

# **Kingship Institution and the Traditional Council in Conflicts in the Babungo Fondom of the Grassfield of Cameroon**

**INNOCENT ATEHGHANG AFUHNGHANG, Ph.D**

*Assistant Lecturer of History, ENS BERTOUA, University of Bertoua*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is an attempt to bring out the nature of relation that existed between the king's institution and the traditional council in Babungo in the colonial era. The relationship was indicated by the division of power between the office of king as village head and Ba, the head of the regulatory association. In the political history of Babungo, decision making and decision makers operated a "secret session" in the compound of the regulatory association called Tifwan. The association was a close arena for diplomatic and political debate operating on a strictly inward flow of information and or proposal and a consensual outflow of decision. Thus the political, social and economic life of the Fondom was always discussed and made known to the population as the sole prerogative of the king. Contrary to this perception, an indebt and scrupulous study of this nature of relation shows that, the king had no such autocratic and overwhelming powers but that effective decision making was in the hands of the senior title set of Tifwan, under the headship and command of Ba. It was this nature of relationship between the king's office and the village traditional council that encouraged King Saingi to attempt a reassertion of his authority with the result that the village became divided between the two institutions. In the long drawn battle for power and authority, belligerents solicited and or welcomed external intervention in the politics of the Fondom in a bid to either alter or maintain the statusquo.

**Keywords:** Cameroon, Western Grassfields, Babungo, Kingship, Ba

---

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Fondom of Babungo is one of the thirteen Fondoms that make up the Ndop plain in the Ngoketunjia Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. It is situated on the Bamenda ring road, about fifty kilometres from Bamenda town. Administratively, the village is governed from the Ngoketunjia Division.<sup>1</sup> The history of traditional leadership and crises of authority in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular is as old as the history of migration, settlement and state formation. This has evolved through time and space from the pre-colonial, colonial to even the post colonial era and the Fondom of Babungo was no exception to this rule. Goheen<sup>2</sup> argues that the question of interest power and influence was at the center of the conflict between the Fon of Nso and his sub chiefs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Republic of Cameroon, Decree No. 92/186 of September 1, 1992 creating Administrative Divisions.

<sup>2</sup> M. Goheen, "Chiefs sub chiefs and local control: Negotiation over land, struggle over meaning" in B. Chem Langhee and V.G. Fanson, (ed); Nso and its Neighbours: Readings in Social history, nassachusetts, Amberst college, 1996, pp. 399-407.

The Fon of Nso reveals that land and stewardship constitutes major symbols of political leadership and had negative consequences on the entire village. He argues that as the traditional society evolved, the conflicts multiplied and traditional authority gradually withered away, thus the struggle for repositioning.

Emerging from what Aletum<sup>3</sup> terms a “palace coup d’etat”, political conflict for authority and power between the regional Fondoms and the Central Fondoms started with the seizure of the throne of Niba Chi, the Fon of the autochthones in Mbebeli by the Tikar leader on his arrival in the area. As time went on, the Tikar leader in Bafut consolidated his authority in a new palace that was constructed in a valley referred to today as Mumelaa. From Mumelaa, the Tikar leader began to wield a lot of power and control over the rest of the Fondoms in the area.<sup>4</sup>

In his study of the political institutions of the Kom people, Nkwi points out that traditional authority is at the centre of all relations. First the authority of the traditional ruler rests on his ritual and moral position. Second, the traditional leader has the ability to enforce decisions in his society. Third, the traditional ruler’s authority is built on consent and consensus rather than on cohesion. Nkwi holds that, Bafut, Kom, Bali and Nso in the nineteenth century emerged as centralized states with centralized authority. The Fon was at the head of a hierarchical political structure, which permitted him to delegate powers and authority to regional representatives. In this political system, the King or Fon, according to Nkwi, was a sovereign leader with a hierarchical authority. In the nineteenth century, most of these rulers were also ruling over confederacies, which were often a mixture of pyramidal and hierarchical authority.

In like manner, the leadership tussle in Babungo that was principally a tussle for authority, power and influence, gained prominence during the reign of Saingi. Certainly not because previous actors were less concerned about imposing their authority and power but because of a combination of stakes ranging from the influence of Fondoms that hemmed the Village and the spectacular arrival and entry of Zingtgraff in Babungo that dramatized the crises.<sup>5</sup> While Zingtgraff saw the division in the village as an opportunity to make a new “friend” in his quest for a base to control the sub region, Saingi saw in the arrival of Zingtgraff an opportunity to exploit the presence of a foreign ally to consolidate his position in the ongoing power tussle. In the same vein, the emerging rich class of blacksmith, but less powerful and uninfluential, ambitiously wanted to use the crises to move to prominence in the political life of the Fondom. In sum, the Babungo kingship crises was blown out of proportion because of the interest of actors within and without the village.<sup>6</sup>

#### **The King and the Traditional Council in Conflict**

The struggle for power, authority and influence reached its peak during the fonship of Saingi. Acting in consent with the other members of the top ranking title-set of the kingdom, Ba took the leading role in ensuring the succession of the king. Ba’s authority was covert and impersonal, hiding behind the masks of the regulatory association. In public, all was done in the name of the king. In fact, Tifwan, the regulatory association was the locus of political authority and Ba, at its head, held effective power in the kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The understanding we make from this is that, kingship in Babungo was essentially dualistic in nature and was in the two personalities of Ba and the king, who represented respectively hidden decision making and open consensual authority.

---

<sup>3</sup> M.T. Aletum, *Political Conflicts, within the traditional and modern institutions of Bafut-Cameroon*, Louvain, Vander, 1974, pp. 55-57.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ndofoa Zofoa, aged 43, HRH Baungo, Babungo, September 18, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nchio Mimke Emmanuel, Aged 67, traditional councillor Babungo, Babungo September 20, 2017.

Furthermore, the regulatory association was a closed and secret association that excluded all women and was reserved for a selected few. Junior recruits entering the association were given clear instruction concerning the power ladder in the village. For example they were informed that the king ceases to be king when he enters the Tifwan's compound and must be addressed as Tifwanneh, meaning the honoured of Tifwan. In the physical and social space of the Tifwan regulatory association, the king ranks only as a privileged and senior member.<sup>8</sup> When the king entered Tifwan, it is not as king but as a member of the Tifwan under its head, Ba. Outside of Tifwan in the public space, Ba ranks second in the kingdom to the king and is considered as his assistant and deputy. In the absence of the king, it is the Ba that stands in his place. The senior title-set of Tifwan, the Voetughau, under the leadership of Ba, selects and install the new king. Tifwan as the "father of the king" is said to "make the new king". In the course of his seclusion in the Tifwan's compound and as the "child of Tifwan" the king stands in a relation of symbolic filial dependency . Thus throughout Saingi's reign, the king was to a very large extent dependent on Tifwan. Fowler captures this over bearing role of the Tifwan association and his personality on the king thus;

Prior to the arrival of Zintgraff and the subsequent imposition of colonial rule, the king was most certainly subordinate to the senior Voetughau title-set in the Tifwan compound. Elderly informants claim that this unit had the power to summon the king, to punish him for infringement of customs and traditions, and that no decision reached by the Voetughau could be vetoed or overtly obstructed by the king. However, the king did rank as an equal to individual members of this set and had his own stool in the Tifwan compound. Yet, he did not have an automatic right to entry to their meetings since they could refuse him access. In a wider context, a titular head of the kingdom was the king but political authority lay largely with the senior ranks of the regulatory association, Ba<sup>9</sup>.

Ritual functions were also another source of conflict between the king and Ba. Ritual functions were under Voetutitum the association of great priests who were under Ba's command. The king only represented the public personification and embodiment of the kingdom as a political and social entity. It is in this sense that, the attribution of directives affecting the kingdom to the office of the king should be understood. Successive colonial administrations were unable to come to terms with a governmental legislative and judicial body that was contained with a close and secrete association and seemingly not accountable to any larger public group.<sup>10</sup>

#### **The King Attempt to reassert his Authority and Power**

As time went on, the king tend to build up strong support groups or personal retainers and other political allies who were to owe their positions and hence their loyalties to the king and not to Tifwan. This was to permit the king to turn the tables and dominate the senior title-set, the Voetughau and Tifwan, who were at the center of decision making for the kingdom. This attempt brought further conflict between the king and Ba. This conflict paralysed the ritual, spiritual and ceremonial life of the fondom. Thus the use of the colonial administration by the king to impose himself at the expense of the Tifwan title holder, Ba. To achieve this, the king refused to permit the installation of successors to the descent group headship, made accusations of serious crimes, real or imaginary and used the colonial administration of Bamenda as an instrument of this policy.<sup>11</sup> The desired goal was to make Ba effectively subordinate to the king in the senior title-set of the Tifwan association.

#### **King Saingi Solicit and receives the Support of Blacksmith's in the power Imblioglio**

The kingdom's blacksmith soon emerged as a new force based on wealth derived from iron production.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Fowler, *African Sacred Kings: Expectations and Performance in the Cameroon Grassfields*, University of Pittsburg, Oxford, Vol. 32, No. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Paul Notue-Bianca Trianca, "Babungo, Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon", Bianca and Volta, Milan 2006, pp. 24-26.

They came up powerfully in opposition to Ba and the senior titleholders, and this constituted a key element in the disputed power tussel. Blacksmith lineages were of growing importance over the years following the death of Nywifon. Without titles or powers vested on them by tradition or the culture of the people that they commanded, they adopted a new strategy of compound expansion through acquisition of slaves. This encouraged the development of a compact settled core to the kingdom that stood in contrast to the redistribution of compounds outside this central area.<sup>12</sup>

While wealth from forging and trading iron products encouraged the expansion of blacksmith groups, it gave no access to what was a limited set of titles associated with political authority. There was scope in the social system for the acquisition of privileges and prestige through the creation of new lineage headships, the purchase of display goods, and membership or increased ranks in male association, but there was apparently very little potential for the creation of a new nobility with high ranks and political powers. This created enormous strain that, together with the fortuitous event of the demise of Ngwifon, almost led to the dissolution of the kingdom. Those without established authority employed force to install their own candidate for the kingship, fighting started in the palace, where Ba was beaten and his cap removed; a serious breach of custom. The kingdom split into two fractions and remained paralyzed politically, ritually and economically for a very long time paving the way for the intervention of neighbouring fondoms in the crises.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Kom and the kingship dispute in Babungo**

Perhaps in desperation resulting from the hardening of positions and the futile quest for a consensus in the dispute, Ba in a diplomatic move and owing to the long standing relations with Kom, invited the regulatory predecessor of the reigning Kom king to install his own candidate Kemeng, the predecessor of the reigning Kom king, is said by some Kom sources to have acquired Kwifon from Babungo, at a time when there were no true kings in Kom, only important elders, and when Kom itself was still only a small group. Relations between the regulatory associations of the two kingdoms appeared to have been sustained at a much higher level than in most instances where Babungo had provided the sacred and other elements of these regulatory associations. The invitation of Ba to the Kwifon of Kom to install his own candidate for the disputed

succession<sup>14</sup> ought perhaps to be viewed in this light. It was not unusual for the regulatory associations of allied neighbouring kingdoms to attend the royal mortuary ceremonies. What is implied here is that Ba would invite the Kom group to attend in order to validate the installation of his candidate for the succession.

This installation had seemingly unintended consequences of briefly uniting warring factions against a common external threat and created a momentary calm in which the position of Saingi was partly consolidated. Yet this dispute is said to have lingered for several years. During this time, each faction maintained separate markets, did not enter each other's wards and sometimes gathered to fight at the boundaries with stones until Saingi decided for a consensus to the matter.

#### **Saingi and the Traditional Council reach a Consensus**

At some point in this drawn-out process of reconsolidation, the German explorer, Eugene Zintgraff and his entourage threatened with death, literally stumbled out of the bush into the welcoming hands of Saingi. This was supposedly the best opportunity Saingi needed all his life, though later events proved that he lacked the domestic backing to exploit it to the fullest for his kingdom. We must acknowledge the fact that his immediate interest was attained.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ian Fowler, *Preliminary Materials for a History of Babungo*, Historical texts by Zintgraff, Moisel, Vollbehi, Leu, Oxford, 2001 and Interview with Fon Zofoa II

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Tiwana Eric, Aged 73, Quarter Head of Babungo, January 13, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Fowler, *African Sacred Kings*, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, *Preliminary materials for History of Babungo*, p. 12.

Zintgraff's attempt to find his return route to Bali Nyonga, with his party of companions running away from an attempt on their lives in Kom, was spotted in Babungo. Saingi sent a blacksmith, renowned for his bravery in slaying a leopard at close range to halt Zintgraff. Then the king along with a single palace retainer and one of his wives hurried after them to entreat Zintgraff to come and rest in Babungo.<sup>15</sup> In a situation like this, it is not at all surprising that Zintgraff later described Babungo as not only the most beautiful of the places he had seen but also the most disciplined. Fowler, putting it in Zintgraff's own words, states that: *"While I was struggling to pass a Brooke, a message came from the rear that natives without weapons were following us. I was wondering what to do when a messenger from the Fon, a stately man with an attractive face, suddenly stood before me. As a sign of peace, he carried a woman's spear and asked us at least to wait until the Fon himself came. The Fon soon appeared, accompanied by his ten unarmed men. A cowhide was stretched, a stool set out, and he sat down looking at me keenly while the crowing carriers looked on. Fon Mungo was his name, he made a very good impression with his full-bearded homely face. He asked through one of his servants why we did not wish to visit him, and whether we thought him a dangerous man. He had nothing to do with Bikom (Kom). We should pay him the honour of coming and staying a few days with him and he would certainly take us to Bali. We should have plenty to eat and drink, so much so that we would have some left over to give the messengers. This invitation made a great impact on the empty stomachs of our people. When I asked Baitabe (my overseer) his opinion, he said grounding his riffle 'well master, we go for town, if they want fight, we fight. Them no fit kill we like fools' and so we turned about after firing a greeting shot for the Fon".*<sup>16</sup>

From the quotation, we understand a number of issues; the welcoming nature of Fon Saingi and his people, the resistant nature of Kom against the Germans and the influential position of Bali Nyonga in the Grassfields. All these elements in one way or the other influenced the power structure of the plain.

Throughout history, individuals, groups and nations have appealed to the individual, group and national interest to justify the policies and strategies that they preferred. States and statesmen pay little attention to morality and legality as similarly contentious issues when attempts are made to determine national interest. Although in many instances, the "rights" or "wrongs" of an issue, idea and action maybe at first apparent, closer examination often clouds what at first glance may have been a clear moral or legal, immoral or illegal conclusion. During the German penetration of the Grassfield, Galega's decision to wait for Zintgraff in the inner circles of his palace was a strategy that was geared at justifying national interest. The morality and legality of the act was never a subject of interest at the time. In like manner, Saingi's decision to leave the inner circles of his palace to the frontier of the village was a strategy to safeguard the interest of the village in the phase of internal resistance and external incursions.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the Galega's situation where he received the blessings of his traditional council, the Saingi "scandal" generated a tug of war between him and his council led by Ba, which indirectly ended in a change in the power structure within the ranks of the villages in Ndop. Just before Zintgraff's contact with the Babungo people, a number of technical, social and economic factors had enabled the village to become a major and very prosperous center of iron production by the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the village was constricted by its logistical position in the region, one which inhibited expansion of its political and prestige system at the expense of its neighbours. This situation bore the seeds of internal conflicts and potential schism which, in the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rose to the surface in the form of a dynastic succession dispute, following the death of the barren king Nywifon.<sup>18</sup> Like the succession crisis in Bamali that reached the climax during the British colonial era, divided the village, attracted sub regional intervention and put the colonial administration in a deadlock, the succession crises in Babungo

-----  
<sup>16</sup> Interview with Jacob Nintai; mention is made of this in Fowler's, African Sacred King, p.258.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ndofoa Zofoa.

<sup>18</sup> Idem.

threatened the integrity of the kingdom and opened way for sub regional intervention. It was only a fortuitous set of historical circumstances culminating in the arrival of Zintgraff and the brave and shrewd actions of the successful king, Saingi, a son to the sister of Nywifon that enabled Babungo to survive as an independent polity in the colonial era. The entire scenario surrounding the interest of the village to the Fon's action along side the position taken by the traditional council to the morality or legality and the rights or wrongs of such a decision is captured by Papp when he alludes that;

*"Throughout the history of the evolution of the state, states have recognized no higher authority than themselves. Obviously then, the state is the entity that defines its own interest and that determines how it will attempt to achieve them. A states interest is called the national interest, and the methods and actions it employs to attempt to achieve its national interests are called national policy. Who within a state defines the national interest? Does national interest change when government changes either peacefully or by force? Which group or groups within a state defines who the friends and enemies of a state are? When serious disagreements exist concerning national interest and national policy, which view of interest and policy is truly national? Does a state in fact have long –term interests determined by geography, resource base, population, cultural ties and other factors that transcend short-term or mid-term definitions of national interest that are influence by the politics of the day"*<sup>19</sup>.

From the quotation, the situation in Babungo is made clearer. We are made to understand that as any state, kingdom or village, Babungo equally had its national interest to defend. As leader at the time, Saingi defined and determined how to achieve that interest which obviously clashed with the method the council anticipated using especially with the change of government from Nywifon to Saingi. Thus the question as to what national interest was, and especially who determines its functioning was at the center of the unfolding of political decisions both for the German officials and Babungo. This situation affected the entire sub region and led to a shift in national interest and policy of actor involved.

The actions of Saingi went against the wishes of the senior title-set of Tifwan. It was a calculated move to get an ally to bolster his internal position and to deflect external threats from Kom, Nso and especially Bali Kumbat. This action by Saingi to bolster his own position, internalized the succession disputes so that the locus of the crisis was shifted from Saingi and *Ba* to include allies with the effect that members became acquainted with each other and began to interact not only in terms of the status and interest they occupied, but also in terms of the role they played and the personality they exhibited. Saingi had his own independent sources of intelligence regarding the Europeans. Zintgraff for instance records that Saingi demonstrated evidence of his gift exchanges and business partner to the elder son of the Bali Nyonga king. It was believed to be one of the reasons Bali Nyonga never gave their support to Bali Kumbat in their quest to establish a paramount structure in the Ndop plain. Any power structure in favour of Bali Kumbat meant that she was to automatically organize and chose their trade partners, which was certainly not to be Bali Nyonga for reasons of their old standing rivalry in the Grassfield.<sup>20</sup>

In the long drawn succession struggle, Saingi saw Zintgraff as representing a potential agent of a powerful external alliance. For Saingi, Zintgraff was the right person at the right time and for the right reason. The penetration of Zintgraff coincided with the defeat of Nsa'ngu of Bamoum. The defeat temporarily eased pressure on the Ndop plain, but at the same time created a power vacuum that attracted the unwelcome attention of powerful neighbouring kingdoms. It enabled Nso to move into the farmlands of the eastern margins of the Ndop plain bringing pressure again to bear on Babessi and Babungo, her closeist neighbours.

---

<sup>19</sup>D. S. Papp, *Contemporary International Relation, Framework for Understanding*, London, Macmillan Publishers, 1988, p.28.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ndofao Zofoa.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The conflict between the king's institution represented by Saingi and the village traditional council represented by Ba was blown out of proportion during the German colonial era. This paper was an attempt to investigate the nature of relationship that existed between the two institutions in the Fondom of Babungo. To realise this, emphasis was laid on the question and exercise of authority and power as was made to be seen and understood by villagers. The paper has brought to light the fact that the struggle over power and authority between the king and the Ba dates back to the pre-colonial period. It exposes the fact that contrary to popular believe that the Fon held overwhelming powers and dictated the politico-economic and social life of the Fondom, real powers was in the hands of the regulatory association called Tifwan under the authority of Ba. This perceived and or real nature of diplomacy in the village negatively affected the Fondom and saw major actors broken up into camps with support directed for the king or Ba, with the result that the foundation and integrity of the Fondom was seriously threatened. Running from the pre-colonial to the colonial era, the conflict intensified, owing to internal division within the Fondom, the interest of powerful kingdoms that hammed the fondom and the schismatic diplomacy of the Germans.

## 3. REFERENCES

1. Republic of Cameroon, Decree No. 92/186 of September 1, 1992 creating Administrative Divisions.
2. M. Gohean, "Chiefs sub chiefs and local control: Negotiation over land, struggle over meaning" in B. Chem Langhee and V.G. Fanso, (ed); *Nso and its Neighbours: Readings in Social history*, nassachusetts, Amberst college, 1996, pp. 399-407.
3. M.T. Aletum, *Political Conflicts, within the traditional and modern institutions of Bafut-Cameroon*, Louvain, Vander, 1974, pp.55-57.
4. Ian Fowler, *African Sacred Kings: Expectations and Performance in the Cameroon Grassfields*, University of Pittsburg, Oxford, Vol. 32, No. 3.
5. Jean Paul Notue-Bianca Trianca, "Babungo, Treasures of the Sculptor Kings in Cameroon", Bianca and Volta, Milan 2006, pp. 24-25.
6. Ian Fowler, *Preliminary Materials for a History of Babungo*, Historical texts by Zintgraff, Moisel, Vollbehi, Leu, Oxford, 2001 and Interview with Fon Zofoa II
7. Fowler, *African Sacred Kings*, p. 258.
8. Fowler, *Preliminary materials for History of Babungo*, p. 12.
9. D. S. Papp, *Contemporary International Relation, Framework for Understanding*, London, Macmillan Publishers, 1988, p.28.

### Oral Sources

1. Interview with Ndofoa Zofoa, aged 43, HRH Baungo, Babungo, September 18, 2017.
2. Interview with Nchio Mimke Emmanuel, Aged 67, traditional councillor Babungo, Babungo September 20, 2017.
3. Interview with Tiwana Eric, Aged 73, Quarter Head of Babungo, January 13, 2020.
4. Interview with Jacob Nintai; mention is made of this in Fowler's, *African Sacred King*, p.258.

### INFO

**Corresponding Author:** **INNOCENT ATEHGANG AFUHNHGANG, Ph.D (Assistant Lecturer of History, ENS BERTOUA, University of Ngaoundere)**

**How to cite this article:** **INNOCENT ATEHGANG AFUHNHGANG, Ph.D, Kingship Institution and the Traditional Council in Conflicts in the Babungo Fondom of the Grassfield of Cameroon, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.2022; 4(2): 193-199.**