

## Righting the Wrong and Writing the Law in Cameroon: Fumbuen Women Against Fon Simon Vugah II

Perhaps the easiest way to evaluate the achievements of Beijing and Nairobi, both of which set out to achieve gender equality, is by looking at the issue as part of a chain of events that came to be fitted in with other developments instigated or accelerated by state reforms or social movements. Women's movements, both national and transnational, exploited the changed political context of the 1990s to advance women's rights. The agitation of these women movements is concrete evidence of the fact that gender inequality persists (UNRISD 2005; Ukeje 2004). Against a background of political liberalisation and a biting economic crisis, aggravated by the Structural Adjustment Programme, women's movements have tended to be radical in effecting changes in the status quo (cf. Okechukwu 2004; Tamale 2004; Pereira 2004; Awasom 2003a). What role can female organisations play at a time when globalisation – a phenomenon initiated some 500 years ago – is in the ascendant?

The Fumbuen Women's Association stands out as an example of a women's movement that serves as an important component of the new civil society in the global age and may be seen to be new actors for change and development in Cameroon's North West Province. Aicha Tambara Diawara (2002: 6) observes that these new civil organisations

... contribute to the emergence of female competence and constitute a real space for apprenticeship in citizenship in regard and regardless of the association's field of activity: cultural, education, social, political; and in view of the independence between the various activities, they are required to play an important role in the integration of women in the political field.

Henson (2002) observes that 'women are weak when they are amongst men'. But within these exclusively female organisations, women prove to be a force to be reckoned with to the extent of effecting

**Susanna Yene Awasom**  
CEFAM, Buea  
Cameroon

political change through the mechanisms of their organisation, as we shall see in this paper. Women are engaged in persistent contestations in order to survive patriarchy or primitive masculinity. Increasingly they have realised that the brunt of domestic upkeep falls squarely on them, and men often take unilateral decisions on sensitive issues like land without informing them. With the intensification of the harshness of the SAPs, women find themselves subjected to further pressures, including working in the labour force and becoming the real breadwinners in their households (O'Laughlin 1997; Udoh 1995). Women are reluctant to allow men to monopolise decision-making over major issues of land, on which the life of the rural people hinges. They are therefore bent on righting obvious wrongs and dictating the writing of more equitable laws for their communities.

This paper examines how, in rural Kedjom-Keku (Big Babanki) fendom (kingdom) in the North West Province of Cameroon, women engaged their traditional ruler in a protracted conflict over land and the issue of citizenship, culminating in his overthrow. This ruler was the Fon (king) Vugah II, who had acted as the traditional custodian of all land in his fendom. Land had been systematically disposed of in favour of rich Fulani grazers since colonial times. The conflict took on a strong gender coloration owing to the fact that rural women traditionally dominate farming and any measure that touches on land automatically brings women to the fore. While men would go to war if a neighbouring village attempted to appropriate part of their land, women would equally go to any lengths if their Fon attempted, or was believed to wish, to dispose of their ancestral land. The fact that men own the land and women own the food crops (Goheen 1998) might be

seen as different sides of the same coin. Men are not as free as they might imagine in managing land the way they feel because of the ambivalent nature of ownership. The Fumbuen women, in essence, attempted to right the wrong belief and practice that land management was the exclusive sphere of men. In so doing, they were writing the law, which makes land use and ownership a negotiated domain and the business of both men and women.

Engendering and manipulating the land question and the problematic of rights and citizenship

In Cameroon, like most of Africa, over eighty per cent of the population depends on agriculture as the basis of their income and survival. The brunt of farming falls squarely on rural women. They thus have a stake in the question of land use and disposal.

Yet female farming in Cameroon is quite precarious with the increasing commercialisation of land by men, sometimes without the knowledge of women, and with the destruction of food crops by domestic animals. Feminist groups are increasingly challenging women's lack of direct access to the land. What they own is the food crops on the land, not the land itself, which is the property of men (Goheen 1991, 1996).

In almost all Cameroonian societies, land is traditionally considered as a common heritage, that is, as a physical, cultural, collective space inherited from the ancestors. It is a community resource space transmitted from generation to generation that is managed by the community's legitimate representatives. This management ensures the social reproduction of the group both in terms of identity and survival. As communal land, it has a cosmological relevance. Land in traditional society is not, strictly speaking, ordinary property that can be appropriated or commercialised.

In both judicial and in farming terms, land is identified with the lineage or village

community to be used or managed without necessarily been owned. In this sense, ownership is different from civil inheritance and is dependent on the community. Land used to be no-one's property but rather a common possession that was treated as shared wealth (Barrier 1997; Le Roy 1991).

In present practice, land in its different forms (farming, forestry, judicial) is a resource, highly valued by both the state and the population. For the state, land is of political and economic relevance. The state poses as the overall owner of all land, for national land is the special expression of the state's power, sovereignty and also a source of financial revenue. For the population, the stake is political and economic but also social and cultural. Land is a factor of power and strength. Land is a vital resource. Culturally and symbolically, land is a sacred object that ensures the mediation of men and women to the sacred. It is an element of social status in the sense that it determines the relationship of individuals to the different networks to which they belong. Economically and socially, land ensures life and the means of subsistence. Although land is understood as both a heritage and a resource, it is more and more understood as an exploitable asset and is at the centre of growing covetousness at the local, regional and national level (Logo and Bikie 2003).

Under the logic of traditional law and customs, men owned land with the traditional ruler acting as its custodian. A woman automatically had access to land by virtue of getting married to a man. Every woman was bound to marry and thereby obtain land. This situation no longer holds with the advent of our modern economic system and the increasing emergence of single mothers and individualism. But men in the rural areas in particular still toy with the idea of owning land at the expense of women.

Both men and women in a given community were identified as citizens of that community and could lay claim to the ownership and exploitation of their ancestral land. But this situation has changed drastically since the colonial encounter as people from other communities criss-cross the national territory and sometimes expropriate land from the indigenous people. Although every Cameroonian can own land in any part of the national territory as a citizen, there is

still resistance to this principle on grounds of autochthony. The nomadic Fulani in particular constitute a class of migrants who arrived in the Bamenda Grasslands at the beginning of the twentieth century (Njeuma and Awasom 1991), and now pose a serious problem today because of their economic activity and their status as 'outsiders' in the indigenous community. In the Fondom of Kedjom Keku (Big Babanki) in the Bamenda Grasslands, the Fulani are seen as grazers, not citizens, and may be threatened with expulsion from the Fondom. The problem in Kedjom Keku therefore revolves around the question of gendered land use, land ownership and citizenship.

### **Fumbuen women against Fon Simon Vugah II**

The Fumbuen Women's Association was formed following the example of a similar women's organisation, the Anlu of Kom, which in 1958 staged a mammoth demonstration against the Endeley government for attempting to interfere with traditional farming methods (cf. Barbier 1985; Awasom 2003a). It made its first public appearance in 1960 when it organised a protest against their Fon, Vubansih, because his domestic animals destroyed women's food crops. This association gradually developed into a strong force in articulating societal concerns and was feared and respected because of its possession of extraordinary powers in the performance of the Kelu rites. The rites could be performed to purify society but also to sanction people, including the banishing of an individual whose activities were deleterious to the well being of society.

The twenty-four year reign of Fon Simon Vugah II (1980–2004) of Kedjom-Keku ended with a bitter clash with the Fumbuen women. But during the early years of his reign, the Fon collaborated smoothly with the women's organisation, which played the role of a kind of police in ensuring that domestic animals did not destroy farmers' crops. The honeymoon with the Fumbuen Women's Association however fizzled out in the 1990s as they became involved in a protracted and complex conflict with the Fon of Kedjom-Keku. The women took the vanguard in challenging royal authority because the substance of the case directly concerned them as traditional food producers. It is important to note that the case was a topical issue

couched in 'the language of the politics of belonging' (cf. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001; Awasom 2003b and 2004). Although the overt cause of the conflict was the land question, it really hinged on the issue of whether or not the Bororo (Fulani) grazers, as recent arrivals in the region starting in 1903 (Njeuma and Awasom 1991), had the same rights as the so-called indigenous peoples. At stake was whether or not the Bororo could be accepted as fully-fledged members of the community. The citizenship element gave the conflict a new dimension and made it almost intractable.

As has been recorded elsewhere (cf. Awasom 2003b), the Fulani in the early twentieth century were welcomed in the North West Province because of their cattle, which was a ready source of meat and because of the taxes they paid. The Fulani were quickly accepted as fully-fledged members of the various communities of the North West Province, and communities which had no Fulani grazers were considered unfortunate. But the increase in the cattle population over the years was bound to be problematic in an agricultural region, owing to the increasing frequency of cattle trespass cases. No lasting solution was found to the conflict between farmers and grazers and the problem was bequeathed to the postcolonial state.

The perennial complaint of the Fumbuen women of Big Babanki to their Fon was that the Fulani grazers had trespassed and had allowed their cattle to destroy food crops. This complaint is common in the North West Province and all traditional rulers have to deal with it with various levels of success. These conflicts however occur again and again because of the demographic explosion of the cattle population and the increasing demands for agricultural land. As was the case during the time of the British, the problem had to be handled with tact because the local community and local government benefited from the taxes levied on cattle (Njeuma and Awasom 1990). These taxes are a significant source of revenue particularly in the North West Province, which is devoid of a ready source of income from minerals, plantations or industries, as elsewhere. Fon Simon Vugah II resisted the call from the women for the expulsion of the Fulani for the simple reason that they were third-generation descendants of immigrants in the Kedjom-

Keku community. The government felt that it could not possibly endorse such a measure (Interview with a pro-royal group by the author, November 2005).<sup>1</sup> Fon Simon Vugah preferred rather to fraternise with the Fulani community as a way of looking for a lasting solution to the peaceful co-existence between the Fulani and his subjects. He took a major step in this direction by admitting a Fulani millionaire, Alhadji Yissouffou Danpullu, into the ranks of traditional councillors and king-makers. The warm relationship between Fon Vugah II and the Fulani was exploited by his detractors who dichotomised the land problem in Big Babanki as one between the Fulani and Fon Vuga on the one hand, and the people of Kedjom-Keku on the other. This perception of the land problem was dangerous because the Fon was made to appear a traitor, in the eyes of his subjects, and intent on giving away ancestral land and rights to foreigners. The Fulani-phobia fanned by the Fon's detractors was used to mobilise the women and public opinion against the ruler. Who were the key royal detractors?

These detractors included the influential diaspora elite (indigenes primarily based outside) of Kedjom-Keku, princely aspirants to the throne of the fondom, disaffected youths, and professional cattle rustlers. The diaspora elite felt Fon Vugah was too soft on the Fulani and was too obstinate for their liking, especially when it came to accepting directives on the development of the local community. They accused him of being interested only in 'the politics of the belly', to paraphrase Bayart (cf. Bayart 1993) and of clinging to the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) for favours at the expense of the village. The elite therefore encouraged the anti-Vugah propaganda that eroded the Fon's popularity.

The royal aspirants with their eyes on the throne propagated the rumour that Fon Vugah II was not the rightful successor of the late Fon of Kedjom-Keku, Fon Vubangsih. Prince Benjamin Vuctibuen, the presumed legitimate heir who had been left out in the cold, championed this propaganda (Interview with Informant 2 by the author in November 2005). The disaffected youths, were, to a man, pro-opposition and ready for any action, given the hardships they were undergoing. The cattle rustlers constituted a dangerous group in the sense that they were respon-

sible for igniting conflict with the Fulani by stealing or maiming their cattle and sheep on the pretext of trespass. The arrest of these cattle rustlers often created tension in the community. The propaganda alleged that the Fulani and the Fon of Kedjom-Keku had connived to arrest, detain and imprison the sons of the soil.

Fon Vugah II definitely had his own shortcomings which need not delay us here. Suffice it to state that the Fumbuen women came under the manipulative sway of the anti-royal propaganda. The petitions that they wrote to the administration against their Fon were very revealing (letter 2003a). The importance of the Fumbuen women lies in the fact that they are believed to have the capacity to sanction anybody, including their Fon, if he was found guilty of violating tradition. The Fumbuen women in action and in concert were therefore widely feared and nobody wanted to incur their wrath.

Having come under the influence of Fon Vugah's detractors, the Fumbuen women petitioned the administration regarding the sale to a Fulani of extensive farmland in Kedjom-Keku around Kephem Abongfem. This Fulani was Alhadji Baba Danpullu of the Ndawara Ranch (letter 2003a). The land thus alienated was said to be ancestral land. This accusation coming from women was serious enough to set the whole community ablaze. The Fon and the Chairman of the Village Council were accused of ordering the arrest of cattle rustlers who happened to be natives of Kedjom-Keku and denied them release on bail. The letter contained the names of several alleged cattle rustlers in police detention, whom the women insisted must be released because they were innocent sons of the soil. Investigation into the matter revealed that the traditional council endowed with the responsibility of giving out parcels of land to needy individuals had actually granted grazing land to Alhadji Danpullu at the Kephem hills as a way of protecting Kedjom-Keku land from encroachment by the neighbouring Bambui chiefdom. In a letter to the administration, the Chairman of the Babanki traditional Council stated:

... Since I took over as Chair of the Village Council, no grazier has been allocated land. My investigation while in office revealed that few graziers have patches of grazing land (uphill)

given by successive councils. Nearly all graziers have bought their grazing land. In 2000, the Village Council ordered Alhadji... Danpullu to transfer his cows to Abongfem... I am told that not even a franc was taken from Alhadji Danpullu... The allegation that the Fon sold Land to Alhadji Danpullu is therefore false (Letter 2003b).

he Chairman also explained that the Fon of Kedjom-Keku had no powers over the Cameroon judiciary as the Fumbuen women had alleged. But the Fumbuen women continued to believe that their Fon had sold ancestral land to the Fulani and was responsible for the arrest and detention of the sons of Kedjom-Keku. They condemned their Fon for admitting the Fulani into the traditional ruling council, thereby exposing ancestral secrets to 'strangers'. The women therefore proceeded to demonstrate 'people's power', a strategy which people in the Philippines have used so successfully in recent times to topple democratically elected governments (cf. Clarke 1998).

#### **Fumbuen women's coup d'état**

The Fumbuen women staged a prolonged rebellion against their traditional ruler from 15 to 19 December 2003. This agitation resumed again in January 2004, culminating in the Fon's departure owing to increasing insecurity. At the beginning of the rebellion, the women held Fon Vugah II and members of his traditional council hostage for almost a whole day, during which they hurled abuse at him for selling ancestral land to the Fulani 'aliens', for selling ancestral secrets to them, and for imprisoning the sons of Kedjom Keku. The women occupied the main road linking Bamenda and Fundong on the grounds that Fulani cattle were persistently encroaching on their farmland, and on account of the 'arbitrary arrest' of the sons of Kedjom Keku. The Fon was overwhelmed by the disturbances and decided to retire from his village so that tempers could calm down. In a mood of frustration, the Fon wrote a confidential letter to the administration in which he alluded to the prospects of stepping down. The Fon's letter read:

I wish to inform the administration of Tubah and Mezam that I have left the Kedjom-Keku palace. The people have given me a lot of trouble since December 2003 till today of my writing

you (sic). My wives and children are harassed for nothing done to them... you the D.O. of Tubah knows my problems (sic). On Sunday the 1st of February 2004, they tabled lies on me that I have written the names of youths of my village and given to the D.O. of Tubah that they should arrest them (sic). I have never communicated the D.O. with any of my villager for you to arrest during the unrest situation (sic)... There is lawlessness in the village and vandalism from the youths. This is aimed at killing me and my wives and children... I think for my 24 years of ruling I haven't been a thief or a bad person to the administration only to the Kedjom people (sic). Let them look for their new Fon who is good. So I am gone (Letter 3: 2004).

This letter in which the Fon informed the administration of his departure and the prospect of his resignation was confidential, written at a time of stress. But the letter could not be taken as a valid notice of resignation – as was popularly held by the Fon's detractors – because the appropriate forum for such a matter is the Kwifon, the Council of Kingmakers, and not the D.O. Furthermore, the letter was not intended for public consumption because of its political implications. This sensitive letter fell into the hands of a conspirator who photocopied it and circulated it within and without Kedjom Keku. The letter had the desired effect as ambitious aspirants to the throne quickly mobilised the members of the Kwifon. They immediately took note of the Fon's absence and proceeded to install an interim successor. This action was in bad taste and Fon Simon Vugah II attempted to return to Kedjom Keku to assume his throne before it was too late.

When the information about his impending return leaked, a band of Fumbuen women under the leadership of Mama Monica Munchine marched to the Fembvang River, which is the main entrance into the Fondom. Here she performed the deadly 'Kenlwu' traditional ritual which blocked the Fon from entering his Fondom. According to Susan Diduk (2004: 27-54), the Kenlwu ritual is a powerful mystical weapon in the hands of the women of the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon. The ritual is performed to curse, punish or banish those who have committed what in traditional terms is considered a treasonable act. By performing the Kenlwu ritual at the main

entrance of the Fondom of Kedjom Keku, the Fumbuen women had banished their Fon, thereby paving the way for the installation of a new political leadership.

### Conclusion

This paper on the Fumbuen Women's Association has attempted to address the problem of land management and crop destruction, which the women of the area believed concerned them as full members of the community. This association came into prominence in the 1990s with a clear agenda of seeking women's empowerment over land issues and of excluding the Fulani in the spirit of 'the politics of belonging'. The Fulani were seen as 'strangers' and 'dangerous land grabbers' with no real status in the community.

The right of women to be consulted over land use in their community is incontestable and in order. But their claim that the Fulani had no right over land in Kedjom Keku is untenable because Fulani are Cameroonian citizens and their presence in the community is economically beneficial. Traditional and customary law must recognise women's ownership of land and must also consider the rights of non-indigenes. Fon Vugah II was a simple victim of circumstances as he found himself divided between the interests of the women, and the law which recognises the fact that every citizen has the right to live in any part of the national territory without fear of harassment. In attempting to integrate the Fulani in his community in the spirit of national unity, the Fon incurred the anger of women who were manipulated to see in such an act a sell-off of ancestral land to 'strangers' – a treasonable act. The Fumbuen women therefore organised a protracted demonstration against their Fon which sent him packing. To crown it all, they effectively banished their Fon by performing the Kenlwu ritual which stopped him returning to Kedjom Keku, thus creating a vacancy in the Fondom. It can be seen that the women were directly responsible for removal of the Fon from power because of the conflicting agenda between the requirements of an ethnic and a national citizen and the perennial clash between grazers and women over crop destruction and trespass.

In the process of pursuing their agenda, the women created a new set of unforeseen problems. After over two years in exile, on 19 January 2006, Fon Vugah II

sneaked into his kingdom in an attempt to resume power. He was caught, tortured, beaten and burnt to death by irate villagers. The murder of the Fon was definitely not on the agenda of the Fumbuen women. They had no aspirations to occupy the throne of the Kedjom Keku royal house (*The Post* 31 January 2006). They had wished to right the wrongs suffered by marginal women who were exposed to trespass and crop destruction by the livestock of the Fulani. Men then stepped in and took advantage of the crisis, taking it to a high and an embarrassing level.

### Note

1. I have omitted the names of my interviewees because of the gruesome murder of Fon Simon Vugah II and the prevailing tension in the North West Province. Those interviewed included the Fumbuen Women's leadership and members, several pro- and anti-royal natives of Kedjom Keku, and the external elite.

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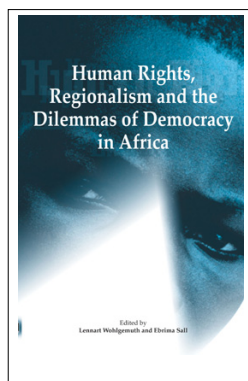
## Human Rights, Regionalism and Democracy in Africa

Edited by Lennart Wohlgemuth & Ebrima Sall

'This is a major contribution to ongoing efforts to raise awareness on the functioning of the African human rights machinery. With the recent election of 11 Judges to the African Court on Human and Peoples Rights, accessibility to the African human rights system is even more essential to ensuring respect and recognition of human rights for Africa and its people.' **Evelyn Ankumah**, Executive Director of African Legal Aid, Ghana.

'Wohlgemuth and Sall have put together a timely publication that presents admirably critical assessments of the role and relevance of the twenty-year old African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, its structure, mechanisms, resources and institutional autonomy, while locating the general discourse on human rights and democracy in Africa in its wider political and socio-economic contexts. These discussions will provide scholars, policymakers and practitioners with useful insights into the continuing challenges and opportunities for human rights promotion and protection in Africa.' **Tiyanjana Maluwa**, Pennsylvania State University Dickinson School of Law, USA

The issue of human right in Africa is as much about the dignity of Africans as it is about the responsibilities and commitments of others towards Africa. In this light the fight for human rights in Africa and the creation of the African Commission for Human and People's Rights are of utmost importance for making true this double aspiration. It discusses the achievements of the African Commission and suggests ways of strengthening and making the commission more efficient in advancing its goals and objectives. The volume points at the new institutional changes on the African scene with the African Union and its many new organs and the importance for the Commission to come to grips with this in the interest of relevance and hope for human dignity in African.



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