17 LAND DISPUTES AND FAMILY TIES IN CAMEROON: DEBATING THE POSSIBILITIES OF RECONCILIATION

Elias Kifon Bongmba¹ and Tanto Richard Talla²

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we discuss the possibility of promoting reconciliation between the villages of Njirong and Ntumbaw in Ndu Sub-division of Donga Mantung Division in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Both villages have contested a piece of land at Mbawrong in the Ndu Sub-division and have not resolved it, despite the fact that the divisional administration of the Division has ruled in the past that the land belongs to Njirong village. We argue that new attempts to promote resolution and reconciliation could consider the family ties that exist between the two villages as a way of inviting them to make decisions that would persuade them to accept legal and administrative solutions to the dispute. Such an approach, considering that relations between families could establish possibilities for a critical dialogue, might open the doors for reconciliation and promote peace and human flourishing. It is thus appropriate to consider the challenges of reconciliation in the Mbawrong land dispute with studies done in different parts of Africa and the role family ties might have played. The literature on family ties in Africa gives very suggestive openings for possibilities that intractable disputes might receive a new hearing if families are engaged.³ James Fenske, a social scientist who has studied land tenure conflicts in colonial Benin, discusses the subtle ways in which family ties were part of the land transactions in Benin.⁴

By family ties, we mean the family connections that exists between individual families of the village of Njirong and Ntumbaw that have grown out of marriages that have taken place between partners in each of the villages. We do not claim that the family approach is better than the legal and administrative approach, but it could serve as an incentive for both parties to respect administrative and legal

- 1 Elias Kifon Bongmba holds the Harry and Hazel Chair in Christian Theology and is Professor of Religion at Rice University. The research for this chapter is part of the research project, "Land in Postcolonial Cameroon", of the Contending Modernities Project of the University of Notre Dame. We express our appreciation to the Contending Modernities Project for the generous support of our research and to ACLARS for a travel grant that made it possible for us to present this paper at ACLARS Conference in Abuja, Nigeria, in May 2018.
- 2 Tanto Richard Talla is the vice dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bamenda, Northwest Region of Cameroon.
- 3 Siegel B. 1996. "African Family and Kinship", in Gordon AA and Gordon DL (eds). *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Second Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- 4 Fenske J. 2014. "Trees, tenure and conflict: Rubber in Colonial Benin", in *Journal of Development Economics* 110:226-238.

decisions in the dispute. Since the land dispute has pitted the two villages in a bitter contest, it has also caused divisions in several families, because marriages have resulted in shared family ties between the two villages. While we do not discuss the full impact of the divisions between the families, our observation is that this land dispute has been very stressful for individuals who have relatives in the two villages and are often forced to choose sides. This stress is inimical to flourishing as individuals and as a community. The data used in this chapter was gathered during a research trip to the disputed land, and includes interviews conducted with other villages in the region who had land disputes but have resolved them.

BRIEFLY MAPPING THE LAND DISPUTE

The land dispute between Njirong village and Ntumbaw village at Mbawrong in the Ndu Sub-division of Donga Mantung Division in the Northwest Region of Cameroon started in and around 1973, when The Fon of Njirong invited Ntumbaw villagers to join his village in cultivating rice at Mbawrong. The Fon of Ntumbaw hesitated, but after several invitations were extended publicly, he agreed and sent his people down to Mbawrong. The Fon of Njirong assigned them a place to cultivate rice and followed the traditions of the Njirong village, but since this plot was adjacent to the boundary between Nso, Ntumbaw and Njirong, the Ntumbaw people annexed the parcel of land they were given by the Fon of Njirong and from then argued that the land was Ntumbaw land. Persons in Njirong, Nsop and Mbawnso who remember this land claim also note that the Ntumbaw people called the parcel they annexed “Powercamp”. When Njirong village challenged their claims, Ntumbaw leaders led by a certain Mr Giyo,⁵ called the area they had annexed Mbawnfui, a name derived from the river Nfui, which is a boundary marker between Mbawrong, Mbonsaw and Ntumbaw. Since they decided to annex the land, the Ntumbaw people also stopped observing the *mbomnta*, the sacred day of Njirong, which on the Wimbun Calendar is on Mruh, and started to observe their *mbomnta* (sacred day) on sing. The Fon of Njirong and his people rejected the claims of the Ntumbaw people and maintained that Mbawrong is their land. They invited the Ntumbaw people to cultivate rice, but did not give the ownership of the land.⁶

The dispute continued for a long time and the elites of two villages under the leadership of the late vice minister of Agriculture of Cameroon, Solomon Nfor Gwei (who was from Ntumbaw), called a meeting of the two Fons and elites from the two villages in Yaoundé to seek a solution to the crisis. These meetings were co-chaired

5 We have followed normal research conventions and changed the names of our informants, except in a situation where we refer to remarks by a state official, Fon, of someone who has given us permission to use his or her real name. Other names used in the chapter are prominent elites from the region who organised negotiations, and a key figure who introduced rice farming in Njirong village, and the chairperson of the Development Committee of Ntumbaw who spoke to us in that capacity.

6 Interview conducted by the research team at Ntumbaw in 2016.

by the late Dr John Banser (who was from Njirong village). At their 24 February 1988 meeting, the elites of the region called on the two villages:

1. To respect the rights of each Fon.
2. Pour libations at the disputed land for the ancestors to determine the rightful owner.
3. Also they agreed that the water supply system in Ntumbaw should be extended to Njirong.
4. They agreed to convene another meeting in Yaoundé with the delegation of the two villages to be hosted by different elites, and the two Fons were to be lodged in separate rooms at a hotel.

When we interviewed people in Ntumbaw, the president of the Ntumbaw Development Committee, Lawrence Balanjo, stated that tensions grew in the new millennium. Thus, the senior divisional officer (SDO) of Donga Mantung Division set up a Divisional Land Consultative Board in June 2004, made up of the Fon of Ntumbaw and a noble from the village, the Fon of Njirong, and a noble, neighbouring Fons of Ntem, Sop, and divisional heads of Services for Agriculture, Lands and Surveys as members. This land commission met at Mbawrong and heard presentations from both villages, including a presentation from the Fons of Ntem and Sop, who both stated that they had boundaries with Njirong and not Ntumbaw and therefore the land in dispute belonged to Njirong. The land commission ruled that the land belonged to Njirong, but the Ntumbaw people were allowed to continue to cultivate food on the land, on condition that they would respect the *mbomnta* (sacred day) of Njirong. Njirong claimed victory, but also accepted that Ntumbaw should continue to work on that disputed lands under the new conditions stipulated by the land commission. However, Ntumbaw did not accept that decision, continued to work on the land and did not observe the sacred day of Njirong.

In response to the 2004 decision, Ntumbaw village filed a petition, signed by 12 nobles from the village, to the minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation in Yaoundé on 7 March 2005.⁷ They argued that during the meeting of the land commission Ntumbaw was not given a fair hearing. They also claimed that commission did not exhaust all the evidence available before deciding that the land belongs to Njirong. Furthermore, the commission showed bias against Ntumbaw in the way they asked the questions because they did not take into consideration the fact that the Fon of Ntumbaw did not have formal education and therefore could not read or speak English. Some observers of the case have pointed out that, since the minister did not respond to their petition, he let the decision of the land commission stand.

⁷ The petition was entitled “An Appeal for the review of a Decision taken by a Land Commission Charged with the settlement of the land dispute between Njirong and Ntumbaw villages at Mbawrong in Ndu Subdivision on 9 June 2004”.

The decision of the land commission that the land at Mbawrong belonged to Njirong, further caused a severe strain on the relations between the two villages. The villagers of Ntumbaw started a boycott of Njirong and imposed restrictions on economic activities in Ntumbaw by members of Njirong village. In 2010, it was widely reported that both residents of Njirong and Ntumbaw were using witchcraft to prolong the dispute. A widely distributed video tape had footage of a meeting in which one of the pastors from Ntumbaw reportedly identified the alleged witches who reportedly confessed that they had used witchcraft to prolong the dispute.⁸ Over the years, the Ntumbaw people launched what is called in Limbum *bzini*, which means to boycott or avoid any person with whom you have a dispute that is not resolved. It became complicated, especially in the Baptist Church, because Ntumbaw people demanded to be separated from delegates from Njirong at inter-church meetings.

NEW TENSIONS AT MBAWRONG

Tensions grew when the Fon of Njirong invited the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) to Mbawrong to promote the growth of palm trees. The Fon told Bongmba in 2013, at a Wimbun Cultural and Development Association of the USA (WICUDA-USA) at its annual meeting of 2012 in Boston, that he had agreed with the CDC that individual farmers would own the crops they grow, harvest the palms and sell them to the CDC to process the palms for oil. The arrangement made with the CDC was a marketing arrangement coffee farmers had with Cooperative Society. The cultivation of this cash crop under the supervision of the CDC dramatically changed the situation at Mbawrong and raised the stakes in the debate about land ownership. The land at Mbawrong was now a prime location for economic development, and many people flocked to Mbawrong for farms given by the Fon of Ntumbaw, against the wishes of the Fon of Njirong. The invitation of the CDC ignited a palm rush, which intensified the battle for the control of the land at Mbawrong. The Ntumbaw people reportedly laid out big plans of developing the land they occupied.⁹ The CDC and cultivation of palm trees at Mbawrong changed the dynamics of the dispute between Njirong and Ntumbaw in two ways.

First, many elites of Ntumbaw, who were silent during the early years of the conflict, now wanted a part of the palm rush and supported the Ntumbaw's position that Mbawrong was Ntumbaw land. Many of the elites coordinated the search for archival documents they thought would establish Ntumbaw ownership of the land.

8 This video was reportedly distributed even amongst Ntumbaw elites in the United States of America, but Bongmba has tried in vain to get a copy of the video.

9 The cultivation of cocoa in Western Nigeria caused land tenure problems in colonial western Nigeria in much the same way, as crude oil was a major source of tension in the Niger Delta States area in Nigeria. See Aderinto S. 2013. "Where is the Boundary? Cocoa Conflict, Land Tenure, and Politics in Western Nigeria, 1890s–1960", *Journal of Social History* 47(1):176-195.

One of the documents was data gathered by the colonial district officer of the region, FW Carpenter, who served the region from 1934. A document from 1938 categorised Njirong village as a quarter of Ntumbaw, but listed the quarter head of Njirong as “Nkwirong”, a Wimbun term, which means the Fon of Njirong. The question Bongmba asked them was why a Fon would be classified as a quarter head, who are called *fai* or *tallanwe*, which means head of a compound.¹⁰ The other argument they presented is that Njirong did not appear on the maps of the Wimbun area and was not an original member of the Warr Clan villages. As further proof, they argued that the Fon of Njirong did not attend one of the meetings of Fons of West Cameroon in which the then prime minister of West Cameroon, AN Jua, was in attendance.¹¹ Ntumbaw wanted the 2004 and decision of the land commission to be reversed on the strength of these documents.¹²

Ntumbaw village also filed an appeal to the governor of the North West Region in December 2012, justifying their claim to the land at Mbawrong and argued that Njirong was not a Fondom, but a quarter of Ntumbaw before 1964, and therefore that the claims of neighbouring villages were false. The governor did not address this petition, but upheld the decision of the Land Commission of 2004. Although Ntumbaw villagers continued to work on the farms at Mbawrong, tension mounted, since they refused to recognise village of Njirong as owners of the land and the Fon of Njirong as their landlord. Ntumbaw claims are grounded on earlier colonial administrative reports, which listed Njirong as a quarter of Ntumbaw. There is no indication that the team led by Carpenter, the district officer (DO) visited Njirong to ascertain if they were an independent village or a quarter. Observers in the region recognised that there was a contest between Njirong and Ntumbaw about the Fontaincy of Njirong, but many people in the Wimbun community also know that Njirong won the argument when the Fon of Njirong was recognised as an independent Fon in his own right and his name and village was entered into the official government record of West Cameroon, called Government Gazette. He was given a certificate recognising him as a Fon 1962 and he retained control of the lands he owned, including Mbawrong. During our research trip in 2015, 2016, some people in the Wimbun community who preferred to remain anonymous expressed surprise at the argument that Njirong was not a Fondom (independent village governed by a Fon or fon). Many people in the Wimbun area know that when Ntumbaw village dethroned their Fon Nfor Bari in 1972, the only Fon in Wimbun land, which supported Ntumbaw, was Fon Nganjo I who was installed as Fon of Njirong in 1933.

10 1934 Intelligence Report on the Nsungli Area by FW Carpenter, Esquire, assistant district officer.

11 Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the West Cameroon Fon's Conference held in the Bamenda Community Hall from 14 to 16 July 1965.

12 This calls for further analysis that we will do when we get additional documents.

During our first visit, people from other villages people, speaking on condition of anonymity, questioned the claims of Ntumbaw, since the place has been called Mbawrong (the Plain of the Rong, a short form of Njirong) for as long as anyone remembers. Furthermore, if the contested land belonged to Ntumbaw, why did they wait for the Fon of Njirong to invite the Fon of Ntumbaw and his people to cultivate rice? Also, if the land was theirs, why did Ntumbaw not lay claim to the entire Mbawrong? None of the Fons of Wimbum land, or even the head of the Warr Clan, His Royal Majesty Fon Barnabas Mbunwe of Mbot, supported the claims made by Ntumbaw. Early in the dispute, none of the political leaders of Nkambe Sub-division and Ndu Sub-division (both in Wimbum land) expressed support for the claims made by Ntumbaw village, except the former mayo of Ndu Rural Council, David Nfor who is from Ntumbaw, who as an administrator did not make his stand known.¹³

In the meantime, the divisional administration has made several attempts to bring both sides together since the 2004 decision. When the elites got involved and presented several documents, the new senior divisional officer of Donga Mantung Division on a maiden visit to Ntumbaw, invited the entire village to meet him at the Ntumbaw Fon's palace. He thanked them for the warm welcome and the presents they have given to him. But he added that in addition to the documents they had presented, the administration had more documents about the division and knew that Ntumbaw had not made a case for why the disputed land at Mbawrong belongs to them. He pleaded with the entire population to reconcile with their brothers and sisters in Njirong village and implement the 2004 Land Commission decision, which gave the right of use but affirmed that the land at Mbawrong belonged to the people of Njirong.

TENSIONS GROW

Beginning in 2012, the debate about the ownership of the land got tenser. First, it was alleged that Ntumbaw had again sold part of the land at Mbawrong. The Fon of Njirong was in Cameroon at the time. He sought a court order from the magistrate court in Nkambe to prohibit Ntumbaw from selling land at Mbawrong. The magistrate set a date to visit the terrain before ruling on the matter. It is alleged that on the orders of the Late Fon of Ntumbaw, Salifu Kwangsa, many people from Ntumbaw descended to Mbawrong and prepared for war.¹⁴ Concerned about a conflict, the Fon of Njirong told the magistrate not to come. The magistrate then summoned the two parties to his court for a hearing and ruling. Before that

13 In 2012, elites of Ntumbaw living in the USA delegated one of their members to speak with the late mayor and ask him to advise members of Ntumbaw village to address their grievances in a lawful manner. The elite reported that when he eventually had a conversation with the Lord Mayor, he simply said that it was very difficult to talk to them because the whole matter had been taken over by youths who were so militant about the case now and did not want to listen to anyone.

14 We have not confirmed this account and treat it here as unsubstantiated rumours.

meeting, the divisional administration sent out a circular indicating that the land dispute had been solved and the land belonged to Njirong. On 21 August 2012, Magistrate Adamu Linus Ndi dismissed the case, stating that both parties should avail themselves of the decision of the 2004 land commission. In effect, the case was dismissed because the court did not have jurisdiction over the matter. The villagers of Ntumbaw claimed victory, proclaiming that they had won the case on the land dispute against village of Njirong. However, this was not the case.

In 2012, following another land commission and on the direction from the SDO of Donga Mantung Division, the DO for Ndu Sub-division titled "Notification on the Final Settlement of the Njirong and Ntumbaw Land Dispute". The senior divisional officer for Donga Mantung Division in his capacity as the chairperson of the land commission went to Mbawrong-Njirong to settle the dispute, and the Fons of both villages and their nobles were present. They listened to presentations by both villages, and the commission considered the following:

- The West Cameroon Gazette of 10 January 1970 for Wimbun Council;
- Area indicating that Nganjo was the tax collector for Njirong and Mbawrong;
- Dictionary of the villages of Wimbun indicating Mbawrong was a quarter of Njirong village not Ntumbaw; and
- Minutes of 9 June 2004 land commission read and upheld by the senior divisional officer.

The senior divisional officer then authorised the divisional officer to notify state council, which was then to notify the bailiff of the following decisions:

1. That all land acquired by the Ntumbaw people before and after 9 June 2004 without the knowledge of the divisional officer Ndu and Fon of Njirong is considered null and void.
2. The farmers of Ntumbaw farming in Njirong-Mbawrong land must pay allegiance to the Fon of Njirong.
3. The said farmers are given up to 31 December 2012 to apologise to the divisional officer Ndu and the Fon of Njirong and also tender application files for regularisation of their situation on the said land
4. The Ntumbaw farmers working in Mbawrong should feel free to go to and perform their tradition in Ntumbaw and not in Mbawrong-Njirong.
5. The divisional officer Ndu should notify the state counsel who shall notify the bailiffs for the execution of these recommendations.
6. These resolutions and those of 9 June 2004 conclude finally the land dispute between Njirong-Mbawrong and Ntumbaw villages and give room for judicial action in case of violation.

Our informants told us that, in response to ruling from the DO, some members of Ntumbaw village decided to ignore the ruling and choose to fight. On 12 June 2013, some Ntumbaw people reportedly used cutlasses and machetes in an attack that wounded seven people. Mr. Evaristus Shey, a Prince of Njirong who was attacked and cut several times, later died as he was being transported to the hospital.

Prince Etienne Ntami's hand was chopped off, and the person who reportedly did that later showed it off as a trophy in Ntumbaw.¹⁵ The earliest respondents to the violence were pastors of the Mbuntzi Field of the Cameroon Baptist Convention, who intervened to stop the fighting and reported the matter to the SDO in Nkambe, Nogone Ndodemesape Bernard, who immediately dispatched a contingent of forces of law and order to Mbawrong to take control of the situation. While the attacks were going on at Mbawrong, angry mobs in Ntumbaw reportedly tried to attack the home of Philemon Bungansa Nfor at Warr Quarter of Ntumbaw because Nfor did not support the cause of the Ntumbaw people. The former pastor of Njirong Baptist Church, who at the time of the fighting was a student at the Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary at Ndu, told us at the church where he was serving in 2017 that he was dispatched by the academic dean of the Seminary to go and take Nfor's parents to a place where they would be safe. Nfor, who at the time was the Baptist pastor of Etoug Ebe Baptist Church in Yaoundé, was a former professor at the Seminary.

Law enforcement officials questioned several people and Mbawrong, in Ntumbaw and arrested seven suspects in Ntumbaw, and charged them for committing acts of violence. Some of the persons who were arrested for violence were charged in court, and as of January 2019, the proceedings have not concluded. Ntumbaw villagers claim that the wrong people were arrested, but no one has ever come up with a list of the persons who committed the crimes, even though members of Njirong village who were attacked gave the authorities the names of their attackers. Speaking to reporters of *The Eye Newspaper*, the Fon of Njirong, His Royal Majesty Fon Kennedy Nganjo II, who called it a dark day in the village, said:

This morning at about 9 a.m. some elements from our brotherly Ntumbaw village attacked and butchered five people from Njirong village who were preparing their farms for palms planting. One of them a handicapped Etienne Ntami had his fingers chopped off. My elder brother Nganjo Everistus Shey an employee with SODEPA Jakiri who was butchered all over his body died on his way to BBH Nso. Four others are on treatment at the Ndu Sub Divisional Hospital. It should be recalled that there used to be a dispute in the area but the administration of Donga Mantung settled the matter in favour of the Rong people. Three appeals by Ntumbaw have been rejected by the government for lack of credible evidence. It is also worth noting here that there is no boundary between Ntumbaw and Njirong at Mbawrong, reason why it is impossible for them to justify their claim to the administration. This cowardly, savage and barbaric act is unfortunate.¹⁶

The divisional officer visited the area of violence and ordered the Ntumbaw people to vacate the farms since they had failed to comply with two land commission decisions. Tensions mounted between Njirong and Ntumbaw villages.

¹⁵ We have retained the actual names of the individuals here because these incidents were widely reported in the media and official documents.

¹⁶ HRM Fon Nganjo II quoted in "Uncertainty in Mbaw Plain: Two Killed, Five Injured Over Land Dispute", *The Eye Newspaper*, 14 July 2013.

The Ntumbaw people have not returned the farms they worked at Mbawrong since 2013. The previous administration in Donga Mantung ordered the Ntumbaw people to leave Mbawrong because they refused to adhere to the terms of the land commission decision. The Peace and Justice Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Kumbo attempted to mediate between the two villages, but it did not succeed.

Things took a different turn in 2017, when a new administration took over in Donga Mantung Division, with a new divisional officer at Ndu Sub-division. The new SDO invited the Fon of Njirong to come to his office for talks on reconciling the two villages. The Fon of Njirong wrote back asking that he should be given some time and will come for a meeting in the spring of 2018. The SDO was impatient and exchanged several text messages with the Fon of Njirong, at first complaining that the Ntumbaw people were complaining too much. But in a rather quick turn of things, both the SDO and DO of Ndu Sub-division started accusing the Fon of Njirong and the DO went as far as issuing a sub-prefectorial order in which he claimed that there was no land dispute and that he would personally take the people of Ntumbaw and restore them to their farms at Mbawrong. The SDO then claimed that the minister of Territorial Administration had not signed the decision of the land commission and that it was null and void.

The Fon of Njirong protested all the claims to the governor and copied the minister of Territorial Administration. He traveled to Cameroon as he promised and held several contentious meetings with the administration, who were now claiming that there were illegal guns in Njirong. When the authorities in Yaoundé asked the SDO to investigate, the only gun they found was reportedly in Ntumbaw. The Fon of Njirong and his nobles contested all the claims the administration in Nkambe and Ndu were now making and questioned why the administration had departed from previous administrative decisions to no avail. He filed a legal complaint with the administrative court in Bamenda against the actions of the DO. When the Fon of Njirong returned to the States, the SDO sent minutes of one meeting they held in which he claimed that both villages had agreed to put aside the decisions of the Land Commission. The Fon of Njirong wrote to the minister of Territorial Administration, protesting and rejecting the claims as false, and stating that they had recorded the meeting because the SDO could not be trusted to tell the truth.

Early in August 2018, the DO of Ndu Sub-division took almost 2000 persons from Ntumbaw to return them to Mbawrong farms. The people of Njirong came and sat on the road at the boundary of Nsop village and Mbawrong, thus blocking the way to prevent the DO-led convoy from entering Mbawrong. The DO claimed he had come to deliver a letter. They told him to give them a message and return to his office. He later ordered the Ntumbaw people to go back to Ntumbaw because they were denied access to the land. Two weeks later, he came again with more than 2,000 people. The Njirong people blocked the road again. In response, the visibly angry DO reportedly heaped insults at the Njirong people and said that they were not a village and their Fon was not a Fon. He allegedly ordered the army to deploy tear gas, and several persons from Njirong were attacked and wounded.

When fighting ensued, the DO and the soldiers escaped, and Ntumbaw people attacked several people from Njirong, burned several houses at Mbawrong and then went up to Njirong village and burned several houses and burned looted traditional sacred objects from Njirong Palace.

The SDO, who remained defiant in the new approach to the Mbawrong dispute, reportedly toured the area, but made no arrests, an indication that he and the DO support what the Ntumbaw people did. The president of the Warr Cultural and Development Association issued a statement calling for calm and discussions between the Warr Fons, but observers condemned the statement because it failed short of condemning the violence and calling for Ntumbaw village to respect the terms of the land commission.

WIMBUM CULTURAL GROUPS CALL FOR PEACE

The Wimbum Cultural and Development Association of Cameroon called an emergency meeting in Yaoundé and called on both parties to refrain from violence, claiming vaguely that land was a gift from God for all to use and that all land in Cameroon is national land. This claim has also been promoted by Wimbum elites who have not had the courage to call for all parties to adhere to the decisions of the land commission. Ironically, both Ntumbaw and Njirong villages rejected the declaration from WICUDA national, as well as the statement of The Wimbum Cultural and Development Association in the United States. Ntumbaw now wants a legal solution, since they have a divisional administration that has abandoned administrative precedence and has not supported their course under the pretence that they wanted to forge a reconciliation.

However, in what several persons have described to us as a stunning development, the three clan heads of the Wimbum community, the Fon of Mbot, the Fon of Ndu and the Fon of Talla, met at Ndu Palace and sent a letter to the Fon of Ntumbaw condemning the violence at Mbawrong, blaming Ntumbaw for the violence and calling on the Fon of Ntumbaw to ensure that full compensation of the destroyed property was made and the sacred objects that were taken from Njirong palace restored. They further called on the Fon of Ntumbaw to respect the decisions of the land commission that settled the dispute. We have talked to many people in Wimbum land following this letter from the Fons, and they pointed out that the clan heads spoke boldly when Wimbum elites failed to speak boldly, all of them hoping to use the dispute for political gain.

FAMILY TIES AND POSSIBILITIES OF RECONCILIATION

The question now for many people is where do we go from here? If Ntumbaw insists, as they do now, that they are ready for an administrative solution, because the current divisional administration supports them, then both villages will find

themselves again in a situation where Njirong will contest the decision. Prior to the most recent acts of violence and dramatic change of position by the administration in Donga Mantung Division, we visited the region in 2017 and interviewed several people about reconciliation. When we returned to the Wimbun area, we decided to find out what happened in other areas where land disputes were resolved.

We visited the villages of Mbot and Binka to talk about the resolution of the Mbot and Binka dispute, as well as the Taku and Ntundip land dispute. Our first stop was at Mbot village, which we visited with John Ndi of Mbot village, a retired schoolmaster and former choir director in Baptist churches, whom Bongmba knew very well. Ndi invited us to come with him to the back of his compound, and it was then that he showed us the disputed land and pointed to some kola nut trees and said that his father planted them. Some of the trees are in the disputed area. However, Ndi told us that the dispute about the fertile plain was taken to the divisional administration in Nkambe, and both villages have spent so much money, and there was violence between the two communities with some fanning the flames of open violent conflict. He affirmed that he knows that the land belongs to his family and therefore part of Mbot village, but he and other members of the Mbot village did not want to engage in any acts of violence, because “if we go to war against the Binka people we would be fighting against our relatives because there are deep family ties between the two villages”.

The present researchers and a research assistant all looked at one another when he made that statement, because we all recognised that he had opened a new motif and a possible line of inquiry which we did not anticipate. Ndi told us: “My wife comes from Binka and we go to Binka every market day and participate in social and cultural activities.” Many persons from Binka have also married wives or husbands from Mbot. A war would involve family members, and no one wants that to happen because of a piece of land. We proceeded to Binka and met with two elders, Pa Simon and Pa David. We said that we did not want to discuss details of the dispute, but that we were mainly interested in why both villages decided to live in peace. To our surprise, the elders said that, although there were some violence and animosity between the two villages, no one in either of the communities wants to see the matter remain at a stalemate or lead to conflict, because of family relationships between the two neighbouring communities.

Our visit to Taku village was facilitated by Timothy Ngange, a field pastor of the Cameroon Baptist Convention, whose office is at Taku village. He took us and two senior elders of Taku village, one of them a resident historian who knew the land dispute between Taku village and Ntundip villages. After introductions in the palace, the Fon entertained us with kola nuts and drinks and gave us a fowl, since there was no time for them to cook us a meal. I was introduced to and invited to tell the Fon the purpose of our visit. The Fon got right to the point and said that both villages had spent a lot of money on litigation, but they finally talked amongst themselves and decided to call off the fight, because they are not only neighbours

with Ntundip, but have intermarried and are now brothers and sisters. The Fon said that although some people would have preferred a legal settlement, he is very sure most Taku people want peace with their neighbours and relatives than conflicts.

We limit the meaning of family ties to bonds established between extended families in Njirong and Ntumbaw villages through marriage. We think that those marriage ties could be cultivated to bring families that have relations in both villages to work together to resolve their differences and adhere to administrative rulings on the land dispute. Wimbun families are patrilocal, and families are involved with extended kin at many levels. Members from both sides of the family tend to treat one another as relatives. What begins as a relationship between two persons also involves a family and a community, making marriage into “an alliance of two persisting families [rather] than the creation of a new one. And like family, lineage or clam members have a collective obligation to assist one another, especially when it comes to settling disputes or paying compensation for each other’s mistakes ... [thus] family ties are more than a curious feature of African social life, for they also play an important role in political relations and the maintenance of social order.”¹⁷

The production of a cash crop at Mbawrong exacerbated the dispute, just as the introduction of Pará rubber from Brazil to Benin heightened tensions, because it promoted “rental transactions, as well as sharecropping arrangements between peasant farmers and migrant rubber tappers. Sale, in particular, was not universally accepted, and these transactions created tensions within communities”.¹⁸ According to Fenske, when that happened, planters and farmers exercised greater freedom in the acquisition of land, because the land was thought to be plentiful and people exercised the freedom to acquire land on which the Fons did not have much power to impose any revenues.¹⁹ To be clear, Fenske argued that rentals generated intra-family tensions, even a context where land was readily available. But the transfer of land to people considered outsiders generated tensions in the long inheritance, since this mechanism of transfer of land ownership faced challenges, as individual planters still exercised great control and legal questions emerged when original owners tried to reclaim what they thought they had lost. The difference with the Mbawrong land dispute is that two villages, rather than individual families, are making the claims to the land.²⁰

Studies from Kenya demonstrate that cases where family ties have worked well, can be attributed to the fact that these disputes involved individuals. “Negotiations and mediation have been classified to operate well at the family and individual level

17 Siegel, “African Family and Kinship”, 19.

18 Fenske, “Trees, tenure and conflict”, 226.

19 For settlement of the Bamenda Grassfields, see Fisiy C and Geschiere P. 1991. “Witchcraft and Accumulation: Regional Variations in South and West Cameroon”, *Critique of Anthropology* 11(3):251-278.

20 Maina MW. 2015. *Land Disputes Resolution in Kenya: A Comparison of the Environment and Land Court and the Land Disputes Tribunal*, MA Thesis, School of Law, University of Nairobi, 63-64.

where common custom and beliefs may contain emotive nature of land matters which may render negotiations unfeasible. Mediation ... which incorporates conciliation methods has been classified as more favorable in resolving individual land disputes in Kenya.”²¹

In places where mediation has been used effectively, the discussions involve members of an extended family. The challenge here is that with the case of Mbawrong, we are dealing with what Catherine Boone, a leading authority on land tensions in Africa, described as lineage lands, where families are considered to be members of the political community and therefore have rights of use. As Boone observes, “to land and in territory under the stool’s jurisdiction ... Lineage lands are supposed to be secure from arbitrary intervention, and users do not pay tribute to Fons ... If the stool takes over lineage lands by asserting eminent domain, the family ‘has a right to expect compensation’,” and designated family heads speak for the family.²²

We are not suggesting that a family, interpersonal and intersubjective relations should subvert the legal foundations that structure political, economic and human rights in the region or the country.²³ We do, however, think a multi-pronged approach, in addition to applying the provisions of the Land Law, is a reasonable way to proceed. We do not want to paint a rosy picture of the idea of family and ties in these cases, because it is also the case that family ties are complicated and often marred by internal disputes between members of the same family, where even siblings may disagree. There are incidents where large family groups can band together to work against another family within the same village or in cultural organisations. Cultural and social anthropologist Michaela Pelican has argued: “Among the Grassfields, the family and close social environment count as the prime source of occult aggression. Native grazing, commonly perceived as an expression of individual affluence, is thus liable to attract the envy of relatives, friends, and neighbors.”²⁴ As social scientists have argued, the family also seems to be where people look when accusations of witchcraft erupt, and one cannot always think that the notion of family immediately suggests neutrality or goodwill.²⁵ Scholars have

21 Maina, *Land Disputes Resolution in Kenya*, 70-71. See also Aiyedun A and Ordor A. 2016. “Integrating the Traditional with the Contemporary in Dispute Resolution in Africa”, *Law and Development* 20:154-173.

22 Boone C. 2009. “Conflict over Property Rights in Land in Africa’s Liberalized Political Economies”. Paper presented at the work in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University Bloomington, 3-6 June, 12. See also Berry SS. 2001. *Chiefs know their boundaries: essays on property, power and the past, Asante, 1896–1996*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 179; Jabs LB. 2014. “No Monkey Destroys his Forest’: A Review of Traditional African Interpersonal Conflict Management”, *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict* 2(1):10.

23 Pelican M. 2006. *Getting Along in the Grassfields: Interethnic relations and identity politics in Northwest Cameroon*, PhD Diss, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, xix.

24 Pelican, *Getting Along in the Grassfields*, 233.

25 Pelican, *Getting Along in the Grassfields*, 355. See also Bongmba EK. 1998. “Toward a Hermeneutic of Wimbum tfu”, *African Studies Review* 41(3):165-191; Geschiere P. 1997.

referred to this as the dark side of kinship ties, even though in other parts of Cameroon, different forms of witchcraft are known to cause detachment from the family.²⁶ But it is the case in most of the region that even when implicated by accusations of witchcraft, the family remains an important, if not the most significant, social unit, and we think that larger questions which involve inter-village conflicts should take family ties into consideration.

FAMILY TIES BETWEEN NJIRONG AND NTUMBAW

Our research demonstrates that, going back to 1933, there are nearly 40 marriages between Njirong and Ntumbaw: that is, about 49 people have married a partner from either Njirong or Ntumbaw. We are still studying the information we have, but we can here provide some broad information on the marriage patterns. We also recognise that, even though the pattern of marriages in Wimbum area is patrilocal, when we asked for this information, our informants immediately started the list with names of women. We then asked if they remembered the husbands. We have summarised the marriage patterns by simply identifying the women married to spouses in different villages for the sake of creating a short list, but this should not imply that the burden is on women, and we do not want this to be seen in the light of current patriarchal structures, which must be challenged. There are 17 marriages between women from Njirong and Ntumbaw men, including:

- 1 woman married the Fon of Ntumbaw;
- 4 women were married to Warr family of Ntumbaw;
- 1 woman married in Mawarr family;
- 1 woman married in Shukop family;
- 2 women married in Tang family;
- 4 women married to people in Hausa Quarters or identified as businessmen;
- 1 woman married at Bamntoh;
- 1 woman married to a Tantoh of Ntumbaw;
- 1 woman married to Ngala of Ntumbaw; and
- 1 woman married to the Fai Tawong family (member of the royal household).

We have identified 23 women from Ntumbaw who are married to Njirong village:

- 4 women married the Fon of Njirong;
- 2 princesses of Ntumbaw (one of them given to the Fon of Njirong to compensate Rong for the skin of a lion which Ntumbaw took from Njirong);²⁷
- 2 women from Warr family married individuals in Njirong;

The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 211-214.

26 Fisiy and Geschiere, "Witchcraft and Accumulation".

27 This is a clear case where a woman was used as if she is property to settle a conflict between the two villages. We have raised this question with the Fon of Njirong and he

- 2 women from a Shufai²⁸ (unclear which Shufai) married to Njirong men;
- Wintoh Yenla, of Mawarr married to present Fon of Njirong;
- 1 woman of Shufai Nga;
- 1 woman from Bantoh married at Tang in Njirong;
- 1 daughter of a Shufai married to Fai Nyawah; and
- 9 other women married into different families.

This is a preliminary list, which we are still checking our sources to confirm. Many of these people are deceased, but we are referring to 39 women who have married persons in Njirong and Ntumbaw. We will eventually do a detailed analysis of this list and trace children and extended family members. But we can make some extrapolations at this point about the possible significance of these family ties and what they could mean for further negotiations and conversation about the relationship between Njirong village and Ntumbaw village.

First, if we consider from these marriages the children, the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren and the great, great-grandchildren who live in both villages, we are talking of a very large number of people. Take, as an example, the case of two women from Njirong who married into a family in Ntumbaw in the 1950s. Both women come from the royal family of Njirong. The first woman had six children. One of the children is married outside of Ntumbaw, and we did not include that daughter's children or the grandchildren in our calculations. The rest of the children still consider themselves Ntumbaw people.²⁹ Our estimates are based on the number of children they have. We have counted the number of children and grandchildren these princesses have. We have taken note of the fact that not all of these children and grandchildren live in the village now, but they still call themselves members of the Ntumbaw village, and the original six children still participate actively in the cultural and business affairs of Ntumbaw family. These descendants are loyal to their aunts and uncles in Njirong and see no reason why they should be bullied by anyone on what stand they should take regarding the Mbawrong land dispute. They believe that the two villages can and should live together in peace. We think that a majority of them support the claims made by the village of Njirong that Mbawrong is part of Njirong village because their mothers told them that the land belongs to Njirong.

has condemned such actions and said it should not be tolerated today and he would not accept such a thing. However, he has argued that the fact that the Fon of Ntumbaw gave a daughter of his to one of his predecessors, demonstrates that they recognised Njirong as an independent Fondom.

28 The term "*Fai*" refers to the subFon. "*Shufai*" means that the individual is a senior subFon, and a ranking member in the village hierarchy.

29 One has three children, and one of these children now has two children of his own. One of the daughters has three children, two of them have two children each. One daughter has one son, and another son has three children. Therefore, at this point, from the one princess of Njirong married at Ntumbaw, the number of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren stands at 19.

Second, based on this limited focus on two princesses from Njirong, we can take the next step and ask what we can extrapolate from these marriages, and here the information becomes interesting. For example, we have taken two women from Njirong who married men from Ntumbaw village in the 1950s. (One could go back to the time when Nganjo I got married from Ntumbaw in about 1933). We have established the number of children these two Njirong women have given birth to who consider themselves people of Ntumbaw village. We have also considered the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren, and our estimates are that for the first women who were married in early 1950, the number of descendants from the two women is 20 and there are 19 descendants from the Njirong woman. Therefore, from these two women from Njirong, we have about 39 descendants. If, therefore, we were to argue that a fair roundup estimate might be about 15 descendants per married women up to this point or over a lifetime, we could speculate that at this time there are about 585 persons in Ntumbaw and Njirong who claim family ties to both villages. If you connect those 585 persons to the other family relationships these individuals have within their immediate parent's relationships in Njirong and Ntumbaw, you could be looking at thousands of persons. That, we think would be a significant number of people who might generate a conversation that emphasises the ties that bind the two villages together and set the basis for a different kind of dialogue that recognises historical data, legal consideration and administrative dimensions of the conflict that might be enriched to create a common ground for dialogue that could slow down the violent conversations that are now spiralling towards conflict.

Finally, these women, their spouses, and members of their extended families would have shared much in common at the time the land dispute started, including religion. It is very important here that they would have shared a faith experience, as many of them would have worshipped together. Prior to the beginning of the conflict, there was only one Baptist Church, which served both Njirong and Ntumbaw. That church was located in Njirong village from its inception, but later transferred to Ntumbaw in the late 1950s, so that the church would share one campus with the Cameroon Baptist Mission Primary School at Ntumbaw. The Fon of Njirong, Nganjo I, and all his wives attended that church, as well as the queen mother of Ntumbaw. All the Sub-Fons of both villages, who were Baptist Christians, also attended that church. Bongmba attended that primary school, returned and taught there as a pupil teacher from 1965–1967, taught the adult men's Sunday school class at Ntumbaw Baptist Church from 1967–1969 and then returned and served that church as a Pastor from 1973–1975.

It is during this period that the dispute started, and Bongmba remembers telling the elites of Ntumbaw at a meeting in Bamenda in 1975 that in helping resolve the Fontaincy dispute of Ntumbaw, he had seen documents that convinced him that Ntumbaw, his village, could not win the case. He urged the two parties to work towards reconciliation, but his opinion was ignored. In addition to the Baptist Church, there was one Catholic Church in Ntumbaw. There were hardly any persons in Njirong who were members of the Catholic faith, except Bongmba's

aunt and the princess of Njirong, who was married in Ntumbaw and belonged to the Catholic Church with her children. Ntumbaw has a large Islamic community, and there is one mosque that serves the two villages. We think that there is a rich spiritual history here that could be harnessed alongside family ties that could start a fruitful conversation. At this point, we think that an appeal to the family relationships that exists between the two villages offers a good chance that the two villages might be open to the legal and administrative decisions on the land dispute. Religion could be used to appeal for a reconciliation, but so far, many members of the Muslim, Baptist and Catholic communities in Ntumbaw have been very adamant, and several persons we have talked to in the region wonder why, for example, the members and leaders of the Baptist Church at Ntumbaw are so militant about the position of Ntumbaw village, to the extent that some of them in the past have invoked the Arab Israeli conflict and argued that God will give the land to them as he gave the land to Israel.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the land dispute between Njirong village and Ntumbaw village at Mbawrong in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, tracing its history and present state and the threat of violence from this dispute. In light of the fact that other land disputes in the Wimbum area were resolved or allowed to die, on the grounds that the rate of intermarriage between the contesting villages compelled the villagers to pull back from acts of violence and make peace, we have argued that this is something that might and could work to promote peace and reconciliation in the case of Njirong and Ntumbaw.