



## Feminist Activism, Economic *Carte Blanche*, Political Control, Symbol and Symbolism: A Historical Interpretation of the *Kelu* Women Revolution in Bu-Cameroon, 1957-59

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### Abstract

The centrality of women in the opposition of male domination and subjugation in colonial Africa was a fall out of decolonisation which quickened after World War II. Within this epoch, the Laimbwe women of Bu in North West Cameroon launched a virulent attack on men and their institutions. The intention was to achieve economic freedom and political control. An effective mechanism of operation, using traditional bodily symbols, was put in place and the result was a neutralisation of the overbearing and imposing influence of men and their institutions respectively.

**Key Words:** feminist, activism, symbolisation, symbolism, revolution, resistance, Laimbwe, Cameroon.

### Résumé

L'une des conséquences de la décolonisation qui s'est accélérée à la fin de la deuxième Guerre mondiale est la centralité des femmes dans l'opposition contre la domination et la subjugation par hommes en Afrique coloniale. Pendant cette période, les femmes Laimbwe de Bu fondom au nord-est du Cameroun avaient lancé une attaque virulente sur les institutions telles que le *Kuijfuai* dominées par les hommes. Leur intension était d'obtenir leur liberté économique et le contrôle politique sous l'administration coloniale. Un mécanisme efficace d'opération se basant sur les symboles physiques traditionnels était mis sur pied, résultant à une neutralisation de l'influence démesurée des hommes et de leurs institutions.

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## Introduction

The African continent during the colonial era witnessed the emergence of persistent pressures on rural communities for labour and natural resources to serve the needs of the expanding urban population as well as the expanding industrial complexes in Europe. This turn of events coincided, and in some cases, led to a firm resolve among women of different African countries to tackle poverty and disease, as well as participate in decision making in the new colonial dispensation. During this same epoch, urban women and children in some African countries were stressed up by the capitalist forces of their colonial power. Unable to bear this pressure *sine die*, some of these women mobilised and developed different stratagems to repel economic and political domination of the men folk in different colonial dependencies in sub-Saharan Africa, notably Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Cameroon (Ifeka-Moller 1975; Kanogo 1987; Kah 2011).

The pre-colonial situation in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa was generally different. It offered women opportunities to actively participate in the stages of production. Conversely, many of them were relegated to domestic chores during the colonial era because of a new economic superstructure that projected men to the limelight. Some women, who continued to engage themselves in economic activities, observed that these activities were systematically deformed and devalued. The Baule women of Ivory Coast, for example, played a prominent role in yam and cloth distribution and were engaged in intercropping cotton in the yam fields in the pre-colonial era. They also spun and dyed thread which was then woven and marketed by men far and wide.

The advent of colonial rule in Baule made male weavers to import thread instead of depending on female spinners for its supply. Cotton was also introduced into the economy and the new seeds and technology were controlled by men (Etienne 1997:44). It became clear that the interdependence of men and women in the cotton industry was a thing of the past. Men controlled most of the activities hitherto handled by women. The result was open confrontation between men and women, not only in the Ivory Coast but also in other parts of colonial Africa like Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon and Kenya.

This development in Baule community led to women's loss of land rights and control of the productive process. Many of them were turned into employees instead of employers of men in the cotton fields and some were completely rendered powerless and unemployed. This scenario was reinforced by the growing availability of manufactured cloth purchased with proceeds from cash crops sale. These cash crops which included cotton, cocoa and coffee were controlled by men (Etienne 1997:44).

Similarly, in Kumasi Ghana, several African women were wholesalers of imported cloth in the 1950s. The situation turned sour towards the end of the decade because of the adverse political conditions under the government of Kwame Nkrumah. When the price of imported textiles rose sharply in the 1960s and there was a shortage in foreign exchange and a decline in the cocoa trade, many women traders suffered (Garlick 1971:102). The colonial and early post- independence eras thus had a very devastating impact on women. Meanwhile in Zimbabwe, like in British Southern Cameroons, after the Land Resettlement Programme, only men were given land while women were taught to handle home economics, cookery, small scale craft and related projects (Jacobs 1984:48; Adams 2006). This programme was gender insensitive and women took it with a pinch of salt. In Zimbabwe and Zambia, party women's wings were founded only as adjuncts of the main parties in the pre-independence period (Tordoff 1997:103). These parties were largely controlled by men, with women playing secondary roles. The story in Yorubaland is an exception to the rule because women were fairly independent of their husbands (Onwuejeogwu 1992:24-5). They traded in goods without the intervention and subjugation of their male counterparts who were instead farmers.

On the contrary, women in many matrilineal societies like Bu in Menchum Division of North West Cameroon were rather economically and politically freer than those in patrilineal societies during the pre-colonial period. Although Bu was a matrilineal polity, women's politico-economic freedom during the colonial period was limited. They however retained rights over children, which are customarily not transferred during marriage within the Laimbwe ethnic group to which Bu belongs. Children are part and parcel of the mother's lineage. The locus of effective authority within this matrilineal society is usually not the father but the mother's brother or the child's maternal uncle. In such societies, the status of women in the domestic domain is usually higher. Based on this premise, the women of Bu were intent on attaining greater economic freedom and political leadership when they launched the *Kelu* revolution of 1957.

As the revolution unfolded, the women of (*Ehzele-ghalu*) *Kelu* reacted to their economic and political subjugation in coded or peculiar traditional symbols. The coded messages and language were directed to one another, to the men folk and leaders of the accompanying institutions, and to the church as an anti-traditional institution. This article interprets, from a historical point of view, the economic and political concerns of the *Ehzele-ghalu* resistance. It examines meaning into the bodily symbols that were part of this revolution in the evening years of British colonial administration in southern Cameroons.

### Relevant Frame of Analysis

The universality of the wrangle over women's contribution to historical phenomena has brought to the limelight several contending but relevant postulations. Early advocates of theories like De Beauvoir (1952) argue that women play second fiddle to men. The reason advanced is that women are constrained to reproducing and sustaining life more than anything else. In this way therefore, it becomes difficult for them to perform other functions at their optimum. This contention, otherwise known as cultural dualism, emphasises the dual action of men celebrating but also denigrating women by virtue of what they think these women can and cannot do. Another theorist who wrote a pioneering work on women and development is Ester Boserup. An exponent of the social evolutionary school, Boserup (1970) argues that women are often relegated to the backward sector of the economy and deprived of participating in community wide decisions by a patriarchal system.

For the defenders of the dependency school like Martha Mueller (1977), the urban and landed elite create opportunities for men in towns who abandon women to community life back home. Exponents of the developmentalist school led, by scholars like Inkeles and Smith (1974), point to the separate development opportunities for men and women. They also argue that when women are opportune to gain employment, the ironic "benefit" they receive is the exploitation of their services and talents by the employer. Other very contemporary theorists include March et al (1999) who highlight four frames of analysis with regards to gender. These include the Harvard Analytical Framework, the People-oriented Planning Framework, Moser and the Women Empowerment or Longwe frameworks. These frameworks notwithstanding, the early theories are still relevant to the gender experiences the Laimbwe women of Bu were faced with during the colonial period and explain why they were relegated to the background within the colonial dispensation. The recent frames are also important because they raise awareness as to the overall advancement of every member of the society.

Some scholars have also been concerned with the different meanings surrounding the body, sexuality and bodily practices. With regards to bodily practices, Connerton (1989:74) argues that in all cultures much of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body. Smith (1997:184-6) generally describes dress which is worn on the body as a people's shared views and experience on a complex set of items. He discusses what obtains among the Kuba, Turkana, Igbo and Frafra of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana respectively in this regard. These societies contextualise several issues pertaining to the body and the use of it. On his part, Roberts (1997:192) describes symbolism as that which evolves with

time and meaning too. He posits that symbols are used to express a people's dynamic worldview. These are indeed the basis of any ritual, religious, political or economic understanding which is however always subjected to debate, depending on different experiences.

Besides, symbols and meanings have also been examined by Davis, Bordo (1997:2), Frank (1993) and Crawford (1984:80) who argue that bodies are used for self expression so that people become who they would like to be. According to Davis (1997:7) and Bordo (1993) the female body is the object of processes of domination and control. It is also the site of women's subversive practices and struggles for self determination and empowerment. Meanwhile, Frank (1990:133) contends that the body is the 'only constant in a rapidly changing world and has remained the source of fundamental truths about who people are and how society is organised.'

It is true that the body has been subjected to different interpretations. The fact however remains that the Laimbwe women used their bodies, gesticulations and other symbols to protest against domination in the colonial period and to assert their own self determination and empowerment in economic and political matters. This could not have been achieved without recourse to certain 'deadly' bodily practices to frighten the men who had gained undue fame and prominence within the colonial system. The women argued that these privileged men needed to be brought under control so that they could regain their positions of freedom. That is exactly what happened in the *fondom* or chiefdom of Bu between 1957 and 1959 when, among other things, *Kelu* women justified the need for economic freedom.

### **The Rationale for Economic *Carte Blanche***

The *Ehzele-ghalu* used the *Kelu* revolution of 1957 to address burning economic issues that affected them. One of these issues was the implementation of new farming rules and regulations. The women were unswerving in their resolve to maintain the old form of slope-wise and not the newly introduced horizontal cultivation of crops. The insistence on the implementation of this method of crop cultivation was at the centre of the women revolution which was ignited from Njinikom-Kom and engulfed some areas of the Bamenda grassfields. Two years earlier, that is, in 1955, the Endeley government enacted a law on farming rules and regulations for British Southern Cameroons.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, the Wum Divisional Native Authority Council (WDNAC)<sup>2</sup> under the leadership of Chia Kiyam Bartholomew, a representative of the Kom Clan Council to the WDNAC, decided to implement this government policy to the letter.<sup>3</sup> According to the 1955 farming rules and regulations, slope wise crop cultivation was prohibited in favour of horizontal cropping or cultivation across contours.

The government presented arguments in support of the reform in farming regulations but the impact was disastrous in Bu village (Kah 2004, 2011). The government argued that slope wise cultivation led to erosion of the cultivated beds and destroyed crops. The end result was a poor harvest, hunger, strife and disease. Horizontal ridging was advantageous because running water and other nutrients were trapped within the furrows of cultivated crop beds for plant nourishment. This new farming method was strange to the women who stuck to the old method. They 'pitched their tents' with the opposition Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) against the ruling Kamerun National Congress (KNC) in Southern Cameroons. The traditional philosophy of providing food and meat to the child, *Wuai, Nyengui, Kesiazheh*,<sup>4</sup> (child, bush meat and food) which was a guiding philosophy of the people in their communion with nature was threatened by what they considered as the callous attitude of the leadership of the WDNAC.

Furthermore, the *Kelu* women (*Ehzele-ghalu*) were disenchanted with the government restrictions of farming within the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve which in 1923 covered a surface area of 13,440 acres.<sup>5</sup> The people were also prevented from exploiting God given resources there. Throughout the period from after the First World War, the colonial government demarcated farmland from the forest reserve with boundary stones. Anyone who ventured into the reserve for clandestine exploitation of its resources was rough handled by forest guards, some of whom were sons of Bu.<sup>6</sup> The revolt was also fuelled by Sylvester Foy, the Wum Native Authority Forest Guard who was in charge of the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve by 1958.<sup>7</sup>

The anger expressed by the Laimbwe women, the prime movers of agricultural productivity, boiled over in 1957. They questioned the restriction imposed on land which, in the pre-colonial days, was exploited freely by all and sundry. Besides, they wanted to redouble their farm sizes by extending their farms into the Kom-Wum Forest Reserve to keep pace with the increasing population. These women then joined forces with their counterparts of the kin village of Mbengkas (Eh, Mbeka) who took the lead in flouting boundary restrictions by removing the boundary stones. They were bent on resisting colonial exploitation with the last iota of their energy for economic freedom. Although some of their ring leaders like Njughekai, Esa-ah Fueh Induum, Kebwei Mbonghelesam, and Ngem Ibo-oh (from Mbengkas) and Kebwei Zei, Fuehlejheh, Musso Mbong, Futele Chou, Sangah Buh, Naiisi, and Ngwo Ndai (from Bu) (Kah 2004:32) were interrogated in the Wum court for disobeying authority,<sup>8</sup> it was clear that the women were on a journey of no return as far as their freedom to exploit natural resources in the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve was concerned.

In addition, they were unhappy with the fact that although men did little farm work, the decision on when the farming or harvesting season commenced came mostly from them. This decision in the past was based on consultations with the *Zhehfuai* or Queen Mother. She was the main person who defended women's interest in male clubs and associations. The major point of dissatisfaction to the *Ehzele-ghalu* was that women representation and influence was trifling, compared to men. They contended that as the majority, they deserved the right to freedom in decision making on matters related to farming and harvesting, without any recourse to men for approval. This explains why during the *Kelu* revolution of 1957 to 1959, women leaders gave instructions relating to crop cultivation without turning to men for approval.

The entire control of the economy would have gone to women had the initial force of the revolution not dissipated in 1959. After the three years of revolt, women began, but slowly, to play an instrumental role in many economic related matters in Bu. Rigid laws on farming and harvesting of crops emanating from men are issues of the past. Women largely control economic issues, especially those related to the rice economy (Kah 2011a; Kah forthcoming). The *Kuifuai* male regulatory society still, however, advises on farming related matters but does not dictate to women farmers. Many of the women are very conscious of their rights and duties to the extent that any interference is likely to lead to revolt.

The Laimbwe<sup>9</sup> women were discriminated against in the ownership of land and property during the colonial era although, today, the story is slightly different. The colonial enterprise regarded men as controllers of land. It was common practice that men cleared a virgin forest, divided the farm into a number of plots which were distributed to the wives, sisters, mothers, aunts and girl friends or concubines. The men owned the farms because ultimate power and/or decision on what to do with these farms rested on them.<sup>10</sup> In 1957, women seized the opportunity and attacked men for their egoistic and land grabbing tendencies. Tradition had placed men in this position but the *Kelu* revolution challenged this *status quo*. From 1957, women demanded to have the right to own land and the sylvan wealth therein.

The long run impact was that women came to own, not only land, but also houses of their own. Some widows and ex-wives are doing it alone and helping themselves and their children today in Bu village. Divorce is gradually complimenting concubinage, a product of family cleavages unleashed by the age-old chieftaincy row in the village (Kah 2008). This gradual change in the sociological environment is giving female headed households greater freedom in economic activities of their own.

Besides, men and women were engaged in different economic activities with unequal fortunes (see Table 1). Men generated income from animal trapping, hunting and timbering in the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve, fishing in the Rivers Muteh and Menchum and their tributaries, mat and bag weaving, blacksmithing, pig and goat rearing and palm oil production. Some of them cultivated upland rice which came in from Abakaliki Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> Some of the other activities, especially palm oil production, farming and rice cultivation, were overwhelmingly in the hands of female labour. In farming *exempli gratia*, apart from male participation in clearing the virgin bush, the difficult task of cultivation and harvesting was reserved for the womenfolk.

**Table 1:** Gender Division of Labour in Bu by 1957

Men's Activities	Women's Activities	Joint Activities
Trapping and hunting	Pottery	Farming
Mat and bag weaving	Basketry	Palm oil production
Lumbering	Palm kernel collection	Upland rice cultivation
Pig and goat rearing	Charcoal burning	
Blacksmithing		
Bricklaying		
Fishing		

**Source:** Compiled by Author from Field Interviews

From the table above, men did most of the income generating activities in the colonial era. Women were engaged in very few of these and could therefore not raise a substantial amount of money for the family. The story today is different because women are the main cultivators of rice which is the main cash crop in Bu. Most elderly men have retired from rice cultivation for coffee and animal rearing but these are, however, on a small scale. Even, weaving and lumbering which use to give them a substantial income are now on the decline because of other economically rewarding ventures out of the village like plantation labour in the South West Region of Cameroon and transportation of planks in the thick forests of the Littoral Region.

Meanwhile, in the farming activities, women gathered and burnt the trees and grass after the men had cleared the bush. They also tilled the soil with their hoes, planted food crops, did weeding of grass and harvesting of crops in due seasons.<sup>12</sup> Men usually gave them compensation for their toil and



sweat which was not considered commensurate to the services rendered. The *Kelu* uprising was then a struggle also for economic disentanglement. It was also an avenue for women to showcase how they were ingenious when it came to issues related to economic development. The fact that some men worshipped money made many women to think that they were slaves to these economic "hawks."

Contrary to the thinking of this category of men, women did a lot to provide for the basic needs of the entire family. Besides their active involvement in rice, maize, plantain, cocoyam, cassava and potato cultivation, women also collected palm kernels and nuts for sale in neighbouring Aghem. They also made refined pots with clay (Geary 1983:6) and baskets with material from bamboo.<sup>13</sup> In spite of all these, men seldom cooperated with women in farm matters because they were preoccupied with economic activities like hunting and fishing. Only very little of what women toiled for was sold for an income. This explains why at times they were not able to meet up with their basic needs. Some men worked for money but used it up in the consumption of the locally distilled *ka-ang* (corn beer) or beer on "country Sundays" or traditional resting days (*Utu-oh-Metsche*). The year 1957 provided a safety valve for accumulated grievances to be diffused. The *Kelu* women (*Ehzele-ghalu*) were determined to banish the men and this was indicative of the kind of torments they had quietly gone through during the colonial years.

Furthermore, long distance trade and the movement of young energetic people to the plantations of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) in the coastal region, soon after the Second World War, was sex selective. Only men moved with many of the long distance traders of palm kernels and mats to the Bafut, Abakwa (Abakpa), Bali, Mamfe, Kumba and Nkongsamba markets, stealing the show. Some of them stayed away for long periods depending on market conditions before returning home. Although some raised money which was used for marriage arrangements, others returned home worse off than the time they left.

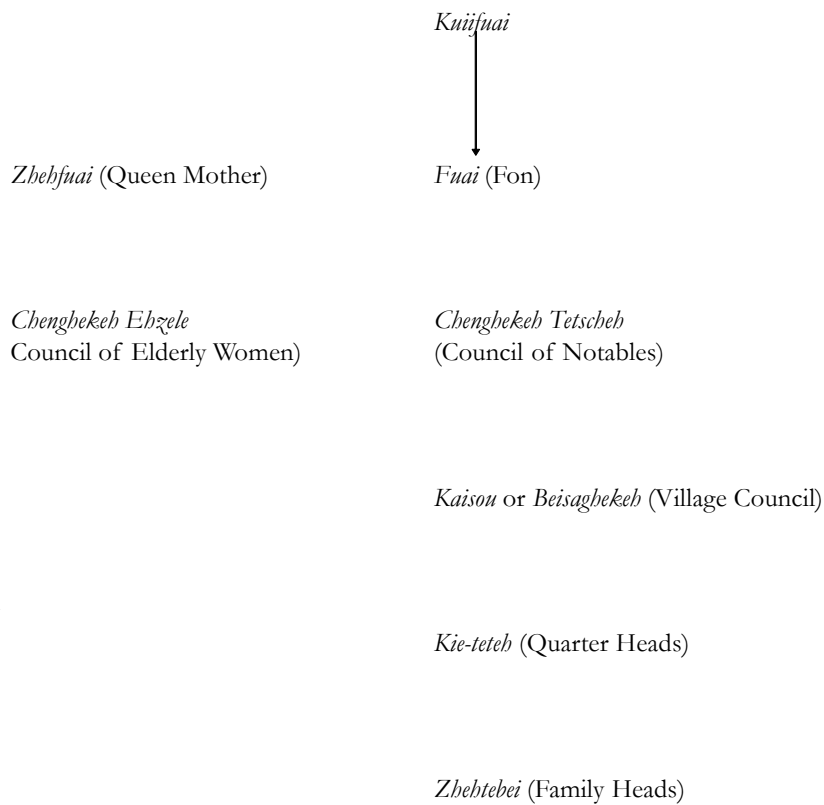
Among young men, it was also a common practice to seek a fortune in the colonial plantations. Since they were guided by the craving for hard currency, they did not go with their wives. While some were in the plantations, they got married to new wives to the disappointment and frustration of their former wives.<sup>14</sup> The 1957 uprising of the womenfolk was partly a result of women discontent with this category of men. Many women wanted plantation workers who were already married to migrate to these plantations with their wives. If this was not possible, it was incumbent on them to provide money for their wives who remained home for the upkeep of the children.

Meanwhile, during the *Kelu* uprising, the *Ehzele-ghalu* maintained the freedom to collect food items from men and women for their regular feasts and to support the women of Kom who were also in revolt.<sup>15</sup> Wombong in Njinikom, Kom was the seat of the *Kelu* movement resistance in the grassfields. The *Utootekpwei Wooteteh* or the quarter/ward leaders led the collection of different food items, notably maize, groundnuts, eggs and beans from the *Ehzele-ghalu* and sympathisers. Throughout this period, they were the only hens to crow so to speak. This freedom was complemented by the need to have political power that had eluded the women for a long time. Their activities had political undertones.

### **Political Undertones of the *Kelu* Revolution**

In the political realm in Laimbweland, women were only partially involved in the decision making process. This was due to male chauvinism, promoted by the structure put in place by the colonial administration. The signal for greater women involvement in leadership matters was ignited by the Mbengkas women who did not only assert their authority but went to Bu to meet their counterparts. Their leaders were received with pomp and pageantry by an enthusiastic crowd of women from the different quarters of Bu, notably Ngohtebah, Fuleh, Nyachu, Fundong and Etei-ngoh.<sup>16</sup> This year marked the beginning of women political leadership. The *Ehzele-ghalu* dictated the pace of events according to their whims and caprices. The table below shows the distribution of political power by 1957.

From the hierarchy of political power presented in Table 2, only the *Zhehfuai* was a noticeable and influential woman in a male dominated society. From *Kuiifuai* to the *Zhehtebei*, men were in control of the destiny of Bu. Women only indirectly influenced decisions and this depended on whether their husbands were in influential positions and willing to listen to them or not. They could also through the *Chenghekeh Ehzele* (Assembly of Women) put up a serious case for redress of a given situation or offence. Other avenues existed but there was a procedure to be followed before attaining a set objective.

**Table 2:** Power Distribution in Bu by 1957

**Source:** Compiled by Author from Field Research in August 2005

Besides, the *Kelu* women (*Ehzele-ghalu*) were determined to usurp the authority of the male regulatory society, *Kuiifuai*. In one instance in 1958, they buried Abuh Sangha, a member of the highest *Kuiifuai* lodge, the *Ikuum* and this made news.<sup>17</sup> His burial was repugnant to tradition and custom and thus loathsome. It was indeed the very first time in the history of Laimbwe that the influential men of *Kuiifuai* were rendered impotent by women. During this time, some men took to their heels only to return after the revolution had subsided. Throughout the revolution, women seized power and authority. For three years, women determined the destiny of the fendom. They were those who decided matters of war, peace and order in the fendom. The political destiny of Bu became the preserve of the *Ehzele-ghalu* who controlled the affairs of the fendom.

The Presbyterian Church, Bu, also came under a virulent attack from the *Ehzele-ghalu*. The institution was described as a new form of authority that spelt doom for the women regulatory society, the *Kefa'a* (Kah 2004). Although some women embraced Christianity to shake off the shackles of subjugation by men, the church's doctrine was in opposition to the customs and practices of the people. The catechists preached against polygamy and regulatory societies describing them as heathen.<sup>18</sup> The *Kelu* women therefore gunned for political power with which to suppress the church. The *Ehzele-ghalu* were of the contention that the church should not be allowed to continue its mission of converting Christians because this would negatively impact on traditional and vibrant women societies like the *Keseem*, *Ketem*, *Fumbweih* and *Kefa'a* to the point that they will dwindle into oblivion. With arrogant pride, dignity and interest therefore, the *Ehzele-ghalu* tried to maintain these societies, not only for the propagation of the culture of the Laimbwe but also for posterity. They sought after power to cripple the Presbyterian Church and what it represented.

Political power was also at the centre of the feminist activism in Bu, considering their support for the opposition KNDP in Southern Cameroons. Like their counterparts in Kom, the women gave support to the KNDP – praying that it should assume the mantle of leadership in southern Cameroons and support them in their quest for political leadership (Nkwi 2003). Although Bu village was the bastion of the ruling KNC, with men such as Rev. Thomas Ngong Amaazee, Daniel Atei Kungem and Andrew Ndo Muam (Kah 2003:111; Amaazee 2004:2) playing leading roles, the 'sleeping giant' in the women of Bu wanted an alternative leadership. They succeeded to hold on to leadership for three years. This awareness in a way contributed to the victory of the KNDP in the general elections of 1959 in Southern Cameroons.

In addition, the *Ehzele-ghalu* made public their intention of not only sidelining the traditional ruler and his Council of Elders but force Fon Chu Mbonghekan to abdicate the throne. The Fon was the subject of attack and ridicule in songs, speeches and ululations. He was considered a foreigner from Kung village in the Fungom Clan Area of Wum Division. This issue was also discussed by the Assistant District Officer (ADO) in the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> The *Ehzele-ghalu* also accused the fon of taking problems of his subject to the Aghem Native Court instead of settling them amicably at home. Some of these women were annoyed with the fon's attempt to subjugate Nyo'oh Wei Induum (Tita Fonjong) and Wangwo Wei Tam, respected notables of the village and of the Ehzem and Eselemei lineages respectively. These two notables wielded enormous power in the affairs of the fondom. Nyooch Wei Induum, for instance, was too influential in lineage and village politics to the extent that no major decision could be taken without him endorsing it. The

*Ehzele-ghalu* counted on the support of these two personalities whenever they encountered some difficulties. Following the detention of some of the women leaders in Bamenda in 1958 for example, Nyoooh Wei Induum was one of those who travelled to Bamenda to secure their release.<sup>20</sup>

The *Ehzele-ghalu* also extended the *Kelu* revolutionary spirit to their counterparts of neighbouring Befang and Aghem. While those of Befang quickly bought over the idea of a revolution, those of Aghem rejected it. Their resentment was fuelled by the fact that this sort of a revolt originated from Kom with whom they were arch-rivals in local politics in Wum Division. Around this period too, there was a subtle leadership feud between the politicians of Kom and those of Wum which impacted on the women of both areas.<sup>21</sup> As long as the Kom women were also in revolt like their Laimbwe counterparts, the Aghem women refused to embrace it because it would have meant stooping low to their counterparts of Kom. The Aghem women tried unsuccessfully to convince the *Ehzele-ghalu* of Bu to stop the revolt.<sup>22</sup> Although the *Ehzele-ghalu* did not succeed in winning over the Aghem women, they successfully pulled the Aguli (Kekuli) and Befang women towards them. The struggle for economic freedom and political control notwithstanding, the *Kelu* revolution was rich in symbol and meaning which were used to good effect.

### **Symbols and Symbolisation in *Kelu* Revolution**

In the course of the women uprising of 1957-59, they used different symbols to communicate serious messages to men regarding their actions. Among the symbols and symbolic actions were the wearing of specific regalia, dry banana leaves, creeping plants, shirts and trousers. Besides, humorists among them painted their faces with wood ash and charcoal and other women sang weird songs and blew whistles.

The use of symbols and other bodily practices as a weapon of attack was not limited to the *Kelu* women of Bu. This was very common among the Kom, Babanki, and Mankon women during the colonial and post-independence periods (Nkwi 2003:159; Diduk 2004:32-35). In Kom, the *Anlu* women used different symbols like dresses, body adornment and other instruments to wade off men from subjugating them. Meanwhile, in Babanki, the women were disguised in old clothing, intentionally mix bright and often gavis colours, necklaces of old bottle tops or wild seeds and whistles (Diduk 2004:32). Some of them were in dried grass tied knots (Diduk 2004:34). In the case of the *Takembeng* women marches of the 1990s, following the reintroduction of multiparty politics, one woman would move ahead of the others with a small pot that contained protective medicine. The others who accompanied them carried stalks of the *nkeng* plant (Diduk 2004:35).

In addition, bodily practices have been used all over Africa from time immemorial. Following the Igbo women riot of 1929 for instance, the women gathered in front of Native Administration centres, putting on short loincloths and all carrying sticks wreathed with palm fronds. They all had their faces smeared with charcoal or ashes and their heads bound with young ferns. All this paraphernalia which was not known to the British was a symbolism for outright confrontation with them. The stick they used was to invoke the power of the female ancestors (Acholonu 1995; Van Allen 1997:314). In other African societies, other bodily practices have been part of their cultural practice from ancient times. The Kuba and other related groups of the Democratic Republic of Congo use camwood mixed with palm oil on the skin to enhance their beauty and the Igbo women of Nigeria paint curvilinear designs called *Uli* on their faces and torsos to demonstrate how beautiful and important they are (Smith 1997:185).

Since symbols and other bodily practices (Roberts 1997:192) are the stuff of culture and constitute the worldview of a particular group, the *Kelu* women of Bu used them to threaten and address issues which they had not been able to address directly. These symbols can better be appreciated within the socio-cultural cosmological and aesthetic environment of the Laimbwe people of the North West Region of Cameroon. The kinds of old dresses worn in a frightening manner conveyed unspoken messages to the *Ehzele-ghalu* and sent a dangerous signal to opponents of the revolution, many of whom were men. Some of the revolutionary *Ehzele-ghalu* disguised into male masquerades to take on and invade the realm of maleness (Kah 2011). These disguised male masquerades included the *Kembaikoh*, *Kooh* and *Mubuh* of the *Kuiifuai* prestigious lodge and *Mukwasuuh*, *Fuhsooh* (*Phesooh*) and *Kekikum*.<sup>23</sup> These were masquerades of the major lineages of Ehzem, Ukwosuuh and Eselemei respectively. The aim of disguising first into masquerades of the *Kuiifuai* lodge was a challenge to this institution and the yearning for the status of equality between women regulatory societies of the *Kefa* and *Kuiifuai*. It was aimed at ridiculing men and also demystifying the myth that men always attributed to these masquerades and the *juju* society as a whole.

The various multicoloured dressing of the *Ehzele-ghalu* also carried with it a lot of meaning not easily discernible from onlookers. Many of these revolutionaries wore dry banana leaves, creeping plants while others gallantly put on shirts and trousers traditionally reserved for men.<sup>24</sup> The wearing of dry and not wet banana leaves was a form of mourning for the difficult economic situation in which the colonial environment had placed them. Creeping plants play an important role in the Laimbwe society. These plants are important because they are used in lineage and community shrines to

cleansing people of ailments especially at the heart of the dry season. Leaves of these plants are squeezed in water for people to drink and for bathing sick children. By wearing these creeping plants, the women pointed to the need for a cleansing ritual that would re-establish the Laimbwe society to what it used to be where there was respect for all gender.

Besides, when women disguised in plantain leaves, they hid in strategic areas to collect information from passers-by which was used to devise new strategies for the success of the 1957 to 1959 uprising. The leaves and plants also provided comfortable bedding for women during night patrols, feasts and long tedious treks to Mbengkas, Baisso and Njinikom to meet with the women leaders there. Meanwhile, the wearing of men's clothing was a way to provoke them into misdemeanour so that they could be punished. It was even more a symbol of the shift of authority and leadership from men to what was considered women-men. This power of the dress was also symbolised in the kind of attires notables wore as community power brokers.

The revolting women also had their faces smeared with charcoal and wood ash like their Aba riot counterparts of 1929 (Ifeka-Moller 1975; Van Allen 1997:34). The use of charcoal and wood ash was no accident. It was an intended, determined, serious and frightening attempt to declare "war" and bring about change in a fendom that had been structured by the colonial authorities in such a way that men stood to benefit while women suffered. The dark charcoal was rubbed on faces to indicate the level of disenchantment the women had for the existing order of things in Bu. This was a very serious way of passing across a message to men, indicating that things were going the wrong way. The women also used compounds of recalcitrant men as public toilets. They urinated and defecated there. The stubborn men were extradited or ostracised and some of them only returned after a cleansing rite had been performed by the village leadership.

To forestall any frustration of their activities, the *Ehzele-ghalu*, like their counterparts in *Takembeng*, threatened to expose their vaginas to public view. The *Takembeng* women had, following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, done this to scare the gun trotting police officers sent to maintain law and order in Bamenda, the regional headquarters of the North West. Kom women had within this same period threatened to expose their vaginas (Nkwi 2003; Kah 2012) on similar counts. The symbolisation in this threat of the vagina shows the central role of women in matters of procreation. Reverence for the vagina is reverence for the woman and her creator. A woman can lose all else but not her vagina which is representative of her entire womanhood. Women do not expose them carelessly and when this happens or threats are made to this effect, men take to their heels for they cannot abuse the part of the body that brought them to mother earth. In fact, in

contemporary Cameroon, the *Takembeng* women of Mankon, Bamenda, used the vagina as a weapon to lend support to the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party and dispel the gun trotting military men (Kah 2012).<sup>25</sup>

The importance of the vagina as representative of an entire womanhood and a dangerous curse to men was not limited to the Cameroonian scenario. Among the Mende of Sierra Leone where tradition and custom is formally practised, men cannot stand the site of a woman's intimate private part. In this society, should a man look on voyeuristically at women while they bathe and were naked, wrath was expected to strike him. If he found himself in such an awkward situation, he would publicly confess and submit himself to a ritual cleansing (MacCormack 1997:94). Although today there is the abuse of this important part of a woman's body by both women and men, many are those who still do not want to abuse it, because of its potential to strike a devastating blow on the culprit.

Besides, in the course of the *Kelu* revolution, the *Ehzele-ghalu* sang weird songs and the whistles were part of their daily preoccupations.<sup>26</sup> The messages in these songs and bodily gesticulations were telling of the relationship between the traditional institutions and women. In one of these songs, the women wished Fon Chu Mbonghekang of Bu dead or forced into exile (Kah 2004). Some of the songs were in praise of Augustine Ngom Jua, a prominent politician of the KNDP of that generation from Njinikom. He had used his party's position to support the bid of Njinikom women to overcome the overarching influence of the colonial administration. Some of the issues the women addressed in the songs included the love for one another, justice, fairness, equality and respect for women. Meanwhile, the whistle was a rallying instrument for members, and was used to sanction culprits and cure the sick.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, bamboos and sticks were used in the 1957 revolution. The bamboo was prestigiously handled by the *Tekpwei*, who were commanding leaders of a higher rank and the stick or the weep was for women leaders of a lower rank, otherwise called the *Basinji (Balinja)*. Unlike the Igbo women's sticks which were used to invoke the power of the female ancestors (Van Allen 1997:314), the bamboo among the Laimbwe was a symbol of authority and majesty which was used to incarcerate wayward people by the supreme commander, the *Tookete Kpwei*. The use of bamboos and sticks was also to instil order from among the ranks of the *Ehzele-ghalu* or the enemies of the women movement. In fact, the two symbolised power in unison which was also personified in a single sovereign, the *Zhehfuai* or Queen Mother.



## Conclusion

The 1957 *Kelu* women revolutionary movement in Bu was a veritable outpouring of venom by the womenfolk because of the need for greater economic freedom and political control. Prior to this year, the colonial enterprise had relegated women to the background as far as political and economic issues were concerned. They used these revolutionary years to transform hitherto held perceptions that did not favour them into notions of freedom and participation. The *Kelu* women (*Ehzele-ghalu*) were uncompromising in their attack of institution and structures that were a hindrance to their freedom.

When this women revolt began, men under-estimated its seriousness and not long afterwards, the revolution gathered momentum and became a serious threat to the stability of the fondom. The kinds of instruments and bodily gesticulations employed by the *Ehzele-ghalu* were mechanisms of success put in place. These symbols and bodily practices radiated messages that facilitated coordination of the revolution and frightened the "all powerful" male institutions into submission. No wonder that even the most powerful male elderly institution like *Kuifuai* crumbled like a pack of cards and only resurrected after the revolt. Even the sanctuary of God was shaken to its very roots. Although the heat of this revolution evaporated three years afterwards, the post *Kelu* society in Bu was never to be the same again. Women became freer to engage in any economically rewarding activity and decision making processes of the fondom without male scornful looks.

## Notes

1. This Southern Cameroons Agricultural Law of 1955 was captioned "A Law to Make Provision for Regulating the Planting and Growth of Agricultural Crops, for the Control of Plant, Diseases and Pests and for Matters Connected Therewith." This law was published in *Laws of the Southern Cameroons 1954, 1955 and 1956 Containing the Ordinances and Subsidiary Legislation of the Southern Cameroons*, National Archives Buea (NAB) Cameroon. Any individual who hindered or molested an Agricultural Officer or other person charged with implementing the law and who failed to furnish the required information was liable to either a fine of one hundred pounds or to six months imprisonment or both.
2. In actual fact, on July 21 1956, the Wum Divisional Authority Soil Conservation Rules were enacted to re-enforce the 1955 law. These rules contained eight main articles describing farm sizes, method of cultivation and restrictions to farmland. In article two for example, farms were to be divided by grass strips six feet wide across the slope on the line of the contour of the land into farming areas. In the fifth article, all cultivated ridges or beds in the farming areas were to be across the slope on the line of the contour of the land. The sixth article restricted farming within ten yards of any small stream, twenty yards of any large stream and thirty yards of any river bank. Those who contravened these rules were liable to a fine of up to ten pounds or two months imprisonment or both. These rules were approved and signed by J.O. field, Commissioner of the Cameroons on 13 August 1956 and went into operation on 1 October 1956. These

rules are contained in *Laws of the Southern Cameroons 1954, 1955 and 1956 containing the Ordinances and Subsidiary Legislation of the Southern Cameroons*, NAB.

3. Chia Kiyam Bartholomew, Njinikom, Personal Communications, 15 December 1997.
4. Within the Laimbwe community, the child is a precious pearl because he/she is an embodiment of the continuity of the lineage. The parents toil daily to provide food and meat to the child for a balanced intake. Women have a special attachment to this philosophy especially in matrilineally organised societies like Laimbwe.
5. File No. 772/22, Ad/14, Wum Assessment Report Bamenda Division 1923-1932, NAB.
6. Cleanboy Che and Peter Chengei, Bu, Personal Communication, 3 January 2003 and 15 May 2004. Cleanboy Che was a forest guard in the Kom/Wum forest Reserve for many years. Peter Chengei always accompanied him.
7. Letter from Sylvester Foy, N.A. Forest Guard in charge of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve, 3 November 1958; Letter from Sylvester Foy, N.A. Forest Guard in charge of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve, 4 December 1958; Letter from Sylvester Foy, N.A. Forest Guard in charge of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve, 11 December 1958.
8. Njughekai, Mbengkas, Personal Communications, 3 January 2004. Mami Njughekai was a principal women leader or kpwei (sing.) in Mbengkas second only to Mabah Isoo. She was interrogated in Wum and threatened to be imprisoned for her role in spearheading the removal of the boundary stones of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. Fueh Isi and Kaifetai were prominent Tekpwei (plu.) of the Kelu.
9. Laimbwe (also Laimbue) when literally translated means "I say". The use of it is in reference to the fondoms of Bu (in Menchum Division), Mbengkas and Baisoo (in Boyo Division). These fondoms speak a common language. Laimbwe is also used to distinguish these fondoms (excluding their many satellites) composed of over 14,000 inhabitants. Read Muam Andrew Ndo "A Lecture on the Laimbwe People and their Culture: Traditional Way of Solving Conflict." If a census is conducted today the figure will certainly be higher. Estimates for Bu alone put the figure at over 10,000 inhabitants.
10. There was recently a protracted court case between Vilian Neme Sih and Andreas Kom nephew to Soppo Ndong, father of Neme Sih. Although the administration was backing her, it took a single action by the children of Andreas Kom to flush out Neme Sih from the land.
11. File No. Ci (1954) 1, December Report Wum Division, NAB.
12. Many informants (men and women) maintained that women played an important role in farming.
13. Salome Kaifetai and Fueh Isi, Bu, Personal Communications, 31 December 2002 and 7 January 2003.
14. Zacheus Zam, Limbe, Personal Communication, 9 September 2002. Zacheus Zam who is of late was a traditional medi-practitioner who left Bu for the coastal plantations in 1949.
15. Many of the women remembered with nostalgia how wonderful these occasions were.
16. Kule, Njuh, Bu, Personal Communication, 6 January 2003. She was one of those who witnessed the preparation and the coming of the *Kelu*.
17. This act frightened men and rendered them completely powerless in the face of the *Kelu* women.
18. The Rev. Pastors I spoke to confirmed this and said that the women even threatened them into abandoning the faith.

19. File No. 1b/1949/2, Petition by Bu Quarter Head and others, NAB.
20. Ngoisei, Fueh Isi and Lembwe Wei, Bu, Personal Communication, 7 January 2003.
21. When Augustine Ngom Jua pulled the population of Kom towards the KNDP, Jeremiah did same for the KNC as far as Wum was concerned. His party was in government at the time.
22. Salome Kaifetai and Fueh Isi, Bu, Personal Communications, 7 January 2003.
23. Anna Chou Wei and Ngoisei, Bu, Personal Communications, 2 and 7 January 2003. Anna Chou Wei is still a very active and a humorous woman.
24. Most interviewees shared this view.
25. This author was an eye witness to this when he was a student in Longla Comprehensive College in Bamenda at the re-launch of multiparty politics in Cameroon.
26. Many of these women sang and explained the songs with pride, ecstasy and above all nostalgia.
27. Vida Wei Chou, Bu, Personal Communications, 6 January 2003. Wei Chou vividly described a scene when the *Ehzele-ghalu* gathered in the house of her mother, Chou Ebei Kule, and blew whistles to end her headache. Soon afterwards, she got relieved of the pains.

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