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Traditions of Women's Social Protest Movements and Collective Mobilisation: Lessons from Aghem and Kedjom Women¹

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Introduction

For the past two decades there has been a sharpened interest in a previously neglected aspect in anthropology, namely, women's collective mobilisations. The available literature is replete with material that links the oppression of women with the introduction of private property and capitalism (Boserup 1970, Hafkin and Bay 1976, O'Barr 1982). The expansion of capitalist interests has been at the basis of the marginalisation and disempowerment of women in the periphery of the world capitalist system. The reactions to this situation have been the manifestation of various forms of resistance. Thus, in accounts of resistance movements in Africa, women's roles and their experiences remain largely on the margins (Ranger 1994, O'Barr and Firmin Sellers 1995). The present paper attempts to examine some recent resistance movements that derive from colonial and post-colonial developments in the North West Province of Cameroon.

The Kedjom and Aghem women's movements which constitute the focus of the paper represent female indigenous institutions fighting against actions that impinged on women's farming activities and access to land for other productive activities. This has called for innovative ideas and new dynamism even in traditional forms of resistance. Women using these traditional strategies of resistance are directing them to aspects of human survival since they contribute to the livelihood of the community. This is an extension of their productive and reproductive roles, which they consider sacrosanct, inalienable and non-negotiable. As Guyer (1995) notes, in almost every region women have access to some kind of productive resource or a particular market which provides them with an income of

their own. When such interests are threatened, it calls for action(s) to redress the situation. It is clear that most of these movements occur in a rural setting, in which all women, the vast majority of whom are illiterate, participate. They defend women's access to and rights over land and vehemently resist all practices that threaten to or compromise their hold on other productive resources.

The Kedjom (Fombuen), Kom (Anlu) and Aghem (Ndofoumbgui) women's movements are rural phenomena with underpinnings in urban life (see Diduk 2004). For instance, the Takumbeng,² women's movement of the Bamenda metropolitan area came into the limelight in the context of Cameroon's democratic transition. There is overwhelming evidence that the Takumbeng is composed of urbanites from ethnic groups around Bamenda with variations in cultural attributes and manifestations as they bring together women from adjoining villages like Kedjom, Bambili, Bambui, Wum, Mankon, Nkwen and Mendankwe that do not share similar linguistic and cultural traits. The present involvement of women's movements in politics is an urban-based phenomenon with a strong regional colour (Jua 1993). Each group mobilised its own members and their meeting point was the protest ground. They had key members in the wards who mobilised others during street protests. It should be noted that the group transcended the barriers of ethnicity, though not of class and educational level. Elsewhere, research has shown manipulation through extraneous forces by virtue of the fact that most of the women participating are illiterate and ignorant, and sometimes did not understand the implications of their actions and the battle they were engaged in (Jua 1993, Yenshu Vubo 1995, Diduk 2004). The visible barriers of class and educational attainment did not affect the cohesion of the group, though the very literate women rarely participated. By virtue of their numerical strength and collective mobilisation for a common cause, the women were able to overcome many impediments. It is argued elsewhere (Staudt 1986, 1987) that elite women have become active participants in the creation of ideologies that preserve their elite status but undermine and subordinate them as women. Resistance movements become mostly the weapon of weak peasants (see Scott 1985).

Seen within this perspective, the Aghem women's movement became famous as early as 1968 when the first major dispute pitting farmers and grazers broke out. The then Wum Division that comprised the present Menchum and Boyo Divisions has gone down in history as the birth place of the female protests of the immediate pre-independence period (Awasom 2002:4) and since then has occupied a prominent place in women's protests in the Cameroon Grassfields, providing a stimulus to the other women's mass mobilisation movements. Under the umbrella organisation, 'ndofoumbgui', the Aghem women's activities have evolved from local demonstrations in the Aghem community such as the recent sit-in at the chief's palace to protest marches that transcend local community borders. For instance, in 1973 they were involved in a march that covered a distance of 80 kilometres from Wum to Bamenda to protest against abuses arising

from farmer-grazer problems. Preceding this movement is the much quoted Anlu of the Kom which was very vocal in the immediate pre-independence period. Diduk (1989) has demonstrated how this movement, born of resistance to a certain interpretation of colonial policies and inscribed within the politics of decolonisation (see Nkwi 1985), spilled over into the Kedjom communities wherein we find the Fombuen making their appearance in public for the first time. This appearance has however become a permanent feature that does not limit itself to the concerns of gender alone but also dictates patterns of participation in modern political life. A fuller account of recent events will situate us in this respect.

This chapter takes a historical, anthropological and comparative approach in situating the trajectory and parallels of two women's protest movements in Cameroon. With the benefit of hindsight, we examine the discourse of social protest and women's resistance in countering male hegemony, transgressions on women's agricultural activities in the agrarian economy and practices that denigrate womanhood and motherhood. The antecedents of women's collective action pioneered by the Anlu and Fombuen are replicated, albeit indifferently by the Takumbeng in the difficult route to Cameroon's democratic transition from the 1990s.

The main thesis of the paper is that women's collective action cannot only be situated within the context of traditional roles exercised in traditional society during the pre-colonial and colonial era. The mutations and extension of those roles have underpinnings in contemporary society. In this light, Takougang and Krieger (1998) and Diduk (2004) observe that the roots of the modern protests in the Cameroon Grassfields captured in the term 'Takumbeng' involved female elders in the past. Kolawole (1997) posits that African women's collective mobilisation and the question of self-assertion and empowerment are glossed over or effaced from mainstream women's theorising. She argues that it is necessary to probe the unexplored areas of the African woman's audibility and visibility to assess the limits of her position as a muted category. Research conducted by Diduk (2004) in the Cameroon Grassfields situates the highly disruptive but mystically charged nature of women's mobilisations and their effectiveness in opening spaces for popular dissent on the national stage.

This ethnographic study attempts a response to the inadequacies in the presentation of female resistance by examining the parallels in the frequent women's movements in Cameroon with specific emphasis on three forms of ethnic associations: the Fombuen society of Kedjom Keku and the N dofoumbgui (Aghem).

Women's Traditional Associations and the Discourse of Social Protest: The *N dofoumbgui* of the Aghem

Political action by women in the North West Province of Cameroon is a cultural given that has become an integral part of the collective conscience of the people at a group level and what Bourdieu calls 'habitus' (2004) at the individual level.

Transgressors of the moral order whatever their status – cattle herders, bar brawlers, or representatives of the state – defy such women at their peril, risking a supposed mystical power of reprisal belied by their apparently humble rural status (Diduk 2004). Against this backdrop, women's movements like the Fombuen, Ndufoumbgui and Takumbeng have taken a prominent place in the discourses and practices of social protest in the North West Province of Cameroon.

Due to their protracted demonstrations and riots, the Aghem women have occupied a leading place in the politics of Cameroon in general and Menchum division in particular. Wum is on record to have witnessed the worst demonstrations in the history of farmer-grazer conflicts in the North West Province. The nature of their demonstrations permits one to draw parallels with the Anlu of Kom. This is clearly evident in the narrative of the Aghem women leader. She notes that in 1937, three chiefs, Kelly Kwala, Fung-u-Tsang, and Keba Mbong, under the leadership of Fon Bambi I, negotiated with Major Walters – the then colonial administrator of Wum Division – for the coming of Fulanis (grazers) locally called the 'Akus'. In 1943, the Fon and these chiefs allocated three grazing areas situated in the outskirts of Kesu, Zonghofuh and Waindo villages. Unfortunately, when the first cattle arrived at Wum in 1957, they were not taken to the designated areas, thus precipitating the first major dispute of farmer-grazer conflict in 1968. As cattle trespass on farmlands became rampant, coupled with the lukewarm attitude of local traditional authorities to rectify the situation, Aghem women marched naked in Wum in 1972.

As the situation degenerated in 1973, more than one thousand women marched from Wum to Bamenda,³ a distance of about 80 kilometres, to complain to the Governor about the matter. This led to the creation of the 'Nseke Commission', named after the then Governor of the North West Province, whose role was to delimit farmland from grazing land. Unfortunately, the commission failed to relocate grazers to the three areas that had been designated by chiefs but instead allocated the areas that were currently occupied by both farmers and grazers.

Consequently, pressure on land had increased with the increase in both the human and cattle population. Incidents of destruction of farmlands by cattle quadrupled. This and other causes triggered the next Wum affray in 1981. 'Though not solely reported as a female protest, women were very instrumental in the Wum affray between Fulani grazers and Aghem farmers which saw the intervention of government soldiers leading to nine fatalities and a number of women wounded' (Chilver 1989:402). The consequences of the 1981 affray were shocking. The Aghem women lost nine of their husbands while several women sustained severe injuries. There was a general outburst of rage at the chiefs, local administrators and the Fulani who were perceived as enemies. This resulted in increased solidarity among the women and a reinvigoration and fortification of the female traditional institution called 'ndofoumbgui'.

Ndofoumbgui spokeswomen reported that after the 1981 affray they requested the men to refrain from active participation in farmer-grazer conflict as it was solely their responsibility. There was an absolute need for every Aghem woman to belong to *ndofoumbgui* to enable them to successfully tackle their opponents. This shows the level of determination of the women. A plethora of female traditional institutions now exist in Wum, all geared at mobilising women for greater activism and involvement in the *ndofoumbgui*. The women's resolve was motivated by the inability of the local administration to effectively resolve farmer-grazer disputes. They argued that using 'commissions of inquiry' to probe issues often proved futile. They cite the 2003 Aghem women's sit-in action during which the Governor of the North West Province created a seventeen-man commission to look at the problems. Although the commission had only fifteen days to present a report with proposals on how to resolve the conflict, by 23 December 2003 when we interviewed a women's movement leader there was 'no sign of the commission anywhere'. Even at the time we are writing this paper there are no indications that the administration has got anywhere with solutions to the problems. This only goes to underline either the dubiousness of the administration in handling conflict situations of explosive dimensions or their reluctance to intervene in domains that are complicated.

The 2003 *ndofoumbgui* uprising of the Aghem women was provoked by attempts to limit women's access to communal land, an act which was interpreted as a disenfranchisement with far-reaching effects on Aghem social and cultural life. The background was the order from the local administrator, head of the farmer-grazer commission, that farmers quit farmland occupied by close to 600 women in favour of two grazers in respect of Prefectoral Order No. 60 of 28 March 2003. This order is said to have annulled order No. 144 of 12 December 2003 that was in consonance with earlier recommendations that called for the demarcation of farmlands from grazing land. Given the uncertainty that characterised the period when these orders were to be implemented, cattle invaded farms and destroyed crops. The women thought they had been tricked to quit the area in favour of the grazers. According to a *ndofoumbgui* leader, this provoked about 8000 Aghem women to take seven traditional rulers including the *kedeng*⁴ of Aghem, Bambi III, hostage through a sit-in strike. For forty-eight days (14 September 2003 to 2 December 2003), the *ndofoumbgui* women occupied the courtyard of the Deng Keghem. During the protest period the women stood their ground, braving both torrential rains and scorching sun. They accused the traditional rulers (custodians of the land) of selling their farmlands to the more influential cattle owners. As was the case with the Pare women's uprising (O'Barr 1976) they suspended all marital and other domestic responsibilities. It may be observed that poor sanitation conditions caused many of the women to develop illnesses and injuries. One of the protesting women was reported to have had her leg amputated due to a tetanus infection she contracted during the sit-in action. Women from neighbouring villages, as was the case with women during the

demonstrations by the neo-traditional Takumbeng, extended support in the form of food and drinks to their protesting *ndofoumbgui* colleagues.

The 2003-2004 Fombuen Uprising and Socio-political Reforms in Kedjom-Keku

On 17 May 2004 a mammoth crowd of resident Kedjom Keku people gathered at the border between their settlement and the neighbouring village of Bambui, both to prevent a Fon⁵ who had ruled them for twenty-five years from returning to the community, and to banish him from the same community. At the forefront of this history-making event were heads of the corporate political units, *vetiveloh*, (literally ‘fathers of the community’), senior king makers (*vechevefon*), *ntsningsegeng* (retainers of the governing society, Kwifon) and the avant-garde members of the women’s movement, Fombuen. While the first three categories of actors in this drama represented the cream of traditional political power, the fourth was an age-old institution that sanctioned women’s opposition to social abuse, political oppression or economic alienation (Diduk 1987, 1989). For once, both the local dominant status group made up of men and the moral guardians of the society made up of the women, were at one to restore order and redress the de-structuring process that a quarter of a century of what community members diagnosed as misrule had set in.

This very significant act was the culmination of a protracted period of unheeded control and sanctions by Kwifon but also unending protests and appeals for better rule by the women through the Fombuen. This was one of the rare moments that the Kwifon dictum that they were always together with the women in ruling the community became literally true. In a sense, this was a perfect marriage of male and female power. This action led to the banishment of the incumbent Fon and the choice of a new one for the community. Several attempts by the local administration to reinstate the banished Fon were futile and although the modern administration originally hesitated to endorse the changes within the hierarchy of the community, it finally had no choice but to agree with the local community. A detailed study of this political event with far-reaching implications for the political anthropology of the region in particular and Cameroon in general will be the subject of a separate study, but it will be instructive to evaluate the role of women in these developments.

The background to the event comprised grievances related to misrule and social injustice, large scale alienation of land to big cattle farmers, insensitivity to the plight of farmers – the majority of whom are women – a false representation of natives (subjects) to the administration and a plethora of other minor complaints. Some of these grievances had been the subject of tussles between the Fon and leading traditional authorities (here represented by Kwifon), several petitions by these authorities to the local administration and protests by women. The most recent of these conflicts had crystallised around a farmer-grazer conflict that

pitted food cultivators against cattle farmers in the fertile high land in another settlement (Kefem). Although this area had been declared exclusively farmland by the technical authorities in charge of farming and grazing in a previous ruling, the Fon and some of his acolytes had still surreptitiously succeeded in settling cattle herds on the area. A combination of shifting cultivation and bush fallowing on the one hand, and extensive grazing on the other soon brought the local people and the grazers into a long drawn-out conflict. Peaceful attempts by villages to obtain redress from the Fon and local administration were fruitless as the Fon persistently labelled farmers as criminals who were 'stealing cattle'. Such a misrepresentation actually led to the arrest and jailing of some local farmers; others who were merely resisting encroachment on their farms were charged before judicial authorities with theft of cattle. In such an atmosphere, which lasted for more than two decades, the community felt itself to be the victims of aggression by the cattle owners with the connivance of the Fon who was supposed to be an objective judge, a source of community continuity and sustenance, and guarantor of social justice.⁶

Each time there was a crisis between the farmers and the cattle owners and in which the Fon tended to criminalise the farmers to the administration, the women protested before the Fon and the local administration, either at sub-divisional, divisional or provincial level. The protest marches and sit-ins of the Kedjom Keku women either at Tubah or Bamenda have now become legendary. Whether this was during the confrontation between local farmers and the late Jurebure at the Kwinchum part of Kefem in the 1980s, the confrontation between farmers and the famous and much dreaded business magnate and kingpin of the ruling CPDM party, Alhadji Baba Ahamadou Danpullo, in the 1990s in the Mbwangang area, and the more recent conflict between farmers and Alhadji Youssoufou at the Abongfen segment of Kefem, women were an active and vocal element of the protest movement that sought redress for farmers. The action of the 1980s recognised farmers' rights over the Kwinchum segment of the Kefem area while the protest of the 1990s led to the recognition of their rights over Mbwangang and the imposition of a 49 million CFA fine to be paid by the grazer Baba Danpullo. The most visible gains of the riots spanning 2003-2004 were that the grazers at Abongfen were dislodged through the concerted action of youth and women. Moreover, the administration has considered the acquisition of land by Youssoufou as illegal and called on him to 'regularise' his situation in Kedjom Keku. The banishment of the Fon from the community and his replacement came to crown local people's action. The timid reaction of the administration in recognising the changes at the helm of the local community have only gone to legitimise the popular nature of social protest, which was initially branded as an 'insurrection' or a 'rebellion'. The modern administration is on the way to endorsing such changes only because they have ushered in a period of social peace and the absence of unrest that was characteristic of the community over the past two

and a half decades. What remains to be seen is whether these gains will be consolidated in the future.

The women in their action drew inspiration from historical antecedents which were inscribed in a long-standing tradition of protest and a culture of dissent. We find here a rare case of institutionalised dissent that contrasts with attempts by the Fon to criminalise the actions of the protesters. Most respondents whom we encountered pointed to the first manifestation as having been registered in the reign of Fon Vubangsi in the 1940s-1950s. This pioneer protest was intended to call the attention of the late Fon Vubangsi to the wanton destruction of crops by uncoordinated grazing practices, in which his cattle were involved. Then, the problem was resolved by setting up a ditch as a protective device against the Fon's cattle to protect the crops from livestock. Other marches occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s during the period of political effervescence. The protests of the 1980s were restricted to localised community-based issues such as the destruction of crops by small ruminants as well as cattle (Diduk *ibid*), while the protest of the 1990s were more in consonance with the wider neo-traditional activities of the women in the Bamenda metropolitan area that were inscribed within the wider political protest that was characteristic of the region (Diduk 2004), although the farmer-grazer problem was still very much in the background.

By tracing their actions to historical antecedent, the women were reaffirming rights to resistance and protest. The capacity to resist, derived from a tradition couched in a distant past, is in itself social capital because it is an accumulation of collective values. It was the re-enactment of a culture of resistance to perverse forms of social domination and alienation. In this way, the women ultimately take on themselves the role of judges of local governance practices. It is in the same way that they are hard in their judgment of local administrative authorities whom they consider complacent in the search for solutions to social crises of this nature.

Besides the role of judges of history that the women take on themselves, the women also join the men as prime movers of history. In joining hands with the men to chase away a ruler considered despotic and insensitive, they assert their rights to self-determination and momentarily recover their autonomy as actors in their own right in the face of a hesitant administration. What is interesting is the fact that the justification for their actions is not the much-trumpeted gospel of human rights. It is simply legitimacy derived from a history of institutionalised dissent and protest. It is also the affirmation of the traditional right to act as custodians of land and as claimants to land in their own right. In other words, they are not only farmhands or persons with user rights as is often wrongly portrayed in modernist circles. One of the leaders of the women's movement, Tabitha, indicated that as mothers they have greater rights to farmland than even the men. When advocating changes they did so in the interest of their children and their husbands whom they also assimilate to children. The woman's job is to

protect the rights of her children, she affirmed. In this respect, it is motherhood, much more than wifehood (see Farnyu and Yenshu Vubo 2005), that gives the women a central place in Kedjom political life. In this motherhood role, women have to assert the right of every community member to food, which is the crux of the struggle over land. It has to be noted that when we say women's protest is institutionalised as is dissent in traditional life, we are saying that it forms an integral part of the social life, is acceptable to everyone and sanctioned as a political institution.

The Fombuen that gives form to this element of dissent and protest maintains only a skeletal structure, as is also the case with the Anlu of the Kom (Nkwi 1985, Ardener 1975, Ritzenthaler 1976) and the Mawu of the Bayang. Every adult female can become a member, while the leadership is made up of jesters and clowns (*vugne*). Its personality is amorphous and its actions spontaneous and on the spur of the moment. Fombuen thus exists but does not have a permanent structure. When it accomplishes its mission it can dissolve back into the community where it hibernates until it is provoked to resurface with the advent of a new crisis. Recent developments that seem to crystallise its activities have not subtracted from this simple logic that owes its operational efficiency to the very nature of its simplicity. The inability of the modern administration to understand the logic of this mode of operation has led many an administrator to read manipulation into its activities as some people consider Fombuen members as lacking in knowledge of the issues of modern politics (see R. Jua op cit.). But on the contrary, frequent incursions into the modern sphere have led the women to develop a heightened awareness of current political issues, even if only in their own way. One may not also exclude the possibility of politicisation as such movements tend to act as powerful instruments of mobilisation. The very resilience of these women in all kinds of weather conditions and their resolve to have their voices heard is daunting. For two and a half decades running these women have not missed a single year to protest (marches, sit-ins). The most recent protest lasted from around mid-2003 to mid-2004 during part of which they organised a boycott of the palace and the Fon and practically governed the community. With the near collapse of the traditional system of government, the Fombuen took over the day-to-day administration. It checked abuses by community members, settled disputes and kept order in the most astonishing manner. Even members of Kwifon (the highest traditional administrative institution) were not spared. The modern administration was also compelled to pay attention to its discourse and include them in all conflict resolution initiatives. In fact, the Fombuen gave power to the community in the end by giving power to the men in the face of a perverse traditional despotism, the rising capitalist interest of the cattle owners, and an ambivalent administration (see also Konde 1991 in the case of Anlu).

Response of Local Traditional and Administrative Authorities

The local traditional and administrative authorities have been very cautious in resolving farmer-grazer conflicts that border on women's land rights and undermine agricultural productivity. The Aghem and Fombuen examples show the excesses and pitfalls in the procedures employed by these authorities. Since the Fulani supply most of the protein in the form of beef, and also pay tax on their stock, and the women's food crops are vital (Fonchingong and Ufon, forthcoming), it is becoming a difficult task for administrators to break the deadlock.

As a result of the importance of the cattle economy in Menchum Division, particularly with regard to the economic interests of local administrators, they have been playing divisive tactics when it comes to resolving farmer-grazer problems. There are claims and counter claims as both parties reproach each other for fanning the conflict. The cardinal question is: how come for over half a century now no definite solution has been found to the farmer/grazer confrontation that has plagued the province?

In the Aghem case, the First Assistant S.D.O of Wum affirmed that, 'since the chiefs are poor, they easily fall prey to Fulani influence - allocating them vast areas of land which is usually farming land in exchange of cash and when a problem arises, they will run to the administration pleading for help'. The cattle farmers in question corroborate this view. Alhadji Manto revealed that when he first arrived in Wum, a chief sold him a parcel of land, and he only later discovered that women were farming on the other side. When he complained, the chief told him to continue to graze on the piece of land. For Chief Ben Afue of Naikom village, 'the S.D.O and D.O. in conjunction with the Divisional chief of lands and surveys issue land certificates to grazers, who as persons holding formal title to land, dominate women and even threaten to take them to court'.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the actions of local authorities have been imprudent. Like their predecessors, these administrative authorities have found themselves caught in a dilemma, because pleasing the farmers means losing out on the much needed cattle money. They have therefore failed to respond effectively to farmers' problems while reaping the necessary funds to sustain themselves and the administration. One *ndofoumbgui* leader indicated that they no longer needed commissions of inquiry and unfulfilled promises.

From interviews conducted with women, men, and the traditional and administrative authorities, it is clear that people subscribe to the gendered ideology of women's contribution to the rural and urban economy in terms of food production and family upkeep. Tih Amban, tihloh (head of a corporate political group in Kedjom Keku), aged 74 and a farmer, argues that 'without the efforts of women, village communities will never develop. Men are warriors and very aggressive. Women have to control them such that they take proper decisions'. Asked if the Fombuen women's protest was legitimate, he said that 'women have confronted the Fon several times on a land dispute at Kefem. Farmland that

belongs to the Kedjom Keku people was sold to the Fulanis; the women therefore did not have access to this land. Cattle destroyed crops that have been sown on this land. Kedjom Keku belongs to all not to a single individual in the name of a Fon. He had no right to sell the land, which belongs to the Kedjom Keku people. Our women are supposed to cultivate on this land and nobody has the right to refuse them access to this land. That is why the women's movement was right when they protested'.

Recognising the greater visibility of women in agriculture and community development, most of the interviewees considered that the actions of the women were appropriate. However, some of the traditional and administrative authorities reproached the women for employing strategies that are antisocial, inimical to culture and uncivil in disposition. The Provincial Delegate for Women's Affairs/Director of Women's Empowerment Centre Bamenda is of the opinion that 'The Delegation of Women's Affairs do not encourage women associations that operate as secret societies such as the Takembeng of Nkwen and the Fombuen as you call it in Babanki. We encourage development associations. The practices of these secret societies, which operate as associations, are disgusting and expose women's privacy (walking naked on the streets)'. She indicated that all traditional laws and customs must be respected as long as they are not repugnant to natural justice. Waylen (1998) contends that women have taken over public space not normally seen as part of their domain for protests, and use their bodies as symbolic and metaphorical devices to subvert the dominant discourse of womanhood.

By describing the women's activities as not conforming to the tenets of modern law wrongly identified with natural justice, the Delegate is simply subscribing to the Eurocentric-American centred view of its justice system as universal and all other systems as deviant. The state official attempts here to place restrictions on the contours of traditional law and its practices by subjecting them to 'natural justice'. Just how natural this justice is, is open to question. It is simply the expression of a selective attitude of the administration towards civil society organisations that has also been highlighted by Temngah (in this volume). What one can say is that the state fails in its attempt to choose its own civil society as these so-called civil society structures fail to take root. On the contrary, the despised uncivil women with their rustic mannerisms succeed in gaining the full status of a vibrant civil society.

Being antithetical to state actions and attitudes, women's movements constitute symbols of resistance to excesses from traditional and administrative authorities. The source of their authority, as Diduk (2004) observes, is not just the fact that they are rooted in a pre-colonial ideology and the social institutions of female moral guardianship. It is that these indigenous roots are essentialist; grassfields women, by their very nature, act in defence of production and reproduction.

Other officials share the view of the Delegate of Women's Affairs concerning the destabilisation that the women's actions can produce. The Senior Divisional Officer of Mezam opines that: 'The women of Kedjom Keku did not request a

meeting with me. They came here as individuals. They intended meeting me as a group. I refused because the association is not registered. The administration does not recognise associations that are not registered. Such associations promote social disorder. I receive development associations and professional groups. Thus, four women from Kedjom met me and complained about a land dispute in the village. I realised after having discussions with them, it's a chieftaincy problem. A commission was therefore set up to study the problem and submit its report. I am still expecting the report'.

This insistence on receiving the women only as an association reflects a selective attitude towards civil society bodies. In this way, only modern associations are given administrative approval and considered as falling within the scope of the acceptable. The insistence that organisations fall within the scope of modern law can be interpreted as an attempt to control all facets of public life in a pervasive hegemonic drive. We are led to question whether the state can legislate on everything or subject all aspects of social life within the scope of the law (see Temngah in present volume).

One way of reading attempts to subject civil society to the regime of modern law when people act to assert traditional rights is that this is a juridification of rights which 'contributes to the surveillance and disciplining of the individual' (Foucault in B. Jua 2002). In other words, instead of guaranteeing rights, legislation restricts them. To the administration the women are infringing on the law by enacting practices outside the ambit of the relevant legislation, whereas the women strongly believe they are exercising their rights offered to them by their society. This leads to a confrontation between the two logics which ends up in an impasse for lack of a *modus vivendi*. This is the ambiguity of the attitudes of the modern society vis-à-vis traditional institutions. Refusing to receive the women as a traditional association because it is not registered but receiving them as individuals exhibits a modernist bias that stresses individuals as citizens but negates the social institutions that shape them as social beings. However, the very resilience of these institutions renders them indispensable in modern space. By inscribing their dissenting voices within the realm of disorder, the administrator relegates the activities of these associations as well as traditional life to the status of the anti-social, hence backward and criminal. With a characteristic western bias the traditional is assimilated to the primitive.

Another reading will consider this attitude as representative of more recent attempts to criminalise dissent by criminalising the instruments of this dissent. Such attitudes arose with the rise to prominence of the neo-liberal programme (Wacquant 2000) but have gained greater weight with the developments of the period after the so-called 9/11 events that have largely defined international attitudes to violent forms of protest. In this regard the administrator falls short of calling the protesting women terrorists. Even then the actions are branded in a communiqué by the same administration as an insurrection.

Even the analysis of the problem is dismissive. By reducing the social problem to a local political issue the administrator admits his inability to come to terms with the social crises that rock the state. Reading all social problems with a political lens therefore re-situates the political actor which the administrator is and enables him to treat the question of dissent as essentially a challenge to the state or constituted order. This also dictates the state's attitude: repression where the threat of breach of peace is sufficiently serious; being dismissive where the threat is at its very least; cosmetic reforms with no far-reaching import where the threats are not too serious but the issues are the source of perennial and protracted complaints. The creation of commissions of inquiry which yield little fruit is one strategy of not only buying time but also warding off social problems without addressing them. We have seen in the case of the Aghem women's movement – and it is common knowledge in Cameroon – that the appointment of commissions of inquiry is one of the surest ways of killing off a burning social crisis. The fact that local peoples finally resort to their own effective strategies of tackling social problems and effecting reforms in the way Kedjom Keku people are doing, points to the fact that the civil society is increasingly capturing its own space where the state fails or acts ambivalently.

Counting the Gains of Women's Protest Actions

Criss-crossing Rural and Urban Spaces

A noticeable activity of the women's movement as presented in this study is the attempt to conquer more spaces in the search for solutions to burning problems. The rural milieu is increasingly transformed as women take their protest actions to urban areas in order to seek redress from administrative authorities.

This analysis presents the role of the N dofoumbgui, Anlu, Fombuen, and Takumbeng as women turning to more intensive political activism. This trend ties in with Andrew Apter's (1999) call for understanding socio-political processes in Africa from the perspective of 'the base', or the people themselves, in this case female subsistence farmers who engage in and talk about making political history. It is important to capture the reasons behind the actions and motivations of women's protest actions. James Scott (1985, 1990) has stressed that peasants, in general, may be savvy political actors, but their structural position often requires them to challenge the political elite and influence formal institutions only through unorthodox means such as work slowdowns or songs expressing ironic contempt for the powerful. Farmers may become critics, but primarily through indirection; they challenge at a slant to avoid the wrath of the state. By contrast, the case of female farmers in the North West Province of Cameroon suggests that they can be very direct and wilful in raising criticisms and pressing for change, whether in regard to local or national issues (Diduk 2004). In an interview with the Senior Divisional Officer of Mezam (September 2004), he indicated that he thought

that women within his jurisdiction are 'enjoying their rights. The women are very conscious of their rights and always protest once their rights are tampered with. That is the reason why the Kedjom women are always protesting'.

If the state is seen as patriarchal and their policies unjust towards women, then women's experience can be seen as one of exclusion from state resources, inequality of access, neglect and outright oppression (Parpart and Staudt 1989). Through public singing, verbal insults, dancing, and demonstrating in public and by generally seizing control of resources and political outcomes (Shanklin 1990), women attempt to force the offending party to change his or her behaviour. Women are ready to respond to the reticence and nonchalance of administrative authorities. This unrelenting attitude could be likened to female resistance in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Protesting women from the Itsekiri and Ijaw communities have been pressing for concessions from oil companies. On one occasion, defiant women's leader stated the women's resolve candidly when she said that: 'The Federal government and oil companies like to oppress us. Since we are already suffering, we did not mind if we died on the flow stations...' (Ukeje 2002). As claim makers, women's resistance activities are largely borne by their pains of childbirth and pangs of motherhood that urge them to create order where chaos is imminent (Ngwane 1996). In this regard, we would be correct in affirming that these movements do not only criss-cross rural and urban spaces, but also stand astride the traditional and modern worlds. They derive their legitimacy from the traditional setting but, in order to articulate the problems of the contemporary period, they make incursions into the modern sphere. In this way they are the necessary connection between history and the present and constitute a bridge into the future.

The Gender Question

It can be deduced from women's activism in the area under study that women and men are both conscious of their roles in society. There is a greater recognition of women's roles in subsistence agriculture and their importance in guaranteeing livelihoods. Diduk (2004) argues that the cultural emphasis on women as guardians of crops and community sustenance clearly sets them apart. Their special status is given expression in routinely essentialised conceptions of gender that are articulated by both men and women in rural and urban communities in the region. What we observe here goes beyond the current dominant discourses and practices around the gender question that evokes far-fetched modernistic notions with little connection to the day-to-day realities of the common folk. There is a conscious attempt in the area under study for women to occupy a critical position as prime movers of the history of their societies. Problems of gender relations gain greater credibility when a synergy is achieved between the two streams of the gender question. The current gains of the present protests go only to strengthen the traditions of protest and the cultural capital of dissent and

in this way foster the democratic culture of pluralism of discourses and practices. In this way traditional institutions are also definitely carriers of positive values.

Transcending Local Concerns

These movements also transcend the immediate localities within which they emerge. Such transcendence may be derived from a long-distant past, as in the commonality of practices such as those in the institutions of the speakers of Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu (see above), or expresses itself as a spill-over effect from the rural into the urban, a chain effect from recent events. It was observed that the women's protest movement of the 1990s touched a large number of groups and addressed issues of wider national import, although they were localised in space. Consequently, although the Takumbeng of the Bamenda metropolitan area was most vocal at this moment (Diduk 2004), a variety of such movements soon arose all over the country. We can specifically refer to the *mawu* of the Bayang and a plethora of similar movements in the Nso, Bali Nyonga, Bakossi and Ewondo areas. The gains of each group only go to strengthen the culture of resistance of the women as prime movers of history.

Notes

1. The division of labour in this paper is as follows: the general design, hypotheses and analysis on the Takumbeng and the Aghem women by Charles Fonchingong, in-depth theoretical insight and the section on Kedjom Keku by Emmanuel Yenshu Vubo, and the field work on Aghem by Maurice U. Besseng.
2. The term in its primordial usage in the area under question and as reflected in political anthropology (Aletum 1977, Warnier 1985) points to a male regulatory society open to princes in contradistinction to *knjfor* (a commoner regulatory society) in the royalty-commoner divide that characterises the binary structure of traditional political organisation in the region. Diduk (2004:52) rightly traces the origins of the usage to this source but affirms that it is 'not clear why this is so'. We can observe that this is much in the direction of what Hobsbawm (1992:1) has styled the invention of tradition and more so of the kind he describes as '... emerging in a traceable manner within a brief period – a period of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity'. In this case the women adopt known, highly respected and revered social symbols and give them new meanings in the search for a new social order. It is in this regard that the actions both claim to be politically correct within the traditional sphere and lay claims to innovation.
3. Bamenda is the provincial capital of North West Province of Cameroon.
4. The Aghem term for King.
5. Local term used by a variety of groups to refer to a King. In the present form it suffers from an anglicised deformation but has gained currency and is often equated with kingship. Within the central Ring group of Grassfields Bantu it is pronounced as 'foyn' (Kedjom, Kom, Oku, Mmen) or 'Mfon' (Nso). Within the Mbam-Nkam community of Grassfields Bantu it goes under the appellation of 'Mfor' (Ngemba speakers), 'Mfon' (Pati-Nun) or 'Fo' (other so-called Bamileke peoples and affines). Its rudimentary meaning points to the

importance of a person or headship of a group. The Bayang, situated to the immediate south of the Grassfields region of Cameroon, also use the term 'nfor' to refer to a chief.

6. On the powers of the Fon in the region see Fowler (1993:255) who affirms that 'epic notions of qualities' required of Grassfields Fon expect him to 'use occult powers and mystical agencies to increase the population and material wealth of his kingdom. The king is explicitly associated with the fertility of the earth...'

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