

INTER-ETHNIC ENSLAVEMENT AMONG THE INDIGENES AND FULANI OF CAMEROON'S BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS

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ABSTRACT

Most communities of the Bamenda Grassfields occupied the area in the early 19th century and established socio-political cultures that were inter-related. In the 20th century, the Fulani whose culture differed with that obtained among the indigenes entered the area. In this cultural encounter both parties struggled for dominance. The “indigenous” people admitted the Fulani herders as aliens and did not resist seeing them as second class, whereas the latter saw their host as slaves (*harbe*) for their practice of crop cultivation. The failure of both parties to equitably admit each other attracted state authority intervention to ensure cognisance of the need for compatibility. These trends failed to attain objective understanding as officials were accused of bias. Consequently, both groups continued in the struggle to sustain cultural dominance on one another thereby entrenching intergroup enslavement. This paper is an attempt to examine the forms of slavery that resulted from the encounter between Fulani and indigenes in the Bamenda Grassfields. It posits that the struggle for dominance by both groups was a form of enslavement and argues that the Fulani just like the indigenous people were enslaved not by the mere existence of divergent cultural identities in a common geographical periphery. It concludes that the failure to attain goals of the solution-seeking process was a greater factor in the enslavement process as the weakness of the state machinery was exploited by the smart group leading to power tussling, victimization and bias attitudes that were a form of inter-identity enslavement.

Keywords: Conflict, Dominance, Enslavement, Exploitation, Identity and Struggle.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, as in many parts of the world, slavery or any form of involuntary human servitude was practiced from the pre-historic times to the modern era. The origin of this social ill is likened to warring groups; taking captives. Such captives were of little use among their captors because of the ease of escape. Consequently, they were sold off to distant places as a means of avoiding loss. Emphatically, this was not the lone means of acquisition of slaves. Rather, this mode of acquiring slaves exposed the slavery institution to a form of inter-ethnic relation as through war captivity; slaves were most often not from the same ethnic group like their master or owner. However, inter-ethnic enslavement among indigenes and Fulani in the Bamenda Grassfields is not likened to this form of human ownership but refers to forceful exploitation of socio-economic, political resources and psychological torture of one ethnic group by the other resulting from differences especially in ethnic background. In this direction, it is important to articulate that the availability of grazing land in the Bamenda Grassfields attracted grazing in the early 20th century while the need for extensive grazing land was an influential factor for the migration of the Fulani cattle herders into the area.¹ In this process, the Fulani whose ethnic traditions differed from those of the occupants of the area were received by the latter (indigenes who were of Tikar, Ngemba, Wimbang, Chamba,

¹ The first Fulani to settle in the Bamenda Grassfields was ArdoSabga who later became LamidoSabga. It was after him that the geographical area known today as Sabga got its name.

Widikum and supposedly, Munchi) as subject people on whom they struggled to impose their customs especially of land tenure.² On their part, the Fulani considering that land for grazing was an absolute necessity and that the Bamenda Grassfields had rich grass, clear streams, was rid of tse-tse flies; all characteristics conducive for cattle grazing, (Nyoh 2012: 47) preferred initially to submit themselves quietly and peacefully to local rulers and did not hesitate to pay tribute when it was demanded. (Fanso1989: 29).As their numbers increased over decades, they began setting up their own political and administrative units (lamidatsandardo'en) (Fanso1989: 29). Out of this organisation was born militancy for the protection of their own interest. The consequence was the rejection of indigenous dominance and the struggle for their hegemony or at least self-control. It was on these grounds that each of the two groups (indigenes and Fulani) tried to isolate each other for the purpose of unlimited control over land related economic resources and in this process, one group was enslaved by the other. This paper is an attempt to examine the forms of slavery that resulted from the encounter between Fulani and indigenes in the Bamenda Grassfields. It identifies the different spheres of enslavement which included labour remuneration, offering of gifts and land conflicts. It makes advance into how efforts by the administrative authorities to remedy the situation rather heightened enslavement.

The Spheres of Enslavement

The encounter between the Fulani and the indigenous people of the Bamenda Grassfields was, as already mentioned, a socio-cultural and economic encounter. In this directive, groups of different identities came together and struggled to forge a union which unfortunately was characterised by tension. In this union, each party struggled to express or exercise dominance over the other making use of whatever advantages that accrued therein. It is within this scope that this section visits the different spheres where either the struggle for dominance or the search for economic security expressed the enslavement of one group of people by the other.

Land Conflicts

Fulani presence in the Bamenda Grassfields quickened the problem of land scarcity (due mainly to land mismanagement). In line with this, Fulani presence introduced the farmer-grazier struggle which established unfavourable relations between the two ethnic groups; that is the indigenous people who claim ownership over land and considered the Fulani as land grabbers and the latter who were struggling for geopolitical space (Dze-Ngwa 2011: 22). This differentiation which is common among ethnically diverse groups exposed the area to land conflicts which were either pacific or violent. In both cases, one group's efforts of dominance actually knowingly and unknowingly subjected the other to enslavement. In this struggle, trespassing was a common phenomenon where one party extended its activities into areas reserved for the other. This phenomenon in the Bamenda Grassfields is as old as the advent of the Fulani in the area. By 1940, this situation had become so acute in the entire Bamenda grassfield region that when Phyllis Kaberry, a lady anthropologist started her study of the economic position of women for the colonial office, she could not escape being involved with the problem of farm damage by Fulani cattle (Awasom1983: 156). The women had been informed by the administration that Kaberry had come to settle their problems which to them meant the cattle problem. So, when Kaberry asked questions on different issues to the women, they only talked about cattle. Realizing that she could not undertake any research

² Land Tenure is only emphatic. There was a general attempt of imposing political dominance on the Fulani and subjecting them to some form of tribute payment.

without attending to the cattle problem, she complained to the administration in the following words; Something will have to be done... Do you think I can talk about anything except the Fulani and their cattle? No matter what I try to discuss-house building (the cows ate the thatching grass) cooking, the cows have eaten the corn, the size of the farm harvest (cows) sickness of children, the cows have eaten the children's food, women's work (its hard because of cows)-it all comes back to this *bête noir*... I don't want to be a scaremonger, but if matters continue for any couple of years or so, the administration may be up against serious trouble.³ By implication, the presence of the Fulani and their cattle in the Bamenda grassfields deprived its occupants of a great deal of available needs rather confiscated (certainly forcefully) by Fulani Grazing activities. In some of the areas toured by Kaberry, she reported that the Fulani had camped within a quarter of a mile of the village and that the women had been compelled to abandon even their kitchen gardens.⁴ As a result, crop cultivators had to travel long distances leaving farm lands behind their huts in search of farms in more distant places. This was a form of enslavement in which the indigenes found themselves as a consequence of Fulani grazing activities.

In the 1990s Cameroon's Bamenda Grassfields, there was cross enslavement following the liberalization of the political atmosphere. The different identities used what they imagined to be a form of inspiration from their political alignment to dominate the other. Thus identity countered identity and the physical evidence was burning of homes of Fulani by groups of youths for either crop damages or vast land occupation while the Fulani who were the "haves" took advantage of sympathy on the part of the administration or even used bribe to bring the rod of the administration to bear on the indigenous people. This at times filled the national gendarmeries and police cells with indigenous youths who were most often using party slogans to wage the war of land liberation. Thus house burning, crop damage and nonobjective arrest and detainment of the indigenes were forms of enslavement. In effect, bribery became a tool of reinforcing inter-ethnic enslavement (new slavery) as did the whip in the old slavery.

An increase in the number of Fulani and cattle was corollary to crop damage and following administrative regulations on resolving emanating crises, compensation had to be paid. But how feasible and acceptable were such compensations? Our argument here is that the measurement of compensation was hardly ever satisfactory especially to the benefactor of compensation as his opinion was not sought. Situations of this nature were at times based on administrative policy towards the enhancement of cohabitation; where policies did not have equal weight on the parties concerned. Worst still there were cases of delayed or unpaid compensation. In 2003 for instance, some graziers in Aghem, Menchum division invaded communal farmlands and crops were destroyed. The demand for compensation went without results and farmers took upon themselves to compound cattle from the farm areas to the SDO's office. (Nyoh 2012: 237) This was followed by Aghem women taking their *ba'ahum*⁵ including the *dengkeghem*⁶ hostage at the palace of *dengkeghem* with the request for an immediate solution to the problem of crop damage.⁷ This act of refusal to settle crop damages and the consequential transfer of cattle from farm to the SDO's office by Aghem

³NAB, Cb (1945)2, Annual Report for the Bamenda Division, 1945, p. 8.

⁴NAB, Ab 17/10, Report on the Farmer-Grazier Relations, p. 30.

⁵*Ba'ahum* is the plural for *bahtum* which in Aghem imply Chief.

⁶*Dengkeghem* in Aghem refers to the paramount chief (This study does not warrant the debate on paramouncy among the aghem federated chiefdoms)

⁷BBC, Cameroon Royal Palace Under siege retrieved from, [http:// www. bbc.co.uk/go/em*fr/-/hi/Africa/3527833.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em*fr/-/hi/Africa/3527833.stm) on January 27, 2011.

indigenous youths followed by the taking of chiefs on hostage was enslavement of the indigenous people orchestrated by ethnic pluralism. This precarious situation extended to life endangering attitude where in Kuk village in Fungom Subdivision, Menchum Division, a Fulani is known to have uprooted a live fence (water catchment) on grounds that the water source was in his land, thus exposing the users of the water source (predominantly indigenous people) to the risk of bad water. In view of the connectivity between the Fulani and the administrative authorities of the area, numerous complaints made on the issue were never attended to; thus, subjecting an entire community to a single Fulani's enslavement through exposure of portable water to contamination. Land related enslavement was not only limited to Fulani enslavement of the indigenous people as the indigenes also treated the Fulani discriminatorily by refusing them the right to ownership of even the land on which they (Fulani) constructed their homes as stated in a petition made by the Fulani to the UN visiting mission in 1955 which stated:

.... In spite of this, we are considered to be strangers permitted to remain in Bamenda on sufferance. We have no security of tenure, not even in the compounds we have lived in and the grasslands we have grazed on for nearly forty years. In parts of Bamenda the native people are against even our building houses and planting crops (Ami-Nyoh 2015: 830).

We ask that we may be treated as part of the community, as inhabitants of Bamenda who make a considerable contribution to the economy of Bamenda; and that we may be made to feel secure in the occupation of our grazing land and dwelling places.⁸ Implicitly, it was not the desire of the Fulani to continue with nomadic life style but they were subjected to this by the indigenous people who refused the former the right to permanent settlement considering them strangers regardless of the fact that many of these Fulani graziers were born in the Bamenda grassfields and knew no other place as place of origin. This indigenous attitude had to do with Fulani citizenry as defined by the British authorities who were governing the territory as a mandate from Nigeria at the time of Fulani influx. They had denied the Fulani the right to citizenship and classified them as 'strangers' rather than 'natives' (Michaela 2007: 5-6).

Labour Remuneration

The Fulani who entered the Bamenda Grassfields in the early half of the 20th century were predominantly cattle herders whereas their host landlords were predominantly planters. The process of co-habitation between both groups was consequent to labour exchange. This actually began with the indigenous people constructing huts and serving as herdsmen (*ngainako*) to the Fulani (Boutrais 1995: 644). This service was waged at 15000FCFA per month or a one year old cow every twelve months in the Nso and Menchum areas (Jumbam 2005: 33; Nyoh 2006: 43). This was following labour laws for recruitment of *ngainako* that were established by the Fulani who were the first to get involved in "extensive" traditional cattle rearing in the area and had as their principal source of staffing; the indigenous people. However, later arrivals of Fulani in the area made available Fulani who could serve as *ngainako*.⁹ These later arrivals however were not very interested in working with the Fulani. This is explained by the fact that; the Fulani cattle owners did not pay promptly and were always suspicious of Fulani *ngainako* who according to the former could easily escape with

⁸RAB, file N° B.2807/5, Petition to the UN, 1955, p. 29.

⁹The first wave of Fulani in the area was dominated by owners of huge herds of cattle and was therefore masters. It was therefore difficult to have herdsmen for recruitment among them and this raised the need for indigenous labour as *ngainako*.

their cattle if payment was not prompt.(Alhadji Lamido Maimoda Abdoulaye Sabga 2010: Int.) Reacting to the conditions of work as a *ngainako*, Musa (aFulani) who worked for Joseph Timbong (an indigene) had this to say; Being *angainako* is a job that can be done by everyone with anybody; what matters is that the *ngainako* should be truthful .There is no problem working with indigenes. Rather, there is an advantage because they (indigenes) pay promptly for fear that their cattle will be stolen if they fail to pay since they (indigenes) stay in the town .I get my salary when I want and at times even before month end especially when I have problems. So, I try to treat my master well so that I can continue to work with him (Nyoh2006: 45).In an interview with Kongnyuy Richard (indigene) serving as *angainako*witha Fulani, he expressed frustration in working conditions under Fulani cattle owners. According to him,The Fulani are careless with their staff, they believe so much in the health of their cattle than they do with the health and living conditions of their herdsmen. The herd in which I live is hardly ever taken care of. The rains drop on my bamboo bed and when I complain I am told I should do the repairs with my money. How can I? I earn 18000FCFA monthly repairing my hut is over 10000FCFA. I have not been able to contract a job with an indigenous grazier because they don't trust their own brothers. They prefer to recruit the stranger Fulani and give them better working conditions (Richard Kongnyuy 2013 int.).

Through the cattle business therefore, Fulani seem to actually prefer to work with the indigenous people whom they can conveniently enslave with bad working conditions especially when the indigene cannot afford to do another job. Apart from poor working conditions, the wage rate established for *ngainako*was a mode of enslavement. Considering that the minimum wage under the Cameroon labour code as of the year 2005 was 28000FCFA, giving a wage of less than minimum to citizens who laboured above the nominal eight hours working day was overwhelmingly a form of enslavement of the labour force. This is further compounded by the fact that the service hours of the herdsmen are determined more by need than by the terms of the working contract. This attitude has introduced carelessness on the part of the *ngainako* exposing the Bamenda Grassfields area to protracted farmer-grazier conflicts which in themselves introduced enslavement by way of growing land conflicts and its after effects.

Employment of indigenes by the Fulani was not limited to the cattle sector. The Fulani also hired indigenous services for the construction of their huts and later (as present) farming in their yard. While some actually made payments in monetary terms, some indigenes especially farm workers received as remuneration for their labour parcels of land in Fulani rugas for the cultivation of dry season vegetable. For those involved in house construction, death cattle at times even in advanced state of decomposition was gratified to the worker as a form of payment for work done. Also, a few cups of salt and/or rice were used for labour remuneration. Though willingly accepted by the indigenous workers, the denigratory nature of remuneration liked indigenous labour for Fulani to enslavement.

Offering of Gifts

Prior to the advent of the Fulani in the BamendaGrassfields, the offering of gifts was common between masses and masses, masses and royalty and among the traditional aristocracy. Gifts were however of socio-cultural character with no strings attached. The influx of the Fulani in the area actually made an extension in this domain as offerings were at the initial point a form of thank you expressed by the incoming Fulani to their landlord chiefs. Upon his arrival in the area for instance, the first Fulani in the Bamenda Grassfields offered cattle to his host, chief (the fon of BabankiTungo) for offering him settlement (Ami-

Nyoh2013:89). With time, offering of cattle by the Fulani to the indigenous rulers became common as they used it as a means of enticing them for settlement. Customarily, the people of the Bamenda Grassfields were hunters who used traps to kill animals. In this way, they were exposed to eating death animals they met in their traps. On their part, the Fulani saw the eating of death cows as ungodly and dirty. To them, an animal actually had to be slaughtered by a Muslim before being considered fit for Muslim consumption. When the Fulani had realised that death cattle was eaten in some indigenous settlements of the Bamenda Grassfields such as Kuk, Wum, Weh, Bafmeng, they made offerings of cows which died of accident, thunder strike or diseases to the indigenous people. To this end, natural rulers were generally favoured as a means of ensuring an unperturbed stay among the indigenes while masses who turned around Fulani rugas on a daily basis and did odd jobs such as fetching firewood, washing clothes, dressing the horses, fetching of water and cleaning the surroundings were equally favoured with such derogatory gifts. This act of offering rejected material to indigenous rulers was an extreme form of Fulani enslavement of the indigenous people considering that the Fulani took advantage of the weak indigenous psycho-social attachment to their customs to offer what was humanly rejected by their own customs [Fulani] as offer to the indigenes (Nyoh 2012: 283).

It is however imperative to mention here that this was a voluntary form of enslavement of the majority by the minority as the latter found their waste useful to the former and exploited the opportunity to cement positive relations with the local rulers of the area who had power over land that was the major source of disconnection between both groups. Whatever were the significance of such gifts to either the Fulani or the indigenous people (receivers), the fact that rejected foodstuff on the basis of religious (Islamic) barking were made as offer in the process of attracting favours from one chief or the other was denigrating to the receiving society and therefore a form of enslavement.

Administrative Intervention

The persistence of especially land related inter-ethnic enslavement which has often been seen as the farmer-Grazier problem attracted the attention of the Cameroons administration from the mandate era to present date. During the period of British administration, The Land Demarcation Scheme, Fulani Development and Welfare Scheme (FDWS), The British Livestock Mission Settlement Scheme for the Fulani and The Barbed Wire Scheme were all used by the British as remedy to the bad relations that existed between the indigenous people and the Fulani to no avail. At independence, efforts to bring harmonious considerations between both groups were made by law. Decree No 78-263 of July 3, 1978 establishing the terms and conditions for settling farmer-grazier conflicts for instance had some imbalances that placed one group at a point of enslavement. To attain the objectives of its establishment, the decree created the Farmer-Grazier Commission.¹⁰ The decree was aimed at striking a compromise between farmers as well as graziers needs. According to Nsoh and Ndamba (2008: 5), the decree on the basis of this “is a good piece of legislation if properly implemented by all but because of corrupt government officials, the law is implemented by local government officials to the advantage of the highest giver of bribe.” The decree thus made one party (that which could not afford the bribe or access a bribe channel) to be enslaved by the other. Thus as stated by Prof. Fanso; “those who know and are wealthy will

¹⁰Decree N° 78-263 of July 3, 1978 Establishing the Terms and Conditions for Settling the Farmer-Grazier Disputes.

continue to enslave those who do not know and are poor.”¹¹ Consequently, the Fulani who knew the bribery channel and were wealthy exploited the situation to enslave the indigenous people who did not know and were incapable of affording the bribe. In most areas of the Bamenda Grassfields, the decree was seen to have reduced the rights of the indigenous people including their chiefs to beggars of what was by right theirs. They considered the decree as a draft aimed at handing over indigenous leadership to ‘strangers’. As such, the weakness of this decree according to Nsoh and Ndamba (2008) did not depend on the fact that there was no land, neither was land mismanaged, rather, their concentration was on the issue of ethnic difference wherein the advent of the Fulani was seen to be gradually reducing their rights over land which they saw as theirs. To this effect, the Aghem saw the decree as government wish against theirs. This feeling of subjugation was in itself enslavement on the part of the Aghem who were dissatisfied with the terms of the decree and had to compulsorily live by it. When crops were damaged, the terms of dispute settlement as laid down by the decree also exposed especially the farming population to enslavement. This was because of the delay to set up commissions for the settlement of the dispute and also the low compensation rates.

Looking at the cases of delay, the commission was supposed to be headed by the prefect and considering the vastness of their area of jurisdiction, settlement was often delayed and when this occurred, planters and pastoralists found themselves at daggers drawn and usually the angry farmer extends his anger into either demolishing or burning the pastoralist’s hut as was the case in the 1990s. This type of reaction to damage or poor compensation actually imposed lack of habitat on the herder for a couple of days while poor compensation rate imposed famine on the planter. To better illustrate the effect of crop damage on famine, permit me use this exemplification made out of a case of compensation in Bui division by Nebasina. According to this example, A farm crop of 1352sqm comprising beans (estimated at five kerosene tins at the time of harvest), three farm beds planted with vegetable, Irish potatoes (estimated at six Kerosene tins at the time of harvest), few beds of pumpkins, 23 stems of Cassava and 49 stems of Coffee seedlings was compensated at 5000FCFA (Nebasina 1981: 186). From the above example, compensation received after crop destruction was not proportionate to the quantity of food crops expected from the farm. The amount paid as compensation could not satisfy the family for even a week whereas the estimated harvest could do for even a month in an area where large families, dependence and symbiotic live style are intimately tied up. Thus compensation rather enslaved the farmer whose crops served accurately as pasture to the pastoralist’s cattle at a price not determined by the forces of demand and supply but by the dictates of law.

CONCLUSION

This paper has brought to light the context and various spheres in which the indigenous people and the Fulani of the Bamenda Grassfields enslaved each other. The phenomenon of inter-ethnic enslavement as stressed in this paper emanated from the failure of the two groups to equitably admit each other. The indigenous people regarded the Fulani as alien second class people while the Fulani saw them as people they could exploit and treat derogatorily. This was the context in which the two groups knowingly and unknowingly enslaved each

¹¹Prof. Emeritus V.G. Fanso, “Keynote Speech at the First AFRICE international Conference”, Yaounde, March 1-3, 2013.

other. This unusual phenomenon of slavery was in various forms that is: Fulani offerings to indigenous people, poor labour remuneration, land conflicts etc. the paper in the light of the issues discussed reveals; that bribery reinforced inter-ethnic enslavement as did the whip in old slavery; that political power and political victimisation or the fears of these were invisible tools for Fulani-indigenous enslavement and that the slavery exacerbated by these groups was partly promoted by the voluntary or involuntary biased intervention of state officials.

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