



Chieftaincy Succession in Bakossi Community: The Case of Bermin Village, 1980-2019

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Abstract: Chieftaincy squabbles has been viewed as a land mark issue among decentralised communities in Cameroon. This phenomenon has become a major discourse among scholars in recent times. Although chieftaincy institutions were characterized by father to son patrimony in most instances, contestation prevailed among families within the Bakossi ethnic group. The case of Bermin became paramount on the bases of power and authority that will influence contestation of either maintaining the statusquo of hereditary or accepting a transmutation into rotatory leadership. This has acted as a major impasse in Bermin chieftaindom affecting socio-economic and political activities. Data collection for the study was drawn from primary sources. The analytical method used was qualitative and presentation approach thematic cum chronology. This thesis argues that the chieftaincy wrangling in Bermin was influenced by the desire of power and authority among influential persons. The findings of this research revealed that succession dissonances emerged out of the growing differences among communities in maintaining a hereditary system or transiting into a rotatory system. The different belligerents exploited the pitfalls of customary and laws enforced to advance claims to the throne on a hereditary or rotatory bases. The difficulty in resolving chieftaincy squabbles in due course stemmed from the inconsistent administrative dispositions that were centred on their parochial interest. The inability to arrive at a compromise amidst growing tensions lead to an eventual standstill in the affairs of the various communities. It therefore created a vacuum over leadership in the communities considering the deadlock among the various families.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chieftaincy succession is indeed a pivotal aspect of traditional governance in Africa, with the institution of chieftaincy being a cornerstone of African communities. The chief, viewed as divine, wielded significant power, exercising judiciary, legislative, executive, religious, and military functions¹. The notion of power and governance in society like Bakossi has always been pegged on the rumour of traditional leaders who by norms were unstill the percolation of European rule the veritable owners of power. As owners of power and custodian of tradition, these traditional leaders who came to be generally referred to as chiefs sought to exert powers not only on people held as their subjects but extended the seal to land, property and other resources. Like the modern European governance, these authorities rule defined areas and had institutions that defined and ran their daily businesses. Disagreement, immensely across between the different traditional leaders over power and influence as well as veritable ownership of people and resources like the modern European governance, these authorities rule defined areas and had institutions that defined and ran their daily businesses. Disagreement immensely arose between the different traditional leaders over power and influence as well as veritable ownership of people and resources. This would put to question the traditional leadership on a rotation bases among different families or hereditary within the same family. This conflicts disoriented the Bakossi society particularly the Bermin, Nteho, Badun and Ebamut chiefdoms, renegotiated the extend and tempo of the relations the people had with their chiefs. With the creation of administrative units, Bakossi politics underwent different mutations each of them affecting developments in several dimensions.

This study tracks the portrait of chieftaincy conflicts in Bermin chieftaindom bringing out the contours of their mutations in the area. Tracing the portrait of chieftaincy conflicts and the actors plus foundations helps in indicating where chords of cohesion can be reignited.

2. STAKES OF CHIEFDOMS WITHIN THE BAKOSSI COMMUNITY

In the context of Cameroon, the institution of chieftaincy despite its highly hybrid character was regulated by status, particularly decree No77/245 of July 15, 1975 which laid down the duties and responsibilities as well as the benefits and categories of chiefs: first, second and third class chieftaindoms.¹ The area of jurisdiction of first class chieftaindom encompasses at least two second class chiefs within a division and is set up by a Prime Ministerial Order. A second class chieftaindom is comprised of at least two third class chieftaindoms within a Sub Division from the Ministry of Territorial Administration and decentralisation. On the other hand, a third class chieftaindom was analogous to a village or quarter in a jurisdiction of the Senior Divisional Officer. As leaders in their communities, Metiege concedes that they play political roles, but are subordinated in their electoral districts and their means of appointment, responsibilities, financial status and disciplinary approach makes them agents of state.²

Furthermore, the leader wields executive, legislative and judicial powers. He designates the officials of these organs and his subordinates. He is both a temporal and spiritual ruler, chief priest, intermediary between the worlds of the ancestors and those of the living. He has overall authority over persons, goods and land - which is sacred and serves as a medium of communication with the dead. He holds the land in custody for his subjects and whoever needs land turns to him, but he has no right of ownership. It is important to note here that the chiefs in Bakossi society during the post-colonial state context are the custodians of the land on behalf of the state which claims monopoly over all parcels of land.

However, the segmentary societies of Cameroon's coastline are characterised by lack of "leaders with all-embracing authority over persons and property nor do they have strong centralised authorities, administrative machineries and constituted judicial institutions. What obtains is a segmentary pattern of traditional political organisation based upon a loose-knit and non-hierarchical clan structure. The exercise of political power is bestowed upon a local chief priest or council of elders, "with specific roles assigned to each member of the council. Authority was in the person of a ritual functionary and not in the chief who was a political leader.

During the pre-colonial and colonial period in the Bakossi society was a centralised kingdom but today various communities are decentralised, segmentary politics under the leadership of a chief. According to Permuta chieftaincy in most villages was hereditary and accession to the throne was restricted to sons of the soil not those alienated or members of slave families, whenever the throne becomes vacant. Upon the death of a chief, members of the royal family decide on who to choose among themselves to succeed the chief to become the next king of that Bakossi village. In view of this, the appointment of good moral standing, show respect for everyone, especially the elders of the community, must be intelligent and demonstrate both fact and wisdom in solving problems in the community.

He must also be literate as today's modern administration demands penmanship skills, specifically the ability to read speeches in public. It was these characteristics of changing times, particularly literacy, that led to a fifteen years long succession conflict between various lineages in Bermin chieftaindom and Ebamut where the elites claimed the chiefs were not educated and as such needed to be replaced and thus led to the persistence of conflict in these areas.³

Most of the appointed Regents in Bakossi areas were usually referred to as "administrative chiefs," "Government chiefs" and the chief himself as the traditional chief partly showing the erasure of their power as well as the conflict between modern and traditional authority systems. The chief, unlike in the western grassland Region of Cameroon where chiefs still have executive right to marriage by capture as a mark of their destructive status within society, was an equal among equals. In other words, he neither commands any special respect nor authority despite his high office. He was usually the custodian of the land and customs of his people though the intermediary of a dense network of institutions including

¹Decree No77/245 of July 15, 1975 which lays down the duties and responsibilities as well as the benefits and categories: first, second and third class chieftaindoms

²Metiege, Divine, Chieftaincy Law: Organizing Chieftaindoms in Cameroon. Available <http://l1nanjecreative-thinkingblog.spot.hu/2012/08/Chieftaincy-Law-Organizing-Chieftaindoms-in.htm/>.2012

³ibid

Muankum and Ngwe.⁴ Based on this complex situation, traditional leadership was highly influenced by powerful elites, hence leading to conflicts.

3. CHIEFTAINCY CONFLICTS IN BERMIN CHIEFDOM

Chieftaincy in Bermin village has witnessed a single transition from one family to another during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The pioneer family that dominated chieftaincy institution in Bermin was the *Muasundem*⁵. The *Muasundem* family had enjoyed exclusive rights during the existence of their father Ber Ngwe. It was based on this premise that the first ruler of this village was Ekoke Nzi⁶. The second error with the Bernin chieftaincy was that Ejome Ngupe ruled before (Ekaka) but from the real traditional sources, Ekoke Nzi (Ekaka) existed and died before Ejome Ngupe.⁷ The reason why the leadership of Bernin village changed hand from *muasundem* family was their inability to withstand the brutal German rule. In fact, the Germans were so ruthless in their search for slaves to the extent that Ekoke Nzi had to abdicate the throne. By the 1890's, the Germans who were so aggressive looking for slaves made the *muasundem* family fled to mbang road at a place called *kpu mbiabe*. As a result of their movement, this throne became vacant as every family was running in fear of the Germans. Unfortunately for the Muabul family, they had a father with leprosy who could not run. His name was Ejome Ngupe. This Ejome Ngupe was abandoned in a hut all alone as the brothers fled from the Germans. When the Germans came and met this man, they sympathized with him and left him unhurt.⁸

After a short while, the Germans left and nursed the plan of coming back unknown to the population of Bermin village. The Germans later came back a few months later and took the population by surprise. In fact, every body fled and abandoned Ejome Ngupe alone in his hut. The Germans this time around caught Ejome Ngupe, tortured, tormented and forced him to lie with back on the ground and to face the sun.⁹ However, the people who were braved enough to tip toe and verify the real happenings saw Ejome Ngupe's torments and reported back to his family members who felt sorry for Ejome Ngupe. The Germans compelled Ejome Ngupe to call back his people using the talking drum. The Germans hide themselves and when the people came, they took them away. The Germans were very satisfied with their booty. In this effect, they immediately crowned Ejome Ngupe as chief of Bermin village and a German flag was given to him as a symbol of authority.¹⁰ Chief Ejome Ngupe ruled until he died around the dawn of the 19th century.

Furthermore, shortly after the death of Ejome Ngupe, the *muasundem* family rose up to seize the throne. Although this caused a pandemonium in the community, it was later challenged by Nzelle Ngupe the brother of the deceased chief. His ascension to the throne was criticized by the elders who thought he was not competent to rule the people of Bermin. After going through the enthronement process at Mbang during palm nut harvesting by the ancestors and with the support of the Germans, Nzelle Ngupe was finally crown chief in 1904. He ruled for a period of over fifty years and was succeeded by his son Johanness Mejame who died in 1986. The afore mentioned chiefs were dynamic and efficient in the functions. All of them emanated from the Royal family from Muabul.¹¹ After the death of Chief Johannes Mejame, the chieftaincy institution in this locality was vacant for so long. Thereafter, according to Nzegge Patrick Etone, a retired head teacher, it was during the Bermin Cultural and Development Association (BECUDA) that Ebong Belle Francis was nominated as chief of Bermin and he ruled for over eleven years before his sudden death between Bambe and Bermin on his way home in the year 2000. Other sources proved that Ebong Francis Belle from the Muanjeh family seized the throne in a civil coup.¹²

⁴ Ejedepang, *The Tradition of a people Bakossi*, p74

⁵ This is often referred to as the royal family in Bakossi community.

⁶ Buea National Archives, Progressive Report on the Bakossi Clan, 1952.8 in fact, ekoke was mistaken in the buea national archives as (ekaka)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Mejame Augustine Esong. Aged 102, grand son of the deceased chief, interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie, 22nd December, 2022

⁹ Interview with Mejame Augustine,

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Nzegge Patrick Etone. Aged 88, a retired Head Teacher from Tiko, 13th April 2020

According to Mathias Kome, he used the pretext of the Bermin Cultural and Development Association as a tool for his operation. Furthermore, this situation sparked off a lot of uproar in Bermin. This conundrum was characterized by attacks, counter attacks, jealousy and envy among the people of a community with the same history. It should be noted here that Ebong Belle Francis finally died on his way to Bermin for an abortive installation which was not to hold due to cancellation from the Governor's office in Buea. In this document slated, re-investigation was ordered as to why to cancel a prefectorial order re-instated by the then territorial administration boss Sampson Enam Enam.

In addition, the death of Ebong Belle Francis, did not brought any solution to the conflict as both camps (Muakwantou) and (Muanjeh) continued to pull the ends of the string to grab back the vacant throne. In fact, the abrupt dead of the late chief Mejame Johanes in 1986 without any heir to the throne created a tense atmosphere among contendants that was the legitimate son Ewang Marcus Along, the grand son Ebong Belle Francis who claimed the late chief fathered him and openly rejected his biological father Ewu Belle Thomas (Ngyiam) the lion. Regarding chieftaincy conflict in this area, the grandson Ewang Along Ngupe Marcus one of the legitimate contendants, on a letter addressed to the Divisional Office of Nguti on the 1st August 1988 with **Ref.No.G.39.03/D3/29/15, dated 4th April 1988**, to the regent of Bermin village, for chieftaincy consultation talks to be held on the 30th April 1988, asking the regent to assemble his villages on this date. In page two of his letter, he started by presenting a brief history to the people of Bermin made up of three major families which includes Muankwantou, Muanje, and Etuge-nzeke. To him, before the arrival of the Germans, the kwatou had been handling the chieftdom.

This particular kwantou family, was divided into four small separate families as follows: Ebul, Sundem, muekwi, and muemuikang. From these four small separate families, the chieftaincy came from Ebul. Ebong Belle Francis, the self-proclaimed chief comes from the Njeh family which had nothing to do with the families cited above.¹³ Apart from that, the chieftaincy started with Ebul earlier mentioned, being the chief's family, he had three sons, namely Ngupe-Kwi, Ebube, and Etulia. The grandson Alung Ngupe Marcus explained that by Ebong Belle trying to lay spheres of influence over chieftaincy title is bringing corruption, and he had put the whole village in confusion. As stated by Ewang Along Ngupe, one of the brothers mentioned that, since the chief's family was a poor one, they will dominate them and even deprive them from their rights.

In fact, after a long struggle through fresh consultative talks, chief Ewang Along Macus was issued a prefectorial order on the 4th August, 2008 as the new chief of Bermin village. The prefectorial order of chief Ewang Marcus was issued permitting and instructing the traditional council how to operate. Nonetheless, this period in Bermin village marked an era of mutual suspicion and distrust between the two opposing camps. Many of these clashes ended in the law courts.

In 2016, during an administrative convocation, the two opposing camps accepted a reconciliation ceremony to take place in Bermin on the 9th of February 2017¹⁴. This reconciliation talks was supposed to be presided at by the sub divisional officer for Nguti Sub-Division. Unfortunately, he did not attend as he delegated powers to the principal of Government secondary school Bermin Ekane Godlove Ngoe who presided at the occasion¹⁵. On this day, the population of Bermin was taken a back when the principal read a new prefectorial order which modified the hitherto prefectorial order of chief Ewang Along Marcus IV. It was clearly written on this pre-fectoral order that Chief Ewang along Marcus IV took over the throne from Chief Ebong Belle Francis. This element was not inserted in the first prefectorial order of Chief Ewang Along Marcus IV. This first pre-fectoral order was issued by the pioneer Senior Divisional Officer of kupe-Muanenguba Division Mustapha Njoya who considered the prefectorial order of Ebong Belle France nullified.

The new prefectorial order was received with mixed feelings by many free thinkers as a purported document intended to distort the hereditary tenets existing in Bermin chieftdom. Many proceeded to say that this document was a weapon to destabilize Bermin once more on the day of this reconciliation and the newly formed traditional council was proclaimed as Ewu Ignatuis Ejome was appointed the new

¹³File no p.1147/s.8, Buea National Archives (BNB),23/05/1967,.8

¹⁴Ademy Bisou.Aged 54 the Secretary General for Bermin Tradition Council,interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie 22nd August,2022.

¹⁵Ekane Godlove Ngoe.Aged 57,the Principal of GSS Bermin who read the Prefectorial Order following power delegation by the Sub Divisional Officer for Nguti,interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie at his residence in Kumba,20th July,2019

chairman of Bermin Traditional Council. The post of regent was abandoned (cancelled). The post of the deputy chairman was equally neglected. The body that formed this council was code named as “The Tiko” Conference. This conference was held in Nzegge’s residence in Tiko who later doubled as the chair. Indeed, the “Tiko” conference yielded positive results but its results were so devastating as its failed woefully. Taking a close look on the issue under investigation, like any other chieftaincy conundrum in the South West of Cameroon, the situation in Bermin emerged in 1987 one year after the death of Johanese Mejaame who died in 1986.

The first instance to takeover the throne in Bermin village without following the hereditary tenets was revealed in 1987 in a meeting at Mabanda-Kumba in the residence of Alphonsius Ngeme. This meeting ended in a complete deadlock as late Alphonsius Ngeme strongly disagreed the idea in his house on grounds that chieftaincy titles are by inheritance and can never be bought in the Bakossi land no matter any amount of money.¹⁶ Ebong Belle Francis during this particular day had made his intentions known to the public to become the next chief of Bermin village though not from the royal family. On the other hand, Ewang Marcus Along held the bull by the horns as he challenged Ebong Belle Francis. Marcus braved all odds in order to inherit what rightfully belongs to him there by maintaining the hereditary principles which has long existed in Bermin chiefdom. It should be noted here that they was a planned consultative talks to be held in Bermin but later manifests and become installation of Ebong Belle Francis as chief of Bermin in 1989 following a prefectoral order No.183/1989 of 22/02/89 appointing Ebong Belle Francis as chief of Bermin village was with effect from the date of signature of this order. The welcome address of this jamboree was read by Bwene Paul Ntube.¹⁷

During his welcome address, there was a clause that read thus:“chieftaincy in Bermin is not by hereditary”. This clause raised eye brows and accentuated a strong mobilization among youths who immediately wrote a memorandum to alert the Nguti Administration of this latest fraud in Bermin community which would eventually resurrects into a blood war. In a letter addressed to the D.O of Nguti, the youths had indicated their disenchantment over this issue. In view of the above, the Divisional officer of Nguti was informed that the installation is not recognized by the youths of Bermin village. Amongst the signatories of this petition was Ewang Along an influential and dynamic young man and that of Mathias Akwi Ewange from Muanjeh family who stood for the truth¹⁸.This petition greatly provoked so many reactions as one Elite Epie Nnoge wrote to congratulates the ordained Ebong Belle Francis as chief. He further reiterated in his letter that Ebong Belle Francis is the choice of the people instead of a mushroom man like Ewang Along Marcus.¹⁹

After a long tussling between the two camps (Muakwatou) and (Muanjeh) Ebong Belle decided to take the Muakwatou to court for justice to take its course. The trial of this case took place at Nguti in the late 1980s but the verdict was finally proclaimed in Kumba same year. In view of this verdict, some Muakwatou leaders like Ambrose Bwene Nzams, Ankeluis Ngole and Simon Hene were sentenced for defamation and threat of life. The element of chieftaincy was later handed to the administration for scrutiny. The sentence of this leaders was not severe as they were only given house imprisonment²⁰. It should be noted that the leader of Muakwatou camp was Ambrose Bwene Nzams . Ambrose was one of the first educated persons in Bermin who residence both in Kumba Fiango and Lobe where he had his palm plantation. Many people who migrated out of the village were accommodated by him.²¹He had a say in chieftaincy matters considering his acquisition of formal education and from the royal family.

Besides, in the court case in Kumba, the struggle still continued as the Muakwatou struggled to turn the tides at the helm of Bermin village. The supporters of Ebong Belle Francis like Bwene Paul Ntube,

¹⁶Bah Julius Belle.Aged 55,uncle to self proclaimed Late Chief Belle at Bermin interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie on the 10th August,2021.

¹⁷Akwi Mathias Ewange from Muanjeh family who stood for the truth.Aged 66 at Bermin Village by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie on the 10th August,2021.

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰Ibid

²¹Ewu Ngeme David.Aged70 Retired Commissioner of Police, in his residence OZA in Yaounde by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie18th December, 2019

Ewang David Mejame, Esong Augustine, Ekwede Alexander, Kome Mathias and Etuge Ankeluis Ngole, all turned against Ebong Belle Francis. All these people were from the family of Kwantou and said they were gullible because he brought them gifts like tobacco, stock fish (mokajo) and whisky. They further explain that it was due to their “langa tongue” that he succeeded over them. First and foremost, they supported him as a care taker (nwale or nkuh) and not as a gazetted chief. The second reason is that he mentioned in his welcome address that chieftaincy in Bermin is not by inheritance thereby trying to destroy the hereditary tenets. Lastly, Belle told lies in several occasions in his own favour so as to win the stool. The king makers further argue that they didn't sign the (installation welcome address) of chief Ebong Belle. In this direction, Ebong Belle annoyed them by forging their signatures.²²

Due to such confusion, chaos, unrest and anarchy in the community, the administration ordered for a fresh consultative talks to investigate and bring out the other side of the story in Bermin chieftaincy. This consultative talk did not and never yielded any fruit as trouble in Bermin still kept on escalating in the periphery of the community. After the consultative talks, the minutes were forwarded to the pioneer Senior Divisional officer of Kupe-Muanenguba Division in Bangem Mustapha Njoya who cancelled the prefectorial order of Ebong Belle Francis. A letter written by the Senior Divisional Officer for Kupe-Muanenguba Division cancelling the Prefectoral Order No. 183/1989 of 22/02/89 appointing Belle Francis as chief. Despite the cancellation of the prefectorial order, Belle and his camp did not show any sign to give-up as they went to Yaounde at the level of Ministry of Territorial Administration.²³ In a related story, the Minister of Territorial Administration Sampson Enam Enam ordered for the re-instating of the prefectorial order of Ebong Belle Francis to be preceded by an immediate installation. In this light, the administrative chain of the South West province was taken aback as the Divisional officer of Nguti was served with an invitation to install Ebong Belle in Bermin. However, on hearing the news of this installation, the Muakwantou people reacted with a petition to the governor of South West province. In reaction to this, the Governor reacted with an official letter to the S.D.O of Kupe Muanenguba Division concerning the issue.

However, before the response of the Governor of the South West Province, a powerful delegation of Muakwantou led by Ambrose Bwene accompanied by his notable like Ankeluis Ngole, Edward Ekine, Simon Hene, David Ewang and the young dynamic Ewang Marcus to see the minister of Territorial Administration. Unfortunately, the minister was not on site. In reaction to this, the Governor ordered re-investigation into this matter and this installation was cancelled on the basis. The reinstating of Belle's prefectorial order was to be done at the base and reports forwarded to the top for confirmation. Not the ministry forwarding reports to the governor and right down to the Sub Division. This was incorrect on the part of the administration because the base does preliminary investigation and forward to the top before any decision is affected.

Prior to the day of the installation, Ebong Belle was served with the cancellation letter from the Governor office by the Divisional Officer of Nguti Sub Division Ngone Benard. Ebong Belle did not reveal this information to his peers of his entourage. But from the office, it was noticed that his enthusiasm gradually disappeared.²⁴ Belle left Nguti after he had evacuated items to be used during and after installation proper. On his arrival between Bermin and Bambe, he started sweating profusely and suddenly, Ebong Belle Francis died.²⁵

In fact, the death of Francis Belle was considered as an immediate cause of all the conflict in Bermin Community as it marked a turning point in the annals of Bermin history. There was too much of resentment as the Muanjeh family accused the kwantou people for masterminding the death of the late chief who was not finally coronated. In view of the accusations, his death had a ramification on the Bermin people as it initiated a system of uncertainty where people had to distance each other for fear

²²Ekwede Alexander, Kome Martin, and Esong Augustine Mejame. Aged 88, 80 and 102 respectively at Bermin interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie 28 December, 2021.

²³Ibid

²⁴Ekine George Etuge. Aged 66, Chief Driver S.C.D.P Douala, interviewed by Epie Ngole Wilfred Epie Monday 8th August 2022

²⁵Ibid

of the known²⁶. People's farm roads leading towards their farms were blocked. A case in point was the late Ebong Belle's mother who disbars Bwene Joseph Esoka the current interim chair of the traditional council from accessing the road. Nonetheless, the Muanjeh people's after the death of Ebong Belle exhibited some degree of brutality on their relatives. A papable example was Sume Agnes married to Muankwatou daughter from the household of the deceased was brutalized.

Moreover, this idea was conceived by Ewu Belle Boniface brother of the deceased who masterminded this assault. Equally, on the other hand, Etuge Gregory Sume fired a gun shot in the air at the village Round About to signal the declaration of war, but thanks to the timely intervention of Ejome Samuel Hene who saved Bermin from a near mutiny. In fact, Ejome Samuel cancelled the muanjeh camp on the effects of war and finally ordered the war declarant to return to his home with his gun. Hence, the funeral was finally conducted hitch free. On a related story, chief Ewang Marcus Along died a few years after his installation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study was instigated by the growing contention among families over traditional leadership. Chieftaincy conflicts in Bakossi community emerged out of disagreements amongst belligerents on maintaining a hereditary system or transcending to a rotatory system. The weak nature of the traditional institutions accentuated the conflicts issues in which wealth and influence became measuring instrument towards ascending the throne. In Bermin chieftdom, the situation became complicated with the advent of administrative authorities who adopted inconsistent measures in handling the issue further complicating the situation. The implications in brought to the forth included animosity, fear and tension.

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