

Etwi, Ntul, Nkwifoyn and Foyn: Sites, Objects and Human Beings in Conflict Resolution in Precolonial Kom (Cameroon)

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Abstract. *Literature on conflict resolution the world over is replete. But literature on sites and instruments dealing with conflict resolution in Africa is largely inadequate and completely scarce in Cameroon historiography. The present paper attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the importance and role of sites and human beings in resolving conflicts in pre-colonial Kom of the Northwest Cameroon, popularly known in colonial historiography as Bamenda Grassfields. The article confronts these sites and instruments, using mostly archival data and interviews with those who were involved in the activities, to prove that pre-colonial Africa had a well defined mechanism for resolving conflict long before European colonialism set foot on the continent. The article takes Kom as a case study.*

Keywords: *Africa, Cameroon, Kom, Etwi, Ntul, Nkwifoyn, Foyn, Bamenda, Bamenda Grassfields.*

Introduction

Etwi, Ntul, Nkwifoyn and Foyn are all found in local diction, *itangikom*. In the pre-colonial Kom these sites, objects, and humans were used in the arbitration, mediation, conciliation and reconciliation of conflicts at a micro and macro level. These sites and objects, as well as humans, constituted punctilious sites as well. Through them, the societal peace and tranquility was maintained. Therefore, conflict resolution received an important place in society also as a result of the ingenuity of the indigenous people. This article is about appreciating the role and importance of these sites, objects, and humans in conflict resolution in pre-colonial Africa – paying close attention to

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Kom of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Of crucial importance and more relevance to the article is the fact that these sites, objects, and humans implicitly played a quasi-religious role in conflict resolution.

The history of pre-colonial Africa has come of age and reflects a plethora of scholars and literature as well. Yet it could be observed that most of this pre-colonial literature was written through euro-centric binoculars. The dearly held belief of the Victorian age was that since nothing existed in Africa in a written form, there was therefore no history. In that philosophy, the conquerors largely ignored the indigenous mechanisms that were used to resolve conflict, although at the same time many of the colonial administrators recorded the pre-colonial systems in assessment and intelligence reports. This article upholds the approach that "the study of a people's history usually begins with the writings of its historians" (Collins, 1996:xi). The challenge therefore rests on the shoulders of local historians fundamentally, because the Eurocentric writers could never have grasped the internal dynamics better than the local historians. Following that reasoning and writing in 1990, the celebrated African oral historian, Jan Vansina stated, *inter alia*:

Imagine that Caesar arrived in Gaul and landed in Britain in 1880, a mere century ago and that your known history began then. You were not a Roman, your language was Latin, and most of your cherished customs had no historical justification. Your cultural identity was amputated from its past. Would you not feel somewhat incomplete, somewhat mutilated? Would you not wonder, what your cultural heritage was before Caesar?....It is no consolation to be told by others that because there are no written sources, no past can be recovered, as if living traces of that past were not part and parcel of daily life (Vansina, 1990:xi).

This article builds on indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that were in place long before the Europeans set foot on the continent. This is much more justified because strikingly enough the role of sites and objects which were used in the pre-colonial period to resolve conflicts is largely missing from the literature.

Arguably, conflict is a feature of all human societies, poor or rich; developed or underdeveloped. Consequently, no human group or community exists without the logical dialectical opposition of friend-enemy either among its members or between it and others. Human groups exist with definite objectives which may be realized with or without the assistance of others. Whoever puts into jeopardy the concrete realization of the common objectives or the achievement of the *bonum commune* creates a situation of conflict and becomes the enemy or a less friendly partner (Nkwi, 1987: 64). The African continent has witnessed conflicts of various kinds. These conflicts are as varied as its causes and the ways these conflicts are managed are also as diverse as the mechanisms which have been put in place to resolve them. One of the ways in which conflict management is handled in the Bamenda Grassfields, which I intend to

tackle throughout this paper, is represented by the indigenous institutions and how they have withstood the changing world, although with some modifications. The traditional methods of conflict management have already taken roots in some parts of Africa and researchers have not failed in their duties to take note. Mwanjiru (2001) maintains that:

“One of the distinguishing features of Africa's political landscape is its many dysfunctional and protracted social and political conflicts. This problem is made worse by lack of effective mechanisms to manage these conflicts. Where they exist, they are weak and, thus, social and political relationships on the continent have been disrupted. This has had negative consequences, including the interruption of the development and the diversion of scarce resources for the management of these conflicts.”

Furthermore, the importance of traditional institutions in conflict resolution was echoed in 1999 when an international conference was held in Ethiopia. We cannot even attempt to view all the papers which were presented, but it is imperative to take one or two papers which were presented in that conference and which have had a direct relevance to this paper. Ofuho (1999), in his paper to the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, which was held from the 8-12th of November 1999 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, brings to light the experiences of grass root peace-making efforts among the communities of the Kidepo Valley of Eastern Equatoria. Kidepo is a big forest that starts from Karenga Hills in the north-east of the border with Uganda and extends deep into South Sudan. The people living along both sides of the valley regard Kidepo as a major asset in terms of both water and grazing resources, particularly during the dry season. It is worth pointing out that communities of the region under study have lived in hostility and co-existence for years and their conflicts have just recently picked up intolerable proportions due to the proliferation of modern weapons. The common source of conflict in the Kidepo Valley is cattle rustling. Cattle herds are the main source of income. Cattle can be sold in exchange for other commodities. A cow is like a modern account in the bank. A cow is payable as dowry in marriage negotiations or used in exchange for grain during hunger situations.

Cattle are used as a source of milk and beef, and cow dung mixed with mud is used for mud-slinging the walls of the huts for shelter. Cattle are a highly regarded asset and each community believes that all the cattle of the world belong to them by divine right. They also claim that each of them is bestowed with the divine right to retrieve by stealth or armed force all cattle that neighbors possess or which each ethnic group might claim to be their own. In the Kidepo Valley, cattle rustling are mainly carried out by a group of men widely known as *mojirimoit*. It is only after a group of *mojirimoit* from neighboring communities raided another community's cattle that responses to such incidences have led to conflict. Initially, all people who own cattle in the region used ordinary spears and arrows for protection of their cattle against rustlers. With the proliferation of light arms, such methods of defense have now been overtaken, and almost all cattle owners

have now acquired deadly automatic rifles. The Karamoja and Dodos of Uganda have been prominent notorious cattle rustlers even across borders into Kenya and South Sudan. These communities have often raided each other's cattle but often resolved their disputes at the community level without much government or NGO involvement. Thus traditional approaches to reconciliation and conflict resolution existed among these communities from times immemorial. Since the beginning of life in Kidepo Valley, there have been as many attempts and practices of peace-making as there have been wars over resources in the region. Each member group of the communities often began their attempts of peace-making by first identifying the root causes of the problem. Most of the problems occurred due to revenge for death previously committed over cattle rustling or during fighting over grazing and water resource areas in the Kidepo Valley. Once the problems are identified, communities convene meetings that may last two to three days in isolation in some forest where they deliberated over them and resolved them. But for such meetings to bear fruit, the role of what may be called opinion leaders and council of elders is crucial. These elders have gained their authoritative influence through wisdom and experience. What must also be keenly noted by conventional mechanisms is the salience of traditional practices such as the use of rituals, symbols and interpretation of myths to bring conflicts to an end. These include the identification of a particular type of cattle and/or goat that must be sacrificed to the evils of conflict from society. Another effective way of grass-root peacemaking in this valley is the use of curses by elders to deter the young *mojirimots* from continuous raids. The curse of elders is believed to lead to mysterious death. The words of elders are bitter and those who have caused troubles often vanish from society. Ofuho in his paper exposes factual stories about conflict, highlights the use of symbols and interpretation of myths to resolve them. All these represent practices of peacemaking, now fashionably termed "grass-root peacemaking" that have for years been used to contain cattle rustling in this region.

Lanek (1999) presented a paper he called: "Mato Oput", the drinking of Bitter Herb" in the same conference as Ofuho. His paper tackled integrating indigenous approaches with national and international mechanisms for conflict resolution and reconciliation. He also contrasted the indigenous approaches, especially the Acholi approach, to the western legal ones. Western legal approach emphasizes establishing guilt and executing retribution and punishment without reference to the victim or the wider families or future reincorporation of the offender into the community. Physical and material penalties and use of force, including costly prisons, provide the sanctions against offending. Western legal approaches are adversarial and evidence must be direct and specific. The process, according to Lanek, effectively encourages the accused to deny responsibility while the Acholi method of peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation are co-operative and can be indirect and circumstantial which does effectively encourage the accused to admit responsibility. He tells that the Acholi, a Luo speaking group occupying northern Uganda, for generations has used Mato Oput as a means of reconciliation within the

context of their tradition. The Acholi believe in leadership through consensus, allowing everyone in their localized clans to have a voice while the traditional head of each clan rules by consent. A major function of the traditional chiefs is to act as arbitrators and reconcilers when disputes occur in order to restore peace and maintain harmonious relations between families and clans. The reconciliation process he describes is called the "Mato Oput" process (Mato Oput - an Acholi vernacular meaning drinking the herb of the Oput tree)

Isike and Uzodike (2011), in their paper "Towards an indigenous model of Conflict resolution: Re-inventing women's roles as traditional peace-builders in neo-colonial Africa" shows how women played a significant role in pre-colonial Africa to resolve conflicts. Boege (2006) critically assessed both potentials and limits of traditional approaches to conflict transformation in the context of contemporary violent conflicts in the Africa. He has also analyzed the strengths and weakness of traditional approaches, which are formulated within the conventional framework of conflict transformation. Afisi (2009) attributes the problems of violent conflicts in Africa today to situations deeply rooted in exploitation and colonial domination of Africa. Cocodia (2008: 9-27), using the case of five African countries (Uganda, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Bostwana and Tanzania) shows how conflicts in Africa could be re-dressed through a radical re-thinking of ethnicity and change of mindsets. Although the above works are not comprehensive enough, they are indicators showing that there is ongoing work on conflict resolution in Africa, their weak points notwithstanding.

Readings in the ramifications of colonialism on Africa suggests that its impact was complete. It also suggests that the lifestyle of Africans was radically altered to suit the colonial agenda. While that was partially true in certain situations, it did not completely hold for all of Africa. The traditional institutions of Cameroon appeared to have 'weathered the storm'. In other words, despite the onslaught of colonialism with its entire itinerary on the continent, these institutions have tenaciously remained the custodians in the traditional conflict management and maintenance of law and order.

In what follows, the article will pursue with detailing the Kom situation, which is the area of study. This will clarify to the reader its location, its social and political history, and how this has played a role in conflict resolution. The second part of the article takes a look at the sites (*Etwi, Ntul*), while the third part examines the human aspect of conflict resolution (*Nkwifoyn and Foyyn*). The fourth part is the conclusion.

Case study: The Kom Foyndom

The Foyndom of Kom is located in the Bamenda Grassfields in the present-day Northwest Region of Cameroon. It is the second largest Foyndom, after Nso, in the Grassfields (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967: 33).

Map .1: The position of Kom in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon



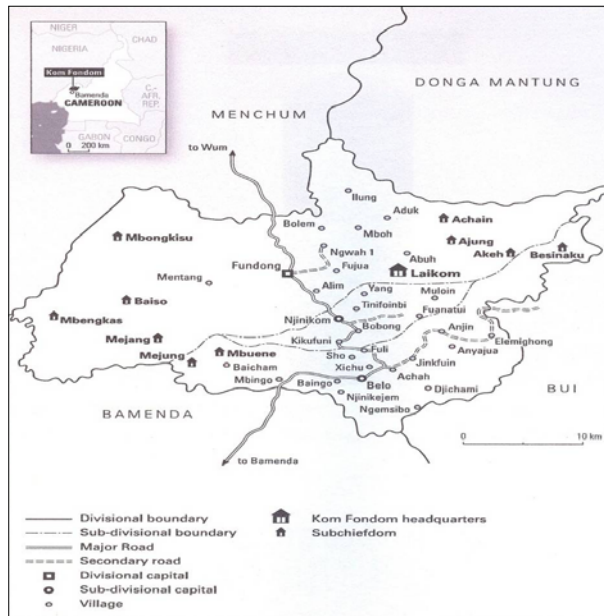
SOURCE: Aaron S. Neba, 1987, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon*, 2nd ed. (Bamenda: Neba Publishers), 15.

Kom shares its eastern boundary with the kingdoms of Oku and Nso, and the southern frontier with Kedjom Keku or Big Babanki and Ndop plain. Bafut is on the western border, while to the north are Bum and Mmen.

Politics in the Bamenda Grassfields is dominated and organised around the Foyndoms ruled by Foyns. These Foyndoms, in general, grew out of conquest and the politics of inclusion and exclusion through warfare, which led to the subjection of weaker neighbors. They were dominated by political and social hierarchies based on kinship/kingship and lineages, on social and political status. Most studies have focused on the Foyndoms and on the establishment of political hegemony through social organisations (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967; Rowlands, 1979; Dillon, 1990).

Kom Foyndom is believed to have been founded about the mid-19th century. It includes sub-chiefdoms which were incorporated into Kom proper as 'vassal states' by Foyn Yuh (c.1865-1912), the seventh ruler of Kom. These tributary chiefdoms included Achain, Ake, Ajung, Mbesinaku, Mbueni, Baiso, Baicham, Mejang, Mbengkas, and Mejung (Chilver, 1981: 457; Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 65-68).

Map 2: Kom Foyndom, with its villages and sub-chiefdoms



SOURCE: Chilver and Kaberry, 1967, 'The Kingdom of Kom in West Cameroon' p. 126.

This study is concerned with Kom proper or central Kom, although reference will be occasionally made to the tributary chiefdoms that constitute the greater Foyndom. According to their oral traditions, the ancestors of the Kom migrated from Ndobu in North Cameroon with other Tikar groups, to Babessi where they settled temporarily. A popular legend recounts their movement from Babessi to their present settlement. It states that while Kom people were at Babessi, their presence was seen as threatening. The King of Babessi therefore devised a trick to eliminate them.

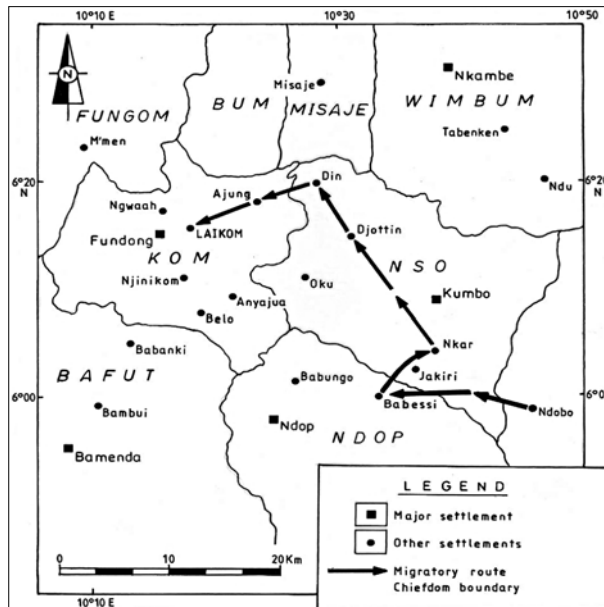
One day the king of Babessi told the Foynd of Kom that some of their people were becoming obstinate and might cause a war between the two groups. He therefore proposed that they should each build a house in which the trouble makers would be burnt. The Foynd of Kom, Muni, agreed to the plan and the houses were constructed accordingly. But while the king of Babessi built his house with two doors, the naive Muni built his own house according to what was agreed, with only one door. After locking the front doors, the houses were set ablaze. The Babessi people escaped through the second door while Kom people were burnt to death. This trick reduced the size of the Kom population in Babessi and made the Foynd of Kom very angry.

Oral tradition further states that in his anger and frustration, Muni promised his remaining wives and sisters that he would avenge the death of his people. He told them that he would hang himself on a tree in a nearby forest and on that spot a lake would

emerge and all the maggots from his decomposing body would turn into fish there. The lake was discovered by a Babessi hunter and immediately reported to the palace. A royal fishing expedition was organised. At the peak of the fishing the lake 'somersaulted' or turned upside down and all the Babessi people present drowned. Following Muni's instructions, a python's track, believed to be the incarnated Foyn, led Kom people from Babessi to Nkar and Idien in the present day Bui Division of Northwest Province.

At Idien they settled near a stream beside a raffia bush. There, the Queen Mother, Tih, bore a son who was to be the next king. That son was called Jingjua, meaning 'suffering'. She also gave birth to Nange Tih, future mother of the *Ikui* clan, Nakhinti Tih, future mother of *Itinalah* and Ndzitewa Tih, future mother of the *Achaff* clan¹. Once the python trail reappeared, Kom people left Idien for Ajung where the python's trail disappeared again. At Ajung, the Foyn of Ajung married Nangeh Tih and bore Jinabo, Nangebo, Nyanga and Bi. After a while the python's track reappeared and Kom people left again for Laikom.² From Idien, the trekkers moved through the Ijim forest to Laikom where the python disappeared. Map 2:3 shows the migratory routes.

Map 3: Migratory routes of Kom people to their present site.



SOURCE: Compiled by the author from oral sources.

- 1 The *Ikwi*, *Itinalah* and *Achaff* are seen as the founding clans of Kom because the three people who arrived in Laikom occupied three geographical cardinal points.
- 2 Interview with his Royal Highness, Foyn Vincent Yuh of Kom Foyndom, Laikom, Kom 14 June 2008.

As far as the literature of this area is concerned, Kom has over the years been subjected to studies of various and multifarious themes, which include sociology, anthropology, history, linguistics, to name but a few (see Nkwi, 1976, 1987 with Warnier, 1982; Dillon, 1973, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1985 and 1990; Chilver, 1961, 1963, 1965a, 1965b, 1981, and Kaberry, 1962 and 1968, Engard, 1986, Geary, 1979, Kaberry, 1952 and 1962; and Chilver, 1961; Kopytoff, 1981; O'Neil, 1987; Rowlands, 1979; Warnier, 1975, 1979, 1983, 1983, 1985 and Fowler, 1979). It will be surprising to note that despite this voluminous literature, scholars have not paid enough attention to traditional institutions and the management of conflict in a historical perspective. This paper therefore hopes to contribute to the plethora of literature which already exists in this sub region.

Methodology employed

This paper employs two methods- the use of archives and oral traditions. The National archives of Cameroon situated in Buea, and Bamenda were gleaned. In these archives, files on assessment and intelligence reports were mostly used. The history of Kom was first written in ethnographic mimeographs by the first colonial anthropologists. They were employed to do so by the colonial regimes so that the people could be easily understood, pacified, and governed. Some of these reports were grossly inadequate, some were misleading and yet others were described and understood in colonial language as 'primitive societies', 'natives', 'tribes', 'acephalous societies' or 'stateless societies'. The Assessment, Intelligence and Annual Reports of various administrative divisions were submitted by Divisional Officers (DOs) to the office of the League of Nations and United Nations on the Bamenda Grassfields. There is no doubt that these colonial administrators were faced with some insurmountable methodological and psychological problems in the collection of the traditions, but on the whole their recorded accounts remain one of the most useful bases for further investigations and analysis.

The Pre-colonial Kom society was made up of non-literate peoples – in the western sense, and as a consequence, the source for this article is largely Oral Tradition-information received from various peoples at different times about their histories. Thus, Oral Traditions encapsulated in interviews were very crucial to the writing of the article, and those interviewed were the people who were implicated in the conflict resolution. For the sake of convenience, one can distinguish between two broad categories: firstly, recordings of Oral Traditions or testimonials of people who were contemporary to the events they described and, secondly, recordings from those who only heard the accounts as handed from one generation to the next. The views of these individual and combined informants all joined to give this article its present shape.

Sites and Objects: *Etwi, Ntul*,

According to the Kom oral traditions, *Etwi* constitutes one of the oldest sites in Kom where conflicts were resolved. It was situated at Laikom, the capital of Kom. These oral traditions were supplemented by archival material. Writing in 1926, the District Officer for Bamenda Province, G.V. Evans, amongst other things stated that,

On passing through the porch at Laikom (sic) leading to the chief's compound, a circle of stones will be observed, which is the original site of the old original court of justice, and is still used to this day. It is known as the *etwi* in Bikom language. The stones, which are set up on the edge, were very much taller in the old days and must have been quarried and fashioned to fit so neatly, though crudely, as they do to form a circle. (File Ad (1926) 4, Bamenda Division: Kom Assessment Report on the Kom (Bikom) Clan of the Bamenda Division, Cameroon Province by G.V. Evans, District Officer, National Archives, Buea).

True to the description of Evans, the below photograph was taken by the author and it best describes the physical location of the site. The colonial processes led to a radicalization of the sacrosanct feeling given to the *etwi*. As it could be observed from the picture people of the palace uses it now as drying lines to dry their clothes. However, the above quotation of Evans also takes note of the nature of stones and labour that was involved in the construction.



Etwi court at Laikom photograph by the author

At *etwi*, the Foyin and some of the elders of the Kom land sat judging cases. If the person was found guilty, their cap will be rubbed with wood-ash. Wood ash symbolizes nothingness in Kom tradition. This meant that the person had no meaning amongst his/her peers in Kom. There were many and varied penalties, as well. The penalty for

murder was death and the servant of the *nkwi*foyn would be the executioner. Theft was punished by the offender giving back five goats, or paying the value of the goats stolen, or probably receiving some flogging. If food was stolen from the farm and the thief was found guilty, then at *etwi* his or her hand was cut off. The worst crime was to commit adultery with the Foyin's wife. It was considered a heinous crime especially if the two were caught 'flagrante delicto'; both were executed. But if there were doubts about it, they were given sasswood poison. *Etwi* was the highest court in the land. (Interview with Bartholomew Nkwain, Kom, 27 December 2011)

Ntul According to Mintoh, one of the oldest people who were members of *ntul*, *ntul* was a shrine square in form, seven feet by seven. Unlike *etwi*, which was made of stones, it was constructed of bamboos and thatched with grass and not mudded like other houses. Except for the Foyin, all members sat on stones laid around the shrines. Its membership was all male and all clans were free to join and the act of admission was known as *su gvuf ntul* (to drag *ntul*)

The *ntul* shrine, so to say, was a centre of reconciliation, mediation and appeasement which offered a forum for arbitration. If a person threatened the life of his neighbor or wounded him with a spear or cutlass the two were brought to the *ntul* shrine. The first attempt here was reconciliation and the moral and legal sanctions were imposed as well. If one of the litigants was wounded, the wounds were treated with medicine procured from the *ntul* lodge.

In the 19th century, Kom experienced many wars of expansion like most West African Foyndoms (Chilver and Kaberry, 1967). During such wars, the Foyin was charged with the duty of offering sacrifices at the *ntul* shrine. This was in order to avert any misfortune that might follow in the course of the war. If there were too many accidental deaths in the foyndom or when the foyndom was hit by a disaster, plague or famine, the foyin again had to enter the *ntul* shrine and offer sacrifices. Members of the *ntul* shrine had to assist the foyin in maintaining calm in the foyndom. If people were found committing crimes like uprooting crops without any reasonable justification – which of course did not exist, or cutting down trees forbidden by law, were usually fined with what was called *bzi-ntul* (the *ntul* goat). The members of the village *nggvin*, a *ntul* parallel, had similar duties. (Interview with Isaiah Chialoh, Fundong, Kom, 30 June 2012)

Apart from the foyin performing rites during warfare, when the wars came to an end, reconciliation was often sought by burying the *mukain* gun powder at an agreed place, which was like a buffer zone. *Mukain* has an ambiguous meaning within Kom cosmology. It meant both a pact and gun powder. To say that somebody had eaten *mukain* was to affirm that he had entered into alliance of friendship or marriage or perhaps a person's total integration into another's clan (Nkwi, 1974). Its medicines, when eaten, produced a forgetting and forgiving effect. It had the sole objective of uniting persons for a common

cause. When the priests appointed by the Foyin carried out the rites of *mukain*, they all spent the whole night at *ndo mukain* (the house of allinace) which was found to the left side of the entrance into the women's quarter of the palace. Of more relevance to conflict resolution, *mukain* symbolized reconciliation at its best.

Individuals in conflict resolution: *nkwi*foyn and the *Foyin*

If *etwi* and *ntul* played the sacred roles in conflict resolution as objects, then *nkwi*foyn and *foyn* played more a complimentary role as individuals and above all as humans. They were complimentary because it appeared that one was a handmade from the other, so to say. For a better understanding, we will treat the two separately, taking note of differences and similarities.

Nkwifoyn

The meaning and derivation of the name *nkwi*foyn is said to be *nkwi*, power and *foyn* – chief, which simply meant the power of the Foyin. In the area where Kom is found (Bamenda Grassfields), it came to have various dialectical variations. In Nso it was *ngwerong*; Bafut, *kwifo*; Bamunka, *ngwose*; Bali, *nggumba*; When a new *foyn* was selected his appointment was subject to the approval of the *nkwi*foyn society. The *nkwi*foyn was what we could call in modern political science jargon as the executive body of the traditional government, long before modern bodies of government were introduced by the western powers to Africa. It provided the Foyin with a police force, emissaries or envoys, and economists for the royal household. In short, it was in charge of the proper functioning of the *foyn*'s administrative machinery. It was also the instrument of the Foyin's secular authority and short of his personal intervention, there was no appeal against its decisions (File Ia (1926) 1 *Nkwifoyn* Society, National Archives, Buea). According to most sources who were contacted during fieldwork, it appears that they recognised the fact that it was their government. "It is *nkwi*foyn that rules Kom. It is our government", they asserted with confidence and emphasis. As the highest executive body of traditional government, it also played no small role in the judicial system and arbitration but not without the caution of the Foyin .

The role of the *nkwi*foyn in conflict in a traditional conflict resolution was noticed much more clearly in arbitration, reconciliation and judicial matters over land issues and witchcraft. Matters of nature were referred to it once there were signs of deadlock in the *etwi* and the *ntul*. Within the ranks of the *nkwi*foyn, if there was a deadlock, then a ban was issued, often known as *a-lang-a nkwi*foyn (The ban of the *nkwi*foyn). In cases of witchcraft, those who were found practicing it in the land were banished by *nkwi*foyn by simply placing a bamboo at their doorsteps. However, no matter how serious the case was, the *nkwi*foyn always acted in accordance with the *Foyin*, who was the alpha and omega of all the *foyndom*.

The Foyin

From the foregoing discussion, much has already been said about the Foyin and the role he played in conflict resolution implicitly. While not trying to repeat the information here, it is important to see the religious position of the Foyin in order to appreciate why he had to play the function which he played in the sites of conflict resolution. The *Foyin*, who is the paramount ruler of the Foyndom, played an instrumental role in the resolution of conflicts. Widely known in the colonial reports as *chief* and *foyn*, he played the role of the chief priest and custodian of all the land. In order to better appreciate the role of the *Foyin*, the throne occupation rites are quite relevant to us.

The *Foyin* was installed in by the ntul lodge, which was a shrine that symbolized the kom state, because, according to Kom oral traditions, it was the first hut which was constructed at Laikom. On the following day after the passing away of the predecessor, following the mourning and burial, people assembled in front of the lodge. The possible heir appeared and the king anointers followed and went round the crowd peering at everyone three times, and at the third time they grasped the arm of the possible heir and put him prostrate on a stone. 'He was then slapped and buffeted for the last time, and was then led to the royal grave shrine, placed on the throne, and robbed' (Interview with the Foyin of Kom, 14 June 2011 at Laikom) After the buffeting, the new king was handed over to the chamberlains (*chisento*, sing.*nchinto*). He was bathed over the grave of the deceased and placed in the chair of the deceased.

As a *Foyin*, he was the person who sat on the ancestral chair, and he was considered the embodiment of the beliefs, hopes, fears and aspirations of his people. Consequently, he was considered sacred in all the meanings of the word and ipso facto automatically, the chief priest of his people. The sacredness of the Foyin's person was encapsulated and found expression in the fact that he was scarcely seen in the public, except on very important occasions. Since one of the important responsibilities of the chief was to maintain a nexus between his people and the ancestral spirits, his religious functions included performing elaborate rituals on important festive occasions. This was not dominantly a reserve of Kom. Amongst the Akan of Ghana, in the West African coast, the chief played quite important roles in the festive of *Akwasidae*, *Wukudae* and *Odwira*. (see Abotchie, 2006: 172) .

It was in the mould of this religious and sacredness of the *Foyin* that one could best appreciate his role in conflict resolution. As a matter of fact, the predominant *modus operandi* of the *foyn* in pre-colonial traditional African society derived from his judicial functions. These included amongst many things to bring reconciliation among and between men and spiritual forces. This implied that the *Foyin's* judicial role included the settlement of conflicts such as land disputes and prevention of criminality.

In the pre-colonial African societies, crime was an act which offended the strong and definite dispositions of the collective consciousness, and was harmful to the gods. This

collective consciousness was enshrined in the laws of public and private crimes. The lineage heads dealt with violations of these crimes. The laws of public crimes were designated as things hateful to the gods and they included murder, adultery, stealing, certain forms of abuse, incest, witchcraft, and treason, just to name just a few. All these transgressions of laws were tried by the *Foyin's* law court, *etwi*. This court is constituted by the chief and his councilors, who were usually heads of the clan. This meant that the Foyin was paramount in all the conflict resolutions that took place in the Foyndom

Towards a Conclusion

Kom, which is located in West Africa, has been the foci of this article. West Africans during the pre-colonial period had many different achievements to their credit, and perhaps failures. Their 'cloth of History' was woven in many different patterns. Many ways of life were followed. Farmers cultivated a great variety of seeds, plants, and trees for food and trade and manufacture. Craftsmen worked in a wide range of skills. Traders extended their business. Outstanding men governed and taught, made war or pursued the arts of peace, wrote books or recited poetry, composed music or carved in wood and ivory, or made fine sculpture in clay and metal.

In all these ways of life, conflict became central. It was and it is found in almost all human societies. What is important about conflicts is how to prevent it or resolve them. In pre-colonial Africa, there were intense and varied ways of resolving conflicts, to which quite little attention has been paid in expert literature. This article has largely focused on conflict resolution mechanisms used in Kom, a West African Foyndom located in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Using multiple sources, the article has concluded that various sites, objects, and humans formed a very important place in the pre-colonial Kom to resolve conflicts. Consequently, they cannot be overlooked because it was these sites, objects, etc, that acted as social equalizers of the system.

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