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# WOMEN, CONFLICT AND PEACE: A CASE STUDY OF A TRIBAL WAR IN CAMEROON

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In conflicts, the position and role of women have traditionally been made invisible or irrelevant. Their experiences are marginalized, if not ignored, by the hegemonic masculinity of the social and political world, associated with male dominance and power which portrays the men as perpetrators of violence and at the same time, the main actors at peace negotiation tables. Yet, conflicts take place within pre-existing patterns of socially defined and differentiated identities with divisions and conflicting interests that impact both men and women.

In this paper, I shall examine four issues:

- The nature of the tribal conflict
- The experience and role of women in the conflict in Cameroon.
- The role of women in bringing peace to the region.
- Women's dilemma in the aftermath.

In addition, the paper examines how creating a sustainable peace environment is hard in a win-lose or lose-lose situation, and was not an easy task even in a win-win scenario, as that of Bafanji-Balikumbat. I will argue for the need to include gender in bringing peace, at the same time highlighting the gender inequalities and injustice in these traditional communities, where a woman is often considered the property of her husband. While suggesting some strategies for reconstruction that will empower women, certain questions will be answered: *who benefits, who loses, who participates, what has changed, who controls, who had access, what is the balance of obligations and rights, power and privileges between genders and between social groups?*

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## THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

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Bafanji and Balikumbat are two neighboring villages in the North Western part of Cameroon. For decades the two villages have had periodic land disputes, which finally led to the intervention of the government in 1968. When government officials realized that the disputed area was Bafanji land, boundary pillars were put in place indicating the official boundary between the two villages, to the dissatisfaction of the Balikumbats.

The 1990s marked a critical time. Heads of states were obliged to make significant choices. They had to take action in response to the crisis resulting from pressures on their regimes for change, combined with aggressive World Bank and Structural Adjustment Programme Policies which had a profound impact on countries in Africa. President Paul Biya of Cameroon, around this time, introduced democracy. With the coming of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s, the Balikumbat leadership

supported the ruling CPDM party while most of the leaders of the Bafanji were either neutral or supported the opposition party (SDF). This was because a new subdivision created in the region was named Balikumbat subdivision and Balikumbat village was made its headquarters, to the dissatisfaction of the Bafanjis.

This disagreement between the two villages led to the invasion of Bafanji by the Balikumbats in 1995. The normal man-to-man arms-free combat of old gave way to the use of firearms, spears, cutlasses, kerosene, petrol and matches. The boundary pillars of 1968 were removed. Almost the entire village of Bafanji was looted and burnt down to ashes. Men, women and children were killed, roads leading to Bafanji blocked and bridges destroyed. Women and girls were raped. There was massive displacement of the population, capture of the Bafanji village shrine, lack of trust, malnutrition and diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. The tribal war of Bafanji and Balikumbat is a typical example of relapse in post-conflict communities. Bigombe et al. put it clearly '...civil wars always end but, usually, they restart.'<sup>2</sup>

Other tribal conflicts that have taken place in the North West Province of Cameroon since the 1990s are the Babanki – Bambili, the Bambui – Fengi, the Awing – Baligham, the Mbessa – Oku and the Bawock – Balingonga conflicts. The last two tribal wars took place in March – June 2007.

## THE EXPERIENCE AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CONFLICT IN CAMEROON

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**Women were also combatants:** Some women were actively engaged in the armed conflict of Bafanji-Balikumbat. They took up arms, especially spears with poisoned heads, and killed as many opposing forces as possible. Some of the worst instances of violence, burning and looting were perpetrated by women. This contradicts the view that men make war whereas women make peace. Some of these women fought in self-defence. In the course of fighting, many of them were killed.

**Women were also caretakers:** While both men and women played combatant roles, women had additional support roles, as they were also involved in caring for the male combatants and victims, and serving as mail runners and spies. One woman reported how she used local herbs to heal a wounded man, how she fed and kept some wounded and sick persons safe until they got better. Unfortunately, these additional roles of women seemed invisible and often unrecognized.

**Women experienced violence:** Women and girls were raped during this conflict. It was not just rape. It was humiliation of the men, since in the culture of the people, their womenfolk are their pride. Of course these raped women and girls can never talk publicly of their plight for fear of being considered “damaged goods” and of being discriminated against. The conflict brought frustration to the men and they themselves perpetrated violence on their women by insults, physical assault and psychological torture.

**Women as refugees:** The conflict created an atmosphere of insecurity and fear, and because people were afraid of losing their lives, they left their homes for nearby villages and cities. Movement was not easy for women as some of them were pregnant, some were mothers of young children, some were traumatized widows, some had to stay behind and take care of the old and their very sick relatives, and some had nowhere to go to. We saw all categories of women and children and non-combatant men sleeping under trees. Even those who finally moved had to cope with the inhospitality of disgruntled hosts for outstaying their welcome.

Movement from home resulted in family breakdown and social destabilization. Non-combatant men lost access to resources and could no longer provide for their families' needs and protection. This resulted in frustration and violence towards the women. Young girls assumed more responsibilities in care and domestic chores. Having lost crops and property, women were limited in their ability to secure their own livelihood.

**Women as civilians:** As civilians, women got caught up in the war, some of them got killed, some lost their husbands, and others lost their children, some lost other relatives. Some women were targeted as part of a deliberate strategy. Women were kidnapped and interrogated until they were rescued by police or gendarmes. I cite here the case of Lydia Nkambeng and Anna Pechendia.

**Social transformation:** The women of Bafanji and Balikumbat, during the conflict, grieved and suffered loss, but they also stepped into roles which they were previously denied, resulting in loss of identity for both men and women. This is because in the course of trying to survive during this conflict, women developed strategies to create a viable and satisfying life for themselves, confirming Lindsey's<sup>3</sup> remark. Men experienced loss of domestic power, and this affected their private sphere resulting in frustration and violence towards the women. There was an increase in female-headed household, a population change to more women than men and the emergence of more women groups.

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## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN BRINGING PEACE IN THE REGION

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**Formal peace negotiations:** During the many formal peace negotiations that took place between the Bafanji's and the Balikumbats with government ministers as negotiators, women played only minor roles like cooking and dancing to entertain the negotiators. The chiefs, quarter heads and village elders (all men) were brought to the negotiation tables. There were no means for women to take part as women. They were ignored and decisions were taken on issues that affected their lives. The peace negotiations were considered to be male matters, which could also mean that they employed discourses and practices closer to men's reality than to women's.

**Informal peace negotiations: Women from within Bafanji and Balikumbat:** Women from within Bafanji and Balikumbat buried the dead, provided shelter for orphans and the homeless in the mud houses that they constructed. These rural, mainly illiterate, women, whose main preoccupation is farming, provided food to those who depended on them. Through their farming groups, thrift and loan groups and prayer groups, they advised themselves to stress the importance of peace to their offspring. They also used some of these groups to improve their economy. War widows sold farm produce to pay fees for their children. Women from this area are forgiving, hardworking and peace loving. They have strengthened the women's groups that existed before the war and new women's groups have emerged.

**Women from outside Bafanji-Balikumbat:** Women from outside who played a role in bringing peace in the region were mainly female non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for example, CAMAUW<sup>4</sup>, and elite women of the area in the Diaspora. The female NGOs lobbied for peace, they were peace mediators, peace negotiators and carried out peace sensitization by organizing training seminars and workshops on peace. Elite women in the Diaspora joined their male counterparts in lobbying and assisting in the creation of a government secondary school in the area, which now provides free education to children. They took part in negotiating and

creating a new road in the area. They comforted and consoled their men, who were frustrated because of the war.

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## WOMEN'S DILEMMA IN THE AFTERMATH

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At the end of the Bafanji-Balikumbat tribal war, the ex-combatants, the civilian population and the refugees were faced with returning home to a crumbled society burnt down by war. The returnees had to rebuild, but with what resources, especially when it comes to women?

In the North West Province of Cameroon in general, and in the Bafanji-Balikumbat region in particular, women and girls are oppressed and disadvantaged in relation to land ownership, labour, education, level of violence, legal rights as well as customary laws. The women of this area do not inherit property in the event of the death of their husbands or fathers. All property is handed over to the sons, nephews or brothers. Women have no inheritance rights because they themselves are considered to be property of their husbands. So after war, a man comes back and rebuilds or remarries any young girl of his choice if his wife or wives were killed. But a woman whose husband was killed in the conflict has no right over her husband's land or property. She has no right over her father's land or property. She cannot remarry because nobody will accept a woman with five children. She has to rebuild but with what resources?

In this community, women are expected to farm land that they will never own, cook, clean, care for the children, the sick and the old free of charge and at the expense of their education. Men take up the paid jobs. Even when the women work, the men manage their resources or salaries. In this community also, a man never dies a natural death. The wife is often blamed for the death of the husband and widowhood is always a horrific experience. Widows are tormented in the name of tradition but this same tradition does not affect the widower.

The aftermath of the conflict was very complicated for women because they suffered tremendously at the hands of the husbands who came back with more desire for power and property. Oppression and violence increased, making the home a torture chamber for the women. The men focused their attention on how to run the new society. Thus, the same men who started the war also wanted to shape the peace.

The conflict provided some women with opportunities to emerge as leaders, and at this point the women wanted to retain their new identities while the men wanted to preserve their pre-war masculine prerogative of dominance. At the same time, the old institutions that governed social and behavioural norms have not changed.

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## CONCLUSION

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From what I saw, the task of sustaining peace at the end of a conflict is enormous. It involves replacing what has been destroyed or lost, bringing in new developments, repatriating and reintegrating refugees, healing trauma, promoting good economic and political governance. I agree with Evelyn Mafeni: 'Post conflict communities are characterized by devastated economy, reduced human and physical infrastructure, lack of transparency in civil institutions, poor governance, corrupt legal systems and judiciary, dependence on aid flow, missed development opportunities and decrease in development potentials'.

However, the scope and pace of rebuilding is heavily determined by how the conflicts end. Conflicts can end in a mutually satisfactory way (win-win), or in a frustrating one for some or all

of the parties involved (win-lose or lose-lose). Most Bafanjis and some Balikumbats appreciate reconciliation but advocate for prosecution and see trials as necessary in order to bring violators of human rights to justice and deter future repression, arguing that a just society is emphatically marked by holding past violators criminally liable. Reconciliation as the people of Bafanji and Balikumbat understand it means holding hands, sharing a drink or meal together, visiting each other and seeking shelter from one another if need be. The question remains as to how trust can be regenerated against a background of recent atrocities, human rights abuses, lost lives and pain.

To rebuild post conflict Bafanji-Balikumbat so as to avoid the possibility of relapse, all aspects of inequality should be eliminated including gender inequality. As Evelyn Mafeni<sup>5</sup> puts it, both women and men make war or are complicit in it, benefit from it or suffer from it, therefore, both men and women should be involved in rebuilding. Women do not only have to be on the agenda, but also have to be at the table to participate in the process of building peace.

What is most important is that the diverse interests of women and men must be integrated from the very beginning of any process of negotiation. In this way, women's experiences cannot be understood in isolation from men's, given that they are generally a consequence of the interrelationship of men's and women's roles and status in society.

In the Bafanji-Balikumbat community, gender inequality affects women most, so it is the women who must bring about a change, because those who are privileged benefit from this system that marginalizes others. Women's groups should not only be for economic and social empowerment but also seek women's political participation at the village, sub-divisional, divisional and national levels. They should fight for inclusion at the decision-making levels. They can ask for a quota for representation at the village council, at the meeting of elders, quarter heads, so that there can be power sharing between men and women. Women should have the opportunity of becoming chiefs. If widowers have to go naked as widows do, that tradition may change. Women and men should have equal opportunities and life chances as well as equal voices. Through their groups and organizations, women can make their recommendations and voices heard, seek women's interests, concerns and needs in the rebuilding framework.

Given that the capacity for women to participate and take lead in peace building initiatives is influenced by many factors such as poverty, poor health care, illiteracy, the Bafanji-Balikumbat community needs to develop special strategies to tackle the issue of inequality. Providing support for women in terms of job training initiatives, mentoring, public awareness, campaign/communication and information technologies, and funding, is important as well as setting targets are further strategies to increase women's participation in decision making.

To sum up, an integrated approach is recommended, one that responds to the needs of the community and facilitates not only change of social values and attitudes but also structural changes to tackle inequality.

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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Bigombe, Betty et al (2000). 'Policies for Building Post Conflict Peace', *Journal of African Economics*, Vol.9 (3), pp. 323-48.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsey, Charlotte (2000). 'Women and War'. *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 82 (839), pp. 561-80.

<sup>4</sup> CAMAUW Annual Report 2002, pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Mafeni (2004). *Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Africa: The Importance of Women's Mobilization*. pp. 25-41.

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