

Traditional female militancy in a modern context

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The exercise of authority or power over populations has often been seen as an affair of men in a men's world. Few societies do tolerate or permit women to occupy positions of relative political importance. Whether a woman is a *mafo* in the Bamileke country, a *nafoyn* among the Kom, a queen in England, she still remains to a great extent under the influence of a man. Curious enough, even in the matrilineal societies, the exercise of effective authority rests in the hands of men. The relative position of women within the power structure might suffice in normal circumstances but when there is an abuse of women, their rights and person, the power structure might be disrupted. This article attempts to show in a concrete way how and when women can take over the power, or can displace the men and rule in their own way. Among the Kom of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, there is a female practice called *anlu* (1) which is a disciplinary technique designed by women to seek redress for particular offences committed by men against womanhood. This essay also attempts to show the origin and the traditional and modern orientation of *anlu*.

Kom is a small kingdom situated in the mountainous district of the Cameroon western grassfield. Its population of 80 000 occupies the rolling mountains of this part of the plateau. Its tradition of origin link its people to the so-called Tikar of the Bamenda Grassfields. The term Tikar or Ndobbo as applied to the Grassfield tribe « implies, rather, a claim to the legitimacy of political institutions and to their ultimate derivation from a legendary centre which sanctioned their adoption »

(1) This article is based on a number of articles and more especially on my own experiences of the 1958 women's uprising and my researches in 1974 and 1975. For further reading confere, R. RITZENTHALER, « Anlu : a woman uprising in the British Cameroon », *African Studies*, 19 (3) 151-6, S. ARDENER, « Sexual insult and female militancy », in *Perceiving women*, (edit) S. Ardener, pp. 29-53, Malaby Press, London, 1975.

(Chilver and Kaberry, 1967 : 127). Kom oral traditions bring their ancestors from Ndobo to Bamessi, probably then its older location in Bamun. After several mishaps these first ancestors finally found their way to the present hilltop capital, Laikom from where they began to expand in numbers and territorially. A majority of the clans (2) in the area are matrilineal descent groups. This fact poses a serious historiographic problem of explaining how a tribe, claiming a common origin with patrilineal groups should possess matrilineal institutions (3). Succession and inheritance is through the uterine line but hardly does a woman inherit or succeed to lineage titles and property. Although the women constitute « the essential parts of the lineage and they give rise to other minimal parts whose continuous multiplication maintains the stability and persistence of the unit » (4) (Nkwi : 1977 : 15), yet they enjoy little or no political power. On the whole it is the men who administer, control, restrains and rule persons. But this does not mean that any man can maltreat a woman. Women have specific rights and obligations. Their position in Kom is well defined.

Women normally have statuses : *wul-ndo* (Lit. man of the house) and *wain-ndo* (child of the house) and *wie-ndo* (wife of the house). A woman is a *wain-ndo* when she is born of a precise social father. She has few rights and obligations towards him. A social father can and does claim the bride-wealth of his daughter. For the rest, he has no control over her after marriage. The *wul-ndo* (pl. *Gheli-ndo*) status is acquired through the mother. A woman as a *wul-ndo* represents the persistence and continuity of the lineage. The third status is that of *wie-nod* (pl. *ükie-ndo*). This carries more rights and obligations. Every married woman is a *wie-nod* of her husband's lineage. Her husband and lineage have *jus in personam* over her and she is considered the property of the lineage. A woman acquires the status of a *wie-ndo* through the payment of her bridewealth and the celebration of the marriage, *Nchawie*. She can only cease to be a *wie-ndo* when she is divorced and the bridewealth is paid back to the lineage of her husband. There are some married, women whose *wie-ndo* status is very high. All royal wives (*ükie-nto'o*, sing, *wie-nto'o*) were considered sacrosanct and treated with extreme respect and decorum. In former days, adultery with any of them was punished with death. Their sacrosanct nature was derived from the fact that they were married to a sacred king. But the highest woman in status is the *nafoyn* (the mother of the king). She was either the true mother of the *foyn* or the mother's sister or the sister. She was held also in high esteem. She advised the *foyn* on certain political, religious and domestic affairs. She lived in the palace and was virtually the guardian of the *foyn's* wives. Like all princesses she

(2) There are about 23 clans in Kom, and only three of them are patrilineal, (cf. Nkwi, *A clanship study : a systematic study of clans amongst the Kom*, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1973 : 28).

(3) Cf. P.N. Nkwi, « The problem of the origin of Kom matrilineal institutions » in *Symposium Leo Frobenius*, Verlag Dokumentation Pullach/München, 1974 :282 :297.

(4) P.N. Nkwi, « Kinship structure among the Kom of the Bamenda Grassfields » in *Occasional Papers of the Department of Sociology*, vol. 1, n° 2 (1977) 12 : 27.

was unmarried and could have lovers. In public she moved with a retinue or an entourage of women and servants, and like most people of her rank she was very much respected. From this it can be seen that women in Kom had specific roles and statuses and no advantage of it could be taken without serious repercussions.

As essential parts of any lineage their rights and person had to be protected from abuse. According to Kom legal practice no one may beat a pregnant or nursing mother ; no one may brutally beat or maltreat his mother or father ; no one may insult his mother saying « look at your rotten vagina » ; no one may commit incest or in short any crime that insults womanhood. If anyone commits any of these acts, he is likely or is sure to be punished or disciplined by *anlu*.

Anlu means to drive away. It was an act of ostracism. If a person maltreated a pregnant or nursing mother, he was ostracized. He could not have any social contact with members of his own close kin group. This action, according to many informants, has a historical background to it. Some informants maintained that *anlu* came into existence when « owing to an act of trickery by an enemy, all the active male members of the community were once slaughtered. To defend the group the women decked themselves in vines. The women kept guard and repelled enemy attacks while the few remaining old men built the houses, hunted for food, and went and paid the required tributes » (Ardener, 1975 : 36) (5). This version agrees substantially with a version which I collected and cross-checked, and which I believe is authentic and reliable.

According to this version, Mejang, a tributary chiefdom of Kom was paid tribute by the Kom during the early days of settlement at laikom. Mejang had at that time a territorial framework extending to the out-skirts of Laikom. The Kom people were required every year to build a house in the palace of the Mejang chief. The house had to be mudded with mud mixed only with castor oil and not with water as was the usual practice. At one stage, the Kom people are said to have refused to perform this onerous duty. This was considered as an act of rebellion which had to be suppressed. One day while the foyn of Kom and a greater part of the male population were away on a hunting expedition, the Mejang warriors decided to invade Laikom and capture the women in the absence of their men. The assault was mounted and resisted. The women had got wind of it through scouts or spies. Under the direction of the *nafoyn* (the queen-mother) the women bedecked themselves in their men's clothes, and vines, carrying sticks and weapons, went out to meet the approaching Mejang force. On seeing the women, of course, they did not know that they were women, the

(5) S. Ardener bases her argument on Mr Francis I.W. Nkawain's manuscript, *The wum women uprising anlu*, 1958. This account seems to imply that this took place at Bamesi where part of tribe was destroyed. The Kom tradition of origin, according to my informants do not give any indication that *anlu* began then though there is trace of the role of women after the Bamesi disaster or tragedy.

Mejang warriors fled as the women chased them down the hills. Many died during this struggle and most of them escaped.

Only a physically deformed man (*fûges*) was captured. The women stripped themselves of their war garments to reveal their true identity. The *fûges* was astonished. He was further instructed to tell the chief and the people of Mejang that they were to pay tribute to Kom. Then Mejang became a tributary chiefdom of Kom. This, it is said, saw the beginning of *anlu*, an effective instrument of dealing with men or punishing those who had committed crimes against womanhood or maltreated women. (6)

Initiated on a military basis, *anlu* was organised along the lines of *njong*, a village military club. Whenever women took action against a man, they met and organised themselves under a head called *na-anlu* (lit. the mother of *anlu*). She was usually the oldest woman in the village. During the period that the women enforced an effective band on a person, she co-ordinated all actions taken to punish the individual concerned. She was assisted by spies (*ûgwesü*, sing. *ûgwe*). But these came under the direct control of *na-gwesü* (mother of spies). The main task of these spies was to see to it that the culprit was completely isolated from the rest of the community and to take immediate action on those who sought social contact with the guilty person. It would be of interest to show how action was taken in the olden days and how effective such punitive measures were.

If a man had beaten his pregnant or nursing wife, it was considered an abomination by the village or tribe as a whole on the ground that « fertility or the child » was one of the things or values that tribal rituals protected and to see a person maltreating a pregnant woman or a nursing mother, was considered worth the action of *anlu*. The women could take over full control and deal with the individual in the way they wanted. Hon Francis Nkwain, a kom himself, gives a vivid description of an *anlu* action in the following passage.

Anlu is started off by a woman who doubles up in an awful position and gives out a highpitched shrill, breaking it by beating on the lips with four fingers (7). Any woman recognising the sound does the same and leaves whatever she is doing and runs in the direction of the first sound. The crowd quickly swells and soon there is a wild dance to the tune of impromptu stanzas informing the people of what offence has been committed, spelling it out in such a manner as to raise emotions and cause action.

The history of the offender is brought out in a telling gossip. Appeal is made to the dead ancestors of the offender, to join in with the *anlu*. Then the team leaves for the bush to return at the appointed time, usually before actual dawn, donned in wines, bits of men's clothing and with painted faces, to carry out the full ritual. All wear and carry the

(6) The version on which I do rely was collected on several occasions and carefully cross-checked with several informants of some credibility (priests, chiefs and notables).

(7) The same sound can be produced to raise alarm and assemble both men and women when a house is on fire, otherwise it could only be a sign of an *anlu* action.

garden-egg type of fruit which is supposed to cause "drying up" in a person who is hit with it. The women pour into the compound of the offender singing and dancing, and, it being early in the morning, there would be enough excreta and urine to turn the compound and houses into a public latrine. No person looks human in that wild crowd, nor do their actions suggest sane thinking. Vulgar parts of the body are exhibited as the chant rises in weird depth (8) ».

These actions continue until the offender repents, and failure to repent in time, he would dry up or withered away and died. The ostracism is so effective that the outprit has to beg for pardon otherwise within days, it is believed he will die. On repentance and the payment of a fee, the offender was taken to a stream and immersed in water. His compound and cooking utensils were kept clean again. It is only after this purification exercise that the person was re-admitted into the village communal life.

A few interesting facts emerge when *anlu* is analysed closely. Firstly, only women are involved and no men or any tribal judicial institution can step in. Any attempt by a man is treated seriously and he could also be ostracized for supporting the culprit. During this period the entire social and political life of the village is in the hands of women, and virtually they can even force their husbands to carry out the chores of domestic functions. Secondly, some gestures seem to indicate the reversal of the natural order of things. According to a Kom mind, it is not natural for a woman to wear men's clothings : vulgar parts of the body (vagina, anus, etc.) must not be treat with disdain or exhibited in a vulgar way (9) : it is not normal for a person to paint his face nor to use another person's compound as a public latrine ; it is even worse to stone a person with a garden-egg-like fruit (*fūnya*). This fruit was believed to deminish a person's « vital force » when he was stoned with it, and that could cause his death. All these actions which were considered to be outside the normal order of things, were performed by *anlu* to show the gravity of the crime committed. Insulting one's mother (« look at your rotten vagina »), beating a pregnant or nursing mother, committing incest, were considered very serious offences.

These offences were also seen as a complete disregard of the essential values of the tribe such as fertility, food and prosperity. These values were protected by tribal rituals. Thirdly, it is in the normal order of things for men to exercise political power. But when *anlu* takes actions, the men are virtually powerless. The women control during the *anlu* action the political and social life of the community. It is only when the purification exercise is to be carried out that the village regulatory society (*akum*) might step in to arrange or fix the date, place and fees to be paid. But the regulatory society cannot and could not interfere

(8) Cf. Francis NKWAIN, « Some reflections of *anlu* » : 1958. This text is also quoted by S. Ardener, in *Perceiving women*, pp. 36-37.

(9) The women uncovered themselves and showed him their breast and vaginas to prove to him they were actually women who were involved in the punitive action.

in any action taken by the women to punish the culprit or any person associated with him. The tribal regulatory society (*kwifoyn*) could act only if several villages were involved, as was the case in 1958, when nationalist politicians utilised the traditional *anlu* for their political ends.

The 1958 women's uprising (10)

In the late fifties and early sixties there was an intensification of nationalist propaganda. The scuffle of nationalist leaders to gain the popular vote needed tact and practical common sense logic. Nationalist leaders seeking popular support were more successful if they marshalled traditionalism or turned to traditional institutions for greater inspiration. Probably this factor explains the sudden rise of the KNDP party (Kamerun Democratic Party) and its grip on the people. Founded in 1955, it succeeded in getting to power by 1959. Its leaders were more articulate, more sensitive and meticulous in the observances of traditional moves or values which they exploited to their greatest benefit.

The KNC (Kamerun National Congress) party was firmly in control in Kom by 1958 under the leadership of Joseph Ndong Nkwain. To win an election against the K.N.C. party in Kom would have required complete revolutionary measures. The KNDP leaders were fully aware of this fact. In order to derail the KNC party and win the popular vote, it is said that the KNDP leaders had to resort to the traditional *anlu*. They were able to mobilise the women and to disrupt public life in their favour. Ritzenthaler affirms that « by the use of demagoguery, sincere promises, the exploitation of dissatisfaction, intimidations and the clever mingling of Kom and European ideas, the women were welded into an effective organisation whose membership at its height was estimated at 99 per cent of the Kom women » (1960 : 484). It must be said that *anlu* was initially a sensitivity to the predicament of women-farmers. The politicians made use of the situation.

In order to transform the traditional *anlu* into a highly organised and powerful organisation, the women had to be highly motivated. This was necessary if *anlu* had to emerge as an effective instrument capable of seizing control of tribal affairs from the men, mobilising men's opinion, and finally to control the tribal vote in the 1959 elections. As the events show, the women were able to keep their husbands, schools and government officials under their menacing control, and finally brought the KNDP party to power in Kom.

One of the major sources of dissatisfaction in Kom was the cross-contour farming regulation which was meant to preserve or to promote soil conservation. The regulation stipulated that women had to « orient

(10) For further knowledge of the utilisation of *anlu* for modern politics, cf. P.N. Nkwai, *Traditional Government and social change*, Fribourg University Press, Switzerland, Fribourg, 1976 : 176 : 184.

their linear garden beds horizontally to the slopes rather than the traditional vertical arrangement to prevent soil erosion in this mountainous terrain » (Ritzenthaler, 1960 : 483-4). The law also prohibited the burning of grass on the farms. This regulation was directly against the traditional way of cultivation and since much of the agriculture was and still in the hands of the women, the regulation insisted that the women had to turn away from their traditional farming methods. Few women were prepared to follow the regulation.

There were rumours that the foyn (king) was about to sell kom land to the KNC leader, Dr. Endeley, then premier, and to the Ibos (Nigeria). The enforcement of the cross-contour regulation by a non-kom agricultural Assistant strengthened the rumours. Since land was considered sacred and protected by fertility rites, it was an anathema selling it or tampering with its fertility dimension. Anyone attempting to do this could be ostracised. To say that the KNC was conniving with Dr. Endeley to sell kom land was sufficient to invite trouble.

The women also wanted the government in power, KNC to protect their crops against destruction by Fulani cattle. The KNDP gave the women the impression that the government in power was incapable of doing so. It was true that crops were not adequately protected from cattle. Women whose crops had been destroyed were usually not compensated. The government could not effectively control the movement of cattle.

It was true again that the cross-contour farming would promote soil conservation. The KNDP leaders knew this and had voted in favour of the law when it was passed in 1955. It was untrue that the land was being sold. It seems that the KNDP leaders were shrewd enough to mobilise ignorant and illiterate women to their cause. They were able to mobilise the women into a modern *anlu* which persecuted and terrorised non-members, created disturbances that caused serious concern to local authorities.

Elections into the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly were due in 1959. The premier, Dr. Endeley, was due to visit Kom in July 1958 and to address the people. In order to forestall any KNC meeting and public manifestations, the KNDP leaders are said to have begun as early as April 1958 to reorganise their party in the light of the traditional *anlu*. They made the women's organisation — *anlu* — the power base and a political instrument. They developed the traditional *anlu* into a cohesive group as the events of June 1958 show.

On the 4th July 1958, a meeting was held in the village head's compound at Njinikom. It was attended by a sizable number of women as well as some KNDP leaders. On that fateful day the chairman of the Wum Divisional Native Authority Council was summoned to explain why the Council had enacted the cross-contour farming law, it is curious to note that a law passed in 1955 was only called into question in 1958. Mr. C.K. Barth made it understood that the regulation had been promulgated with the consent of all the political parties. He further insisted that it could not be repealed. The KNDP leaders present did not associate themselves with the views expressed by C.K. Barth,

one of the KNC learders. His stand that the law was there to be obeyed and could not be changed sparked off demonstrations that were to paralyse the socio-economic and political life of the Kom kingdom for many months to come.

Mr. Barth was chased away from the meeting by a group of angry women to the great pleasure of the KNDP leaders who stood there unmolested. Mr. Barth made his way to the mission compound as the women followed him stoning and beating. When he was given shelter by the missionaries, the women swarmed the mission compound singing obscene songs typical of the traditional *anlu*. The news of this event spread like wild fire and by evening the official modern *anlu* demonstrations had begun to gather momentum.

It was becoming apparent that these women's demonstrations would disrupt most aspects of life. On the day Mr. Barth was chased away, it began to rumour that schools would be closed, and that even market-places would be occupied.

On the 7th of July 1958 some women, mostly from Njinikom, gathered to disrupt classes in the school in which three KNC teachers and one other teacher, erroneously believed to be a KNC supporter, were teaching. This fourth teacher seems to have defected from the KNDP in which he was a member, most probably because he did not approve the utilisation of ignorant women for a political cause. On that Monday, only about twenty per cent of the school pupils were present. Eighty per cent had stayed away on the instructions of their mothers. Women had taken over control of everything.

The parents of the twenty per cent were either ignorant of what was going on, or were children of KNC staunch supporters. As I was doing my last year of primary education, my father who knew little or nothing about local political manoeuvres, persuaded me and my two brothers to continue to attend classes. He said he would not stop his children from pursuing their studies on the instruction of women. According to my own eyewitness account, the women dressed in vine or leaves and some wearing their men's dresses, entered the school compound singing mocking and obscene songs. They entered the classrooms and began to beat and intimidate the teachers as well as admonishing the school children to stay away from classes. The demonstrations were so serious that no classes were held that day.

On the 8th July 1958, the first major mass demonstration took place at Njinikom. This demonstration drew women from every part of the Kom kingdom. It was on this day that the women demanded the removal of the KNC teachers at the Njinikom Boy's School. The women succeeded in suspending the courts and some schools for the rest of the year. Their demands manifested that the KNDP was the brain behind the women's demonstrations. The fact that these demonstrations were made to coincide with the visit of the Premier, the KNC leader, is a pointer to this assertion. Besides, those who did not associate themselves with the *anlu* were usually molested or ostracised. My father who did not associate himself with the *anlu* activities and has opposed their moves as non-traditional, was branded a KNC supporter

and he was ostracised. The *anlu* forbade any person visiting our compound. Anyone found visiting us was treated as a KNC supporter and therefore anti-*anlu*, or anti-KNDP.

On the 11th of July 1958, Dr. Endeley made his visit despite warning that he should not undertake it. Travelling from Wum to Njinikom through Bafmeng, the Premier and his entourage came across several road-blocks set up by the women. On arrival at Njinikom they met only a handful of supporters. The KNDP had initiated and achieved a total boycott of the visit ; the *anlu* women had succeeded in intimidating their men from attending the meeting with the Premier. Further demonstrations and reports of mock-burials of KNC leaders by the *anlu* women gave the impression that persons supporting the KNC party would be punished supernaturally with death as was the common belief when a traditional *anlu* was organised. Mr. Joseph Ndong Nkwain died suddenly on 21 December 1958. Some informants believed his death was caused by *anlu* while others hold the contrary view. It must be remembered that Mr. Nkwain was KNC leader in Kom and also a member of the Southern Cameroon House Assembly. When the *anlu* started, he resisted very strongly and on one occasion the women had him beaten up and stoned when he refused to give up his political views.

On the 14th July 1958, the Divisional Officer attended another mass rally at Njinikom in order to listen to the grievances of the women. The demonstrations were so wild that no police action could handle it. Only a few police officers were despatched to cover the event, and government had only to dialogue with the women. Even the traditional ruler, Foyin Alo'o Ndiforngu became virtually powerless. The women had taken over control of tribal affairs. The regulatory societies — *Kwifoyn* and *mükum* — remained completely aloof. The *foyn* and the Divisional Officer attended the rally. During the meeting the *foyn* further affirmed his stand on tradition and told the women that it was false that Kom land was to be sold. The Divisional Officer sought also to pacify the women by promising to suspend the cross-contour farming regulation if the women could return to normal life. In fact, the regulation was suspended and then re-instated when the KNDP came to power in the 1959 elections. He also promised the women that all those who had been convicted for violating the law would be released and no action taken against them. Their demand that the KNC teachers should be removed from the Njinikom Boy's school could not be met.

The Divisional Officer explained that it was beyond his competence to remove them because the teachers were employed by the catholic mission. He further admonished them to moderate their views, and above all not to molest those children whose parents wanted then actions against those who did not share their to go to school. Despite these attempts to mollify or temper their spirits persecutions of KNC partisans continued. Rallies continued to be held at village level. These rallies gradually developed into KNDP grass-root cells. One thing one must note here is that women's action was so effective that they were able to remain virtually in control for three years. In its early stages in

1958, it was difficult for the government to repress it. An arrest of one woman was likely to provoke mass demonstrations. Towards the end of July 1958, the police came to arrest the ring-leaders. When they arrived the *anlu* leaders voluntarily gave themselves up and agreed to travel to Bamenda. This action brought large numbers of women trekking the 55 km road to Bamenda. It was difficult to take action against women who looked innocent and ignorant, and yet who were all prepared to go to prison. The government, unable to deal with the case, ordered the women back, but this time providing transport and food for all. To the women, it was a great victory. To the KNDP leaders, it was a greater victory and achievement.

The *anlu* leaders were quite brilliant. The overall head was called Queen while her assistant was named the D.O. These names were directly derived from the colonial structures. The head was the Queen with reference to the Queen of England and her assistant, the D.O. was named so with reference to the Divisional Officer who used to be the representative of the Queen. The Queen Fuam lived at Wombong, and the D.O. Mrs Muana also lived there. These two women became virtually the rulers of Kom, for little was being heard of about the Foyn. For some time Wombong the village in which lived the Queen and the D.O. replaced Laikom the traditional capital. The centre of power was no more Laikom but Wombong. It was from here that orders were issued by Fuam and Muana. It was from here that directives about how to vote in the 1959 elections came. The women who had gained the right to vote, voted massively for the KNDP. For sometime the women spent more time in *anlu* demonstrations and the promotion of the KNDP image that they neglected most of their traditional duties — farming and domestic chores, to no protest of their men.

By the middle of 1959, some of them had gained positions in the male dominated courts. Mrs Muana became one of the most brilliant judges in the customary court which was transferred to Njinikom from Laikom under *anlu* instructions. It was only until the turn of 1961 that women began to return to normal traditional life, but they had succeeded in providing the KNDP with a strong grass-root political basis.

Conclusion

The status, person and role of women differ from society to society. Usually these dimensions are defined always in relation to men's role and status. The world is apparently a men's cosmos. Even in matrilineal society such as Kom one would expect the contrary. In the Kom matrilineal society men occupy more important and significant position within the power structures. The women enjoy a specific right in so far as they constitute the essential parts of the lineage : they are responsible for the persistence and continuity of the lineage. It is this factor that gives the women the high respectable position whose violation cannot

be condoned by neither the global society nor by the women constituting a corporate group.

The *anlu* as a disciplinary measure is just one of the many cultural features that were exploited by politicians for their ends. The tapping of the sentiments of women was only part of whole complex practices among African politicians who turned to traditional institutions for inspiration.

What comes through in this essay is this that women in Kom have a well defined position within the social structure. They constitute a very important vital element whose dignity, prestige, honour and importance cannot be trampled upon without serious repercussion-ostracism.