

**CONFLICT ON LOCAL BORDER MARKET IN BUI DIVISION,  
CAMEROON THE CASE OF OKU AND NONI OVER THE  
CONTROL AND  
OWNERSHIP OF BALU, 1997**

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**Abstract:** Ethnic friction in postcolonial Africa comes in many forms and has many causes. In most cases, artificial political boundaries and newly created administrative units continue to deepen ethnic rivalry in nearly all parts of Africa. The increase in sub-national administrative units in recent years especially in the 1990s in Cameroon in particular and Africa as a whole is part of the decentralization process since there is hardly any state in Africa, which is not ethnically plural. These administrative units are still perceived as specific phenomena, not only in terms of historical development but also in the context of their impacting change on the daily lives of the inhabitants. The administrative changes have equally put to question some of the existing premises found at border areas. On this note, this paper focuses on the 1997 ethnic discrepancy between the people of Oku and Noni, of the Bui Division in the North West Region of Cameroon over the borderland market situated at *Balu*. Data was primarily collected during a field study in both localities also substantiated by secondary data from dissertations and newspaper articles. After analyzing the data we found out that this study contributes to the emerging debate that new administrative units have led to series of ethnic frictions in the North West Region in particular and Cameroon as a whole.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Border Market, Administrative units, Oku Noni, *Balu*.

**Résumé :** Les conflits ethniques dans l'Afrique postcoloniale sont multiples avec des causes multifformes. Dans la plupart des cas, les frontières artificielles et la délimitation de nouvelles unités administratives sont à l'origine des rivalités interethniques. L'accroissement des unités administratives au Cameroun et en Afrique au cours des années 1990, participe du processus de décentralisation et de l'intégration de la diversité ethnique et culturelle. Ces unités administratives sont toujours perçues comme des phénomènes spécifiques, non seulement en termes de développement historique, mais aussi pour leur impact sur la vie quotidienne des populations. Ces mutations administratives ont également remis en question la configuration des espaces frontaliers. De ce point de vue, à partir des données qualitatives et quantitatives issues des sources documentaires, des enquêtes de terrain et des entretiens menées dans les deux localités, cette communication analyse les conflits ethniques de 1997 dans le département de Bui, région du Nord-Ouest-Cameroun, entre les communautés Oku et Noni, au sujet du marché frontalier de Balu. Elle contribue au débat émergent sur le rôle de nouvelles unités administratives dans l'aggravation des conflits ethniques dans la région du Nord-Ouest en particulier et, au Cameroun en général.

**Mots-clés:** Conflit, Marché frontalier, Unités administratives, Oku Noni, *Balu*.

## Introduction

The history of most communities in Africa since independence has been in most cases, theatres of inter-ethnic strife generally expressed over the control and ownership of land. Today, lands and its control has been subjects of intense interest to governments, policy-makers, and ordinary people in most African communities, and researchers. In Cameroon, competition over land especially in the 1990s appears to have increased as has its documentation. Such antagonism is caught up in local and national politics, including the resurgence of traditional or customary authority in many parts of the North West Region of Cameroon. Worse still, the 1990 events in line with new administrative units have resurfaced ancient or old claims as rightly recorded in the *Balu* episode. Local borders became potential source of inter-chiefdom conflicts especially when administrative decisions are not well implemented as an attempt to solve border crisis.

This paper seeks to situate recent administrative readjustments and the creation of new administrative units (subdivisions) in Bui Division which has resulted to conflict episode between the *Fondoms* of Oku and Noni over the control and ownership of the *Balu* market. The first part of the paper briefly reviews the geographical and historical context in which the *Fondoms* find themselves. The second part examines the contradicting views by both communities about the disputed area called *Balu*. The third aspect of this paper analysis the evolution of the skirmishes coupled with the various peace attempts drowned from the various stakeholders. Finally, the fourth part discusses the impact of the 1997 *Balu* skirmishes all together with the present state of affairs in the abandoned area.

### 1. Geographical and Historical context of the *Fondoms*

Like many *Fondoms* of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, geographical and historical factors have influenced the settlement and intercommunity relations both characterised with peaceful and conflicting episodes. In this section, we examine the geographical and history context of the Oku and Din-Noni *Fondoms*.

#### 1.1. Geographical Context of the *Fondoms*

The Oku *Fondom* is situated in the eastern part of Bui Division with a surface area of about 3732.50 square kilometres. It is bounded to the west by Boyo Division, to the North by Noni subdivision, to the East

by Kumbo and Jakiri subdivision and finally to the South by Ngoketungia division.<sup>1</sup> The Oku *Fondom* lies approximately between latitude 6°5' and 6°20' north of the equator and longitudes 10°20' and 10°40' east of the Greenwich Meridian. The grid reference of the summit of Mount Oku is 6°12' N and 10°27' E.

Following the relief, the terrain is hilly and naturally mountainous situated around the western high plateau. Mount Oku is estimated to be 3,008m above sea level, this forming part of the Oku landscape which is been characterised by high peak, deep valleys and extensive escarpments.<sup>2</sup> Given that Oku is situated below the mountain and falls within the tropical climate region, its fertile soils have over the years encouraged rapid colonisation of its slopes for agriculture. Due to the nature of the Oku hilly terrain, transport facilities had always been a great hindrance to the people until recent moment where she enjoys some tarred and semi-tarred roads. The topography of this area has made the inhabitants to fashion themselves with the socio-economic potentials available. In fact, Oku is a cold region this resulting from its height above sea level. However, some villages in Oku like Mbam (at the boundary zone with Din-Noni and near the disputed site) and Ibal have a warm climate. The Oku highland is the main watershed of Bui division.<sup>3</sup> In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Oku was covered by thick forest. But today, due to repeated burning and witting, the forest is less widespread equally its forest products such as honey farming, soft woods for caving and medicinal plants. The forest was therefore the stimulus of a rich culture.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Din-Noni is a village in the Noni subdivision. It is one out of the six *Fondoms* in the subdivision but has two *Fons* out from the outstanding ten local Chiefs in the subdivision. Though with some slide differences, Din has almost the same physical features with Oku. In fact it is quite difficult to have a genuine separation in terms of geographical analysis of both communities. In spite of these similarities, Din is bounded to the south by Mbam-Oku and Ndum-Oku, to the west by Biyo Division, to the north by Nkor-Noni and to the east by Djottin-Noni. In Din, the temperature throughout the years ranges from 20 to 27°C. In fact the physical environment of both communities has greatly

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Maclead, "The Conservation of Oku Mountain Forest Cameroon", Study report N°15, ICBP, Cambridge-England CB3, 1986, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Noni Lantum, "Traditional Medicine-men of Cameroon: The case of Bui Division", Traditional Medicine Census report series N° 1, Yaounde 1985, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

encouraged inter-village relations at all moments of the people's history.<sup>5</sup>

In actual sense, both communities have common agro-economic activities in their respective areas. This engaged over 85% of the teeming population, agriculture is for the most part subsistence. The population (especially women) cultivate mostly food crops while most men go in for cash crops basically coffee.<sup>6</sup> Besides agriculture, these communities from the early times were blessed with traditional healing talents. Tourism is gradually, but surely gaining grounds in the environment given that Oku is imbued with a good number of touristy sites such as the vicinity of Lake Oku, Mount Oku and some handicraft centres. Animal husbandry such as: cattle, pigs, poultry and goats are also sources of income in to these people. Nevertheless, these aspects have equally influenced the intensity and frequency of conflict between these *Fondoms*.

### 1.2. The Historical Background

Historically, Oku like most Grassfields *Fondoms* has some conflicting versions on its history of movement and settlement. Oku is found to the western edge of Nso with whose traditions asserted a dynastic connection. The first account points to the *Gonba forest* as a centre of dispersal. According to this version, two princes of Rifum separated in this forest and went off to establish their dynasties. According to the second account the Kovidem ruler and many of his people fled from the *Gonba forest* after the first raid and sacking of Kovifem prince of Rifum who had settled earlier after a quarrel with his brother. The two met and lived together until one left and moved north to settle in Tavisia and the other travelled West and founded the present Oku capital (Elak).<sup>7</sup> One thing is clear from these accounts that the founders of Oku and Nso were closed brothers. Whether they were closed kings or brothers, cultural and linguistic evidence as well as oral traditions point out the ancestry.

According to oral traditions, the Oku found the Kijem people in occupation on arrival. This group was later to move out of Oku and take residence in the southern sector of Kom only to be displaced

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Nchoji Nkwi "Traditional Diplomacy: The study of Inter chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields North West Province of Cameroon" Yaounde, SOPERCAM, 1985, pp.37-45.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Stephen Ntang, 71, *Fon* of the Mbeleh family, Nkali-Din, October 26, 2004.

<sup>7</sup>P.N.Nkwi and J.P.Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Grassfields*, Department of Sociology, University of Yaounde, 1982,pp.140-142.

around 1845 by *Fon Tufoyn* of Kom<sup>8</sup>. The Jikijem village, which the Kijem people abandoned, was established most probably in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If the second sacking of Kovifem may be taken as a landmark, the Kijem people who had reached the area in an early population movement already occupied the village. The removal of the Kijem people from the area is attributed by Oku traditions to the anger of the lake god, but Oku pressure may not be ruled out completely. In line with other scientific works such as that of Dr Jeffreys, it is noted that a man called Yunji founded the village. Yungon, Tsemton, Ngube, Ndisiango and Ndifo after the Kijem people had evacuated the area.<sup>9</sup> Apart from her displacement, Oku never became an expanding *Fondom* despite its access to iron works. Her land made defence easier especially from the Fulani raiders though she was raided in the reign of *Fon Ngam* who fled from his place and took refuge in the Ijem forest. The raiders burnt nearly the whole of Oku but did not reach Jikijem village.

At this point, the origins of the name "Oku" are highly attributed to oral tradition. The story goes that; the Oku people had been invited to help in a building project in the Nso land. After the building was accomplished, the Oku people then threatened to remove the plaster from the walls if they were not given food. When their demands were not met, they carried out their threats and removed the plaster from the walls. They were then referred to by the Nso people as *Veku* "plaster removers". But when the British colonised the area, they spelt it as "Oku". The Oku people pronounce the name as *Ebkuor*. The English appellation as it stands has no meaning whatsoever in the local dialect.<sup>10</sup> Being a centralised society, there exist three major clans in Oku namely, the *Mbele* (royal), *eldzung* (clan of traditional priests) and the *Mbulum* (the clan with families having some sacrificial duties). The royal throne of Oku *Fondom* has passed through the following successive *Fons* though some without defined period of succession: Nyanya, Ewuh, MkongEwuh, Ney, Moteh, Mkong Moteh, Ngang, Yanchoh, Keming, Ngum Tayeah, Mkong Ndakoh (?-1909), Ngek Yulam (1909-1940), Ngum Yuteh (1940-1956), Sentieh (1956-1992), Ngum III (1992-2006), Nsetieh II (since November 2006).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> P.N. Nkui, 1982, pp. 140-142.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Ndifon Ndey, "Traditional authority in Oku from the earliest settlement to 1961", *Maitrice* Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde, 1991, p.5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp.5-7.

<sup>11</sup> Oku Cultural and Development Association (OCDA), Almanac for the year, 2007.

On the other hand, the Din *Fondom* is composed of two *Fons* derived from two heading families. These families are “Ndinbolah” headed by *Fon* Stephen Ntang and the “Medzeng” headed by *Fon* Solomon Dom. According to our sources, these two *Fons* are said to have come from Mbinon (found in Noni Sub division) and Menging (found in Bum, Boyo Division) respectively. These two families therefore came and settled in the area today known as Din at close historical intervals.<sup>12</sup>

At the pinnacle of the Din political set-up, are two *Fons* heading the two distinct families as earlier said, the *Fon* of “Ndinbolah” is said to make up a substantial chunk of the population. While the *Fon* of “Medzeng” having a lesser family population. In fact, the two *Fons* work hand in glove and in warmth and cordiality to insure the smooth functioning of the *Fomdom*. They perform traditional sacrifices concomitantly. Each of them knows their particular functions especially in the political domain. In line with traditional diplomacy, Din unlike Oku has similar traditional features.

## 2. The Contradicting History of *Balu* the disputed Area

Many historical explanations from both camps were advanced on the disputed *Balu* piece of land. In this regard, we shall thus with the help of the available sources, mostly oral and administrative documents, examine the history of the disputed area.

During our research period, we were blessed to have come across many Oku and Din informants who share a similar view as their counter mates. One of our information in Oku was Ngum Martin Yong the former chief of service, finance and administration in the Ndop high court. During the 1997 crisis, he was the chief of judicial affairs in the Kumbo High Court. His view with that of Njakoi John Bah an Anthropologist and a paralegal service holds the opinion that the name *Balu* has a meaning in the Oku dialect.<sup>13</sup>

In Oku, “*Balu*” means there is a leopard here as such, the Oku people used the “*Balu*” piece of land as their expedition hunting ground. Before the name *Balu* came to be, our informants from the side of Oku narrated that, one man on a certain morning had seen a leopard moving into the bush of the named “*Balu*” area. This man called the attention of hunters found at that locality, telling them that “*Baahluh etkeghenfeig*” that is warning them that, there is a leopard in

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Nforme Ndeh Peter, 69, Educated Elite, Elak-Oku October 27, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ngum Martin Yong, 47, Chief of service Finance and Administration, Ndop High Court, October 20, 2004.

that small bush. This is how the name *Balu* originated. Then due to raids that characterized the era in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the incoming Din people eventually colonized this piece of land. As incomers, instead of paying allegiance to the Oku *Fon* who was not even prepared to welcome them at that area, the Din people did not abbe to any principle of allegiance. They rather decided to exploit the area in the domains of farming and commercial centre as time goes. So it came to a time when, the Oku people wanted to let them understand that, the land did not belong to them. But as time went on, and as a result of some administrative changes in line with new administrative configuration, the control of the area became a major source of open complicit witnessed in 1995 and 1997 respectively.<sup>14</sup>

In the same light on the history of the disputed place, the former Lord Mayor Thaddeus Ndishiangong Tata (of blessed memory) of the Elak Council unlike his predecessor moved us down the memory about the disputed area *Balu*. His version about the whole show in his own words is:

This place the Din people crossed the official boundary and were claiming is not theirs [...] it is true, that some people were exiled long ago from Din, and they were given asylum in Oku to settle in one small quarter in Mbam-Oku called Kefum. When they settled there, after sometime, they wanted to claim this place to belong to Din, where commissions held meetings and it was proved that the property there for hundreds of years belongs to the Oku people. A man might ask: what is *Kefum*? Kefum is a place people occupied for some time and later abandoned it probably due to some socio-economic crisis. And when the original inhabitants of Kefum left, the exiles were given refuge there, thinking that of course they were refugees. But after some time, they were trying to play tricks to win that place from the Oku people. But they have been disproved. Kefum is the residential area of *Balu*. *Balu* was a farming area of the people who lived in Kefum-Mbam. That is all I can say about.<sup>15</sup>

During our interview with *Fon* Ngum III (of blessed memory) of Oku, he went further by saying that; the name "Din" is purely in the Oku dialect which means to show. And this name was applied to the present inhabitants of Din who settled in this area thanks to the Oku

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Nyakoi John Bah, 41, Anthropologist paralegal Elak-Oku, October 23, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ndishiangong Thaddeus, 56, the then Lord Mayor Elak Rural Council, October 21, 2004.

*Fon* by then. In this case, “Din” means to show while “*Balu*” means “not there” as explained by the Oku *Fon*.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, we had serious difficulties in getting reliable informants Din. This is because they could really not narrate the history of the disputed area *Balu*. While in the Din palace, we came across one of the *Fon* who did not grant us any interview for fear of contradictions since his other colleague was not on seat. Many people we came across did not have a mastery of the disputed area. Some openly said that they were recent settlers and could not give us the right version on who owns the place. Despite these difficulties, we were fortunate to come across the former Mayor of Nkor Council by name Thaddeus Taba who was a frontline actor in grappling with the crisis on the administrative side. He gave us his own version of the disputed *Balu* piece of land, which we summarized below: “*Balu* was inhabited predominately by the people of Din. They had houses there, they had their farms there, and since Oku laid claim over it, [...] they became a little bit aggressive. But practically property at said area belongs to the people of Din”.<sup>17</sup>

This view was in conformity with the general appraisal we could gather from the people of Din though without further details on the historical evolution of the place especially before their arrival on the site. To them, *Balu* is a whole quarter in Din. They laid claims on the stone of sacrifice (*ifam*) found far away from *Balu* that is about 5km from main land.<sup>18</sup> Also, they claim to be the ones who put the structures found in *Balu*. The Din people predominantly practiced farming there at *Balu*. To them, the Oku man has very little to say about the area (*Balu*).

### 3. Evolution of the Conflict and Peace Attempts

From the above fluctuating versions, the two camps were obviously prepared to exchange their grievances during series of armed confrontations just within the decade. This section thus examines the evolution and peace attempts especially by officials to resolve the *Balu* crisis.

#### 3.1. The Advent and Evolution of the Conflict

The border conflict opposing the people of Mbam-Oku against Din-Noni never started abruptly in 1995 and 1997. It is a long ago

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with *Fon* Ngum III, 76, Royal Highness *Fon* of Oku, October 26, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Taba Thaddeus, 61, former Lord Mayor Nkor-Noni Rural Council, November 3, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Kibuh Patrick, 42, Teacher Nkale-Din, October 27, 2004.

grievance which gradually generated and got to full maturity in February and November 1997 which marked the climax of the long ago awaited clashes.

Due to renaissance of land and boundary disputes, serious problems between Oku and Noni arose in 1992 after a presidential decree reorganising the administrative units. This decree created the new subdivisions of Oku and Noni.<sup>19</sup> The decree of implementation defining the boundary between Oku and Noni subdivisions located *Balu* which the Oku claimed as part of theirs in the Noni subdivision. This fracas, which began in 1992, persisted as Din reiterated that *Balu* is an integral part of their land, given that their Kinsmen inhabit it. The dispute finally resulted in three bloody confrontations between the two communities in 1995 and worsened in the year 1997. During the first clashes of 1995, it is alleged that three people were killed, the *Balu* market burnt down and the divisional officer's car from Oku was stoned. The two major confrontations of February and November 1997 were often regarded as special cases simply due to the historical activities that surrounded the whole North West Province by then. This event was in line with the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) movements. This then explains why the 1997 skirmishes were of high historical value.<sup>20</sup>

Above all, the wave of hostilities between the two communities of Mbam-Oku and Din-Noni was provoked when the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Bui Division, Martin Tiku Tangi Arikai reminded the disputing communities that, administratively, *Balu* belongs to Din in the Noni subdivision. But since he wanted to exercise his authorities as the number one peace mediator, the Oku people rejected his decisions coupled with the enforced artificial boundary between Mbam-Oku and Din-Noni. It was investigated that no official map existed to that effect and this explains why it was never shown to the Oku people when they asked for it. However, the SDO warned the Oku people and further said: "The Bui administration was to employ all the machinery at its disposal to stamp out violence in Bui and seek solutions to all land disputes".<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the 1997 crisis was also tied to the detachment of Noni from the then Elak Rural Council (ERC). Before the creation of the Nkor Rural Council in 1995, which went operational in March 1996, the Noni and Oku areas were all under

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<sup>19</sup> Decree N° 92/186 of 01/09/1992 and 92/207 of 05/10/1992 of 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ngum Martin Yong.

<sup>21</sup> Kum Set Ewi and Willie S. Berinyuy, "Bui land dispute: Two Killed, several Injured, Houses burnt", *The Herald*, February 17th-18th 1997, pp.1-3.

the jurisdiction of the Elak Rural Council. Revenues collected from the two communities therefore went into the same coffers. But when the Noni people assumed autonomy under the Nkor Rural Council (NRC), confusion cropped up as to which council should collect revenue from this border market of *Balu*-ERC or NRC? A bone of contention started.

The first skirmish of 1997 started in February 11 and extended to the 15 of the same month. Following collective information collected in Din and especially by Ntang Charles, serious blames goes to the Oku for haven orchestrate the first skirmish of 1995.<sup>22</sup> This is because, the Mbam-Oku people were often misbehaving to the Din women in their various farms found around *Balu*. They further said that the Mbam-Oku people claimed to be "big". Following the above misdeeds, the Din people stayed neutral until February 11, 1997. They further more explained that, during the periods of mid and late December 1996, some tax collectors from Oku came to the *Balu* market with gendarmes and captured some Din natives and took them right to the Oku capital Elak.<sup>23</sup> The Din people were forced to pay taxes in Oku meanwhile the tax system was already abolished by the state. In addition, some gangs left Oku on February 8, 1997 and deliberately burned the *Balu* market. No administrative action was taken by both subdivisions of Oku and Noni respectively to remedy the situation. Then on February 11, 1997 (youth day) around 5:30 P.M, Killian Ndinseh's house (a Din native who lived in *Balu*) was burned by the Oku people. This then gave birth to the first *Balu* war of 1997.

Not far from the above explanations, some Mbam-Oku key informants said that what actually brought them to war with the Din people was the fact that the Din people farmed in *Balu* land claimed by them (the Oku people. More so, this piece of land was orally demarcated by the Din people including *Balu* as a territory in Din. In this case, Din was part of Oku and there was no boundary demarcation between Oku and Din.<sup>24</sup> The Elak Rural Council usually collected revenues for the past years. But when the Oku councillors accompanied by the Oku Divisional Officer (DO) Andre Kamdem went to *Balu* during the period of late December 1996 for revenues and tax collection, they were confronted with the Noni Councillors for the same purpose. Fights broke out because the Oku DO Andre Kamdem was slapped by one of the Din people who claimed that the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ntang Charles, 42, Farmer Din, October 27, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Ntang Charles.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Formeh Francis, 43, Farmer Mbam-Oku, November 3, 2004.

area was theirs and any revenues collection was to be in the hands of the entire Noni (Nkor) council. This comment is contrary to that of the Oku people who claimed that the Din people had local boundaries with the Mbams in present days Boyo Division.<sup>25</sup>

The territorial dispute which began on February 6, 1997 is being referred to by local cynics as the "Tanyi Tiku Arikai's cup final". The fighting occurred only few days after the SDO for Bui Division planted beacons demarcating the boundary between *Balu-Oku* and *Din-Noni*. At the ceremony conducted on February 7, many observers noted that the problem was far from being resolved as *Fon Ngum III* of Oku refused to endorse the new boundary, which declared *Kefum* and *Emsahlum* quarters in Mbam-Oku as part of Noni subdivision. On the other hand, his counterpart of *Din-Noni* equally refused to pour the traditional libation to seal peace. Sceptics thus left the scene, warning that the boundary mediated by the SDO did no more than leave an uneasy calm. It took just four days to prove them right when on February 11 the two communities went to war which lasted for almost a week before the November confrontation.<sup>26</sup>

Accusing fingers from both communities were mostly directed at the then SDO for Bui Division as having sparked off the second episode of conflicts between Mbam-Oku and *Din-Noni*, in November 1997. From our findings, we were informed that the SDO for Bui went ahead to impose a new boundary on these communities without even the knowledge of the North West Governor *Fai Yengo Francis*. As earlier in a meeting on February 12, the SDO for Bui scolded the *Fon* of Oku, *Ngum Samuel III* and *Andre Kamdem*, the DO for Oku, for not ordering gendarmes to prevent the fighting. The next day *Arikai* himself was reprimanded by his senior *Fai Yengo* for demarcating new administrative boundaries while he as Governor had no idea.<sup>27</sup> But the SDO argued that he had written to the Governor informing him of the need to stop land disputes in Bui by mapping out administrative boundaries. The SDO added that, since he did not get the reply, he interpreted *Yengo's* silence to mean consent and went ahead to define the new boundaries that sparked off the *Oku-Noni* clash.<sup>28</sup> Gendarmes coupled with military troops who arrived Oku as a result of the SCNC activities in *Elak-Oku* patrolled the disputed area at *Balu*.

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<sup>25</sup>Interview with, *Formeh Francis*.

<sup>26</sup> *Willie Berinyuy Shyatum*, "Bui land dispute: seven killed four village burnt", *The Herald* February 21-23, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Fai Gheh Nsahnen, the village head of Mbam-Oku, (border village) extrapolates:

When the SDO visited the area he indicated that the boundary between Din and Mbam should be near G.S Emsahlem. The Mbam people questioned with indignation why the SDO who was new to the place could not get and in depth knowledge of the matter before taking such a decision. They described the administration as being biased, dishonest and partial. They told the SDO that he was sowing a seed of discord, rather than that of concord. Then the following morning, Oku people on their way to the farms were prevented by the Din people from going beyond the SDO's new demarcation. This inevitable triggered off the second conflict of the year.<sup>29</sup>

The reasons for the cause or origin of the second conflict would be incomplete if we did not orally get from a Din person on the circumstances that led to a second skirmish between the two communities. Once more Taba Thaddeus, former mayor of the Nkor rural council explains: "I think the second conflict was just a question of burning of houses by the people of Oku, which led to the defence of the area by the people who inhabited *Balu* that is the Din people. They fought in defence of the property that was being burnt".<sup>30</sup>

When asked to assess the role played by the SDO for Bui, Taba Thaddeus had this to say: "He was chairman of the land consultative committee. But after the consultation, where all the four were present, all that they did there, we were waiting for the outcome of their findings when the next morning was only houses being burnt".<sup>31</sup>

On the strength of the above, it is clear that the partiality and meddling of the administration in demarcating the boundary between the chiefdoms contributed heavily to the outbreak of hostilities again as from November 15-18, 1997. Since there was no peace between the two chiefdoms, Din people thought it necessary and created their own parallel market some few kilometres (about 5km) from *Balu*. The market day was the same as that of *Balu* before the banning order. Their intention was basically due to fear and the wish to avoid the Oku people whom they considered hostile to them.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Fai GhehNsahnen, 78, Village Head Mbam-Oku October 27, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Taba Thaddeus.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Taba Thaddeus.

### 3.2. Attempts to Solve the *Balu* skirmishes

To better solve the differences, it was thought necessary for both local and traditional authorities to work in great collaboration with the administrative authorities. In this view, it was necessary for the various *Fons* to lead the mediation processes before calling on the attention of the administration. In fact, very little was done by the belligerent before and during the conflicts.<sup>32</sup>

During our research tour, some sources opine that, the Oku people under the leadership of *Fon* Ngum III and the then councillor of Elak Rural Council, Simon Yongka Babey levied series of complains at the Kumbo High Court in relation to the *Balu* question. But unfortunately, the court file got missing. In this case, legal proceedings were short lived because none of the participants took part during the court sessions. However, as a result of mounting tensions, the then SDO of Bui Division (Tanyi Tiku Arikai Martin) administered it in his own way till the reactions of the commission of the Ministry of Territorial administration came and calmed the two belligerents (Oku and Noni).<sup>33</sup>

The administrative authorities of Oku and Noni subdivisions in particular and those of Bui division in general spent sleepless nights in their quest for an amicable and definitive solution to the conflict. Meeting after meetings were convened with the land consultative committee in the disputed settlements.

After the last conflict of November 1997, the area in conflict (*Balu*) was visited by the fact-finding commission of the Ministry of Territorial Administration, led by Constantine Dzono, Inspector-General in the Ministry of Territorial Administration. The purpose was to calm down the warning groups and to seek amicable solutions to their land and boundary disputes. The task of the commission was to determine and make proposals for the final demarcation of the boundaries in dispute between the warning *Fondoms* as a means of restoring peace. The disputed area was personally visited by the then North West Region Governor Fai Yengo Francis (Oku native). The presence of the Governor to *Balu* in mid November 1997 only calmed the up growing tensions from both camps, but without a final solution.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the "Kumbo Accord" of 1999 came into existence as a result of constant violation of the injunction order by the belligerents after the *Balu* crisis. In the agreement, both *Fons* agreed to withdraw

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Fai GhehNsahnen.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Fai GhehNsahnen.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Taba Thaddeus.

completely from the interested *Balu* area until a final decision was to be taken as time goes. It is quite clear that, right up to date, no final decision had been issued about *Balu* and this failure to react promptly had given forum to the former occupants to subsequently move back to the area for farming activities. Following our observations in the area concerned, no permanent structure except farm hamlets exist in the area.<sup>35</sup> The renounced *Balu* market was an attractive local commercial centre where people left places such as Kumbo, Kom and Kambe to carry their weekly business ventures stopped to exist since 1997. This stop to exist has adversely affected the Noni Council who was credited to collect taxes and revenues in the *Balu* market.

#### 4. The Impact of the 1997 *Balu* Conflict

In fact, wars are usually the outcome of personal ambition or they are reactionary measures taken to counter unjust aggression or the oppression of an individual or set of peoples. Personal ambition and aggrandisement have led often to expansionist wars. The unjust treatment of peoples or section of a community has led also to civil up-risings. Seen in whatever light, wars always have some disastrous effects, as was the case with the *Balu* skirmishes. In fact, wars have casualties, some lead to mass movement or force people to abandon old sides the case of *Balu*. The *Balu* crisis has been at the origin of displaced people far beyond the area concerned. The atmosphere of insecurity has led many indigenes to opt for total submission rather than going in search for a new homeland. The taking of captives and other valuables has been an economic potential to the invading group.<sup>36</sup> But in this study, we have broadly limited our consequences on human, material and administrative relations.

##### 4.1. Human and Material Casualties

In 1995, Oku and Noni fought over *Balu*. Three people died in that incident, the *Balu* market was burnt down, and the DO's car stoned. As if that was not enough, the 1997 skirmishes resurfaced in an extraordinary way. This was because, after evaluating eight days of fighting between the belligerents, data from studies gave us some vivid statistics about the whole show. Ndom Solomon, *Fon* of Chiengh in Din contributed that, up to 137 houses were burnt down by the people of Oku. More than 200 Din people were displaced and scattered all over neighbouring communities such as in Nkor, Noni,

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Menang Alfred, 31, farmer Nkan-Din, October 27, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Nyamjoh John Nchaji, 37, Counselor Nkan-Din, October 27, 2004.

Tadu and Mbino while some escaped right to Bum and Akeh in Boyo Division.<sup>37</sup> Counting the loss, Ndom further said, three corn grinding mills, four main juju shrines and farms belonging to the people of Din were damaged. The only structures left were the Baptist Church, *Balu*, and two palaces that were saved by the arrival of North West Governor, Fai Yengo Francis and the law enforcement officer. Ndom who appreciated the timely arrival for the Governor on February 13, lamented that: "My *Fondom* is now like a haunted desert. We hurriedly packed out of the palace, which was the target of attack that morning".<sup>38</sup> In fact the Oku people silently blamed the Governor and the law enforcement officers who prevented them from capturing the *Fon* of Din.

Apart from the above, some of our sources especially oral and local newspapers revealed that, about 20 children died from malnutrition and water-related diseases and many as 20 were slaved in the war.<sup>39</sup> More than 30 were hospitalised at the Bansa Baptist Hospital for serious injuries as a result of the nature of arms used (Dane guns, machetes and spears). It is rather unfortunate that administrative officials who could have furnished us with reliable information hesitated for what they described as "security reasons".

#### 4.2. Impacts on Human and administrative relations

It is rather unfortunate that the *Balu* skirmishes did not play in favour of human relations between these communities. Really at the end of the conflict, the relation between Oku and Noni was greatly strained. In fact, immediately after the disputes, it was rare and almost difficult to witness counter visits. The relationship that prevailed at that moment was that of hatred, animosity, melancholy, grief, bewilderment, xenophobia and misery. As days passed the aforementioned spectre gradually but surely faded into oblivion.<sup>40</sup> Today, the situation is quite different because the interaction between the two communities is well expressed especially in the domain of traditional diplomacy and family interactions. Though still fresh in mind and without any fear of contradiction, one may say that the state of affairs prevailing between the two *Fondoms* is that of love, calm, serenity, warmth and cordiality. This is evidenced by the

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ndom Solomon, *Fon* of Chiengh-Din October 23, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Ndom Solomon.

<sup>39</sup> Kum Set Bui "North West Tribal wars: political manipulation or perpetual source of instability?" *The Herald*, January 7-8, 1998, pp.4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Kum Set Ewi and Willie S. Berinyuy, "Bui land dispute: Two Killed, several Injured, Houses burnt", *The Herald*, February 17th-18th 1997, p.5.

chained of interaction conspicuous between these two people. Oku people visit Din on a business, celebrations, farming and sports.

However, some schools of thought hold that the only viaduct out of the quagmire is through a traditional libation, without which war still looms over the area. The libation will act as the ultimate solution to the problem. The interaction to some people is apparent and a matter of time, if libation and eventually, reconciliation are not done. In actual fact, the Oku Rural Radio station, which was created as one of the main talks of peace building was and is a great viability after the 1997 skirmishes. The people of Oku and Din are operating almost at the same frequency and over the same wavelength coupled with constructive and peace building programme.<sup>41</sup> The sense of belonging in the same division could also account for the subsequent unity within the communities.

On the other hand, the *Balu* crisis has exposed the witnesses of the administrative authorities on their side. This is true and confirmed fact especially when the SDO for Bui Arikai scolded the *Fon* of Oku, Ngum II and Andre Kamdem, the DO for Oku, for not ordering gendarmes to prevent the fights.<sup>42</sup> The next day, SDO himself was rebuked by Fai Yengo Francis the then North West Governor for demarcating new administrative boundaries while the Governor had no idea. In a similar situation, Fai Yengo in the weeks that follows loosed his position as Governor of the North West partly because of numerous inter-ethnic frictions in the region. The above differences widely reduced the chances of preceding a lasting solution about the *Balu* piece of land. In brief, the period that banged from 1990-99 was highly characterised not only in Bui Division in particular, but in the North West in general as a theatre of inter-chieftdom conflicts.

### Conclusion

This paper has thus examined intercommunity strife resulting from administrative readjustment on the area known as *Balu*. The market place use to serve as a meeting point for neighbouring communities to sell and buy their produce on weekly bases. But the market stopped to exist since it was burnt down by the Oku people and since then, there has never been a lasting solution as to who owns the area. The injunction order put in place has not been respected since the people still have personnel interest and are constantly farming in

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with NgongFederickKechang, 36, Reporter in Din Language over the voice Oku Rural Radio, October 27, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with NgongFederickKechang.

the disputed land as time goes. From this case study, it is a framed truth that, "violence often give rise to violence". This is because, the 1995 wanton destruction of lives and property in the disputed *Balu* area did not wipe off the idea of war, but instead degenerated and gave birth to another serious bloody confrontation in 1997 with similar effects as discussed under consequences. In this case, our fear is that another invasion could still occur, as was the case in 1995 and 1997 respectively if concrete decision by government is not put in place to avoid future embarrassments.

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