage where the inner fears of mankind are discharged in mass destruction. By this reasoning, what ever is done in rage is devoid of rationality and morality. In this regard, war irrespective of the causes produces adversities, the main contention in this paper.

Destruction of Property

The cataclysms between these villages in the 1990s shattered what they had taken almost a century to build. One of the causes of these wars was Balikumbat attempt to impose her hegemony in the region especially on Bafanji, an age-long rival. Situated at the junction between North West and West Regions, Bafanji was the economic melting pot in the entire region. She harbored the busiest market in the region, the Producers Cooperative, Regional Agricultural Post, most equipped Health Centre and the breadbasket for the entire region. Though Balikumbat was the administrative centre, these economic services in Bafanji attracted a regional focus. This enviable economic effervescence of Bafanji antagonized Balikumbat which saw this development as threat to her regional status. Consequently, the conflictual relations between these villages were not unconnected to this scenario. It was for this reason that during the 1995 Balikumbat invasion, these services were targets. According to Pinyinchu ^[9 p.82] "Balikumbat invasion of Bafanji was not for land. If this was the reason, the war would have been limited at the border. But the Bafanji village was razed as the main market, the Cooperative buildings and the Agricultural Post were destroyed".

Apart from these services, more than 500 houses were destroyed or burnt in Bafanji and about 150 from Balikumbat. All the shops and stores in the Bafanji main market were reduced to ruins, rendering the owners homeless and hopeless. Border quarters in both villages were completely burnt down by angry retreating

fighters. The magnitude of this destruction could be deciphered from the court case between Peter Ngufor of Bafanji and Fon Gagwanyin III of Bali-Kumbat. The former sued the latter for the singular destruction of his property worth 550.000.000frs CFA. In a court judgment by the Bamenda High Court, Gagwanyin III was slammed the sum of 172.000.000frs for the destruction of an individual property in a village that numbered more than 18000 inhabitants.

Loss of Lives

In indigenous warfare, there exists no professional army, trained to meet the challenges of combat battles. In this light, no code of conduct guided them at the battle field. Though some customary codes existed such as the avoidance of pregnant women, killing was rampant. The warriors, novices in military tactics were exposed to unintentional killing. For example, there was no uniform attire to identify fellow warriors at the battle fronts hence it was not uncommon to hear the warriors killed on their own side. Warriors in most cases were the male youths whose only driving force was chauvinistic patriotism and youthful exuberance. These complicated their inexperience hence many lost their lives in the war. Another cause of high death toll was the act of burning of houses. This was bedeviled by the fact that most of the attacks were surprises and caught targeted villages in high degree of unpreparedness.

Stories were narrated how the sick, disabled, children and some avaricious adults, chasing their property were burnt in some houses. The high death toll was also fallout of suffering by war victims in the forests and neighboring villages. These refugees were those who harbored border quarters, those whose houses were burnt, women and children who could not go to the war fronts. These groups died because of diseases and hunger. The most devastating effect was the fact that most of the youthful population was at the war fronts hence worst affected. The loss in population was thus not only quantitative but qualitative.

Generalized Insecurity

War generally instills fear of the unknown and in an atmosphere characterized by fear, insecurity imaginary or feasible becomes a *modus vivendi*. Usually, post-war relations between these belligerent villages were characterized by mutual suspicion, ostracism and hatred. Such a scenario was fertile ground for delinquents and law-breakers, who orchestrated their misdeeds in clandestinity. The border quarters, were usually abandoned because they were either burnt to ashes or the

inhabitants might have deserted the areas due to generalized uncertainty. What worsened the situation was the fact that these law-breakers were not only found in both villages but they cooperated secretly to not only perpetrate but perpetuate these incivilities. This rendered the dismantling of the network difficult and each village accused the other of sponsoring such acts. This rendered relations between them very sour as Pinyinchu ^[9 p.73] argues,

One of the consequences of the 1995 war was the fact that since the two villages were boycotting each other, mischievous elements from both villages took advantage to cause trouble in the neighboring quarters [...]. Such activities occurred often around border quarters of both villages. Since they were deserted by inhabitants, they became safe havens for thieves who carried out cross-border operations such as robbery, raping, kidnapping and razzias.

The activities of these criminals thus included robbery on traders to get their wares, attacks on houses to collect all what was portable, raping of women on their fields, breaking into stores and shops, especially in the Bafanji market that was burnt and thus deserted and catching of animals.

Expensive Judicial and Administrative Proceedings

The struggle to redress boundary lapses by the villages was not only through warfare. At times, the leadership of the villages or individuals, victims of the war took the matter to court. With bureaucracy and ineffectiveness of these courts, judicial proceedings were rendered long and costly. Really, the local administrators played a preponderant role in the settlement of these problems. As the embodiment of corruption, these administrators extorted colossal sums from these villages, claiming to handle the matter to their favor. For example, after the destruction of Bafanji in 1995 by Balikumbat, the Governor of the North West Region, Bell Luc Rene, after an enquiry by the Land and Survey Departments, recommended the payment of the sum of 435.000 francs CFA by each of the belligerent villages. This was for the retracing and planting of pillars removed prior to the war. It should also be noted that such sum was demanded from parties without enquiries on why pillars were removed.

Despite this administrative order, Balikumbat did not pay her own share of the money for the retracing of the boundary. Rather, the Bafanji who were most affected, paid the total sum with the pious hope that a final solution will be found to the problem. But Bungfang [10 p.42] insinuated that "such money ended up in the pockets of corrupt administrators who had no sympathy for the plight of the suffering masses." Indeed, on the day of the retracing exercise, the governor was absent, together with authorities in Balikumbat. The governor's representative, his entourage and the authority in Bafanji were chased away at the sites by armed thugs, purportedly sent by Balikumbat. The attempt thus ended in futility and Bafanji never only wasted colossal sum, but the boundary was not retraced. This was because solving the problems entailed destroying a network for money extortion from these corrupt administrators.

The above example was not enough lessons for Bafanji and the following year, Ngufor Peter, elite of Bafanji took the Fon of Balikumbat and others to court for the destruction of his property. After more than two years of delayed justice, the finality was that Gagwanyin won the parliamentary election and enjoyed immunity hence a halt to the proceedings. All attempts to have this immunity removed for him to face justice ended in fiasco after Ngufor had spent colossal sum for the judicial process. Boundary disputes were thus politicized and perpetuated to create avenues for administrators to extort the villagers, as Nformi ^[6 p.5] aptly captured "SDO Accused of Fanning Bali-Kumbat -Bafanji Conflict".

Economic Malaise

No matter how industrious a group is, it can never be self-sufficient. Trade is needed to ensure easy circulation of goods to promote development. But wars between these villages disrupted inter-village trade as Pinyinchu ^[9 p.92] highlighted. After this confrontation, inter-village visits stopped and some marriages between natives of both villages broke down. Trade was seriously hampered. This was because Bafanji market that was busiest in the region was ruined. Besides, the Bafanji people would not permit the Balikumbat into their markets again.

The post-war atmosphere, characterized by insecurity and ostracism thus disrupted trade that was necessary for fast economic recovery in these villages. Another hindrance to trade was the fact that both belligerent villages were important trade routes in the region. Balikumbat was the gateway to Bamenda, the North West Regional capital while Bafanji was the gate way to Mbouda, a major

trade center in the West Region. Since indigenes of both villages could not thread the ground of others, movement to Bamenda by Bafanji and to Mbouda by Balikumbat by indigenes was hampered. Bafanji people had to dig a road overnight through Bambalang to reach Bamenda, a distance that cost twice as hitherto through Balikumbat. On the other hand, Bali-Kumbat had to pass through Bamenda to Mbouda to sell their wares and this tripled their cost of transportation. It was therefore glaring that resources that could be used for the reconstruction of their villages were simply wasted.

Existence of Idle Land

The failure of the administration to retrace the boundary between both villages in 1995, following the disruption of the exercise by thugs, led to frequent trespasses and encroachment by indigenes. This worsened the situation as tension arose each time such incident occurred. This obliged the administration to pass injunction orders forbidding either party to farm, hunt or fish on the disputed land. Disputed areas where land 100 hectares on the border of villages affected by border problems. It was in this light that an injunction order was passed on the land at the border between both villages. Such land remained idle when indigenes, especially in Bafanji lived in abject need of farming land. Agriculture being the main activity of the people, such idle land was anti-developmental.

Conclusion

The Balikumbat-Bafanji case study was a microcosm of the plethora of land related crises emanating from the lacunae of colonial systems. Really, empirical studies are unanimous that colonial legacies are partly responsible for the turbulence in African today. The Cameroon-Nigeria border crisis over Bakassi and land crisis in Zimbabwe are paragons. Equally, the Kuasasi-Mamprusi chieftaincy crisis in northern Ghana and Kikuyu land crisis in Kenya are quintessence of these colonial fabrications. Indeed, enjoying good neighborliness for almost a century despite turbulent times, the establishment of formal boundary between Balikumbat and Bafanji by colonial masters, leading to land tenure based on individuality, as thought by the *Whiteman*, produced a scenario similar to the European Scramble for Africa in the 19th century. Having understood the new concept of land as imposed by boundary traced and demarcated with pillars, these villages rushed to secure much thus violating the very boundary they consented to without proper mastery of its implications. The politicization of problems resulting from this boundary by the 1990s, with the reintroduction of multipartyism in the country, led

to two wars whose nefarious effects set new records. Property worth hundred of millions were destroyed, more of the productive part of the population was lost, general insecurity installed, trade compromised and land that could be used for farming, left idle, in respect of injunction order. These not only reduced to ruins the efforts of these villages for a long time but punctured their desires to effect developmental projects.

From the above analyses, it could justifiably be said in line with Land ^[11] that the imposition of boundaries by colonial masters in Africa was problem-infested whereas the spillover of multipartyism, seemingly a desired model by most states and statesmen in Africa, may not be free of its own problems, especially when the basic tenets like tolerance, rule of law and good governance are shunned. Finally, if the colonial masters and multipartyism could be indicted for the many land-related crises in Africa, the post-colonial governments, through their administrators as Edward ^[12 p.17] opines, have been found wanting in handling these crises. The bureaucracy, corruption, delays and double-standards that characterized the management of these crises are revelatory of sustained failures that haunt Africa in many domains. However, Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji are neighbours and are bound to live together. Resort to violence might not be the best solution for the most unjust peace is preferable to the most just war. If the handling of the Bakassi crisis between Cameroon and Nigeria could be a paragon in tribal cases, then it would be inarguable to take Cameroon as an incontestable reference peace crusader.

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