

A Brief History of the Bakweri Land Problem

By Dibussi Tande

When Cameroon became a German Protectorate in 1884, the Germans realized that the area around Mount Cameroon, home of the indigenous Bakweri ethnic group, was an agricultural paradise. They immediately instituted a policy of wholesale confiscation of native lands for large-scale commercial agriculture. Through the use of coercion, brute force, and a series of repressive laws, the German colonial Government forced local indigenous communities to give up vast expanses of native lands without compensation.

The German colonial Government also instituted the notorious and inhumane policy of packing the Bakweri into inaccessible, disease infested and inhospitable Native Reserves. Through this policy, thousands of Bakweri were forcefully displaced from their original villages and herded off onto strange and unfriendly patches of lands around the plantations. In one swoop, the Bakweri, who prior to the arrival of the Germans were described as aggressive, independent and dynamic, were transformed into a dejected, despondent, lethargic and dependent people. Ripped from familiar surroundings on which their entire traditional culture derived its strength the Bakweri began an alarming downward spiral that would continue for over half a century – a fate no different from that of Native Americans.

In total, the Germans alienated about 400 square miles of the most fertile land around the Mount Fako area alone, and stripped the Bakweri of over 200,000 acres of their most fertile lands with tragic results. According to the 1922 British Annual Report to the League of Nations:

“Uprooted from the homes of their forebears, settled willy-nilly on strange soil, deprived of their old-time hunting grounds, and fishing rights, the Bakweri have retained but a small sense of tribal unity or cohesion.”

Over two decades later, another British report posited that the land alienation had deprived the Bakweri "of all incentives" and that they had "relapsed into what is still an indolent state of mind." Even the birth rate among the Bakweri reduced at an alarming rate, with observers predicting an early extinction of the Bakweri group.

Evidently, the replacement of the Germans by the British after WWI failed to resolve what became known as the "Bakweri Land Problem". In fact, the British felt that it was "impractical" to return the confiscated land to natives even though they were sympathetic to the plight of the Bakweri. Instead German farmers were allowed to return and take over their plantations for "economic reasons".

In 1946, the Nigerian legislature, whose control extended into the British Cameroons, passed two ordinances. The first allowed the Governor of Nigeria (who was also Governor of British Cameroons) to purchase German-owned lands which were then declared "native lands" to be held in trust for the natives. The second ordinance created the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) to take over and exploit the ex-German plantations. In response, the Bakweri created the "Bakweri Land Committee" (BLC) whose goal was to "be incharge of all the land in the Victoria division which virtually belongs to the natives."

From its creation, the Committee passionately fought for Bakweri land rights, sending dozens of petitions to the British Crown, the Government of Nigeria, and to the UN Trusteeship council. In fact, the BLC was granted an oral hearing at the UN in 1947 but could not honor it because of a lack of funds. British Trusteeship on British Cameroons ended in 1961 with the Bakweri Land Problem largely unresolved, and with the ownership of the CDC transferred to the Government of independent Cameroon.

The authoritarian political climate under Cameroon's one-party state precluded any kind of BLC advocacy consequently the BLC went into hibernation. And, the Cameroon Government did nothing to address the issue. It instead tightened its stranglehold on CDC-controlled lands by arguing that they were "national lands".

It wasn't until the political liberalization of the 1990s, and more specifically the announced privatization of the CDC under IMF auspices in 1994, that the Bakweri would rise again to demand justice. In August 1994, they issued a memorandum insisting that the only acceptable privatization plan was one based on

“terms which recognise the ownership of land as a distinct variable which together with the cash make plantation agriculture possible. Therefore, landowners deserve ground rent compensation in much the same way as the CDC was liable to pay ground rents for the use of the land.”

Professor *Ndiva Kofele-Kale* was then designated counsel for the Bakweri people with instructions to work with a revived BLC (now known as the BLCC) to present their case before the United Nations and other international fora. Instead of listening to the plea of the Bakweri, the Government sought to divide the Bakweri into pro and anti-BLCC factions, and then unleashing a decade-long campaign of intimidation and persecution of BLCC members.

It was under these difficult circumstances that the BLCC launched an international legal campaign at the beginning of the new millennium to seek redress.

In September 2002, the BLCC filed a complaint with the *African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights* under Articles 55, 56 and 58 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights concerning the violation of the land rights of the indigenous people of Fako division.

In its complaint the BLCC had called on the Commission to recommend, among other things, that the government of Cameroon affirm the lands occupied by the CDC are private property; that the Bakweri be fully involved in any CDC privatization negotiations; and that ground rents owed to the Bakweri dating back to 1947 be paid to a Bakweri Land Trust Fund.

On November 14, 2003, the BLCC and the Government of Cameroon made oral submissions regarding the admissibility of BLCC vs. State of Cameroon before the African Commission in Banjul, Gambia. Dr. Dion Ngute, Minister-Delegate for Commonwealth Relations, held brief for Government while Professor Ndiva Kofele-Kale was lead counsel for Complainants, BLCC on behalf of the Bakweri people.

In February 2006, the Commission issued its ruling on the matter stating among other things that the BLCC had the *locus standi* to speak on behalf of the Bakweri because “the counsel himself and the BLCC has been duly authorized, by a resolution of chiefs, to further the interests of the Bakweri, which fact has not been denied by the Respondent State”. The African Commission also “found [BLCC’s] presentation/narration of violation of rights protected under the Charter to be sufficiently clear to be taken up by the Commission.”

Nonetheless, because African Commission did not want to serve as a “Court of First Instance” in the matter, it recommended that the BLCC and the Government of Cameroon “settle the matter amicably”, and to this end, availed its good offices to both parties.

While the BLCC has officially accepted the African Commission’s mediation offer, the Government of Cameroon is yet to respond some six months after the Commission’s ruling.

For additional details about the Bakweri Land Problem, the BLCC, and the Bakweri struggle for their ancestral lands, visit the *BLCC Digital Archive* at <http://www.blccarchives.org>

For the BLCC Communications Department

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