Administrative Obduracy in Implementing Judgements Crystallising Conflicts in West Cameroon: An Insight into the Missong Chieftaincy Crisis 1967-1971

Protus Mbeum Tem

Bamenda University of Science and Technology and the Catholic University of Cameroon (CATUC)
Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract

This paper examines the management of the Missong Chieftaincy conflict by the Wum divisional administrations after the West Cameroon Government had adjudicated on the matter in 1967. It argues that the suppleness of the Wum administration in implementing the verdict of the Chieftaincy Tribunal and the Executive Council entrenched the conflict between Luh Beh and Tryself Apwa Ngu and their supporters. With the refusal of Beh to concede defeat, the Wum administration did little in bringing him to order as he continued acting like the chief and refused submitting to Ngu, the victor. In spite of his activities, that degenerated the crisis, the Wum administration remained silent on the matter until 1971 when it decided to implement the decisions of the Chieftaincy Tribunal and Executive Council whole heartedly and stopped Beh from postulating as the chief of Missong after a long period of suspense, hatred and division in Missong.

Keywords: Administration, Conflict, Crisis, Missong, West Cameroon and Wum.

Introduction

Conflict is indispensable to human existence and as per Flippo [1], it would be unbelievable that conflict is absent within communities. This view is also held by Adeyemi and Ademilua [1] who argue that Conflict is unavoidable and exists in all human organizations. Kerzner [2] corroborates this and is of the opinion that conflict cannot be disassociated from human development.

This is true especially when people compete over the same interests or goals Thamhain and Wilemon [3] and it has become impossible to avoid conflict or disagreement in a gathering of more than one or in a society where parallel intentions and commitments do not agree [4]. As such, opposition, disagreement, and friction between two or more parties, arguments, protests, demonstration and aggression among other destructive behaviours have remained inherent in human organisations or better still are indicators of conflict in society [1].

Even though Conflict in itself is not bad it becomes a problem when poorly managed and can degenerate or lead to undesirable consequences. In order to prevent this this from happening, proper management strategies should be adopted in minimising them and according to Adeyemi and Ademilua (Ibid), this has remained a topical issue in human existence and may include; forcing, structural changes, avoidance, compromise and smoothing, third-party intervention and cooperation among others.

In relation to his prescriptions, third party intervention remains on one of the best ways in settling conflicts especially when the other processes have failed.

This is reminiscent of the Missong Chieftaincy conflict where the administration had to intervene and though the Chieftaincy Tribunal decided the matter, the divisional administration stayed it and did little or nothing in implementing the decision immediately and this led to the spiralling of the conflict. This was against
the prescription of the Social Department which stipulates that; in order to implement an administrative decision, the parties affected should be notified of the recommended administrative action. If any review or appeal mechanisms exist, the conflicting parties ought to be informed. They must understand the verdict and reasons for such an action. It further postulates that it is also advisable to consult the people and prepare their minds before the decision is implemented. Failure to respect these remedies only exacerbated the conflict.

It is because of the inability of the Wum administration to follow these processes or act promptly that this paper discusses the stubbornness of the sub divisional and divisional governments in implementing the 1967 decisions of the Chieftaincy Tribunal and Executive Council of West Cameroon leading to the entrenchment of the Missong Chieftaincy conflict between 1967 and 1971.

For a better understanding of the failures of the Wum administration in implementing the decision of the Tribunal and Executive Council, it is necessary to discuss the genesis of the crisis and the intervention of these two administrative arms of government. It is only then that we can appreciate or blame the Wum administration for refusing to act and bring the matter under control [5].

**Setting and Background**

Missong village is situated in Fungom Subdivision of the North West region of Cameroon. Before the unification of Cameroon in 1972, the area fell under the administrative jurisdiction of Wum District which was found in Wum Division of West Cameroon. [6] The people of Missong are Tikars. They migrated from North Eastern Nigeria, passed through the Ngoundere Plateau, Ndop and Kom before settling at their present site [7].

Upon settlement they established an autonomous chiefdom under Nsimkeh who was later succeeded by Changabong, Wagabong, Nkohfu and then Luh Beh in that order. It was during the reign of the former that squabbles erupted as the death of Wagabong signalled the beginning of trouble as he had no child and the throne was betrothed to Nkohfu who was not of the royal family. He had to act as a regent and was expected to hand over power to Tryself Apwa Ngu, the son of Wagabong, when he became of age. However, upon his death, Luh Beh, his nephew took over power and Ngu challenged his authority when he became of age. He argued that, Beh was a caretaker and had to hand over power to him now that he had become of age and thus declared himself the rightful chief of Missong in 1964 [8].

Such a move was detested and countered by Beh who opined that he was the rightful owner of the throne and that Ngu was not of the royal line. This claim was refuted by Ngu who argued that the throne belonged to him and with support from some of his people, Bijum Quarter, he began acting like a chief. This led to tension, hatred and division in the village and this provoked Ngu to called on the Sub divisional Administration, under the leadership of the Divisional Officer (DO) for Wum District, to intervene and restore the throne to him and his family. In a letter to the Ministry of Local Government, the DO for Wum District, reported the matter to the Minister of Local Government as he opined that;

*The present chief, Luh Beh, who claims to have been reigning for 30 years, is being regarded by his opponent, Mr Tryself Apwa as regent. Mr Apwa, a contestant, says that Luh Beh was a mere regent who should now surrender the throne* [9].

Though he conveyed the palaver or trouble to the Ministry, caution was taken not to degenerate matters as on the 11th of December, Ngu was advised by the DO to respect Beh as the chief of Missong pending the decision of the administration on the issue. It should be recalled that, the Ministry had called on the chieftaincy tribunal to act on the matter and Ngu was called upon to wait for the hearing and decision of this institution. He was called upon to deposit the sum of 34,600 francs in
Wum Treasury before the case would be heard. This was in line with the regulations in force whereby the contestant to any chieftainship was obliged to pay that amount which would be refunded to him if he became the victor. This was done by him on the 24th of March 1964 and Receipt No. 15/248915 of 24th March, was presented to the divisional administration as a sign of conformity with the law.

While waiting for the Tribunal to deliberate on the matter, he was counselled to conduct himself and continue respecting Beh as he remained the chief of the village [10]. While waiting for the decision of the Tribunal, the divisional administration visited the scene of conflict and initiated consultative talks between the two contestants and their supporters, elders of Missong and chiefs of Fungom area on the 19th of April 1965 [11].

In spite of this attempt, the crisis continued unabated until the 10th of September 1965, when the Tribunal met in Wum. Even though the Tribunal heard the matter on the above mentioned date, the contesting parties had to wait with disillusionment for six months before a decision was passed or justice dispensed and this was on the 18th of March 1966 [12]. According to the verdict, the Tribunal;

- Agreed that Tryself Apwa should be recognised as the village head of Missong in view of the fact that Nkomfo and Luh Beh were regents.
- Directed that the deposit of 34,600 francs paid by Tryself Apwa in Wum Treasury Receipt No. 15/248915 of 24th March, 1964 should be refunded to him.
- C) Recommended that the Missong Community should be asked to build a house for Luh Beh so that he can move out of the Palace into it [13].

Though this decision was taken, in March, little or nothing was done Wum administration in implementing it as the DO instead called for the reversion of the decision on the argument that Ngu would not be accepted by the people and that more trouble would arise if the reigning tenant was dethroned. However, after a careful study of the matter by the Executive Council, the Ministry did not adhere to his worries or arguments as the Permanent Secretary of Local Government, on the 25th of October 1965, postulated that;

On further discussion, it was agreed that Council was right in recognising Tryself Apwa as chief of Missong. Council accordingly directed that the decision taken and conveyed in conclusion of the 25th Meeting held on 22nd October 1965 be implemented [14].

With orders from above, the DO decided to lay the matter to rest and in the presence of the two contestants, their supporters, quarter heads in Missong and chiefs of Fungom. He presented Ngu to the people of Missong as chief of Missong on the 20th of July 1967 [15]. This declaration was made in the presence of chiefs of the entire Fungom area and a letter to that effect was handed over to Ngu and here is an except;

...By this decision, the government recognises you as the chief of Missong, and at the same time appeals to you for peace and corporation among your people ....I wish to congratulate you and your success and also appeals for your corporation at all times....[16]

This decision lay to rest the tense situation in the village and Ngu was charged with the responsibility of mending fences and uniting the people under his leadership.

Beh’s Refusal to Concede Defeat and Administrative Suppleness

After the installation of Apwa Ngu, uneasy calm reigned in Missong. Luh Beh was never to give up the throne easily as he continued priding himself as the chief of Missong. For instance, the Ishiane which was always drunk by women at the chief’s palace was also made available in his compound at the Bikoum quarter. He out rightly denounced any attempt at stopping him from doing so by the chief and his council [17]. To him any quarter head could do so. However, many wondered whether he was a quarter head or why this was not done by the other quarters except himself.

Again, Beh refused handing over palace instruments that symbolised authority [18].
He and his supporters further refused taking part in community labour. Whenever this was taking place he smuggled himself to a nearby village, Zah, and only returned when this was over, a move that was emulated by his supporters. He remained in control of the kwifon[19] and other juju societies contrary to the tradition of the people as these were to be under the firm control of only the chief. His activities were such that fragmented society and have been summarised by Ngu when he wrote;

**Mr Luh Beh is leader of outlaws in Missong. He summonses an illegal women’s juju and controls his own Ngumba [20]. The village council has warned him on several occasions to refrain from illegal practices but to no avail ....”[21]**

The situation was so disturbing that Apwa and his Council called on the administration to eject him and his supporters from Missong. They further warned that if this was not done, they will do so by themselves [22].

Instead of the DO calling Luh Beh to order or issuing an administrative edict prohibiting him from carrying out such acts, going against the authority of the chief and the laws and customs of his people, he called on Ngu to take the matter to court [23]. One would have expected him to take action because the chief was an auxiliary of the administration and any disrespect for Ngu was not to be welcome by the very administration he represented. The DO understood so well that Beh was acting contrary to the promise and decision taken at Zhoa on the 20th of July 1967. Here is an excerpt of the decision signed by all the chiefs of Fungom, the contesting parties and their supporters and elders from Missong and around Fungom. All;

- Recognised Apwa Ngu as the Chief of Missong
- Luh Beh cease to be chief of Missong from the date of this order
- That Missong community will build a house for Luh Beh
- That we will keep the peace and order in Missong village at all times
- That in the event of any breach of the peace, we should be held responsible by the government [24].

This was endorsed by the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Wum Division. By going against the very undertakings that he signed, it was incumbent on the SDO to arrest him before postulating any action in order to make peace reign but he did not do so. Knowing too well that the court decision would take a long time to yield any effect he would have arrested him to avert the uneasy calm that reign in the village since 1964. His failure to address the situation only exacerbated the tense situation in the village as the chief, his council and supporters decided to take matters into their hands and unsuccessfully tried to expel Beh from the community, a move that was resited by the former and his supporters.

**Failure in Enforcing Administrative Decisions Igniting the Crisis**

The inability of the administration in respecting and enforcing its decisions fuelled the conflict. Instead of basing their actions on previous administrative decisions they did everything possible to stay the execution of the Chieftaincy Tribunal’s verdict and that of the Executive Council. This is justified by the fact that the attempt to expel Beh instead ignited the intervention of the divisional administration and the police as they warned Ngu and his councillors that they had no right to expel Beh as this was an infringement on his natural rights as a citizen of Cameroon. They reminded all of them in general and Ngu in particular that;

... a Cameroonian has the free citizenship of stay in any place where he or she so desires, and you and your councillors, therefore in this case, have no right to eject trouble givers out of your area of administration.... If any person challenges your right as a chief, you can contest the matter in any competent jurisdiction. If there will be any rise of disturbance of peace in the Missong area, you will be held liable [25].

The administration and the police were not wrong in protecting Beh and his counterparts but they did little or nothing in bringing Beh and his supporters to order pending the adjudication of the case in any competent court of law. As per the laws of the land, as mentioned above, Chief Ngu
was the representative of the administration and anything should have been done to protect him and his authority. Furthermore, the decision was not the best as little or nothing was done in addressing the real issue, that of insubordination from Beh and his supporters to the chief. One finds it difficult to understand why Beh’s actions met with little or no respond from the administration for if any attempt at interfering with the authority of the DO or SDO and the police would have met stiff resistance and prompt action from the administration.

The inability of the administration to stop Beh’s activities instead accentuated the crisis as he continued acting with impunity and by January 1969, the situation had deteriorated. His intransigence and disrespect for authority had grown so wide that his followers became uncontrollable. He remained in possession of Kwifon, juju societies, tax nominal roll which was suppose to be in the keeping of the new chief and had formed his own traditional council that he hosted in his compound.

Furthermore, he was still in custody of the tiger teeth [26] and above all continued acting like a chief. Fear gripped the whole society as Ngu and his supporters were determined to evict him form Missong by force in defiance of the SDO’S warning and that of the police. They damned the consequences that were to follow after their actions [27].

Matters were made worse when the two contestants clashed on the ownership of a piece of land and this almost resulted to open hostilities. The supporters of Ngu argued that the land was inherited together with the stool by Beh’s uncle from Ngu’s father and it was incumbent on him, Beh, to return it to Ngu. The councillors (those under the control of Ngu) of Missong questioned Beh’s resistance in leaving the land for Ngu. To them, for ten years, the land was farmed by Ngu until recently, Beh laid clams to it and would not entertain Ngu on it [28]. These allegations were refuted by Beh and his supporters who also claimed that the land belonged to his predecessor and as his successor it belonged to him. What actually provoked the outburst was that Beh attempted constructing his Kwifon house there but this was destroyed by Apwa and his adherents [29]. He thus called on the DO to intervene.

It was only after then that efforts were made by the administration in bringing the conflicting parties together since 1967. In order to reinstate sanity, the DO together with security officers warned both parties to lay off claims to the land and allow the administration to decide on what to do with it in the future. This was on the 26th of April 1971. He was very categorical and warned them that he would not take things lightly if they decided to disturb the peace of the village in what he termed ‘your worthless disputed plot’ as evident in the following words;

*My Good Friends,... It appears you both think that you can sit here and play on the intelligence of the authority. You, both, do not seem to or care about the order I gave you in my office on the 26th of April 1971 in the presence of the station officer, National Security, Wum ... and the elders each of you brought that the disputed plot should be left vacant and that I shall in future decide what use it be put.*

*I am by this letter warning the two of you seriously that there be serious consequences for your jointly disturbance of peace in Missong village at any time from the date of this letter [30].*

This initiative was salutary and the problem laid to rest but the skirmishes in the village were far from over.

**Administrative Determination Signalling an End to the Crisis**

Beh remained headstrong and found it difficult in relinquishing his position as chief of Missong.

Things were compounded by the administration still maintaining him as customary court member/Judge, representing his village in the Fungom clan court, a position he held when he was chief. However, the administration was alarmed when he took his place among the chiefs of Fungom and prided himself in chiefly regalia on the 28th of August...
1971 during the Cameroon National Union Conference. This nailed a final blow to his activities as on the 31st of August 1971, the administration decided to put aside their manoeuvres and solve the problem once and for all. In a strongly worded letter to Beh, he warned him to refrain from all activities that related to his former position as chief. Here is an excerpt of the DO's warning:

...you being made a customary court member does not mean you have once more been restored as another chief of Missong but this is to encourage you join hands with your chief, Tryself Apwa, to make Missong a peaceful village and to direct attention to the development of the village [31].

He was also called upon to refrain from using anything that is preserved for chiefs according to native law and customs. He went further; “… Be careful too, that you do not lose your appointment as court member by your actions which will shake the peace in Missong”[32].

He thus called on the chief of Abar (one of the senior chiefs of Fngom area) to rally all the chiefs of lower Fungom and made it clear to them that Beh was no longer chief and that he should stop acting like one. Such deterrence was enough for him to stop all his unhealthy activities at home.

Such a stern warning and deterrence had been awaited since 1967 after the installing of Ngu as chief. However, it had to come four years after without any justification while the people of Missong remained greatly divided under two leaders. If this this warning had come in 1967, immediately after the Tribunal's decision and that of the Executive Council, the people should have been saved from all the uproars and fusses that characterised life in Missong from 1967 to 1971. Nonetheless, the final decision came and peace and unity finally returned to the village though time was needed for old wounds to heal.

**Conclusion**

The paper examined the inability of the Wum administration in implementing the Chieftaincy Tribunal's decision and that of the Executive Council on the Missong Chieftaincy conflict between 1967 and 1971 pitting Ngu and Beh. It contends that though the decision to recognise and enthrone Ngu was passed in 1967, it took four years before it could take effect as Beh still prided himself as chief. While the administration failed in stopping Beh, the conflicts intensified and continued unabated as Beh refused handing over the throne to Ngu and continued acting like a chief. He remained in possession of sacred objects of the village and in control of traditional institutions like the Kwifon.

He further instituted his own traditional council to rival that of Ngu. As the two sides tussle for authority, the administration remained mute on the matter until 1971 when it intervened. Beh was warned to desist acting like a chief and respect Ngu as the chief of Missong. This brought a final full stop to the problem as Beh did little or nothing in protesting or resisting this administrative prohibition. One wonders why this decision took so long to be effected while tensions flared in Missong. It is therefore advised that the administration should act promptly on issues that concerns chieftainship as any delay in arresting conflicts within this institution affects not only the individuals but entire communities negatively.

**Reference**


6. Wum District was later split into Fungom and Wum Central Subdivisions in 1996 and the name of the Division was changed to Mentchum Division in 1968. In 1973, the then West Cameroon was divided into two provinces, North West and South Provinces (later changed to North and South West Regions in 1996). Worthy to note is the fact that the two Cameroon reunited in 1961 and became a federation of two states, East and West Cameroon.


8. Ibid


10. DMW/644/26, Letter from DO Wum Division to Mr. Tryself Apwa, Missong Chieftenacy Dispute, 11 December, 1964.

11. Ibid.

12. Letter from Tryself Apwa, Missong Village through the DO to the Honourable Secretary of State, Local Government, Buea; Refund of Chieftaincy Deposit, 34.600frs, 13/3/67.

13. REF. WCA(1965)25, Missong (Wum) Chieftaincy Dispute, 22/10/65.


15. Letter from J. N. Ntui, SDO Wum, to Luh Beh

16. Letter from J. N. Ntui, Senior Divisional Officer, Wum Division, to Tryself Apwa, Missong Village, Fungom Area, Wum, 20th July, 1967. Ref. no. DMW.644/68A.


18. These include tiger teeth and a horn used in assembling people for important activities in the village.

19. Regulatory Society that enforces decisions of the Chief and his council

20. Kwifon

21. DMW.644, Missong, P.103.

22. Ibid.


26. Symbolises authority and is handed down from one chief to the other.

27. Letter from Chief Tryself Apwa and Councillors, Sajo, Ibbo, Bwesa, Nchoto and Lango, Missong village, to District Officer, Wum Distirct, 13th November 1968 and Letter from Councillors and Chief Tryself, Missong Village, to the District Officer Incharge of Wum Division, 9/1/69.

28. Letter from Missong Councillors to the District Officer, Wum, Mentchum Division, 11th May 1971.

29. Chief Lubeh, Missong Village, 16th May 1971, to the Divisional Officer Wum Subdivision, Mentchum Division.


32. Ibid.