

Power, Symbolism and Conflict in Bafut, Cameroon

Divine Fuhnwi Ngwa

Department of History, FALSH, University of Ngaoundere, Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

Email: divinefuhnwi@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Political power and authority in the African context are a myth. It is manifested and represented in various ways including in the form of natural forces and animals. Their importance and representation vary from culture to culture and from one community to another. Each community has beliefs and myths related to animals and power systems. Animals are believed to have such exuberant energy or power that permits them to command authority and control in the jungle. Such is the case of lions and elephants. Thus there are cultural restrictions and control over these animals as paraphernalia or symbolic representation of power and authority in several African societies. Power mongers yearn to appropriate these animals or parts of their bodies in the form of totems, insignia or paraphernalia to show case their power, prestige, aura and social status. Such ventures constitute sources of friction given that the process of appropriation of the symbols may stir conflict of extreme dimension. In the late 1940s in Bafut, a conflict occurred between the Fon (traditional ruler) and some subaltern chiefs over the control and ownership of some wild animals in the area. This conflict destabilised the political system of the *fondom* and perpetrated disunity whose impact continues to negatively affect the *fondom* into the 21st century. We intend to have an in-depth examination of the conflict in this paper and from our sources, we conclude that the symbols and symbolism associated with power breeds conflict in many indigenous African communities (such as in Bafut) and efforts are needed to restore peace in these communities.

Keywords

Power, Symbolism, Conflict, Bafut, Cameroon

1. Introduction

In most African communities, power and authority are associated to mystical

forces. Many are those who believe that a leader cannot succeed in his reign or rulership without the assistance of some supernatural forces attached. The sources of such power vary according to the beliefs, customs, traditions and environmental conditions of the people concerned. These factors dictate (influence) the exercise of power within specific context in line with the perception of the community in question. One aspect of the forces of power revolves around animals. They are generally believed to have some energy or extraordinary power that permits them to wield authority in the jungle and nature. Africans thus believed that the appropriation of such animal power by human beings permits them to wield power within their community just as some privileged animals do in the jungle. For instance, the appropriation of the lion prowess will permit one to have a devouring ability just as the lion does in the jungle.

This conception imbedded in the African traditions gave rise to certain mystical practices attached to animals. A close relationship was established between human beings and animals especially within the context of power and authority. The situation gave rise to what we refer to in this article as totemism (totemic culture). Totemism is thus a practice where power mongers in African communities yearn to appropriate animals or parts of their bodies in the form of totems, insignia or paraphernalia as symbolic representation to show their power, prestige, aura and social status. In this attempt, conflicts of varied dimensions are generated in the communities given that the process of appropriation of the symbols goes with friction and tussles amongst the contenders.

The Bafut community in Northwest Region of Cameroon was affected by similar conflicts in the 1940s. Here, a conflict occurred between the Fon (traditional ruler of the Bafut) and some of his subaltern chiefs who tussled over the control and ownership of some wild animals in the area. The aim of our article is to examine these conflicts in historical context. Given the devastating impact the conflicts had on the political system of the *fondom*, we decided to undertake an in-depth investigation into the problem with the hope of contributing towards the efforts needed to restore peace in the community.

Drawing from historical, anthropological and sociological sources, a blend of these subjects permits us to have an understanding of one aspect of power in African political systems in line with the tradition, custom and belief of the people involved. We are also edified on the intrigues that perpetually destroy the foundation of power systems and authority in most African communities. The people's belief in totemism and symbolism in the exercise of power, breeds conflict within the political system.

From a historical perspective therefore, this article examines how power is manifested and represented in animals. Such representation leads to conflict and using the Bafut community as a case in point, we contend that animal symbols and symbolism associated with power generate conflict thus endangering peace and unity amongst indigenous people, leaders and communities.

2. Background

The social and political power structure or organisation of the Bafut society reveals that it was patrilineal in its kinship relations. It means that descent and succession and power were claimed through the father (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 1950: p. 41). Succession in Bafut was not by primogeniture or by the first son. Any son, rather than the first, was entitled to succeed provided the father indicated this in his will. A father with many sons usually chose the favourite one and not necessarily the eldest.

The smallest unit of the kinship group was the nuclear family (*nji inda*, meaning, bottom of the house). This was synonymous with the smallest territorial unit of the *fondom*, namely, the compound (*ndugu*), which consisted of a man who was the compound head (*mbong ndugu*), his wife or wives, unmarried sons, daughters, servants and other dependents. The compound head could also be the head of an extended family or a patrilineage (*ngwe'enda*), which came next after the nuclear family. Coming after was the lineage (*acheu*) consisting of a number of extended families whose members claimed descent from a common ancestor. It was headed by the successor of the founder of the lineage (*tacheu*) in whose hands power and authority over the lineage rested. Higher up the ladder, a number of lineages constituted a village.

As in the neighbouring *fondom* of Kom studied by Chilver and Kaberry, there were two main social classes in Bafut identified with power, namely, royals and commoners (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967a: pp. 123-150). There might have been a third category, slaves, but their numbers fluctuated greatly since they were usually integrated into society (Hawkesworth, 1926: p. 36). Among the royals were the Fon and the chiefs (*batangchuo*) of the component villages. Then there were the Fon's wives (*bangiebunto*—women of the palace), the princes (*boont'o*) and princesses (*boont'o bangie*). The princesses were usually married off to nobles as a way of gaining political support and enhancing royal power and authority.

There was a nobility class (*bukum*, sing. *nkum*) composed exclusively of commoners elevated to the rank by service or who acquired power through payment of high fees to their peers and the Fon. The shortest way to achieve the coveted rank of *nkum* was to enter the royal service as a *nchinda* or page (Kaberry, 1963: pp. 282-298). After serving the Fon for about 5 to 9 years or more (without pay), the young man was released after performing some ceremonies, *af'eh* and he became a *che-eh* or an assistant *nkum*. This was a subaltern rank. After a few months to five years, depending on his ability to pay the required fees, he was elevated to the full rank of *nkum* by the Fon. Achieving the *nkum* status was a prerequisite for appointment to any position of power or responsibility in the Bafut *fondom*.

At the head of the political structure was the Fon. He was both the political and spiritual head and also exercised both executive and judicial authority over his subjects. His position was re-enforced by the near-sacred nature of his personality (Robert & Ritzenthaler, 1962: pp. 22-23). The Fon had multiple political

symbolism, judicial, religious, and social duties. He controlled external relations with other peoples, making wars and treaties. Internally he made laws. All justice was in his name and he was the final court of appeal and had the power of life and death over his subjects. As chief priest of the *fondom* he offered sacrifices to his ancestors and interceded with them for the welfare of the people. In summary, the Fon was the visible manifestation of the Bafut body politic, power and authority. However, he was merely the tip of the political iceberg.

As in most African kingdoms, the Fon of Bafut was assisted by some royal relatives. At the beginning of each reign, a queen mother (*maamfo*) was appointed. She was usually the Fon's mother or in her absence one of his sisters. She advised the Fon, exerting a moderating influence on him. In addition there were two brother assistants to the Fon, namely, the *ndimfor* (elder brother) and *muma* (younger brother), who also served as advisers. They appeared with the Fon at durbars, sitting at the right hand but off the dais, with *ndimfor* next to him. There was another brother adviser. This was *Tabufor* (father of *fons*). He was usually any son of the late Fon who happened to have been born before his father was enthroned as Fon. Such a son was automatically excluded from the throne of power, since a *fon* must be someone conceived when his father was already on the throne, that is a "child of the leopard skin." By the circumstances of his birth therefore, the *Tabufor* had no power ambitions for the throne, hence his role as father to the new Fon (Bradbury, 1967: p. 31).

In all these arrangements, none of the royal advisers acted as regent when the Fon died or was absent from the palace. The body which shared power with the Fon and acted in his absence was the council of elders or *kwifor*. Literally, *kwifor* means holder or supporter of the Fon. It was an institution common to all the Grassfield kingdoms and was called different names. Thus it was called *nwerong* in Nso, *kwifoyn* in Kom, *nkwifon* in Mankon and *ngumba* in Bali, all studied by Chilver and Kaberry (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967b: pp. 62-63, 1961: pp. 362-372; Kaberry, 1959: pp. 366-383). The members who must have reached the *bukum* rank were hierarchically ordered and this was rigorously maintained. Movement up the hierarchy involved elaborate ceremonies which were accompanied by payment of high fees and heavy feasting of members. At the head of the body was the *tandakwifor* (head of the house of *kwifor*). The strength of *kwifor* lay in the fact that it acted as a check on royal power. The Fon acknowledged this and tried as much as possible to avoid confrontation with it. Princes were totally barred from membership. Only the Fon was admitted into its membership. He endorsed the admission of new members only on the recommendation of the old ones.

The powers and functions of *kwifor* were carried out through different agencies or lodges. The innermost and most secret of them was *ndangore* (ordeal house). Its membership consisted of between seven and fourteen *bukum*, chosen after rigorous screening. It took important decisions concerning both the internal and external security of the realm. Its most important function was to act as a council of kingmakers. Other duties of *kwifor* included the burial and funeral

of a Fon, enforcement of rules regarding land utilization. It also arranged sacrifices, festivities, community work and assessment and collection of tributes. Above all, it was the sole transmitter of the Fon's orders to the people.

Apart from *kwifor*, there was another council of elders, this time of princes only, namely, *nda-takumbeng* (house of thunder). It acted, though not always successfully, as a check to the overwhelming powers of *kwifor*. Its *raison d'être* was to protect the interest of princes since they were barred from membership of *kwifor*. Just as *kwifor* had its *ndangoro*, so *takumbeng* had its *ndach'onka*, the highest or innermost lodge where important decisions were taken. The head of the *nda-takumbeng* was *ndimfor*, who was the chief adviser to the Fon. In brief, the hub of power and authority in Bafut was the central palace from where all other cords of power were tied and radiated to all the nooks and crannies of the *fondom*. The representation of central power amongst the people was manifested through material symbols called *njoo ntoo*, meaning Palace things. The *njoo ntoo* according to Ronald Engard were strictly reserved or destined for the central palace no Bafut indigene made use of the *njoo ntoo*. Amongst these palace things were special animals identified with power and thus served as symbols of royalty in Bafut body politics and *fondom* as a whole.

3. Power Symbolism

As mentioned above, in Bafut tradition there are specific animals identified with power and authority. To begin with the Fon, royal gadgets and the Fon's clothing were fabricated or made with parts of animals that were reserved as symbols of the Fon's power and authority. The position (status) of *fon* went with praise names such as *muunangwe*, meaning, Lion's cub. The lion by Bafut tradition and many other African kingdoms is one if not the most powerful animal that wielded authority and power in the jungle. Such lion prowess was attributed to the Fon of Bafut. That is, in the eye of Bafut indigenes, their Fon was the most powerful man on earth with no rival to contest his power or authority. He was the lion of all generations. This was justified by the inscription of the lion at the entrance of the inner chambers of the Bafut palace (see **Figure 1** below) where

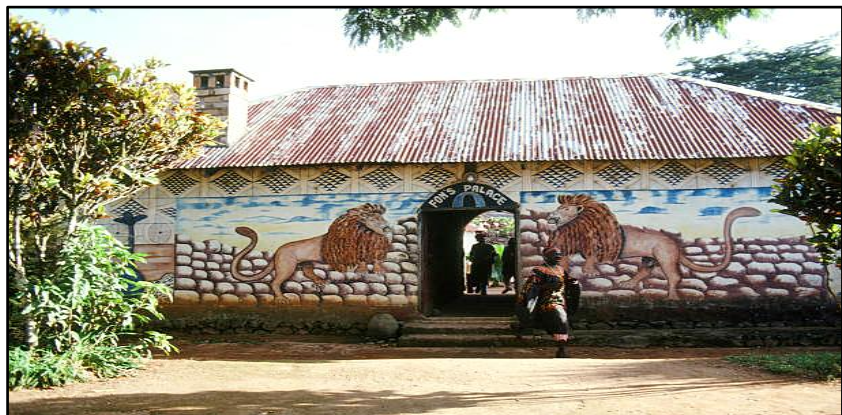


Figure 1. The lion symbol at the Bafut Palace. Source: Fon's Palace, 13 March 2017.

the Fon resided. People coming into the Bafut palace and seeing the lion design from distance understood that the Fon was indeed symbolised by a lion.

In line with this philosophy, Bafut princes upon succession to the throne arrogated or adopted names such as *Abumbi*, meaning he who rules the world, *Achirimbi*, meaning he who ends the world. All these names articulated power and projected the Bafut king as a demi-god in front of his people. Just like the lion (king of the jungle) the Fon of Bafut was indeed the king of his kingdom void of any rival (Ngwa, 1999: p. 10).

Another name attributed to the Fon of Bafut was *atscha-te-yeh-yah*, meaning he who passes and no trace on its path can be found or made out. Such swift actions in Bafut tradition were associated to snakes especially the pythons that were dreaded by all the villagers. Besides, the skin of the python was included in the sacra of royal things (*njoo ntoo*). Nobody in Bafut made use of the skin of a python or the bile. The skins of pythons were used to make royal belts, mufflers and caps for the king. Whatever the king used, no other person was allowed to use it. This clause was to limit competition and detractors of the throne and its occupant. The venom and bile of the python called in Bafut *feboofénooon-guube* was a deadly poison such that just an iota of it that filtered in the hands of unscrupulous people could be used to terminate or extinct a cross section of the Bafut population. To control the proliferation of the bile in the hands of wicked ones, Bafut tradition and custom instructed that all pythons caught by hunters (whosoever) should be brought and slain in the palace (see **Figure 2(a)**).

Here, the skin and bile was to be handed to the Fon and *kwifor* who took custody of the bile and ensured that it was carefully disposed under tight security and vigilance. Consequently, the python was made a royal power symbol (paraphernalia) and no Bafut indigene caught a python and made use without taking it to the central palace (ibid.).

The elephant on its part played a great role in power symbolism and politics in Bafut. Several parts of the elephant were symbolised with power and authority. For instance, the teeth of the elephant were a royal hand bangle called in Bafut *abanghe*. Only the Fon, titled sub-chiefs, top ranking princes of *ndachuunkaa* (*takumbeng* house) and nobles of *ndanghoree* (*kwifor* house) wore the *abanghe* (elephant teeth). The tail of the elephant was used to make a Whig for the Bafut Fons (See **Figure 2(b)** and **Figure 2(c)**). The elephant tusk was made a footstall for the Fon when he was seated at the palace plaza during great ceremonies and festivals in Bafut (see **Figure 2(d)** and **Figure 2(e)**). No other indigene was authorised to use the elephant tail to make a head whig for himself or use the elephant tusk as a footstall. Any violation of this custom was synonymous to serious conflict with palace authorities.

Thus to avoid conflict and to have a proper control of the royal symbols (parts of the animal), Bafut tradition and custom recommended that all elephants caught on Bafut land should be brought and slain in the central palace (Ngwa, 2011: pp. 38-39).



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

Figure 2. (a) Hunter with a python catch. Source: JPG File 0130-WA, 10 Feb 2022; (b) Fon Achrimbi II in Elephant tail Whig. Source: Fon's palace, 20 July 2021; (c) Abumbi II in Elephant tail whig. Source: Fon's palace 12 July 2021; (d) Elephant Tusk, Footstall for the Fon. Source: Fon's Palace, 4 July 2021; (e) Tusk as Footstall for a Fon. Source: JPG File 210, 10 Dec. 2021.

The leopard was also identified with royalty and power in Bafut. Apart from using the leopard skin and teeth to make royal garments and necklaces for the

king, in Bafut, the skin was used as a bed for the Fon. This phenomenon played a great role in the politics of succession to the throne of Bafut. Princes who were legitimate to contest or succeed the throne must be born of the leopard skin bed and until it was so no prince could have the right to succession. It was believed that the Fon could have concubines and deliver male children with them. Sometimes princes were called in to succeed the throne when they had already gotten married, established their homes out of the palace and delivered children. Such was the case of Suh-Ayieh (Achirimbi II) who was called from his residence in Manji to succeed the father, Abumbi I at the age of forty. Princes with the aforementioned status were not legitimate for succession given that their mothers did not conceive them on the leopard skin bed (*koohnangwe*). Hence the first and primordial rule to have legitimate right of succession to the throne of Bafut was that such a contender or pretender must be born of the leopard skin bed. The leopard skin could also be used to make royal belts called *koo-mbuutee*. All over the grassfield region of Cameroon and especially in the North West Region, the leopard skin was used as a foot stool mat for the kings (*fons*) (See **Figure 2(d)** and **Figure 3**).

Hence, no hunter caught a leopard and made use of it in Bafut otherwise it was going to generate conflict of wide dimension or extensive proportions. The custom thus stated that all leopards caught on Bafut land should be brought and slain at the central palace. The procedure was that the hunter or concern had to take the leopard to his nearest village authority such as quarter head, lineage head or sub-chief. Both will take the leopard to the central palace as either a trophy or tribute to the king. In the palace and in the presence of the Fon, kwifor nobles, princes, sub-chief and hunter, the leopard would be slain and the skin and teeth given directly to the Fon. The meat or flesh of the animal was then shared accordingly. At times the hunter was decorated with a red feather or porcupine quill thus making him a title holder in Bafut. No Bafut indigene dared to violate this tradition and go scotch free.

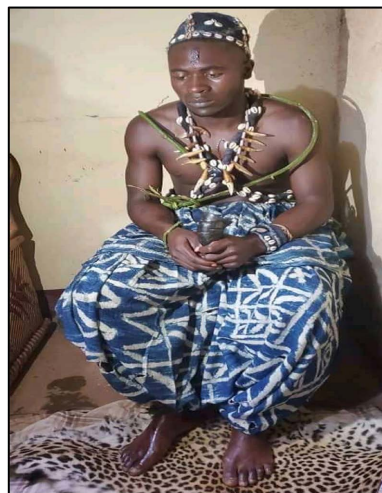


Figure 3. Leopard skin foot mat for North West Fons.

The porcupine was made royal by virtue of its quills or spines. The spines were used as power symbols or insignia for decoration and award of the highest nobility title (*nkum*. Pl. *bukum*) in Bafut. Only the Fon had the right or prerogative to award the title of *nkum* to a Bafut indigene (see **Figure 4(a)**).

The spine placed by the Fon on his traditional cap was a symbol of great authority bestowed on him. The Fon did that in the name of *kwifor* and *takumbeng* which were the structures that represented the Bafut people's interest in the political system and Bafut body politics as a whole. Bafut men who received the porcupine quill from the Fon were authorised to administer Bafut people in any part of the world where they found themselves in the name of *kwifor* and *takumbeng*. In other words, he became the direct representative of Bafut traditional and political institutions outside the *fondom*. No Bafut man was permitted to wear a porcupine quill on his cap without due authorisation, decoration or recognition from the central palace. In the same way no other person, traditional rulers or authorities within Bafut were allowed to award titles and decorations to people using the spine. Only the Fon could do that in the whole of Bafut land. This also applied to awards and decorations with the red feather of a parrot called *nefuruhnenguuh*. Anybody who used these symbols (spine/red feather) perhaps for personal interest above the common interest of the land, provoked serious conflict and confrontation with the Fon and the central palace authorities (ibid.: 38-46).

Next were the buffaloes and antelopes. These animals were identified with royalty and power in Bafut because of their horns. The horns of animals were generally categorised and attributed various values. The horns of domestic animals like cows and goats could be used by low class men of the commoners' rank. These were men who were not identified with any significant political authority or power in Bafut. The horns of buffaloes and antelopes were used by the nobility

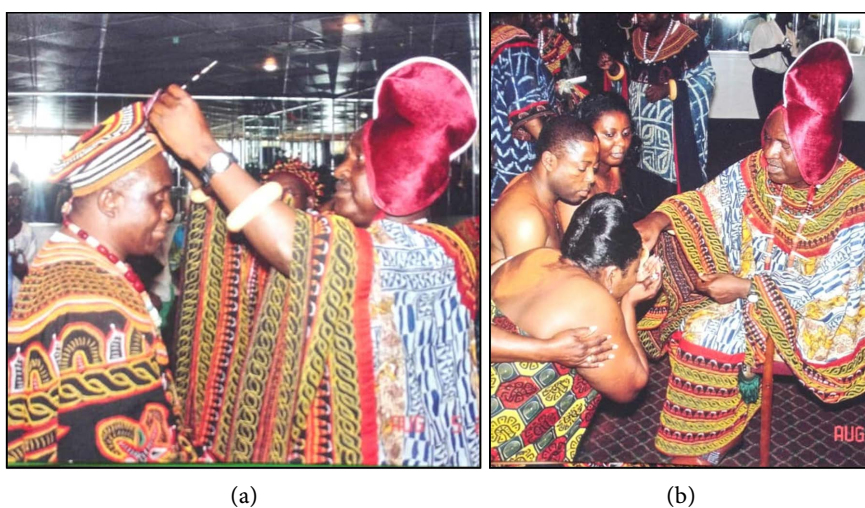


Figure 4. (a) Traditional decoration by Fon Abumbi II. Source: Fon's Palace Bafut, 12 July 2021; (b) Fon perform libation with his horn cup. Source: Fon's Palace Bafut, 24 July 2021.

and royalty as drinking cups (see **Figure 2(b)** above). The horns of wild animals were given high traditional value, authority and power such that the highest class in the land (nobility and royalty) attached a lot of restrictions and customs to them. Generally, the drinking horn of a Bafut man has much to play in the life of his family, power politics and authority in the *fondom* as a whole.

First, from the Fon in the palace down to the commoners, they used their drinking cups to perform the marriage rites and libations of their daughters during their traditional wedding. It was believed that the blessings of the girl from the farther and entire family came from the wine she drank out of her father's horn cup during her traditional marriage ceremony (See **Figure 4(b)**).

In other traditional ceremonies, libations to the ancestors were performed and poured out using the horn drinking cup. The horn cup was said to be mystical because the words or incantations made over the horn cup at every level worked according to the desires that were pronounced or declared over the cup at the time of action. If there is one thing of great political significance in Bafut, it is the horn cup. It holds sway and command authority and power over the lives of family members. Successors or family heads and other authorities in Bafut have learned to safeguard the horn cups of their ancestors jealously as well as use them judiciously to bring peace, progress and blessings to family members at all levels and ages. It is believed that in times of sickness, if the affected member of the family drank out of the ancestral horn cup or if the holder of the cup spoke words of blessings and protection out of it, the sick person will get well. In the same vein, the holder of the cup could curse a family member or bring ill-luck if situations compelled him to speak bitter words over the ancestral horn cup. Generally the ancestral horn cup was not only a symbol of power but also a symbol of unity in a family and society as a whole. Hence no Bafut family ever minimised the role, effects and value of the horn cup. The horn was also part of the power gadgets given to a noble during decorations.

Given the power symbolism of animal horn cups in Bafut politics and the society as a whole, the traditional authorities in the palace decided to incorporate many of the wild animals into palace things (*njoo ntoo*). Thus animals like the buffaloes and antelopes were made royal animals with traditions, customs and restrictions placed on them. No Bafut indigene caught a buffalo or an antelope and made use of the horns. It was instructed that hunters who caught such animals should bring them to the central palace where it will be slain and the horns given to the Fon. Any contrary action to this was synonymous to violating tradition and could degenerate into serious conflict (*ibid.*).

Birds and animals in Bafut were generally labelled with law parts. That is, certain parts of animals and birds like the gizzard of fowls, hearts, kidneys and livers of animals were reserved for people in authority and power. They benefited from this anywhere they found themselves amongst Bafut people. However, such privileges were determined by the individual's status, power and authority wielded amongst the Bafut both at home and abroad. Conflicts of great magni-

tude occurred amongst Bafut people in gatherings over who has the right and legality to consume the gizzard and other lawful parts of animals slaughtered during the occasion. Some people had been poisoned and some killed in the quest to eat gizzards and lawful parts of animals in Bafut. The act of killing somebody (through poison) was not seen as a mere attempt to eat the heart or gizzard of a fowl. It was a power tussle amongst the concern given that gizzards and hearts of animals were symbols of power and authority exercised over the Bafut people.

There existed forest reserves for the Fon all over the *fondom*. These reserves and other landed property belonging to him were generally called *koohmfor*. The people were prohibited from cutting down trees or harvesting any natural resource in the forest; talk less of catching an animal from the forest and consuming. It was the exclusive right of the Fon to exploit and makes use of all resources abound in these forests. The Fon's forest reserves were carefully carved out in all the villages (chiefdoms) where forest was found in Bafut. Hunters were barred from hunting in these forests reserves except on special assignment by the Fon and central palace authorities. There were specific periods when hunting was organised in the Fon's reserves and all animals caught from the forests were taken to the Fon as tribute. An attempt to violate this custom led to conflict and could even result to death or banishment (exile) from the village. Bafut people learned to steer of conflict or confrontation with the central palace by avoiding to carry out any activity in the Fon's forest reserves. The reserves were made sacred by tradition and were incorporated into palace things (*njoo ntoo*) as symbols of royal power. With the advent of colonialism the Bafut political system was infiltrated by alien mentality and practices that put the Fon and central palace at logger heads with some Bafut sub-chiefs who took upon themselves the audacity to violate tradition and arrogate to themselves animals that were destined for the palace (as *njoo ntoo*). A series of conflicts ensued between the Fon and some of his sub-chiefs beginning with the Banji Leopard-skin crisis.

4. The Banji Leopard Skin Crisis

As we stated above some animals such as leopards, buffaloes, Pythons, elephants were labelled royal animals because royal permission was needed to hunt them. After the animals were caught, the Fon was entitled to certain choice parts. For instance, in the case of an elephant, the tusk and tail must be handed to the Fon. For a leopard, the skin, teeth and whiskers must go to the Fon. Failure to bring any of these animals to the Fon constituted an affront and thus could lead to severe sanctions or, in extreme cases, war on the tributary chief who aided and abetted such an act.

In September 1949, one hunter from Banji called Tangie caught a leopard in his trap and took it to his village head, Talah. As stipulated by tradition, it was supposed to have been taken to the Bafut palace. Talah, instead of executing what the custom demanded, decided otherwise. He told his councillors and

people that it had been the tradition that all leopards killed in the village were taken to the Fon of Bafut, but the one in question would not be taken to him. The leopard was then skinned in Talah's presence. While the meat was shared to those present, Talah retained the skin, teeth and whiskers (File 361/223, 1950a). Because this was a slap in the face of the Fon of Bafut, the reaction from the palace was swift.

As a matter of fact, in pre-colonial times, such attitude would have resulted in a punitive expedition or war against Talah. But such a move was no longer possible in the colonial period, as the Fon's powers to declare war had been taken away. So the only alternative opened for him was court action. He thus filed a suit against Talah in the Bafut Native Court. The case was registered as: "Criminal case N° 85/49 [...] unlawfully killing and making use of a leopard value £25 which is against native law and custom at Bafut 2 weeks ago. Skin, teeth and Whiskers to be returned [...]" (ibid). What is of interest to us in this case is the manner with which the problem was presented, the debates and arguments of the various parties involved, and the position of the British provincial administration on the matter. It is also important to mention that it was during this case that the Fon came out for the first time to sit on a court bench that had to handle a matter between himself and one of his subordinates. From this, one could gauge the dimensions which the crisis was to assume and the extent to which tension had reached in the Bafut community.

The case filed on 11 October 1949 had the Fon of Bafut as the complainant and chief Talah of Banji and Tangie (one of his quarter-heads) as respondents. In court, the Fon claimed twenty-five pounds for the meat of the animal which Chief Talah and Tangie consumed. He also asked that the skin, whiskers and teeth of the leopard be surrendered to him (ibid.). During the court hearing, Tangie, the hunter acknowledged that he caught a leopard in his trap and took it to Talah his village head as tradition required. But Talah and other people in the Banji village said though all leopards killed in Banji were formerly sent to the Fon of Bafut, the one in question would not go to him. The reason advanced by Chief Talah was that the Fon had not been representing the Banji people; consequently, the leopard was skinned at Talah's compound where the flesh was shared to the villagers while he retained the skin, teeth and whiskers.

When Talah was put in the dock, he declared that in the past, his late father used to collect the leopard from the hunters and take to the Fon of Bafut. He too had done so except for the one in dispute. The reason was that at the time he inherited his father's stool in 1945, he took a personal decision not to adhere to the custom as his father did. He wanted to introduce his own method of administration. Standing as witnesses for the Fon of Bafut, four Kwifor elders (*bukum*), namely, Bena, Mbonjum, Ndifo-ngwanka and Nsa'alah confirmed that actually Talah was bringing a new system of administration in Bafut for it had never been heard anywhere that a sub-chief or citizen of Bafut caught a leopard and retained it. The Fon was the only person entitled to the leopard.

After examining the case, the court asked Talah to produce the leopard skin in court on 20 October 1949. On that day, Talah came without the skin and told the court that 'his big men' in the village had asked him not to do so. Observing that Talah had broken his word by allowing third parties to dissuade him to renege on a promise, the court ruled that the people concerned should be arraigned before it. Hence, Talah and Tangie were asked to pay ten pounds as compensation for the meat of the leopard to the Fon. They were also asked to return the skin, whiskers and teeth to him. Failure to comply with this decision, they would serve a prison term of three months. Chief Talah refused to comply and decided to take an appeal to the D.O, P.T. Barton. On 12 April 1950, the D.O confirmed the judgement of the Bafut Native Court. Yet, for eight months, Talah and Tangie did not produce the leopard skin, teeth and whiskers as ordered by the court. Achirimbi II complained to the court, which once more convoked the two Banji leaders. Both men declared their unwillingness to respect the judgement of the court. They were thus sentenced to thirty days imprisonment ([File J.D.S. 85/49, 1950](#)). Chief Talah immediately applied for Resident's review of the case. In spite of the court's refusal to alter their judgement, D.O, P.P. Grey intervened and suspended the sentence for two weeks so that the review formalities could be fulfilled.

While doing this, Talah and Tangie also decided to petition the Resident. They argued that the forceful handing over of the leopard's skin to the Fon of Bafut was an act of oppression and injustice. Besides, the Fon had taken the pleasure of prosecuting nearly every village head in its area on the same demands and claims of twenty-five pounds damages at the Bafut Native Court. Talah drew the attention of the Resident to the fact that native law and custom related to leopards was the same all over the Bamenda Province. In all the villages, when a leopard was killed, the skin was surrendered to the village Head. So, Tangie, his quarter head did just the right thing to hand over the leopard to him as his village head, who in turn had the right to retain the skin. Thus, the claim of the Bafut Fon over the skin was simply because he felt he was a big chief. This position was not a guarantee for Achirimbi to intimidate him to hand over the skin. He too was a village head with right to the leopard skin ([File 361/223, 1951a](#)).

To Talah, it was an insult to his person for the Fon to think that he was merely a quarter head and not a Village Head. Talah drew the attention of the Fon to the fact that Banji was seven miles away from Bafut and had been ruled by many village heads. If the Chief of Bafut failed to recognise his position in his village, the inhabitants who made chiefs would be able to justify whether he was a village head or a quarter head. Besides, the Bafut people came from Ndop and met them already settled on the land with their own customs as a village. Thus the assertion that Banji was a quarter of Bafut was a farce that should not be accepted by the administration. Talah thus appealed to the Resident to review the case and annul the prison terms meted on them by the Bafut Native Court and confirmed

by the Assistant District Officer, P.T. Barton.

The case was eventually placed on Resident's review by the D.O on 22 July, 1950 (File N.A. 1646A(B)115, 1950). Talah once more acknowledged the existence of the custom of surrendering leopard skins to the Fon of Bafut. But he declared that they were not ready to obey it again because the Fon has not "dashed" him. The Resident asked Talah how he wanted the Fon to dash him for a service he had not yet complied with. Chief Talah replied that his people were fed-up with giving presents to the Fon and receiving nothing in return. The Resident then pointed out to him that in as much as it was native law and custom for the Fon to "dash" those who brought leopard skins to him, it was also an obligation for the skin to be brought to him. Where the native law and custom was not complied with, it was then that they could take action against the Fon for their customary "dash".

Again Talah and Tangie admitted that they were in possession of the leopardskin but said that the whiskers and teeth had been eaten up by dogs in Banji. The Resident concluded that they were conscious of the native law that these things had to be handed over to the Fon. The Resident saw in them a deliberate attempt to flout acceptable native law and custom which was judged not repugnant to natural law and equity. He therefore saw no reason why the custom should be stopped. That said, the Resident modified the D.O's judgement to read that the skin, teeth and whiskers be given to the Fon of Bafut within one month. Failure to abide to the decision, Talah and Tangie would be charged for contempt of court and imprisoned for three months (File NW/La/C. 1950/11, 1950a).

On 20 November 1950, Tangie and Talah were eventually committed to prison after failing to obey the court order. When the Banji people got news of the imprisonment of their village head, they petitioned the Governor in Lagos to intervene in the case. They asserted that it was because of the important position of the Fon of Bafut in Native Administration that he was being supported by the British administrators in the Province against smaller chiefs. Also, the Fon's court cases against many village heads in the area had no link with Native Administration or Government with which they had no problem. The Fon was simply taking advantage of the support of the administration "to swell his stomach" with proceeds from them. According to them their leaders had to suffer the imprisonment simply because they killed a wild leopard which was not the property of the Fon. The Banji people reiterated that they were not part of the Fon's village. They were a separate village with their own village head.

Thus, the handing over of the leopard to their village head by Tangie was no offence against native law and custom. Hence, the Fon of Bafut should be informed that the leopard was handed to the rightful authority. However, for the fact that the leopard skin had become a source of dispute, they, the Banji people had taken it from their village head. The skin should henceforth be considered community property. In this respect, His Excellency the Governor should cancel the unreasonable case and the decision of the lower court which had no proper appreciation of the facts related to the leopard skin. The Banji petitioners

warned that if the case continued, they, together with their women and children would all move to prison for the issue was no more a personal matter of the village head alone (File 361/223, 1950a).

In another petition addressed to the Resident of the Province, the Banji stated that the problem with the Fon of Bafut was not the leopard skin per se. The issue at stake was that the Fon considered their village head as a mere quarter head. This act did not only belittle their village head but it also misled the native court to pass a prison term against him. The D.O and Resident had confirmed the unreasonable judgment. The application for Governor's review of the case was therefore intended to make this point clear so that through his intervention peace and understanding could once more reign in the area. In effect, the imprisonment of their leader and his quarter head, before the final decision of the Governor on the case, was illegal. The Banji petitioners thus requested the unconditional release of their leaders pending His Excellency's reply. But if the Resident still felt that their village head should continue to suffer in prison, then he should open the gates of the prison for the entire Banji village. The Banji petitioners also vowed to deal with the wicked acts of the Bafut Chief and if the Government continued to help him oppress them, they would resort to lawlessness and unpleasant actions without further petitions to the administration (ibid.).

All the petitions written by the Banji people were submitted to the D.O for onward transmission to the higher authorities. He made his own minutes which accompanied the petitions. His observations on the matter stated clearly that the Banji people were subordinates to the Fon of Bafut. Like the Obang people, their distance away from Bafut central town caused them to repudiate the Fon's sovereignty and control over their village. Also, the assertion of the Banji that their chief was an independent village head was in contradiction with statements made by the chief himself. Firstly, Talah and Tangie acknowledged before the Resident that it was native law and custom for them to give leopard skins to the Fon of Bafut but they were not going to respect the custom because the Fon did not dash them. In the D.O's view, this declaration was a clear testimony of the Fon's sovereignty over Banji; else they would not have been his subordinates in the past. Secondly, the Banji people were asked by the Resident to sue the Fon for a breach of the custom of giving them dash. Chief Talah shied away from it because such action would have simply confirmed subordinate relations between Bafut and Banji (File N.A 1646A(13)27, 1950).

On the issue raised by the Banji people as to whether offences against native law and custom should be treated as civil or criminal matters, the D.O submitted that it was correct to make it a criminal matter because the accused had intended permanently to deprive the Fon of an article which according to native law and custom he was the owner. He therefore asked that the Banji petitioners be informed that Talah and Tangie offended the Fon by violating native law and custom. Thus, the issue had been correctly tried criminally and that the statements of the accused to the Resident confirm that their village was subordinate to the

Fon of Bafut. The D.O further stated that the Resident's review was the final legal redress and the order must be carried out. Any act of lawlessness would be vigorously dealt with (File N.A 1646A(13)131, 1951).

When the Commissioner of the Cameroons in Buea received the petitions of the Banji people, he sent a telegram to the Resident for the Bamenda asking him to explain the problem in Bafut (File 361/223, 1950b). Responding to the Commissioner's telegram, the Resident F.R Kay remarked that the Banji people were those who encouraged their village head to violate native law and custom. This was justified by petitioners themselves who fully acknowledged that they were in possession of the leopard skin that was to be handed to the Fon of Bafut. To the Resident, this was a criminal act that had to be handled with vigour so as to deter others from committing similar offences.

However, the dispute as noted by the Resident was not really an issue of the leopard skin which was merely symbolic. It was a dispute about sovereignty whether the Chief of Banji and his people were subject to the Fon of Bafut as their overlord. Of recent, they claimed to be an autonomous village with Talah as their village head. In doing this, the Banji neither admitted nor denied the fact that they were at any time subject to the Fon of Bafut. They simply inferred that if at any one time they were so subjected, then in recent times, such subjection, together with all the strings attached to it, was an anachronism. Their intention was therefore to lure the Governor to help relieve them from all the 'ancient burdens' attached to the estate. Aware of the fact that if they remained under the Fon of Bafut, he would continue to be entitled to leopards caught in the village, the Banji leaders thus sought to stop this from continuing.

On the one hand, an autonomous status for Banji would give their chief the right to be entitled to gifts of leopard from Tangie and other Banji villagers. The Resident noticed this during the court proceedings. The declarations of Talah and Tangie incriminated them in this direction giving the fact that they acknowledged the existence of the native law and custom which asked them to hand over leopards killed in their village to the Fon of Bafut. He also noticed that in the past, the ancestors of Talah who came from Widikum acknowledged their conquered position under Bafut. They remained subordinate to the Fon and paid tribute to him without any problem or argument. It was only in the late 1940s that the Chief of Banji and his people sought to assert their autonomy without any regard to the rights of the Fon.

Many cases of this nature kept coming up in the Bamenda Division concerning leopard skins. They had always in all circumstances formed the subject of criminal prosecutions. To the Resident the act was an insult that was neither a private nor personal issue; it constituted an affront to the whole community. This was especially so because once the customs administering the community were violated it could possibly cause a serious breach of the peace that the Banji themselves so desired. The Resident drew the attention of the Commissioner to the fact that if it was in the past, the action of the Banji people would have caused the Bafut to avenge by picking up arms against them. Therefore, to pre-

vent the conflict from degenerating into a war, the Resident proposed that the Banji petitioners should be informed that where there was any dispute over the customary rights and duties of themselves or their leaders, the use of the expression “village head” should be avoided; the word “sub-chiefs” could safely be used. Also, disputes related to their customary duties could best be determined in the court of law. Hence His Excellency should decline to intervene in the matter (NW/La/C. 1950/11, 1950b).

The Commissioner of the Cameroons E.J Gibbons endorsed the proposals of the Resident for they were in line with the attitude he had adopted regarding similar matters that arose in the Trust Territory. The Banji and Obang petitions together with the comments and recommendations of the administration in the Cameroons were sent to the Secretary, Eastern Provinces Enugu for action (File 361/223, 1951b). On 5 April, 1951, the Chief Secretary of the Region, AFFP Newns replied the Banji Chief and people that where there was any dispute over the customary rights and duties of themselves or their sub-chiefs, the dispute could best be determined in a court of law and that His Excellency the Governor, declined to intervene in the matter (ibid.).

Despite this ruling, the Banji village refused to hand over the leopard skin to the Fon of Bafut and 11 June 1951, the Fon sued the Banji councillors said to be in possession of the leopard skin. Their names were recorded as Akombo, Ngongnjo and Benedict (File 361/341, 1951a). The councillors refused to appear before the court for trial. Hence, the court passed a judgment upholding the Fon’s claim of twenty-five pounds, the leopard skin, teeth and whiskers. They were asked to pay all these in one month (ibid.) The councillors, in reply took an appeal but the court still upheld the decision of the Bafut Native court. The councillors then decided to apply for D.O’s review. The D.O on review still asked them to hand over the skin to the Fon within fourteen days. Yet, Akombo, Ngongnjo and Benedict decided to petition to the Resident against the D.O’s decision (File 361/341, 1951b). In the petition, they claimed that they were wrongly accused by Chief Talah for being in possession of the leopard skin. Their argument was that those who should have been accused were two Banji villagers called Mimba Funifa and Tumankeri. They acted as middlemen sent by Talah to collect the skin from his compound and hand over to the court. The Resident was thus asked to probe into the matter to establish the truth (ibid.).

On 24 August, 1953, the D.O eventually placed the case on Resident’s review (File 2408, 1953a). From the evidences provided in the Resident’s court, he concluded that if the Banji councillors were not in possession of the leopard skin, they at least knew where it was. Hence the judgement of the native court as amended by the D.O on review was confirmed by the Resident. The councillors were asked to hand over the skin either to the Fon or to the court on or before 12 November 1953. Failure to so do, they shall be charged for contempt of court (File 2408, 1953b).

Not satisfied with the decision of the Resident, the Banji councillors petitioned the Chief Commissioner of the Eastern Provinces, Enugu against the decision

(File 2408, 1953c). They argued that the decision was based on false evidence provided by a certain Ndifo-ngwanka. All along, this witness had been present in the previous trials but refused to give any evidence of support. His sudden appearance only during the Resident's review was indicative of the fact that the evidence was a "cooked one." Also the fact that he was one of the Fon of Bafut's councillors and a relation of his meant the evidence was bias. To the Banji petitioners, Ndifo-ngwanka was out to support the Fon against them.

Furthermore, to show that the case was a "masquerade," nobody was called from Talah's compound to testify that he actually took the skin from where Talah kept it and gave to Funifa and Tumenkeri, to deliver to the Fon. Thus, they insisted that for the administration to have a headway on the issue, one or two persons who handed the leopard skin to Tumenkeri and Funifa in Talah's compound at Banji must be called up for interrogation. From this, the administration would discover that nothing was handed to Tumenkeri and Funifa, let alone being seized as they said at the Bambui three corners by the councillors. Hence, Akombo, Ngongnjo and Benedict asked the Chief Commissioner to ensure that justice prevailed in the matter (ibid.). But in the view of the D.O for Bamenda, no further legal action could be taken on the matter. Thus, the lieutenant Governor was advised to reply accordingly (File 5351/1954/5389/Ib, 1954). On 19 July 1954, the Resident wrote to the Civil Secretary in Enugu to impress on the Banji Councillors that the time for seeking legal redress had expired, and they had therefore exhausted all forms of legal redress (File 1954/5389/Ib, 1954a).

However, while waiting for the response of the Chief Commissioner to the Banji people, the D.O continued to seek ways of resolving the problem out of court. Thus when the Bafut Native Court pressed on for the enforcement of a third action of imprisonment against the Banji leaders, the D.O wrote to the Fon of Bafut expressing the view that the repeated imprisonment sentences in such a complex matter were becoming useless. Hence the Resident asked him to suspend further sentences with the hope that he and the D.O would meet the Fon for a discussion that could bring the troublesome matter to an end soonest (File 1954/5389/Ib, 1954b).

On 3 August 1954, the Chief Commissioner's response was received by the Resident. It stated that the Commissioner had declined responsibility to intervene on behalf of the Banji councillors. But the letter further pointed out that as long as the court judgment and review decisions stood for the first accused who was Akombo, the rest of them namely, Ngongnjo and Benedict, had the right of appeal since the matter was only reviewed on the application of Akombo (File 1954/5389/Ib, 1954c). From the response from Enugu, the administration in Bamenda became more confused. Firstly, the response that Akombo had lost further rights to review meant that the decision needed to be enforced immediately. But the judgment could not be enforced with positive results against Akombo because the sanctions accompanying the judgment were not to be borne by him alone. In fact, the three councillors had to hand over the leopard

skin as stipulated by the court judgment. Furthermore, the Chief Commissioner declared that the Resident's review was null and void. This meant that the whole legal proceedings in the case were null and void. According to the Bamenda administration, any decision in the matter concerned three persons thus it was difficult to pass a judgment in subsequent trials that would affect only one or two persons among those concerned (*ibid*). That said the D.O for Bamenda opted for a compromise.

This gradual shift from relentless support of the Fon in the conflict can be explained. The British authorities initially stood firm behind the Fon in total respect of the policy of the time. As Peter Geshier puts it: "British officials were never tired of quoting Lugard's memo for Indirect Rule, which emphasised that the chief was a crucial link in the development of Native Administration. Only by reinforcing the chief's position could a viable Native Authority emerge—a structure to which the British hoped to transfer as many tasks as possible" (*Geshier, 1993*). Hence, in the face of accusations and slander around the Bafut paramountcy, the British remained firm in their support of the Fon, Achirimbi II. To the British, it was unreasonable for them to lower the influence or prestige of the Fon in the wake of challenges to his authority from his subordinates. The court was particularly seen as a forum used by the Fon to foster his personal interest and authority, which were in line with those of the colonial authorities. It soon became obvious that the courts could not foster any peace in Bafut but persistent conflicts. For peace and co-existence to actually reign as wished by the administration, negotiations for such peace had to be sought out of the courts. Other avenues, strategies and sources of dialogue had to be exploited. For this reason, the administration in 1954 opted for a round table conference for peace among the Bafut leaders.

Thus on 20 November, 1954, the D.O for Bamenda invited the chiefs of Obang and Banji to a meeting at the small market square in Obang on Tuesday 25th November, 1954 at 10a.m. (*File 1954/5389/Ib, 1954d*) This meeting in Obang eventually prepared the grounds for a peace conference which took place in the Fon's palace on 29 November 1954 between the Fon of Bafut and the villagers of Obang and Banji (*ibid.*). After expressing the grievances each leader bore against the other, the following decisions were unanimously arrived at: All three parties, Achirimbi, Nanoh and Talah earnestly desired peace in Bafut. All cases which were before the Native Court or on review concerning the handing over of leopard skin to the Fon would be withdrawn. Never again would the parties involved resort to the courts for enforcement of their customs. Chiefs were invited to visit the Fon periodically as the need arose but were not compelled to do so. The D.O, A.B. Westmacott then congratulated the Fon and chiefs on the success of the meeting. He said that the village heads would in future be regarded as chiefs and not as sub-chiefs as heretofore. The D.O further said that he would recommend to the Commissioner of the Cameroons the appointment of the village Head of Obang as a member of the Bafut court (*File 361/223/11, 1954a*).

On 1 December, 1954, the D.O asked the Bafut Native Court Clerk to furnish his office with a list of the civil and criminal cases between the Fon of Bafut against Banji and Obang people. On 23 December, 1954, he officially informed the Bafut Native Court Clerk and appeal Court Clerk at Ndop that Achirimbi had decided to withdraw all cases from the Native Court, on appeal or review between him and the village heads or elders of Banji and Obang. In future, no further cases of that nature should be accepted in court without prior reference to him (File 361/223/12, 1954b).

From this action, one may interpret the withdrawal of these cases to be a genuine pursuit of the British desire to maintain harmony and cordial relations amongst the Bafut. But in reality the dimensions of these traditional issues were more than the British to handle, partly, because of lack of personnel and partly because of their shallow knowledge of local realities. However, one fact stood clear and it was that the cancellation of the cases portrayed that the peace accord was being enforced as a means of restoring harmony in Bafut.

A major problem with the accord came when the Chiefs of Obang and Banji interpreted it to mean that their villages had become autonomous and their status raised from sub-chiefs to autonomous chiefs. From 1955, they began to act as such, demanding from the British administration the privileges and advantages that other chiefs within the colonial administration enjoyed. These attitudes created new areas of conflict between the Fon and these chiefs. Other semi-autonomous villages in Bafut soon followed the example of Banji to create problems for the Fon of Bafut. The next subtitle takes up these problems.

5. The Otang Buffalo Crisis

The buffalo was one animal identified with royalty. That is why the Fon laid claim to animals such as buffaloes, leopards, pythons and elephants killed in Bafut; they were called royal animals. According to Chilver and Kaberry, the king had special monopolies and privileges, some symbolic and some of more direct economic value. Leopard skins, dwarf cattle and ivory were royal monopolies (Chilver & Kaberry, 1963: pp. 7-11). The forests holding these animals were reserves or hunting grounds for the king. Jean-Pierre Warniers observes that the buffalo was not just a mere royal monopoly of grassfields kings, the horn of a buffalo was an indelible symbol of royal power and authority. The horn was used by the kings to perform many important ritual functions. For instance, in Mankon, the drinking cup of the *fɔn* was a buffalo horn and during the annual dry season festival he used it to bless his people by spraying salivated palm wine out of the horn on his people. Warnier concludes that only important chiefs and lineage heads were permitted to own buffalo horns. The horns were acquired from the Fons through the performance of certain traditional rites and ceremonies, after payments of the required dues (Warnier, 1993: p. 311).

At the level of the lineage heads, R.G Dillon explains the ritual functions of the buffalo horn among the Meta people. He explains that the drinking cup of the

lineage was seen as a means of establishing continuity with the dead fathers in ritual context (Dillon, 1960: pp. 22-25, 1981: pp. 361-370). Consequently, the magnitude of a conflict that could occur over a buffalo or its horns was far-reaching in society. Our informants, Mbah Wanki, Gabriel Yahnchoo and John Njofor told us stories about important lineages or families that have perished in Bafut as a result of the misplacement or theft of the ancestral buffalo horn.

Achirimbi II on his part became very offended in 1963 when he received news that the Chief of Otang, a subordinate and two of his villagers killed a buffalo in what he claimed was his forest reserve in Otang Village and disposed of it. Worst still, the chief did not send the buffalo horns to the palace. This did not only deprive the Fon of his customary right to the entire buffalo but also the symbol of power. On 8 July 1963, therefore, Achirimbi II, sued two Otang inhabitants for killing two buffaloes and making use of them without informing him on whose land the lawful animals were killed. According to the Fon, this act was a serious breach of tradition. On 10 July 1963, the Chief of Otang, Fonjong reacted to the Fon's move by petitioning the D.O for Bamenda on behalf of the Otang people sued by Achirimbi. Chief Fonjong in his petition decried persistent ill-treatment suffered by the Otang under the whims of Bafut people who had maintained the institution of slavery on his subjects.

According to Fonjong, Bafut people had completely buried or wiped out the name "Otang" and had nicknamed them "Bugri." This name was not only derogatory to the personality of the Otang but it portrayed how the Bafut considered them as war captives that should be treated as slaves. Besides, the Bafut Fon, Achirimbi II, had been cruel to Otang people. On 8 July 1963, he had captured one Otang citizen and locked him up in his palace because he killed a buffalo and failed to render it to him (the Fon). Chief Fonjong saw no reason why other villages should be free and only the Otang people had to be consigned to such cruel rule and slavery (File B. 3137, 1963a). Chief Fonjong was making allusion to his other Widikum brothers of Obang and Banji for having the impression that the 1954 peace accord was the granting of autonomy and freedom from Bafut. The Chief further raised questions as to whether such obnoxious rule still existed in "this modern world." Hence, he appealed to the D.O and other authorities of West Cameroon to rule on their behalf and put an end to such evil acts (ibid.).

On 17 July 1963, the Assistant District Officer (ADO) for Bamenda, Mr. Epo, wrote a letter to the Fon of Bafut informing him about the report he received from the Chief of Otang. He drew the attention of the Fon to the terms of the 1954 peace accord highlighting the fact that the agreement gave the Chiefs the right to pay their taxes direct to the taxation office and the right to use their leopard skins and buffaloes (bush cows). Hence, as long as the animals were caught in the forest of the said chiefdoms, they needed not be surrendered to the Fon. The ADO then warned the Fon and told him that if the allegation about cruelty

was true, then he was strongly advised to toe the line else he might one day find himself in the sweet embrace of the law (File B. 3137/164, 1963). Copies of this letter were sent to the Village Heads of Otang, Banji and Obang, referring them to the 1954 agreement to which they were signatories. This implied that the 1954 accord was still valid and they had the right to retain all lawful animals killed in their villages.

In fact the ADO's letter backed the chiefs in their confrontation with the Fon of Bafut. That made them very happy as they expressed satisfaction with the decision of the ADO that their cry for years had finally been heard by the administration. This was an opportunity that was to be fully exploited to press for autonomy from Bafut. Thus, on 21 July 1963, Ben Ngwa of Banji, Chief Edward Aya of Otang, Alum Ungum of Atta and Nanoh of Obang issued a joint communiqué congratulating the ADO for his declaration. They remarked that the declaration gave them the green light to understand that henceforth, they were living in their own independent villages and were free from all the tortures and evil acts that the Fon of Bafut inflicted on them. Thenceforth, they were going to join the taxes of their villages with those of Obang for payment at the taxation office (*ibid.*).

With this plan, a type of "federation" of Widikum family groups in Bafut was being created under the leadership of Obang. What remained was confirmation or recognition by the administration. On 3 August 1963, the people of Obang, on behalf of this "Widikum Federation," demanded for representation in the Bafut-Ndop Council and the customary court. The Obang remarked that because the Widikum groups in the area were now independent villages, it was a right for them to automatically have representation in the Bafut-Ndop Council. The petitioners told the D.O that they were anxiously waiting for the confirmation of the "confederation" of the Widikum family groups formed under the leadership of Obang (File B. 3137, 1963b).

The joy and euphoria of the "Widikum" leaders were short-lived for on 6 August 1963, the SDO for Bamenda reacted to their declaration. In a letter, the SDO clearly informed the Chiefs that Obang, Banji, Atta and Otang were all villages of Bafut. He emphasised that although the 1954 agreement stated that all cases related to leopard skins were to be withdrawn from court, there was no mention of bush cows (buffaloes). He therefore warned the chiefs to be careful in their disposition of any bush cow killed in their villages. The chiefs were asked to maintain law and order in their villages and to refrain from the maxim of divide and rule. In the SDO's view, the grouping of the four villages of Banji, Otang and Atta, was an attempt to come together and present a common front against lawfully constituted authority. The Widikum chiefs were therefore called upon to desist from such a scheme and work for mutual co-operation and agreement with the Fon (File B. 3137/167, 1963).

The government authorities would not have decided otherwise given that Achirimbi was the sole Local Authority in the area, especially when it came to

the maintenance of law and order among the local populace. What the SDO was pointing out was that success in the Fon's local administration was synonymous with the success of state administration in the area. There was another policy factor at stake, namely, protection of the environment. During this period, government was pursuing a policy of forestry and wild life protection (Forestry Ordinance (cap. 75) of laws of Nigeria, 1948; [File Ja/a \(1962\)2, 1963](#)). Government had empowered local native authorities to carve out communal forest reserves where necessary in areas under their jurisdiction. In this light, a long list of endangered wild life species earmarked for protection was published by the West Cameroon Government. Animals like the elephants, buffaloes, lions and many others were short-listed for protection by the state. So, issues like the Otang buffalo crisis presented an opportunity for government to enforce its policy on animals and forest preservation against indiscriminate poaching.

Meanwhile in reaction to the ADOs letter, the Fon of Bafut had written a letter to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, J.N. Foncha bitterly complaining of grave insult on his personality by the ADO of Bamenda, Epo. The Fon complained that the Otang (Bugri) people were found guilty by the court for violating native law and custom. But they were unable to pay for the animal killed and were consequently sentenced to a term of imprisonment. When the ADO, Epo learned of the problem, instead of addressing a letter to the court he wrote directly to the Fon. Besides, the judgement had been endorsed by the SDO, G.K. Kisob, indicative of the fact that the administration was fully aware of the proceedings against the Otang people. Achirimbi thus enquired to know whether the court was wrong in punishing these men and if so, why he should be the one to be insulted by Epo instead of the Court or Traditional Council which was the organ that had indicted the Otang people in court for violating native law and custom. The Fon opined that Mr. Epo was annoyed because the two culprits claimed the same ethnic origin with him since they affiliated themselves with Wum, Epo's birth place, than Bafut. This was the basis of his insulting warnings to the Fon. What the Fon explicitly stated was that ADO Epo was partial.

Achirimbi further remarked that even if there existed an agreement that he signed in 1954 under the colonialists at the time, that should not arise after independence because as an administrator of an independent Cameroon, and being a Cameroonian himself, the ADO should know the importance of native law and custom and should not make reference to bad decisions taken by the colonial administrators on matters that greatly damaged native laws and tradition. According to the Fon, Epo was an African and a Grassfielder. He was expected to have a thorough knowledge of the practices, native laws and customs of the people in his jurisdiction. As an administrator, one of his primordial objectives ought to centre on upholding the traditional institutions, native laws and customs of the people in his region of origin. Achirimbi told the P.M in clear terms that he had been ruling for 31 years since colonial times. For the entire length of his reign none of the white administrators had ever warned him either verbally

or “documentally” as Epo did. The native laws and customs governing Bafut people were one and did not exempt other people. In other words, there were no groups of “untouchable” people as far as the Bafut native laws and customs were concerned. Hence the Otang who constituted a village within Bafut were not exempted.

The Fon also expressed his wish that the 1954 Peace Accord be revised for it was inadmissible that people should reside on his land and be free from his control. Besides he had become an object of insult on an issue that touched his administration. The Fon questioned whether Epo wanted him to create a boundary on his land between Widikum groups and Tikars. Without mincing words, Achirimbi further told the P.M that as long as he lived, the Bafut *fondom* would never be split and so the 1954 peace accord was null and void. To Achirimbi, when he signed the accord in 1954, he felt that he was sacrificing enough on his part to appease his sub-chiefs and peoples so that they could forget about past odds and live together in peace and harmony. It was also to permit a smooth traditional administration from the centre to the periphery of the *fondom*. Little did he know that he had used his signature to endorse the autonomy of Widikum groups in Bafut as it was being interpreted at the time. Achirimbi thus declared his determination to see a thorough investigation carried out on the matter. According to him, the issue was a very painful sore in his heart and could only be healed through a “better step” taken to reveal the crux of the matter at stake (File B. 3137, 1963c).

On 13 August 1963, the Secretary to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon addressed a service note to the SDO for Bamenda requesting him to probe into the petition of the Fon and furnish his office with the necessary information (File B. 3137/176, 1963). Meanwhile, that same day, Mr Epo had written a letter of apology to Achirimbi. In the letter, the ADO withdrew the letter he wrote to the Fon on 17 July 1963 and promised to call a meeting of the Bafut chiefs during the next appeal court session in Bafut. On 6 September 1963, the SDO for Bamenda, George C. Kisob informed the Secretary to the Prime Minister in Buea that he endorsed the native court rulings and the imprisonment of the two Otang people who violated native law and custom. In effect the ADO had acted in ignorance and since he had apologised to the Fon, Kisob felt that the matter should be regarded as closed (ibid.).

We can conclude that the buffalo crisis and the manner with which Mr. Epo handled it, obviously annoyed the Fon of Bafut who reacted by writing directly to the Prime Minister in Buea. Foncha, on his part could not permit the crisis situation to continue for long. After all, the Fon of Bafut was his political ally and Bafut was within his constituency. His aim was to please the Fon at the expense of the “Widikum” chiefs. This he did through the Bamenda administration.

6. Conclusion

Our study focused on the articulation of power and its attributes (insignia). Us-

ing Bafut as our case study, we saw that animals were great symbols of power in African communities. The appropriation of these animals gives the owner an honorific representation in society. The mad quest for these animals or their parts (as symbols of power, status and representation) amongst power mongers breeds conflict of extreme dimension and magnitude in society. They were in effect moving in the footsteps of their colonial masters who scrambled for African territories as symbols for power and prestige in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ebanek made this clear when he stated that the possession of colonies was regarded as a symbol of a so-called “first class power”. The strength or greatness of a nation depended on the number of colonies that nation possessed. The search for these territorial symbols in Africa generated conflict of extreme magnitude among the European powers (Ebanek, 2015). In Bafut animal trophies as symbols of power spark similar conflicts among the local leaders with immeasurable impact on the body politics of the *fondom*.

Conflict negates peace and societal cohesion. No community can perfectly develop amidst conflicts, especially when they have to do with leadership and body politics of the people. A mild solution was provided to such conflicts in Cameroon by government policies and regulations in the late 1970s. Government passed a series of laws on animal protection and against illicit poaching. Government also passed laws on forest reserves and exploitation. This eventually took away the duty of either protecting the forest or laying claims of ownership to it by any traditional ruler or chief. In this way, conflicts related to power symbolism by means of animal insignia were minimised in Cameroon communities with Bafut inclusive.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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