

Opposing Administrative Mediation Approaches And Conflict Elasticity In The Bali-Nyonga-Ngyen-Mbo Land Dispute, 1855-2016

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Abstract: *The process of conflict mediation most often solicits multi-centric actors who share complementary and at times opposing stratagems on preventing, managing, resolving or transforming conflict situations to peace settlements. The Bamenda Grassfields, a geographical and socio-political setting in Cameroon provides a classic setting of areas where wide ranging competition over land boundaries between ethnic polities have attracted various administrative interventions. It is in this prism that this article examines the role played by the colonial and post-independence indigenous administrative authorities in the Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen Mbo conflict from the period roughly around 1855 to 2016. With the aid of qualitative historical analysis drawn from primary and secondary data, the paper contends that administrative authorities conditioned by contextual exigencies within the divide between the colonial and post-independence periods, considerably designed the tenacity of the inter-village conflict between Bali-Nyonga and Ngwen-Mbo. The study reveals that, the Bali Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo land clashes remained irresolute due to the divergent approaches of intervention. While the German administrators showed partiality by supporting the Bali against the other groups by employing coercion for submission in the guise of pacification, their indigenous counterparts after independence, sought to neutralize Bali influence by accommodating the petition of Ngyen-Mbo on Bali land invasion. The result of these divergent administrative solidarities was a spiral of crisis that gained added impetus with the evolving socio-political circumstances and time.*

Key words: *administrative, colonial, elasticity, mediation, opposing, Bali-Nyonga, Ngyen-Mbo.*

I. Background

Bali Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo are two distinct ethnic polities located in the Bamenda Grassfields of the present North West Region of Cameroon. Bali Nyonga village constitute one of the Chamba chiefdoms¹ which was the hub of the creation of Bali Sub-Division under Mezam Division on 26 August 1966 following decree N°66/DF/433. It is administratively bounded to the north and east by Bamenda II Sub-Division, in the South by Batibo Sub-Division and in the west by Mbengwi Sub-Division.

The people of Bali Nyonga belong to the Chamba Lecko group that migrated from the Chamba country around the River Faro on the Cameroon-Nigerian border.² This Chamba group raided their way southwards between the 1770s and 1830 through Koncha, Tignere, Tibati, Banyo, Tikar country, and Fouban before settling in the Bamenda Grassfields under the leadership of Gawolbe who died around 1830 in a battle with the Bafu-Fondong.³ The death of Gawolbe resulted into a succession crisis which split the kingdom leading to the formation of new fondoms. These fondoms were founded by princes with the exception of Bali Nyonga which was established by Princess Nahnyonga who after securing her own followers, handed the new fondom to her son Nyongpasi who picked up the reigning name of Fonyonga I.⁴ In the process of creating new

1 The other Bali fondoms include Bali Gangsin, Bali Gham, Bali Kumbat, and Bali Gasho.

2 Babila George Foncang, "An Explanation of the Conception of God among the Bali Nyonga and its Impact upon the contemporary Christian practice with particular reference to Hymnology and Prayer", A Dissertation submitted to the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu Natal, December 2004, p. 24.

3 Mathew B. Gwanfogbe, Bali Nyonga: From Migration to Settlement, p. 12

4 Ibid. p. 13: The fondoms created by the princes are today known as Bali Gangsin, Bali Gham, Bali Kumbat, Bali Gasho and Bali Kontan.

fondoms, the Bali invaded the territories of indigenous or earlier settlers who were either pushed out of their land or were subdued and reduced to vassals. In 1885⁵ these raids on territories eventually sowed seeds of land disputes between Bali Nyonga and some villages, notably, those of the Widikum clan among which was the Ngyen-Mbo.

Ngyen-Mbo⁶ is part of the Widikum clan which is sub-divided into the Moghamo, Meta, Ngie, Ngunu, Mubaji, Ngemba, Ngwo, Essimbi, Mankon and Beba-Befang.⁷ The people are part of a large migration which started around the 15th or 16th century from Sanakang, a locality around the Cameroon-Nigeria boundary.⁸ The leader of this group of migrants was known as Taah and subsequently Tawidikum. Tawidikum waged territorial wars that finally settled him in a place called Dudum which was later renamed Widikum after their leader. Of the original Widikum, a large number penetrated far into the Grassland before they settled in the southern stretches of the Western Grassland. The main body under one of the leaders, Mbeka first halted at Etat, some ten miles to the east of Widikum. It is from here that the majority of Widikum villages today claim their origin.⁹ The Widikum migrants were halted by the Tikars and their outlying settlements were kept in check from spreading by other powerful chiefdoms like the Kom, Bafut and Wum.¹⁰ After nearly a century and a half of peaceful development and expansion, the Widikum suffered from successive cataclysms of Bali invasions and subjugation beginning but not ending in 1850s. One of such attacks which centred largely on territorial expansion was on Ngyen-Mbo.

Ngyen-Mbo is located within Mbengwi Sub-Division of Momo Division in the North West Region. It is a community of three villages amongst the 29 villages that make up Mbengwi Sub-Division, created by Decree No 68/DF/431 of 26 September 1968. It is bordered to the North by Bafut and Menchum Valley Sub-Divisions, the East by Bamenda II and Bafut Sub-Divisions, South by Bali and Batibo Sub-Divisions, and West by Ngie and Njikwa Sub-Divisions. The Sub-Division lies in the transitional zone between the forest and grassland regions of Cameroon. As close neighbours and given competition over resources engendered by dynamic population impulses as well as power diplomacy, Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo entered an unrelenting period of internecine land margin conflicts. During the different periods of the crisis, public administrative authorities introduced divergent mediation tactics that only sustained the conflicts.

II. The Role of German Colonial Administrators

German administrative policy in the Grasslands of Bamenda was designed to favour village-groups that collaborated with her colonial exploitation mission while those that did not were subjugated and placed under the suzerainty of friendlier ones as vassals. This policy hinged on an alliance with the village of Bali-Nyonga, and was cemented by a treaty of protection signed on 23 August 1891 between Dr. Eugen Zintgraff, representing the German Government, and Fon Galega I, representing the people of Bali-Nyonga. The treaty offered an opportunity for German colonial authorities to combine forces with Bali-Nyonga in subjugating and exploiting village-groups in the region.¹¹ In exchange for surrendering his powers, Fon Galega I had the advantage of control over all Grassland villages. Attempts by Bali-Nyonga to implement the provisions of the treaty would become the source of recurrent conflict with neighbouring villages because the it used the treaty as an alibi to encroach on lands that belonged to other villages.

5 Mathew B. Gwanfogbe, *Bali Nyonga: From Migration to Settlement*, pp. 13-16

6 The name Ngyen-Mbo was adopted on the 18th August 1953 through a resolution taken by the Mengen Mbo Council at Napkwe Menemo Area to represent the new Mengen-Mbo settlement following the surrender of land to them by Bali Nyonga and other Widikum tribes after the 1952 Bali Nyonga/mengen-Mbo clashes and subsequent resolution of the conflict by Administrative Authorities. To avoid confusion, we shall be making use of the name Ngyen-Mbo to refer to this settlement even to periods preceding the adoption of the name.

7 Arnett, Assessment Report on the Mogamaw and Ngemba Areas, 1925, Bamenda Division, Archives N° AB20, Original File N° 1454/1925, p.2.

8 Nji, Ajaga and Mbakwa, M.A., Agwe, J.N., *A History of Tugi An emperial Case Study in the Sociology of Politics and Development*, (Bamenda: Akwi Memorial Foundation, 2009) p.1.

9 Arnett, Assessment Report on the Mogamaw and Ngemba Areas, 1925, Bamenda Division, p.3.

10 Ibid. p.2.

11 Chiver, E.M, *Zintgraff's exploration in Bamenda, Adamawa and Benue lands 1889-1892*, Buea, 1966, pp. 30-31

From 1902 to 1915 the German colonial government in Cameroon recognised Bali-Nyonga suzerainty over a large area in the study area. For this recognition, Bali-Nyonga assisted the Germans in subduing surrounding village-groups. Zintgraff realized the impossibility of 6000 Bali-Nyonga soldiers subjugating more than 15000 soldiers of the neighbouring villages. For this reason, the control authorities provided 1000 rifles to Fon Galega I, and Bali-Nyonga soldiers were drilled in the art of modern warfare.¹² A German military station was set up at Bali-Nyonga, and on 15 June 1905, Fon Galega I was given a list of 33 villages under its control.¹³

German colonial support for Bali-Nyonga and a small number of favoured village-groups resulted in the demarcation of arbitrary boundaries reflecting that dispensation. This was the case between Bali-Nyonga and the surrounding Widikum clan villages. Hostilities between the two had commenced long before the establishment of German rule. Before this time, Bali-Nyonga had conquered part of its present territory from some Widikum villages, although the amount of land taken was not well determined. An uneasy peace and some degree of co-existence between Bali-Nyonga and these groups prevailed just before German rule.¹⁴ With German support, Bali-Nyonga was able to maintain a strong hold over Widikum village-groups, depriving them of some of their ancestral land.

The Widikum clan villages refused to acquiesce to German policies that placed them under Bali-Nyonga suzerainty, and some like Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen-Muwa rebelled by proclaiming autonomy. These villages were razed by a joint Bali-Nyonga-German force and their subjects were rounded up and taken to specific locations inside Bali-Nyonga. Many ended up as labourers in German plantations on the coast while their land was taken over by Bali-Nyonga. The two village-groups most affected were Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen-Muwa.¹⁵ While these two persistently refused to accept the position of vassal to Bali-Nyonga, the initial British response as colonial mandated power was to maintain the set-up established by German administration.¹⁶

III. The Role of British Colonial Administrators

In an attempt to take advantage of the transition from German to British rule, five Widikum villages again rebelled by seceding from Bali-Nyonga. But, when the villages of Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen-Muwa who inhabited land adjoining Bali-Nyonga attempted to secede by building new huts on the disputed land, their huts were destroyed by the British in 1921 and their subjects were rounded up again and taken to Bali-Nyonga. The British defended their action by arguing that the land they were building on was right on the Bali doorstep and within the limits set by the Germans to Bali land.¹⁷ The British position, as upheld by W.E. Hunt, D.O for Bamenda Division, and confirmed by the Resident, Cameroons Province, was that Bali-Nyonga had suzerainty over the land inhabited by Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen-Muwa.¹⁸ The Ngyen-Mbo people left the area and resettled in Santa and elsewhere yet agitating until 1943 when Mr. Spence, the District Officer, persuaded the Fon of Bali Nyonga to offer to the Ngyen-Mbo another land. This offer was refused by the Ngyen-Mbo people stipulating that it must be their former land or nothing.¹⁹

Ngyen-Mbo, through their representative, E.F. Fawty, and some Widikum elders petitioned the British Trusteeship administrators. Between 1948 and 1949 F.A Goodliffe, Senior District Officer, was appointed to hold inquiry under the Inter-Tribal Boundary Settlement Ordinance with a view to determining the boundary between the parties.²⁰ The findings of Goodliffe indicated that the Ngyen-Mbo people had lost all their rights

¹² Ibid, p. 8

¹³ Hunt, W.E, *An Assessment Report on the Bali Clan in the Bamenda Division of Cameroons Province*, Bamenda, 1925, p.23.

¹⁴ See file No9570 Qf/b(1) 1943:11 in the National Archives Buea.

¹⁵ See file No4848 Qf/b(3) 1933:32 in the National Archives Buea.

¹⁶ See file No4848 Qf/b(3) 1933:115 in the National Archives Buea.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See file No734 Qf/b(2) 1943:2 in the National Archives Buea.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Report of an Inquiry held under the Commission of Inquiry Ordinance (Chapter 37), Nigerian Gazette N°37, Vol. 40, Government Notice N° 794, Lagos: 8th June 1953, p. 23.

over the land in dispute to the Bali Nyonga by conquest sometime before 1890.²¹ Though the Ngyen-Mbo objected and officially complained to the Chief Commissioner under Section 7 of the above Ordinance for a review of Mr. Goodliffe's decision, the Chief Commissioner, however, confirmed Goodliffe's decision and also notified the Ngyen-Mbo that they had a right to commence proceedings in court for a declaration of title over the said land. Consequently, in 1950, the Ngyen-Mbo instituted a case against the Fon of Bali in the Bali Native Court which was later transferred through an Order of Transfer under Section 28 of the Native Court Ordinance through suit N° C/33/1950 to the Supreme Court.

In the petition, the Ngyen-Mbo claimed all the land within the area of jurisdiction of the Bali Native Authority which covered an area of about 130 square miles, and demanded 1000 pounds for damages.²² In court, the Ngyen-Mbo argued that the disputed land was given to the Bali-Nyonga when the latter sought the former's protection against the Bali Kumbat. The Ngyen-Mbo helped them to ward off Bali Kumbat threats and gave the Bali-Nyonga land for settlement called 'Wukai' during a ceremony wherein a fig tree was planted to demarcate the land given to the Bali-Nyonga. The Bali-Nyonga rejected the Ngyen-Mbo version for want of historical foundation and maintained that, the land in their possession was first acquired by conquest from the Widekum indigenous inhabitants by another Bali group known as the Bali Kontan which in turn, was wrested by them around 1830. From that time, there had been in occupation of the land until the time of German arrival and had only allowed the Widekum to carry on subsistence agriculture on it on the proviso that they pay tribute as a sign of recognition of Bali-Nyonga authority.

The verdict pronounced by the Supreme Court established that the plaintiffs in the consolidated suits were non-suited on the grounds that they had not pleaded title under the land and Native Rights Ordinance (Chapter 105, section 4) and that no title could be granted to them except by the Governor and that, without such title, their claim to damages and an injunction could not be entertained. The Bali were awarded 150 quinees as cost.²³

The Ngyen-Mbo people were aggrieved at the above decision and felt that their case had been dismissed without its merits having been considered. They could not understand why, in their earlier complain to the Chief Commissioner whom they regarded as the Governor, he advised them to pursue their claim of title to the Supreme Court which they did, and while at the Supreme Court the judge declared that he could not grant the declaration of title, requesting them to apply to the Governor. According to the Commissioner of Inquiry, "the Widikum people were very understandably mystified, if not bewildered at the dilemma in which they found themselves. The Governor told them to go to the Court and the Court told them to go to the Governor."²⁴

Unsatisfied with the verdict, the Ngyen-Mbo, on 3 March 1952, armed with machets, spears, and guns, carried out a pre-concerted attack on Bali Nyonga wherein crops, cattle, and property were looted and wide spread damages were done to dwellings. Some Bali were killed and many wounded. The Ngyen-Mbo as a result of this attack were able to occupy temporarily the whole of Bali land except a small area around Bali town, and resisted attempts to evict them.²⁵ This attack prompted British Trusteeship Administrative authorities to clearly investigate the claims of both parties on the question of land title so that their respective rights could be ascertained. Accordingly, on 18 March 1952, the Governor appointed the Honourable Justice A.G.B Manson to be the sole Commissioner under the Commission of Inquiry Ordinance to inquire into the rights of any native communities to occupy or use, either under native law and custom or otherwise, the portion of land situated within the Bali Native Authority and to make recommendations.²⁶

After consulting the parties concerned in several meetings and reviewing extant reports on the case including that of Goodliffe between 1921 and 1942, he noticed the land conflicts indicated in table 1 below and made the following observations:

21 Ibid.

22 RAB. File No. 2146/1967. Role of Administrative Officers in Land Matters, 1967, 12-14.

23 Ibid, p,35

24 Ibid. p. 24.

25 Ibid. p. 35.

26 RAB. File No. 1306/1977 Affairs of Administrative Officers in the Southern Cameroon (Copy of Acts), 1977, 14-22.

Table:1 Land Disputes Between Bali and Widikum Communities

N ^o	Date	Communities Concerned	Head of Inquiry
1	1921	Bali/Sambutu	Mr. Hawkesworth
2	1923	Bali/Bafawchu	Mr. Hawkesworth
3	1925	Bali/Meta	Mr. Sharwood-Smith
4	1927	Bali/Meta	Mr. J.S. Smith
5	1928	Bali/ Bafawchu	Mr. J.S. Smith
6	1928	Bali/ Pinyin	Mr. J.S. Smith
7	1928	Bali/ Asong	Mr. J.S. Smith
8	1928	Bali/Gusang (Moghamo)	Mr. J.S. Smith
9	1928	Bali/Eum (Bamenjong)	Mr. L. Cattle
10	1928	Bali/ Kai, Nya, Tuanyang, Cobyang	Mr. L. Cattle
11	1932	Bali/Bande (Mankon)	Mr. H.H.Marshall
12	1932	Bali/Bametchum	Mr. Brayne-Bakar
13	1938	Bali/Bafawchu	Mr. Scheffield
14	1942	Bali/Bametchom	Dr. Jeffreys
15	1942	Bali/Babad (Baba II)	Dr. Jeffreys

Source: NAB. File No. 1230/1958 Cb (1958)1, Reassessment Report for the Bamenda Division 1958, pp. 10-12.

1)The Bali Nyonga arrived at their present site about 1820 or 1825 as warriors, well-armed, well organised and subjected many of the indigenous inhabitants whom they found in the area, including many of the Widikum communities including Ngyen Mbo and that Zintgraff, the first German explorer in the area arrived some seventy-five years (1889) after the Bali had settled on the area and referred to them as “the most feared of the inland tribes and their friendship a necessary preliminary to the exploration of the North Cameroons”.²⁸ In this light, the Bali people had since been in actual and effective occupation of the land, except for an attempt at re-settlement by the Ngyen-Mbo people in 1921 and 1934.²⁹

2)The Bali conquest in 1884 just before the German arrival cannot be regarded as entirely exact and that the Bali claim to the large area of suzerainty granted to them by the Germans in 1905 cannot, historically speaking, be accepted. Hence, the vassalage of the Widikum people by the Bali was of no importance because what linked them in the past was all history as the Widikum communities were free and independent from the Bali.³⁰

3)The Bali acquired the area in dispute by right of conquest during the pre-colonial period when tribes were migrating and seeking new settlements hence they drove the occupants and formed their own settlement on the land so acquired. They however allowed the Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen -Muwa to settle on and farm, in common with the Bali, on certain areas of the land which the Bali had acquired from them by conquest.³¹

4) The claim on a gift of land, “Wumkai”, to the Bali was unconvincing as no evidence of demarcation existed. Again, the identity of those who fixed the boundaries at the time (about 1825) when “Wumkai” was alleged to have been granted to the Bali people was not proven. Equally, it was not clear as to which Widikum community granted the land to the Bali ³² and the Widikum witnesses in the case failed to prove with unanimity the conditions under which the “Wumkai” land gift was given to the Bali.

27 Ibid. p. 26.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 RAB. File No. 1515/1974. Political Activities in the Grassfields, 1974, 22-25.

31 Ibid. p. 27

32 Ibid. p. 28

5)The Widikum claim that the Bali took possession of their land with the complicity and assistance of the Germans and British colonial administration was not true as the Bali had settled on the disputed land through conquest some forty to fifty years before the arrival of the Germans. The Bali only sought the assistance of the British administration when the Ngyen-Mbo threatened to reoccupy their lost land.³³

6) The Ngyen-Mbo claim as indigenous owners of the land which they did not lose by conquest to the Bali was rejected and so they requested for boundary adjustment that would enable them to be separated from the Bali because they did not want to remain and farm on Bali land. This was owing to what S.T. Muna described as “the intolerable conditions” under which they lived with the Bali. They therefore proposed that Ngyen-Mbo and Ngyen-Muwa communities should be removed from the Bali land. Not even a Conciliatory Committee consisting of members out of the two parties could bring the parties into agreement.³⁴

7)The alleged shortage of land for the Widikum community, if true, was not a ground by itself for depriving the Bali people of their customary rights of occupancy under the Land and Native Rights Ordinance.³⁵

8)Since the boundaries were fixed, and adjusted in 1921 and 1934, there had been no trouble between the disputing parties. Therefore, there was no substance in the Widikum complaints that they were not given the opportunity to be heard. That the findings were unfair, and or that administrative officers were prejudiced in favour of the Bali .³⁶

Goodliffe therefore concluded that, Ngyen-Mbo, including the other Widikum petitioners were ill-advised, misguided and misled by unscrupulous agitators who, for personal reasons, encouraged false hopes for reacquiring all or part of their land from the Bali. He thus made recommendations based on the above observations to the Governor who accepted several aspects but refused that under the Land and Native Rights Ordinance, rights could not be granted to a Widikum individual or a Widikum community by the Fon of Bali subject to the payment of tribute to the Fon or subject to other conditions as suggested by the Commissioners report.³⁷ He also refused to make a formal positive declaration to give exclusive rights of occupancy over the land in dispute to the Bali Nyonga to their native laws and customs as requested by the Commissioner on grounds that it was without precedence and would create uncertainty regarding the validity of existing rights and titles in the Bamenda and Cameroons Provinces, since the vast majority were not documented. ³⁸.

Finally, the Government charged the Native Authorities of Bali and the Bamenda South West Federation to take all necessary steps to promote amicable relations between the Bali Nyonga and Widikum Peoples by considering the Bali Nyonga proposal of being prepared to give concession of land to the Ngyen Mbo and Ngyen Muwa to settle and live side by side with their Widikum brothers without interference at all from Bali Nyonga, and for the Widikum people to respect the existing boundaries and withdraw their claims of considering themselves as the landlords of Bali land.

The Government equally requested the Resident in charge of Bamenda Province to carry out a full investigation in conclusion with the Native Authorities concerned, interested persons including technical experts, in order to make recommendations regarding measures to put an end to frictions between the Bali Nyonga and the Widikum by considering adjustments which might be found expedient for the accommodation of the Widikum communities, and the possible participation of Bali Nyonga people in the Bamenda South Western Federation.³⁹

Brayne-Baker, the Resident of the Bamenda Province launched the investigation on 20 June, 1953. He focused mostly on the plight of the Ngyen-Mbo because they had no land that “legally” belonged to them. Negotiations between Bali Nyonga on the one hand and Ngyen-Mbo on the other lasted almost a year from June 1953 to April 1954 and almost stalled on numerous occasion due to constant bickering from representatives of both parties.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the first phase of negotiation, an estimated Ngyen-Mbo population of about 200 families had no land because their land had been acquired by Bali Nyonga through conquest. Most of them

33 Ibid. p. 29.

34 Ibid

35 Ibid, p. 31.

36 Ibid

37 Ibid

38 Ibid

39 Ibid

40 RAB. File No. 1414/1976. Records of Activities of Administrators, 1976, pp. 10-22.

lived and farmed on Bali Nyonga territory and others left the territory completely. Since their plight was more urgent and considering the threats of insecurity the dispute posed, Bali Nyonga was inclined to be generous and flexible. The first piece of land offered to Ngyen-Mbo by Bali Nyonga was near the village of Kai. This land was mucky and mountainous, unfavourable for agriculture and settlement. Though good for grazing, it was turned down by the Ngyen-Mbo. Mr Tien, a government interpreter then suggested another piece of land bordering Kobenyang in Meta clan which was more accessible and fertile. This land was ostensibly Ngyen Mbo land seized from them by Bali Nyonga through conquest.⁴¹ At the end, the British administrator advised that little cost would be incurred in displacing the few Bali Nyonga found around the identified portion on the surface area of 706 acres. This arrangement was welcomed by the Ngyen-Mbo community, but the Bali Nyonga people were not happy and it took some considerable pressure from the administration to persuade Bali Nyonga to yield to the agreement.⁴²

The 706 acres was largely insufficient to settle the entire Ngyen-Mbo population, and as a result, ninety three more acres was negotiated from Bali Nyonga, but was still not enough. The British colonial authorities approached the neighbouring Widikum village, Kobenyang and Mankon village for rescue. Brayne Baker and his team of boundary experts entered into negotiations with the Fon of Mankon. Surprised at Kobenyang's generosity towards Ngyen Mbo that gave 745 acres, the Fon of Mankon surrendered 245 acres of land to Ngyen-Mbo thus making a total 1789 acres compared to the 58,878 acres of land held by the Bali Nyonga community.⁴³

An agricultural officer, I.G Matters, was brought in from Bambui who surveyed the entire land ceded to Ngyen Mbo and found it to be accessible and good for settlement. The demarcation of the land was done and on the 26th July 1955 the Provincial Surveyor, K.J.O Shanghnessy addressed a correspondence to the Resident, and informed him that they had finished their work although due to the refusal of the Ngyen-Mbo people after 30 June 1955 to carry the necessary stones or provide help in any way, only nine boundary beacons were marked by Cairns.⁴⁴ Muna, Ex-Minister of Works, member of the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly and Chairman of the Ngyen-Mbo Council was particularly impressed with the arrangement aimed at developing a new homeland for the Ngyen-Mbo community. In a correspondence titled "Development of Menghen Mbo New Settlement" signed on 18 November 1953 by S.T. Muna and the three village heads of Ngyen-Mbo, Chief Fongen, Chief Fombu and Chief Fongwe, assured their people that a practicable solution had been reached on the land dispute between the Bali and the people.⁴⁵ Despite all these, the Ngyen-Mbo desire for more land caused the two parties to be in conflict at the time the independence of Southern Cameroons was introduced by reunification with the Republic of Cameroun.

IV. The Role of Cameroonian Administrative Officers

After the independence and reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Republic of Cameroun and the subsequent creation of the North West Province, the newly appointed administrative authorities took over the management of the nagging Bali- Ngyen Mbo conflict. The conflict took many twists and turns because of the decision of administrative authorities to appease the Ngyen-Mbo with land from the Bali and the former's request for additional land to host developmental projects and the wrath it elicited from the Bali. For example, in a bid to calm down the violence planned by Ngyen-Mbo, on 7 October 1977, the Governor of the North West Province, Abouem a Tchoyi, proposed an additional five kilometer of land to be ceded to the Ngyen-Mbo by Bali Nyonga as claimed by the Ngyen-Mbo since 1955 and assured the Fon of Bali that the rights of his people as concerns their houses, farms and property found within the land to be ceded would be protected and that for such generous gesture, the Government of the United Republic of Cameroon would take measures to ensure that the rest of the land was recognized as Bali Land.⁴⁶ When the Fon rejected the offer on grounds that such concessions would also mean that similar requests from Chomba, Pinyin, Mbu,

41 *ibid*

42 *Ibid*

43 Report No. SB.17/142 from the Survey Department, Bamenda, 10th December 1953.

44 Correspondence No.S.B.24/44 of 26th July 1955 from the Survey Department, Bamenda addressed to the Resident, Resident's Office, Bamenda found at the Regional Archive Bamenda.

45 Correspondence accessed from the Regional Archive Bamenda on 12/06/2016.

46 Ref. N°613/I/CP/PNO/CG.30/SG of 7/10/1977, Governor's Office Bamenda

Ngyen-Muwa and others be considered as well, the administrative authorities of the North West Province sought the arbitration of the President of the Republic, Ahmadou Ahidjo, who signed Decree N°77/525 modifying the territorial boundaries of certain traditional communities in Mezam and Momo Divisions. The above Decree was later amended by Decree N°82/20 of 8 January 1982. These decrees, as indicated in Article 11 of Decree N°77/525 of 23 December 1977, abrogated settled colonial boundaries between Bali Nyonga and Ngyen Mbo by creating and defining new boundaries in an effort to stop the conflict.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the terms of these decrees were not effectively implemented and so acts of violations were signaled by both parties and the administration since it was signed.⁴⁸

Members of the Bali Traditional Council in a petition captioned “Arbitrary violation of Decree No.77/525 of 23 December 1977 and threats to lives and property of the Bali people” addressed to the President of the Republic through the Governor of the North West Province on 10 May 1982, decried the fact that despite their petition addressed to him on their disapproval of the above Decree, he has signed a new Decree N°82/20 of 8 January 1982 with the complicity of Hon. S.T. Muna⁴⁹ to seized kilometers of Bali land and give it to Ngyen-Mbo. They condemned the unilateral application of the new Decree by government agents, armed gendarmes and armed Ngyen-Mbo villagers and on 4 May 1982 up-rooted three huge boundary beacons and defiantly established their own boundary deep into Ngyen-Mbo land by clearing a path of about ten metres wide and hundreds of metres long.⁵⁰ In fact, the unbending attitude of the Balis and the unsatisfied Ngyen-Mbo land needs explain why their land differences remained unsolved. This picture of things was captured by Tchoyi in the following words:

The Bali Ngyen-Mbo crisis gave me very tough times while I was Governor of the North West Province, as the Balis will not want to let go any piece of their land as the people of Ngyen Mbo continued to press hard to take some land from them. Both parties, despite the several attempts made by myself as Governor and my other collaborators were not willing to abide by the decisions of the Administrative authorities to make some concessions. The Balis belief that they have already given enough land to Ngyen-Mbo through concessions and are not willing to give any further. On the other hand, the people of Ngyen- Mbo are of the opinion that the land the Balis relinquish is just part of their land. In actual fact for this crisis to be definitely brought to an end, the people of both clans must be ready to give and take.⁵¹

This frustration was also evident in his letter to the the Fon of bali wherein he lamented thus:

I am dismayed to notice that all the understanding and patience shown in the settlement of this matter by the Government and all efforts made to persuade the Bali people to desist from further acts of violence and provocation have not yielded any positive results.⁵²

In a bid to prevent further macabre acts by the Balis, the Governor as from 7 October 1982, forbade Bali people other than the families living thereon access to the disputed land and through Provincial Order No 987/PO/E/GNW.54/S.6/SG/LA of 30 September 1982, farming, weeding, clearing and developing any parcel of that land was prohibited. The full implementation of this decision meant that the Balis were banned from almost all activities on the ceded area. In frustration therefore, the Balis continued to foment attacks and destruction of houses and crops in the disputed area hence frustrating any effort towards a peaceful settlement of the land conflict. Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo relations therefore was punctuated by tensions and sporadic

⁴⁷ Decree N°77/525 of 23rd December 1977 to modify the territorial boundaries of certain traditional communities in the Mezam and Momo Divisions.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Salomon Tandeng Muna was born in 1912 at Ngyen-Mbo and served as the first Prime Minister of the federated state of West Cameroon from January 11, 1968 to June 2, 1972 as well as Vice President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon from 1970 to 1972.

⁵⁰ Letter Ref. No7315/L/E/CF/CG.30/S.1/SP of 5th October 1982, Subject: Violation of Decree No 77/525 of 23rd December 1977, Governor’s Office, Bamenda.

⁵¹ Interview with David Abouem Atchoyi, 76 years old, Former Governor of the North West Province, Bafia, 20 June 2020.

⁵² Interview with David Abouem a Tchoyi

confrontations until 1986 when Ngyen-Mbo request for more land for development purposes ushered in another ugly phase in their historical land vendettas that beckoned for administrative attention once more.

In 1986 the Ngyen-Mbo Development Association submitted to the Mbengwi Land Consultative Board, an application requesting for about 400-500 hectares of arable land to start a modern Agricultural Project within the area that was ceded to Ngyen-Mbo from Bali in line with Decree Nos. 77/525 of 23 December 1977 and 82/20 of 8 January 1982 respectively. The Mbengwi Land Consultative Board meeting on the 7 January 1986 on the above application chaired by Francis Achiri Ade, Divisional Officer for Mbengwi Sub-Division, responded affirmatively that 53 sufficient arable land (between 400-500 hectares) was available in Ngyen-Mbo for the proposed modern agricultural project and ruled the chairman of the Board to immediately call on the authorities to take necessary steps to evaluate what developments exist in the area and the persons who need compensation so as to avoid unnecessary problems in future.⁵⁴

The Ngyen-Mbo request for the 500 hectares of land to carry out a giant agricultural project on the disputed land with the consent of administrative authorities was viewed by Bali people as a ploy to enter into immediate and effective occupation of the said land considering the delays registered by the Administration to effectively implement the dispositions of Decrees Nos. 77/525 of 23 December 1977 and 82/20 of 8 January 1982 respectively. Consequently, the Balis opposed this move and rendered a planned evaluation exercise on the contested site by the Mbengwi Land Consultative Board impossible. , the wish of the Ngyen-Mbo Development Association could not be granted as a result.⁵⁵

In response, the Ngyen-Mbo Traditional Council in a letter dated 28 May 2010 applied to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to open a Young Farmers Settlement Support Program in Ngyen-Mbo arguing that the village has arable land and is prepared to give 500 hectares of land for the above project. In reaction, the Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Jean Nkuete signed Decision N°0124/MINADER/ SG/DOPA/PAIJA creating an installation site at Ngyen-Mbo for Young Farmers. The above Decision was highly appreciated by the Ngyen-Mbo people who as viewed the project more as a project for their village than a national one and also serve as a smoke screen to tidy their territorial boundary dispute with the Balis.⁵⁶ They therefore led the Coordinator in charge of implementing the project on part of the disputed land with the Balis to have the project installed there. The Balis on their part, equally viewed the Project as a means for the Ngyen-Mbo to take over the land in dispute, an attempt they vowed could not be granted.⁵⁷

Consequently, on the 21 June 2011, the Balis petitioned the Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on the installation on the 21 June 2011 of the first batch of twenty Young Farmers on the disputed land. To Bali Nyonga, the implementation of this development project by the government, was a guise to prevent them from exercising agricultural activities on their “land”. They argued that from the first batch of recruits who came from the following Divisions: Momo (09); Mezam (04); Boyo (03) Donga-Mantung (02); Bui (01); and Bamboutous (01), non was a native from Bali Nyonga. Even the four from Mezam under which Bali Nyonga belong, instead 02 came from Santa, 01 from Bafut and 01 from Bamenda III Sub-Divisions.⁵⁸

Reacting to the above petition, the Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on 10 July 2011, transmitted the said petition to the Governor of the North West Region to examine and report. Governor Lele Lafrique Tchoffo Deben Adolphe, on 20 July 2011 forwarded the Minister’s letter to the S.D.Os

53 Ibid

54 Ibid

55 Ibid

56 On 6/11/2012 the Governor of the North West Region in a bid to solve the land dispute between Bali and Ngyen-Mbo as well as ensure the effective execution of the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers Project, held a meeting with concerned stakeholders. One of the suggestion was for the traditional rulers of Ngyen-Mbo to identify another site not in dispute to installed the Project. The Ngyen-Mbo Chiefs refused that they did not have another site except that in dispute to installed the Project.

57 Interview with Gwanbobmuga Dinga, retired civil servant, 72 years old, Bamenda, 17 May 2019

58 See correspondence N°30/L/CF/E-29/SP of 28/07/2011 from the S.D.O Mezam to the Governor North West Region on the subject: Land Conflict on the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers site.

of Mezam and Momo for examination, observation and elements of response. The Senior Divisional Officer for Mezam, Mache Njouonwet Joseph Bertrand, on the 28 July 2011, while responding, acknowledged that the zone of implantation of the Young Farmers Project was for a very long time subjected to a protracted land dispute between some traditional chiefdoms in Mezam and Momo Divisions. He equally recalled to the Governor that the above dispute had been resolved by Decree N°77/525 of 23 December 1977, but due to inability or failure to pay compensation to the Balis as requested by Article 8 of the above Decree, the Balis found on the land transferred to the Ngyen-Mbos have resorted to reclaim the lands they had abandoned by farming on it, an act seriously opposed to by the Ngyen-Mbo who also were engaged in farming on the same land.⁵⁹

The Senior Divisional Officer for Mezam recalled to the Governor that his colleague of Momo and himself, following the Governor's directives had embarked on convincing the two disputing parties to carry out their agricultural activities side by side peacefully while waiting for a definite solution. To him the Young Farmers Project would have served as a crystallising factor to diffuse the tension between the two communities, but unfortunately it is not the case because of the way the project was managed. He therefore proposed to the Governor the following:

1. That the Governor should take over the supervision of the implementation of the Project.
2. To guarantee a durable peace in the zone, the youths of Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo should constitute the majority of the recruits.
3. The rehabilitation of the road Bali-Ngyen-Mbo in order to activate socio-economic activities between the two communities which should lead to the promotion of pacific coexistence between them.
4. The involvement of Administrative authorities and Traditional Rulers especially that of Bali in the execution of the Project.⁶⁰

Having received the S.D.O's opinion and considering the continuous tension between Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo as a result of the above land dispute, the Governor of the North West Region on 6 November 2012, presided over a meeting to examine and seek for a lasting solution to the poor relationship between the above villages. This meeting was urgently prompted by further complaints addressed to the Governor by both parties. The Bali petition submitted by Lawyer Harmony Bobga Mbuton was captioned "Recent provocation of Kontan population by means of trespass and destruction perpetrated by Ngyen-Mboh People with the backing of the administration of Momo Division".⁶¹

The petition expressed Bali objection to the execution of Ministerial Decision N°0124/MINADER/SG/DOPA/PAIJA/2010, creating the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers Settlement site within land occupied, exploited and developed by Bali people.⁶² As such they requested the withdrawal and cancellation of the above Ministerial Decision and for an injunction of execution of the Ministerial Decision until the matter was decided by the Supreme Court.⁶³

The Ngyen-Mbo petition was submitted to the Governor by the Chairman of the Ngyen-Mbo Traditional Council, Chofor Ndasi Christopher. In the complaint captioned "A complaint against acts of violence, aggression and murder, perpetrated by Bali villagers against Ngyen-Mbo citizens", they noted that the Balis have systematically destroyed and uprooted some of the pillars planted by the administration of the state in 1982 pursuant of Decree N°82/20 of 8 January 1982 and in the process, seized farm tools specially from those of the Wosing and Njenka quarters.⁶⁴ the climax of the Bali atrocities in their opinion however, took place on 1 October 2012 when an armed band of Bali men with weapons ranging from firearms, machets, clubs and other vices invaded Ngyen-Mbo, caught their first victim Kabit Valery, battered him to the point of death. The second victim, Akenji Samuel, was shot with a gun on the right thigh and had murdered in recent times the following Ngyen-Mbo persons; Daniel Atanga, Jude Mukom and Awasum James.⁶⁵

59 File No. 123/2011. The Bali Ngyen-Mbo Conflict, Archives of the Governor of the North West Region

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid

62 Ibid

63 See letter dated 1st October 2012 from the Abalu-Bobga, & Co. Law Firm, consulted on the 16/09/2016

64 Ibid

65 See letter of 03/10/2012 from the Chairman Ngyen-Mbo Traditional Council, registered N°1990 Confidential North West Governor's Office, consulted on the 16/09/2016.

From the above opposing positions, the governor decided that there was need to demarcate the boundary between Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo as stipulated by the above Decree and its amendment and insisted that the Young Farmers Project could not be banned just because some errors were made when it was conceived. He thus appealed to the Traditional Council Chairpersons of Bali-Nyonga and Ngyen-Mbo to collaborate and conceive development projects in the area to be forwarded to the powers that be for endorsement. This move, it was believed, would engaged the contestants in meaningful activities that could help move their focus away from the crisis.

Following the above decisions and recommendations, the Governor went to Yaounde to meet with the Ministers of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation and his colleague of Agriculture and Rural Development to abreast them on the realities with regard to the Bali/Ngyen-Mbo land dispute and how it affected the people of Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers Project. He handed to the Ministers reports on the above two preoccupations as well as a budget estimate amounting to 17.445.000frs to be made available to the Regional Commission for it to go to the disputed site and materialize the boundaries between Bali and Ngyen-Mbo.⁶⁶

The request for financial means for the Regional Commission to go and have the demarcation done tabled by the Governor to the Ministers cited above was not granted. This resulted to the Commission not doing the job, the Young Farmers Project put on a halt as a result of insecurity and acts of vandalism on the crops planted on the site. As a result of continuous acts of vandalism on the site, the Governor on March 13, 2014, chaired a meeting to assess the prevailing situation at the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers Settlement Project. Attending the meeting amongst his close collaborators were the S.D.Os for Mezam and Momo, the Attorney General at the North West Court of Appeal, the representative of the Regional Delegate of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Coordinator of the Young Farmers Settlement Project. During the said meeting the Coordinator of the Project made known that, vandals from Bali within the past few months have progressively destroyed the crops planted on the site.⁶⁷

The S.D.O for Momo reported to the Governor that, as a result of acts of vandalism perpetrated by Bali indigenes, the Forces of Law and Order have been making regular patrols around the disputed site, but due to lack of means which were provided by the Mbengwi council, the said patrols have been suspended pending the provision of more funds. On his part, the Attorney General of the North West Court of Appeal made known that they have not received any case file concerning all those carrying acts of vandalism on the disputed site and that they need to prosecute all those involved in such acts. Closing the meeting the Governor recommended to the S.D.O of Momo to contact the Company Commander of the National Gendarmerie who should work in collaboration with his colleague of Mezam and the respective State Counsels to build up the eventual case files against the perpetrators of acts of vandalism on the disputed site.⁶⁸

Despite the intentions and measures taken by administrative authorities at the Regional, Divisional, or Sub-Divisional levels to ease the escalation of tension at the disputed site, violence and destructions were constant. In a letter dated 21 May 2015, addressed to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers indicated that not only are the Gendarmes and Police on security patrol around the site being fired at with guns from the Bali people, but equally the convoy of the Governor of the North West Region was shot at when he visited the site after the first and second destruction by the Balis.⁶⁹ In addition, the Young Farmers maintained that, for the past four years and precisely by the month of May 2015, they have lost 8ha of maize, plantains, fruit trees and 3 years old 17,600 coffee plants in production from the destructive acts of the Bali people.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ RAB. File No. 1545/2011. Ngyen Mbo Young Farmers Project, 2011, 3-8 09/4"> dRDSan".1E" Relt=:rs="Fr w:ao>w:rF581p w:rsidP81Eer>

Notwithstanding the above notification on the insecurity and destructions taking place on the disputed site, no concrete action was taken by the Minister and Administrative authorities to put a stop and resolve the dispute. This therefore motivated the Balis again as a result on Sunday the 24 April 2016, carried out another series of destruction at the PAIJA Young Farmers Project site. During this invasion, an estimated 30.000 coffee plants already on production and 2400 plantains on production and a variety of fruit trees were destroyed, crops sprayed with herbicides and others off-rooted with the help of a tractor.⁷¹ Writing on 6th May 2016 to the Prime Minister Head of Government, the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers indicated that the perpetrators of the above destruction were the same for the past five years and were well known by the authorities but nothing was done to bring them to justice. To help the authorities in their investigations, the Young Farmers forwarded the under mentioned names as the Balis responsible for the destruction of their crops and buildings.

Table 1: Names of Balis Responsible for the Destruction of Crops in Ngyen-Mbo in 2012

NAMES	AGE	CROPS DESTROYED
Titabai Victor (Leader)	44 years	Coffee and Yams
Pefock Martin Fielding	39 years	Coffee and Plantains
Sanjella Bernard Doh	29 years	Maize and Yams
Tita Fonjah Eric	33 years	Maize and Yams
Albert Folabit	26 years	Tomatoes and Vegetables
Andrian Yebit	28 years	Coffee and Plantains
Emmanuel Tita Fonjoh	30 years	Plantains and Tomatoes
Forbutu Emmanuel	27 years	Coffee and Maize
Ndiforty Robert	28 years	Plantains
Tita Fanbeng Emmanuel	28 years	Coffee
Asam Peter	24 years	Coffee, Yams and Maize
Sangwala Mbafuh	24 years	Coffee and Plantains
Forbutu Jean	23 years	Tomatoes and vegetables

Source: Governor's Office Bamenda, File No. 436/2012 Bali-Ngyen-Mbo Conflict, 2012, 6-7.

The year 2012 was understandably, a very bad year for the people of Ngyen-Mbo as most families could not feed themselves. The economic difficulty caused by this conflict created rural-urban exodus of Ngyen-Mbo people as well as motivated others to stand strong in defense of their land.⁷²

On 23 May 2016 the Governor, instructed the top senior administrators of Momo and Mbengwi to convene an appeasement meeting on the Bali Nyonga/Ngyen-Mbo land dispute aimed principally to protect state investment on the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers Project. Presided over by Namba, the 2nd Assistant S.D.O for Momo, and Ndoumbe Dika Jean Pierre, 1st Assistant S.D.O for Mezam, the Fon of Bali informed them that, the Project had been installed on a disputed land and as such would not work and wondered why an important project meant for the youths could start without proper consultation with the Fons of the affected land and

insisted that the name, “Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers” should be changed and Article 8 of the 1977 Decree demarcating the boundary between Bali and Ngyen-Mbo should be applied.⁷³

The hard stand of the Bali provoked the administrative authorities to insist that the parcel of land demarcated for the Project was now state property and belong neither to Bali Nyonga nor Ngyen-Mbo and promised that a competent regional commission would handle the boundary dispute, and warned that the destructions on government investment on the Ngyen-Mbo PAIJA Project site should stop.⁷⁴

These warnings fell on deaf ears as on 7 July 2016, about sixteen hectares of farm land of the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers was destroyed by some Bali youths destroying 8000 coffee plants, 445.000 corn, 1200 plantain stems, 16.000 tomatoes stems, and 309 yams plants were destroyed by the invaders.⁷⁵ In retaliation, the Ngyen-Mbo Young Farmers on 12 July 2016 barricaded, with the help of trunks of trees, the road linking Mbengwi to Bamenda. It took the administrative authorities of Mbengwi several hours of negotiation with the Young Farmers to have the road liberated.⁷⁶ Further administrative attempts at arbitration was rendered difficult by the outbreak of the Anglophone crisis in the North West and South West Regions in 2016 and its transformation into an armed conflict in 2017 between secessionist forces and the Republican forces made it impossible for all stakeholders responsible for the management and resolution of land tenure conflicts to hands off from considering the evolution of the Bali Nyonga/Ngyen-Mbo conflict as a priority. This was so because some battles of the armed conflict between the secessionists fighters and the Republican forces were equally fought on the disputed site.

V. Conclusion

This article has revealed that since the escalation of the Bali Nyonga/Ngyen-Mbo conflict, the British colonial administration, the UN Trusteeship leaders and the administrative authorities of the Republic of Cameroon have multiplied their efforts in resolving the conflict by organizing several meetings and enacting administrative acts aimed at bringing the crisis to an end. The creation of the PAIJA project was aimed at pacifying both communities. But, the project was poorly conceived and executed thus serving as justifiable reason for the repeated Bali Nyonga attacks and destructions on the disputed site. After the last major meeting in 2016, attempts at finding solution to the crisis was stifled by the outburst of the Anglophone crisis that turned into an armed conflict. The havoc caused by secessionist and the regular Government forces fighting each other in the region has made it difficult for the administrative authorities to continue in resolving the Bali-Nyonga-Ngyen-Mbo conflict and this has had a toll on the people of both communities.