

BAKWERI ARMED RESISTANCE TO GERMAN COLONIALISM, 1891 – 1894

By Dibussi Tande

Contrary to widely-held beliefs that the Bakweri made no effort whatsoever to resist the spoliation of their lands by the Germans, they did in fact mount a fierce anti-German campaign, particularly around the slopes of Mount Fako, and successfully inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Germans at Buea in 1891; the first ever German military loss on the African continent, which led to a complete reappraisal of German colonial/military policy on the continent, and, unfortunately, laid the basis for the brutal campaign to annihilate the Bakweri. The Bakweri were one of the few groups in all of German Africa that were thoroughly and systematically suppressed by the Germans. That they even survived to tell the story is a testimony to their resilience and tenacity in the face of adversity.

The story of Bakweri military resistance against the Germans is also the story of **Chief KUV'A LIKENYE** of Buea, whose epic clashes with German troops remain one of the most glorious (but largely unknown) chapters in Cameroonian history.

THE BAKWERI RESISTANCE CAMPAIGN OF 1891-1985

From the time they landed on the Fako coast, and especially after they came in contact with the Bakweri of the interior, the Germans had nothing but grudging respect for the Bakweri, particularly the fierce and fearless warriors of the villages around Buea, whom the future German Governor of Kamerun, *Von Puttkamer*, praised in 1886 for their “powerful well-built bodies, their courage and their skill in hunting...” Another German, Dr. Preuss, who would later become infamous for his appalling brutality towards the Bakweri, described them in yet another report as being “rough (*rauhen*) and bold (*dreisten Benehmen*)” in their dealings with the White man. These were fierce mountain warriors who were not afraid against invaders, as the Germans would learn the hard way in Buea in 1890s as they tried to penetrate into the Bakweri heartland.

THE FIRST BAKWERI-GERMAN WAR OF 1891

The war of 1891 has its origins in the desire of the German colonial government to occupy the area around Mount Fako, which it believed should have happened at least a decade earlier when Kamerun became a German colony/protectorate. It was also an attempt to crush Kuva Likenye, the mountain king who, according to the 1891 Report of Acting German Governor Von Schuckman “frequently disturbed the peace of the mountain, and had instigated an uprising among the mountain tribes... the Buea people even threatened to attack Victoria” in a bid to reclaim their lands.

In November 5, 1891 a German expeditionary force led by *Karl Freiherr Gravenreuth* (who had brutally crushed a revolt of the *Abo* people (Douala) in February of that same year) and *Lieutenant Von Stetten*, was dispatched to tame the mountain people by what the acting German Governor described as “... a demonstration of our existing power.” The contingent also included Dahomean, Togolese and Kru (Sierra Leonean) soldiers who had disembarked a few days earlier at the Victoria port from the *H.M Cruiser Habitch* (pictured below).



When Chief Kuva Likenye of Buea learned of the imminent attack by the German force, he was unimpressed by it all. Instead, he prepared his forces to send a clear message once and for all that the mountain people rejected all form of German control in their area. A seasoned contingent of local fighters, among them 400 marks men, was put on alert. The German and Bakweri forces would have a memorable clash at the *Minonge* ravine, now

spanned by the bridge between the Buea station roundabout and the Buea Mountain Hotel.

In spite of superior German forces, the forces of Kuva Likenye held their ground, and foiled the German advance into Buea. The German Commander, Granvenreuth, was killed and Lieutenant Stetten wounded as they desperately tried to dislodge the Bakweri forces from the ravine. With their Commander dead, and the Bakweri guns continuously pounding enemy position, the German expeditionary force panicked. Routed and in total disarray, the force fled across the Mountain to the Mboko coast and back to Victoria, with the Bakweri in hot pursuit.

Although Western historians insist that the only German lost in the confrontation was Gravenreuth, Bakweri legend has it that six Germans actually lost their lives in the expedition, and that their skulls now reside in a secret shrine in the village of Wondongo, Buea.

For the next three years, the Bakweri would hold the Germans at bay, preventing any serious implantation in the Bakweri heartland.

According to Edwin Ardener in his seminal work, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon*,

the waste of Gravenreuth's expedition had serious repercussions. It should have been used to go far into the interior to counteract French movements. In March 1894, Germany signed an agreement with France that fixed the eastern boundary of Kamerun far more narrowly than once had been hoped for. The official memorandum on the treaty contained a withering catalogue of the ineffectiveness of German colonial expeditions compared to those of the French. The home negotiators had, as a result, no serious territorial claims in north and east to offer. The Zingraff and Granvenreuth expeditions were singled out as failures in this respect.

Thanks to their defeat of the German-led forces, the Bakweri had slowed down the advance of the Germans into the Cameroonian interior, even if only temporarily.

1894: THE GERMAN REVENGE

The Germans never forgot this defeat in the hands of what they wrongly considered an ill-trained ragtag army. In the next couple of years, they would implement policies aimed at isolating Kuva Likenye, and cutting off his sources of arms. By 1994, they had largely succeeded in their policy of attrition, and in December 1994, a newly constituted, better-prepared and heavily armed German force, the *Schutztruppe*, led by *Von Stetten* launched an attack on Buea. In spite of a heroic resistance, the Bakweri were no match to this superior German force. As one historian puts it: “The German Pygmy had become a Giant.” Outmanned and outgunned, Chief Kuva retreated to the village of Ewonda, and sent agents to Momongo to buy arms.

The arms never came.

In the end, Kuva realized that further resistance to the German imperial army was futile, and that the Bakweri were simply being annihilated by forces they could no longer contain or overcome.

According to P.M. Kale in his 1939 study of the Bakweri,

... for fear of Bakweriland being annihilated, brave Kuva called his people together, and with the words of a leader bade them to leave Buea for a while... this land, he told them, had been ‘their ancestors’ for generations, and it would be theirs forever, and so no fear should be entertained as to their coming back again.

To prevent further bloodshed, Kuva went on exile to the village of WonyaMokumba where he caught ill and died shortly thereafter. He was secretly buried on the border of

Buea and Wokpae, were his grave remains hidden and unmarked to this day. All across Bakweri territory the following song of praise could be heard:

*Lo! The hands that waved the spear
And loaded the gun
Lo! The dreadful voice that roared
And scattered the multitude,
The hero remains immortal.*

In April 1895, a brutal Peace Treaty was imposed on the Bakweri, and signed on their behalf by Chief Endeley, brother of the Late Kuva. They were dispossessed of their former territory around present-day Buea station, and forcefully herded into what the Germans described as “formerly ownerless land” in lower Buea. A huge fine was imposed upon them, and Bakweri slave labor was later used to build the German Government station, established on their original site that became Buea, the capital of German kamerun in 1902.



The Schloss - Built with Bakweri Slave Labor

This second German expedition marked the beginning of the systematic German campaign to dehumanize and wipe out the Bakweri, seize their lands for plantation agriculture, and lock them up in the so-called Native Reserves. Like the Zulus after the defeat of Chaka, like Native Americans after the failure of their resistance against European settlers, the Bakweri had, by the end of the 1890s, been completely subjugated and their once vibrant culture in complete disarray. The roots of the social and cultural ills that would plague them for most of the 20th century can be traced back to this policy.

THE IMPACT OF THE BAKWERI ANTI-GERMAN CAMPAIGN

That the Bakweri armed resistance failed was not because of cowardice. Far from it! It was simply the case of a poorly armed African ethnic group not being able to hold its own against superior European military power. As Ardener has stressed, the Bakweri anti-German campaign

“was a small-scale political movement, but one which was aided by the strategic possibilities of the Mountain, was for a brief period actually equal in scale to the amount of German power that could be deployed from Victoria.”

In his analysis of the great warrior Kuva Likenye, Ardener writes:

Kuva’s case is of more than local interest. This remote and ideologically merely intuitive tribesman held up the march of events, by an unexpected veto on the foreign economic exploitation of the mountain. The veto only ended with his death. During its existence, it revealed serious weaknesses in German Colonial administrative and military practice... the resistance of the mountain people provided one of the important shocks of the early colonial system in Kamerun. As a resistance movement, it was before its time...

After the second Bakweri-German war, which ended with the defeat of the former, the Bakweri would turn to another form of resistance; they engaged in an early form of

passive resistance, by refusing to do manual labor on their captured lands even when forced. Many died of diseases and cruelties in the concentration camps into which they had been driven. The Germans had a simple solution for this Bakweri strike. They imported other Africans to do the work, hence the age old contempt by the Bakweri for immigrant Africans who were hated for cooperating with the enemy. Of course, Bakweri passive resistance would later be misinterpreted as a sign of laziness, a stereotype that has, unfortunately, become embedded in the national psyche.

To conclude, one thing is certain; if the Germans had coveted any other ethnic group's lands to the degree that they coveted the Bakweri lands, they would have done just as thorough a job of decimating the lands' owners.

115 years after the valiant people of Buea, led by their fearless leader Kuva Likenye, stood up to the German army, another generation of Bakweri have taken up the mantle to once again fight for the protection of their ancestral lands. Led by the Bakweri Land Claims Committee (BLCC), the people of Fako division are taking their case for land compensation and restitution to the Cameroonian people and the international community. They are insisting that at a time when the Cameroon government is determined to sell off the Cameroon Development Corporation (which controls practically all of the German expropriated lands), the hundred-year old claims of the Bakweri, which began to be expressed in an organized and coherent manner after the Second World War, be taken into account.

Will the Cameroon government listen to the cries from the slopes of Mount Fako, and will Cameroonian people rally around the Bakweri to rectify this blot on the Cameroonian national landscape?

References

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