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## Crossing Rural-Urban Spaces

The Takumbeng and Activism in Cameroon's Democratic Crusade

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- 1 For the past two decades interest has increased in a previously neglected aspect in anthropology, namely, women's collective mobilisations. Most of the accounts of resistance contain skeletal presentations of Women's roles which do not capture the full force of women's activism (Somerville 1994).
- 2 Other researchers have situated these movements within an anti-colonial and nationalist framework (Cleaver & Wallace 1990; Denzer 1976) while others have situated local political activism through the discourse of female farmers (Diduk 2004). Some literature may also minimize women's oppression and resistance by linking it with, and making it a subcategory of the hardships stemming from the introduction of private property and capitalism (Boserup 1970; Hafkin & Bay 1976; O'Barr 1982). What the intricate cobweb of women's groups and organisations has in common is that, for the most part, women have been left out of the historiography as currently written.
- 3 Perhaps the major reason for this oversight in the professional literature is that women's activism was not recorded, nor were their efforts to advocate for the respect of their rights within communities (Walker 2000). Thus, in accounts of resistance movements in Africa, women's roles and their experiences remain largely on the margins (Stroebe 1982; O'Barr & Firmin-Sellers 1995; Ranger 1994; Africa Rights Monitor 1990). Kolawole (1997) posits that African women's collective mobilisation and the question of self-assertion and empowerment are glossed over or effaced from mainstream women's theorizing. Thus, it is necessary to probe the unexplored areas of the African women's public protests and activities either: so that their voices can be heard more completely or in order to assess whether she has indeed been voiceless or simply unheard and unremembered. The *Takumbeng* women's movement, the focus of the present study has displayed remarkable dynamics and adaptability to the changing political landscape in Cameroon. Diduk (2004) observes that by the early 1990s Cameroon's national ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), had become, for many Cameroonians, emblematic of malfeasance and the abuse of authority. Along with growing numbers of other political

supporters from the Northwest Province rural women joined in support of the newly emergent national opposition political party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF).

#### Locating Cameroon and the Study Area

- 4 Cameroon is situated in the Gulf of Guinea with an estimated population of over 16 million inhabitants, distributed into ten administrative provinces. Between 1975 and 1985, Cameroon's economy grew annually over 10 percent in real terms. All this changed by the late 80s with a sharp decline in world market commodity prices for many of the country's primary exports. This intensified in late 80s and 90s. The dismal economic performance got worse with the implementation of Structural adjustment programs from 1987 with attendant effects on household incomes and social services (Konings 1996; Fonchingong 1999). Economically, Cameroon is classified by the World Bank as a low income country and was recently (2000) considered under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) initiated by the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank and IMF) for debt service relief overtime.
- 5 With over 250 languages, Cameroon has a chequered colonial history. It was conquered by the Germans then the French and subsequently the British. The data presented in this paper is derived from my research in Bamenda; which is part of former West-Cameroon, and was ruled by the British as a province of Nigeria under the mandate of the League of Nations (later UN) from 1922 onwards (van den Berg 1993: 5). After independence in 1960, both the Western and Eastern part of Cameroon were reunited, at first federatively in 1961 and after 1972 as a united state (Ngoh 1996).
- 6 The North West Province of Cameroon is one of the most highly populated provinces with 1.7 million inhabitants representing 11.8 per cent of the national population (Ministry of Plan and Regional Development, United Nations Development Programme, 1999). Referred to in ethnographic literature as the western grasslands, Bamenda (provincial headquarters of the North West Province) is the political nerve-centre of Cameroon, and is the birth place (1985) of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) and the Social Democratic Front (SDF) opposition party, launched on May 26<sup>th</sup> 1990. It is within the framework of the quest for liberal democracy and the various means that Cameroonians have employed to achieve that objective that this study seeks to make a contribution.
- 7 The major objective is to analyse the democratising strategies that the *Takumbeng* women employed. The agency and adaptability exercised by this secret society is compared to other women's historic movements in Cameroon (Anlu, Fombuen) and elsewhere in Africa (Aba, Pare, Mau Mau and the Niger Delta). The *Takumbeng* certainly imbibed the culture of protests that was instituted by the Anlu women's movement of 1958. Diduk (1989) and Ritzenthaler (1960) note that by 1957, women in many fondoms of the Northwest began to mobilize in defence of community interests and to voice their grievances to British administrators in Bamenda. Today, the associational equivalent of Anlu and Fombuen continues to mobilize locally in many grassfields fondoms. Until recently, in spite of the similarity of moral issues raised in individual fondoms, women did not join across ethnic groups in a formal sense (Diduk 1997a) as was the case with the *Takumbeng*. For many centuries for example, the Aba riots (1929) in Nigeria (Ifeka-Moller 1975) and the Pare Women's uprising in Tanzania (Feierman 1990; Tripp 2001) dwelt on women's resistance to colonial and traditional taxation policies, the Mau Mau war in Kenya (Lambert 1956; Kanogo 1987) in the early 50s was geared at resisting British colonial policies of land acquisition. The incessant Women's movements in the oil rich Niger Delta of Nigeria is

consonant with women's quest for livelihood improvement by pressing for social services from multinational oil companies.

#### Women's Movements and the Occupation of Cultural and Public Space

- 8 The *Takumbeng* enabled both rural and urban women to re-adapt and use an indigenous institution to address issues of governance and human rights under a post-colonial regime. While its precursors, *Anlu* and *Fombuen* occurred in a rural setting, the *Takumbeng* is a secret society caught at the interface of the rural/urban divide, in which post-menopausal women participate. It emerged in the wake of Cameroon's political liberalisation in the early 90s. Jua (1993), Diduk (2004) provide insights into the roots of the *Takumbeng*. This was a highly respected and powerful association in the pre-colonial period.
- 9 It takes its name from the society of Princes in the Bafut fondom. Activists come from at least sixteen different fondoms, especially within a thirty-mile radius of the Provincial capital, Bamenda. Among them are the fondoms of Akum, Bafut, Bambili, Bambui, Kedjom Keku, Kedjom Ketinguh, Mendankwe, Chomba, Mbatu, Nkwen, and Santa. The group is composed of mostly urbanites from these ethnic groups around Bamenda.
- 10 Takougang & Krieger (1998: 233) observe that, the roots of the *Takumbeng* involve female elders in the past; the presumed connection of *Anlu* with other grassfields movements requires further investigation. The existence of such collectivities encouraged women to come together to defend their traditional rights. Male secret societies are common in the grasslands. These are known as the *Kwifon*, *Tifuan*, *Nwo* and *Ngwerung* in most localities and are strictly male enclaves. From the perspective of women, it was necessary to defend their traditional rights and tackle issues of common interest through female enclaves. Local traditions of protest and disciplinary actions recorded portrayed women deeply embedded in institutions to defend their cultural rights. Rural women regularly joined together to censure men as well as other women. These actions are parallel to and approved by the male regulatory association, *Kwifon* (Diduk 2004).
- 11 The secret society as Yenshu (1995) contends is an urban based phenomenon that was typical of societies in Bamenda and their meeting point was the protest ground. The group had key members in the quarters who mobilized others during street protests. It should be noted that the group transcended the barriers of ethnicity with the exception of class and educational level. Research elsewhere by Jua (1993: 182) and Yenshu (1995: 18) talk of manipulation through extraneous forces since most of the women participating were not conscious of the stakes. The cohesion of the group was guaranteed through its numerical strength and collective mobilisation for the course of social justice.
- 12 The *Takumbeng* came into the spotlight during Cameroon's troubled transition to multiparty politics in the early 90s (Takougang & Krieger 1998: 116-128), the 1991 "villes mortes" ("ghost town") operations (Jua 1993: 182) and the state of emergency declared in Bamenda from October 27, 1992. The *Takumbeng* surrounded the compound of Fru Ndi (Chairman of the SDF opposition party), placed under house arrest in the aftermath of the proclamation of the results of the 1992 presidential election.
- 13 In tandem with the actions of the *Takumbeng*, women elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa have actively resisted the impositions of colonial rule in the form of levies and taxes (Ardener 1975; O'Barr 1976; van Allen 1976; Ritzenthaler 1960; Nkwi 1985; Diduk 1989; Scott 1985). As individuals and groups, women resisted colonial policies that they considered inimical to their social and economic progress (Weiler 1988).

- 14 While the Aba riots were provoked by the expected threat to women's economic activities of tax impositions by the colonial government in place, the *Anlu* (1958) was purely agricultural as women resisted the colonial government's demand that women switch from horizontal to vertical contour farming, a task that proved onerous for farmers, who were expected to farm horizontally on steep slopes (Nkwi 1976).

#### Context of the Research

- 15 Through a combination of historical accounts and contemporary ethnographic data, the study attempts a close analysis of the *Takumbeng* society. To achieve this, we refer to case histories, women's recollections personal and eye-witness accounts to shed light on the trajectory and predicament of this society in post colonial Cameroon. In the discussion we also ascertain the contribution of this secret society to issues of governance in Cameroon. Fieldwork was undertaken between October-December 2003 and January-February 2004. The objectives of our study was to:
- 16 Examine the activities of the *Takumbeng* female secret society in the wake of political liberalisation in Cameroon.
- 17 Determine the connection between the *Takumbeng* and its predecessors the *Anlu* and *Fombuen*.
- 18 Compare the women's movements in Cameroon with other resistance movements elsewhere in Africa.
- 19 The study was guided by the following hypotheses.
- 20 The *Takumbeng* female secret society and its precursors the *Anlu* and the *Fombwen* contributed to shaping the discourse of political activism in Cameroon.
- 21 A re-adaptation of its erstwhile strategies and tactics was instrumental in supporting opposition demands for a liberal democracy.
- 22 Women's integration into politics can spring from women's collective mobilisation efforts and militancy.
- 23 Qualitative data was gathered through the use of interviews, informal discussions and conversations. We held two focus group discussions with some prominent leaders and some members of the female secret society who constituted key informants. This was augmented with a critical and analytical review of literature on similar forms of female protest in Cameroon and beyond (Ardener 1975; Ifeka-Moller 1975; Diduk 1989; Goheen 1996; Tripp 2001). We interviewed a total of 65 people from various villages in Bamenda. The research methods used permitted the interviewees to tell their own story and to converse with us or engage us in conversation. Data was also collected from newspapers and press reports. The informants opted to remain anonymous. Respecting their choice, we decided not to mention their names or reveal their identity in our publications. However, their ages which do not totally disclose their identity appear as indicated in the survey.

#### Gender Identity and Indigenous Activities of the *Takumbeng*

- 24 The *Takumbeng* female secret society stands out distinctly as an indigenous society wielding traditional female power and authority within the Mankon fondom of the Cameroon grassfields. The appellation (Grassfields) is derived from the savannah vegetation that covers the Western highlands of Cameroon. The group is heterogeneous and derived from indigenous ethnic structures in adjourning villages and chiefdoms of Nkwen, Chomba, Mbatu, Mendankwe, Akum, Santa, Bafut, Bambili, and Bambui. These

peoples are said to belong to what has been referred to in ethnographic literature as the Ngemba speaking peoples of the grassfields of Cameroon that share a high degree of social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic characteristics with the exception of Bafut and Nkwen that was classified by colonial ethnographers as belonging to the Tikar ethnic group. It should be noted that such classification owe very much to colonial constructions and reformation of identity (Yenshu & Ngwa 2001).

- 25 In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a dual system operated in which women and men formed separate socio-cultural entities, and made decisions in their own separate spheres. As Sacks (1982) observes, women formed themselves into kinship groups, worker collectives, women's associations. These groups were organised around women's interests, including overseeing marital and gender relations in general.
- 26 The group is involved in a flurry of activities. It serves as an instrument of ritualistic cleansing, especially, in the absence of rainfall, an epidemic or a plague. The women come out often at midnight to dance and perform rituals to cleanse the land. They also provide a form of social control for women and uphold the fact that women should be well behaved and conduct themselves properly in society. Women are cautioned to refrain from acts like drinking excessively, becoming adulteresses, gossips and abusive. They are equally sanctioned against acts like stealing, indulging in witchcraft practices. Those found guilty are fined and in extreme cases they may resort to very punitive forms like urinating and excreting in the compound of the defaulter as an ominous sign. This has been the *modus operandi* of the *Anlu*, *Mawu* and other female secret societies in Cameroon.
- 27 Rallying women's groups for community development endeavours are also high on the agenda of *Takumbeng*. They reinforce the observance of the traditional Sunday set aside to implement such activities. During this period, they monitor community work, hygiene and sanitation campaigns. They usually seize farm tools and crops harvested on such days and those contravening are imposed a fine. Since farming is the mainstay of most women, the group does not condone any acts that might affect their lifeline. They catch stray animals like goats and pigs that destroy crops especially during the peak agricultural season. The animals can only be released upon payment of a stipulated fine to the Quarter-head, (the traditional head) of the neighbourhood. These forms of social control find semblance in the contemporary activities of the *Fombwen* who continue to resist the encroachment of their farmlands by graziers. Groups whether along secret, kinship or gender lines often served wider political and social functions, providing women with organisational and affinitive bases for non agricultural pursuits (Lambert 1956; Stamp 1975-1976).
- 28 Consoling departed ones is another preoccupation of the group. This is done through dancing and singing of dirges at funerals of fellow members as a parting fraternal gesture of honour and respect. The group also partakes in agricultural activities by helping members in collective farm work on a rotatory basis. Members have their turn as far as receiving support in the cultivation and harvesting of food crops is concerned. They also advice pregnant and nursing mothers on childbirth and nurturing and insist that women rest properly during their post partum period. Traditionally, women come together to promote their common economic, political and social interests and the uniting of women on the basis of gender identity provide them with a unifying idiom of action (Wipper 1995; Diduk 1989). The *Takumbeng* used its mystical powers to check any excesses and their technique of shaming became a strategy in pressing for political freedoms.

### Political Activism and Crossing Rural/Urban Spaces

- 29 As noted earlier, the *Takumbeng* came into the limelight in the 1990s on the heels of political liberalisation in Cameroon that ushered in a new democratic dispensation. This was occasioned by the clamour for multiparty politics spearheaded by the Social Democratic Front Party (SDF). As a result of pressure mounted on government, in December 1990, the Biya regime formally sanctioned the existence of multiparty. Also, the 1990 Law on freedom of association endorsed the holding of public meetings and demonstrations so far as they did not pose a threat to public peace.
- 30 These actions were premeditated given that the coalition of opposition parties were stepping up demands for the government to convene a sovereign national conference in order to better define the rules of the game in the new political dispensation (Takougang & Krieger 1998; *Cameroon Post*, 76, 1991). The intransigence of the regime in place led to a series of protestations by opposition parties. The end result was civil disobedience campaigns, ghost town operations and other forms of economic sabotage geared at forcing the regime to comply. The *Takumbeng*'s debut was during the Dead country operations<sup>1</sup> and other acts of civil disobedience that ensued. However, the informants indicated that they were embittered with the killing of six innocent citizens on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 1990, when the SDF party was being launched in Bamenda. This triggered some contemplation of action and mobilisation by the *Takumbeng* to examine the crisis that had escalated.
- 31 Eyewitness accounts underscore the fact that the group gained momentum during the ghost town operations by distributing tracts to re-inforce total compliance of civil disobedience activities. They also sensitized the public on the need to resist all undemocratic practices. The resuscitation of the *Takumbeng* was occasioned by what some of the members decried, *inter alia* as the wanton killings of their children, Anglophone marginalisation, illegal arrests, victimization of law abiding citizens because of their political leanings. As mothers, they were at a loss as to why the regime in place opted for repressive measures instead of engaging opposition parties in meaningful dialogue. As one informant aged 50 years put it, as life givers, they could not remain indifferent to the sufferings of the masses. They could only show their condemnation of such inhumane practices by protesting. Others emphasized that as mothers, they could not be unsympathetic to their children dying in the streets for want of a genuine democracy. The pains of childbirth and pangs of motherhood (Ngwane 1996) urge women to create order where chaos is imminent.
- 32 In the aftermath of the proclamation of the 1992 presidential election results, there was general turmoil and restoring law and order proved knotty for administrative authorities in Bamenda. To arrest the situation, the opposition leader of the SDF was placed under house arrest. As one informant declared, these actions were considered to be draconian, repressive and directed at their "illustrious son" whom they were cocksure had won the 1992 presidential elections. Most members of the society interpreted the declaration of the state of emergency on the North West Province as the Biya regime's punishment to the province for their unflinching support to the SDF party. An informant, 51 years of age declared that they could not abandon Mr. Ndi in the cold at these very trying moments of the democratic struggle. Their resolve was unshakeable considering the impoverishment that their sons and daughters were immersed in.



- 33 Members were quickly rallied at short notices when the group was contemplating action. As they move passed the neighbourhoods, others joined the rungs. As indicated by an informant, aged 60, the group performed traditional rituals before any outing. However, their activities were perceived differently by neo-traditional authorities. The *Fon* of Mankon who had inclinations with the ruling party (as first Vice President) denounced the activities of the group especially their unalloyed support to the opposition SDF. This created some friction between the ruler and the society since their activities centrally under his *fondom* became intractable.
- 34 Several attempts were made by the *Fon* to forestall the performance of the *Takumbeng*. The group was caught between allegiance to a traditional ruler, an adherent of the ruling party and to the opposition SDF—crusader of democracy. With the advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon, the neutrality of chiefs as paragons of tradition became eroded as they indulged in partisan politics. The traditional power of some chiefs and *fons* was put to serious test in the new democratic dispensation. This was the state of affairs between the *Fon* of Mankon and the *Takumbeng*. Moreover, some prominent elite of the CPDM party accused the SDF of manipulating the *Takumbeng*. On this issue, the interviewees intimated that the SDF was defending the rights of the suffering masses. They as mothers who stand for such values could only pay back by supporting the noble course.

#### Situating Political Activism in the Context of Multiparty Democracy

- 35 Women of the grassfields have sought pragmatic and shifting alliances with chiefs, the British colonial government, Cameroon's post-colonial national governments and different village actors for a very long time (Diduk 1997b). The *Takumbeng* adapted its tactics to suit the exigencies of the period. The reasons behind their *modus operandi* constitute the fundamental question upon which the article attempts to shed light. They continue to protest for the sake of food provisioning, children and the conditions of livelihood, democratic governance in the modern state structure. The *Takumbeng* occupied centre stage of the discourse of public protest, given its militancy, enforcement of the civil disobedience campaigns and ghost town operations, tactics used by opposition parties to press for a levelling of the political terrain. Women have taken over public space not normally seen as part of their domain for protests and using their bodies as symbolic and metaphorical devices to subvert the dominant discourse of womanhood (Waylen 1998). Their presence involves maternal authority to restore peace, threatening and using bodily exposure against violators from whom it is meant to shame and stop (O'Barr 1982; Diduk 2004).
- 36 Usually, during public protests, the apparel and demeanour of the women is telling. Their hair was mostly grey and they circulated almost nude, teeth clenched with a large blade of grass gripped in between their mouth symbolizing "no talk but action" (Goheen n.d.). One of their hand properties which signalled their peaceful disposition was the use of the traditional plant called *nkeng*<sup>2</sup> (*dracaena*) which is a symbol of peace.
- 37 Use of the plant was symbolic and meant to register disapproval at certain "unholy" practices. As the informants put it, the group became very sensitive to acts of injustice and their natural sympathy as mothers especially with the killings of children they had painstakingly given birth to. To break the deadlock, the group had to re-adapt its role akin to the *Pare* women in Tanzania who were mobilized into a new form of political activity by the new circumstances in which they found themselves, not because of pre-existing structures.



- 38 The *Takumbeng* decided to throw its weight behind the SDF party, whom they considered as frontline social democrats. The practice of disrobing and shaming through exposing their nudity constituted their major tactic. As reported by Takougang and Krieger (1998), a week after Biya's "*sans objet*" speech<sup>3</sup> in parliament, July 5, 1991, the *Takumbeng* openly challenged Cameroon's security forces in Bamenda, confronting mainly non-local, certainly uncomfortable troops blocking a protest march to the provincial governor's mansion.
- 39 Their actions took the form of chanting, wailing and stripping themselves naked in order to scare off the forces of law and order drafted to quell the civil disobedience campaigns and ghost town operations that were strongly adhered to in the Province. Their passage in the morning meant every place had to remain closed and everybody had to desert the streets (Awason 2002). It is held that being mostly rural and illiterate farmers from adjourning villages, the women could be easily manipulated by the opposition chieftain. However, the informants denied these allegations. To them, being the metonymic of society, they could not in any way tolerate acts and behaviour that trampled on inalienable human rights.
- 40 Such rights had come under attack from the regime in place. Though their days on earth were numbered, they still valued life for as one informant put it "no fly would follow the corpse to the grave". Their approach was peaceful since they did not want the crisis to escalate bearing in mind that the fallouts of their struggle would benefit the younger and future generations. As O'Barr and Firmin-Sellers (1995) note, when women's interests both economic and political are threatened, they become more militant in protection of such interests which touch on livelihoods, productive and reproductive roles.
- 41 The women were mostly post-menopausal women who it is believed had given birth and need not be carefully protected against witchcraft or a sorcerer's harmful medicines which can cause infertility, still-births or physically deformed children (Diduk 1997a). Perhaps, this explains why women who had already attained menopause spearheaded female political activism since they were free from excessive household chores. Post-menopausal women often exercise considerable influence and are sometimes able to assume ritual or political roles that were formerly denied to them (Awason 2002; Potash 1995). Being post-menopausal is consistent with a cultural precept that ascribes deference, mystical prowess and fortitude to the elderly. According to Diduk (1997a), these older "mothers" have far greater moral and mystical authority than do other women. Their nudity does not imply vulnerability as they relied on mystical powers and rituals that are common with secret societies that spell doom for defaulters. They are tolerated because it is ominous for any onslaughts to be directed at them.
- 42 Since most of the women of the grasslands are involved in the cultivation of crops as a means of livelihood, agricultural growth implies spiritual protection and ritual fortification. Nowhere are these relationships more evident than in farm rituals and those for the birth of children. Before individual farms could be cultivated in the grassfields, special agricultural rituals had to be performed on behalf of the community (Diduk 1997b). This helps to explain the respect and fear that young women and men in general exhibit towards the *Takumbeng*, especially, when they appear nude as they confront the military during demonstrations.
- 43 Eyewitness accounts indicate that on several occasions during the turbulent political period (1990-1992), these women disrobed in Bamenda (the provincial capital and

stronghold of the SDF) when they came in close contact with soldiers deployed to the area to restore order. The *Takumbeng*'s symbolic representations were not understood by a considerable number of the predominantly Francophone soldiers. Some of the soldiers we interviewed registered their shock and disbelief in desecrating cultural norms by watching the nakedness of those they considered their mothers.

- 44 Most of the military men, especially, those from the grasslands who are familiar with the sacrosanct aspects of tradition were rendered helpless and found it difficult to execute directives from hierarchy. A military officer who hails from the area and who opted to remain anonymous disclosed that on a Wednesday in November 1991 when the forces had to repel demonstrators that were agitating for the release of indicted opposition leaders, he came in close contact with one of the prominent member of the *Takumbeng*. The woman who happened to know him, asked him to turn his face as they were about exposing their nudity. Reason being that in the circumstance, sanctions hit hard on those who are conversant with the abominable act and do so intentionally. The interviewee confessed that later on, he had to go for ritualistic cleansing.
- 45 It is not uncommon to find that those who are well versed with the cultural repercussions had to show up, pay a fine and be involved in a cleansing ceremony to wash off the ill luck. Allegedly, there was an increase in the death toll of soldiers drafted to Bamenda to quell down demonstrations. It is hard to fathom the functionality of these traditional beliefs and its effects on those who are not aware of the consequences.
- 46 Undeniably, in the course of the confrontations some overzealous soldiers who were insistent on confronting some of the *Takumbeng* members died under mysterious circumstances. It is even alleged that the Governor of the Province, the Legion Commander of the National Gendarmerie and the Provincial Chief of National Security lost their wives in turns some months later due to their spearheading acts of torture against the women. The deaths were attributed to the chanting spells and incantations of ill luck and spell of doom from the *Takumbeng* (*Cameroon Post*, 78, 1991).
- 47 The aftermath of the protest marches has led to a modification in the behaviour of most of the Francophone soldiers on assignment in Bamenda. The soldiers are very cautious and avoid any direct confrontations with the women. *Cameroon Post* (77, 1991) reports on the activities of the *Takumbeng* with the caption "Women move naked to reinforce dead country in Bamenda". As reported the women moved in groups at busy streets and strategic junctions dressed up without underpants ready to expose their nakedness to anyone suspected of violating the ghost town injunction imposed by opposition parties throughout the country. The women were exercising some traditional rituals, which require that they move about with symbolic leaves hooked on their mouths to enforce total compliance of the civil disobedience campaign.
- 48 Motorists, taxi drivers and members of the security forces who attempted to harass demonstrators were in most cases scared off by the nude women. Asked why they used their nudity as a strategy to frightened off security forces and others, an informant aged 60, indicated that they considered themselves "kings of the Earth" and "architects of life" by virtue of their procreative capacity. Anybody who does not respect that natural fact will invite ill luck at his/her doorstep. She further affirmed "it is natural, we are life, he/she who does not show respect to the spring of life calls for darkness" and with God's support, darkness will be made manifest. In this context, darkness refers to curses and misfortunes that might befall any defaulter. Yenshu (1995) notes that their most potent

weapons were their old age-symbol of wisdom and the ritual of uncovering their nakedness to anybody who sought to resist their injunctions and actions. On such occasions, their costumes were sombre, their countenance and demeanour reflected a state of melancholia. This scenario common with the other women's movements show women voicing their opposition to acts and policies that undermine their productive and reproductive rights, especially access to land and food production, vital for family sustenance.

- 49 As a corollary to the *Takumbeng*'s mystical and psychological prowess, *Cameroon Post* (77, 1991) reports on an opposition rally led by the chairman of the SDF party. They reckon that the women applied the "*Takumbeng* formula" when troops tried to approach the over 50,000 marchers. The troops were frightened off and the protesters continued unperturbed.
- 50 On the same day at the slaughterhouse of the Bamenda Main Market, the women also invaded the slabs and scared off butchers and clients who attempted to defy the "operation dead country". Motorists who dared to drive through the Santa-Mbouda road (outskirts of Bamenda town leading to the West Province) were also forced to make an about turn. In a day, the group could make several stops to ensure that the ghost town operations were enforced. This to them constituted the only veritable weapon to force the government to the negotiating table.
- 51 The crescendo of their actions was the barricade of the compound of the chairman of the SDF party during the state of emergency declared in Bamenda from October 27-December 28, 1992 following post elections violence. To forestall any attempts at rigging the elections, the opposition leader had earlier on convened a press conference designating himself President-elect based on the election tally sheets of his party. He was placed under house arrest and a dusk-to-dawn curfew enforced on Bamenda. A communiqué from the government indicated that they could no longer contain the state of generalized insecurity and grave peril that ensued following the 1992 presidential election results that proclaimed the CPDM candidate-President Biya winner.
- 52 Goheen (n.d.) reports that the women set up a 24-hour guard, rotating every 12 hours at Mr. Ndi's residence. The *Takumbeng* blocked the entrance to the house of the opposition leader to prevent his extradition to Yaoundé. As recounted by the informants, they frequently performed certain rituals and demarcated a line to separate themselves and the advancing security forces. They entreated the intervention of the ancestors of the land and relied on God's protection since they considered their course a just one. As affirmed by the informants, their actions were guided by the philosophy that the virtuous will always triumph. *Cameroon Post* (137, 1992) reported that thousands of persons defied the state of emergency in Bamenda to show solidarity to Mr. Ndi and others under house arrest. During the protest march, the elderly women occupying a vanguard position stripped naked. They were carrying tree leaves in their mouths and crying softly "we have decided to follow Fru Ndi. No turning back, No turning back". Interrogated as to the reason for occupying the frontlines, the informants intimated that it was a unanimous resolve to ginger others, signal to the opposition leader that "it was a cross they were ready to carry to a logical end". If they passed away in the exercise, the opposition chieftain and his followers should under no circumstance relent or betray the gracious course. It was a sacrifice as they put it for nothing good comes cheap.

- 53 It is alleged that some time in October 1992, an overzealous gendarme officer from the Moslem Northern part of Cameroon attempted to force his way through the defence cordon mounted by the *Takumbeng* at Fru Ndi's residence. As two informants aged 49 and 55 years recounted, they stripped themselves naked and the gendarme officer instead of retracting watched on intently. Some minutes later, his rifle dropped and he collapsed and died a few hours later. The women attributed his demise to a curse since he had despised their nudity by staring intently.
- 54 Takougang and Krieger (1998) report that street demonstrations were the most dramatic feature of Cameroon's political crossroads. On such occasions, the *Takumbeng* displayed traditional paraphernalia and postures of defiance to excessive authority, including disrobing, against very uncomfortable security forces, who for the most part were not familiar with local customs. Asked if straddling between the household and the public arena did not invite reprisals from their husbands, the informants indicated that they had to overstretch their time to meet up with the unprecedented event. "Since they followed the shift system", they could ensure the upkeep of their husbands and other dependents.
- 55 It is astonishing to observe why the group became very committed to the person of Fru Ndi. Most of the informants mentioned his charisma and resoluteness to the course of social justice. It is held that (Jua 1993) during the early days of the SDF party, the chairman and his party quickly won the sympathy of the group by distributing basic necessities critical for survival like rice, soap, sugar and palm-oil, meant to placate them. The informants indicated that Fru Ndi's largesse was a gesture of concern, which was not aimed at buying them over.
- 56 Despite the odds, the group remained resilient. In November 1992, some 20 women of the society were arraigned and held in detention at the Bamenda Gendarmerie Legion. They were arrested on the following charges:
- 57 – They went around foodstuffs market urging those selling to close down and observe the ghost town operations until the state of emergency is off-lifted.
- 58 – They pressed for the release of arrested opposition leaders and supporters.
- 59 – They called on troops surrounding John Fru Ndi's residence to be recalled to the barracks (*Cameroon Post* no. 135, November 19, 1992). The gendarmerie office records indicated that the crackdown was legitimate since they were accused of inciting and disturbing public peace and order "*en flagrant délit*".
- 60 The arrests portrayed how the women were conscious of the stakes and bent on having their demands addressed. In detention, they were asked why they supported the opposition. They decried all acts of injustice, torture and molestation of their sons and daughters. They added that they stood for truth, justice and peace. They pledged their unalloyed support to the opposition because they believed they had a manifesto of social justice, which they were out to defend. Interrogated on their pig-headedness, the women emphasized their resolve as guarantors of natural rights occasioned by their reproductive role. They could not stand to see these values being trodden upon.
- 61 Their mobilisation strategies as an informant, aged 60 intimated was backed by regular meetings. Impromptu meetings could be held at the eldest member's house and others were rallied at short notice through a whistling sound they were familiar with. These tactics could be modified depending on the circumstance. Questioned on how they coped with food provisioning during the state of emergency, the informants indicated that they

operated in turns and when it was time to keep guard at Fru Ndi's residence, they brought baskets of foodstuffs. They also relied on the support of other women's groups in the adjoining villages. An informant aged 67 years, who hails from Big Babanki, indicated that women in Big Babanki (a village some 24 kilometres from Bamenda) learnt of the happenings and felt obliged to provide support. In this light, and during the state of emergency, they mobilised and collected foodstuffs from other women's networks. In a group of about sixty women, they trekked from Kedjom Keku to Bamenda Town. This was meant to show solidarity.

- 62 The group quickly won the empathy of the masses through sensitisation on acts of injustice. To reinforce the ghost town operations and civil disobedience campaigns, their prime target was taxi drivers who are the hob-nub of economic activities. The *Takumbeng* made it crystal clear that they were championing a good course and expected them to pay back through work stoppage.
- 63 During opposition rallies, and other manifestations, they occupied a vanguard position. According to an informant, aged 60, being at the forefront was an indication that as mothers, they were bent on liberating their children and grandchildren. At times, in case of any confrontation with the soldiers, their strategy was to stoop low and in extreme cases, remain seated on the streets. None of them moved and this option according to one informant, aged 55, was to show their peaceful disposition in breaking the impasse. Their undiminished scale of resistance quickly won the sympathy of the public that deemed it mandatory to lend them support.
- 64 The transformation of the *Takumbeng* from an indigenous female secret society to a modern protest group is visible in a context of political intransigence and economic deprivation. The generalised state of turmoil warranted the intervention of postmenopausal women who got to centre stage of the charged political atmosphere. The consensus drawn from the interviews and focus group discussions was: As mothers, they had gone through the pains of childbearing and understood how laborious and excruciating it was to accept the state of affairs without serious questions. As they put it children belonged to all mothers and "are fruits of the same womb" without any distinction, so any attacks on them invited their wrath as it was an attack on humanity. They could only fraternally fight back like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa.

#### Women's Activism and Grassroots Movements in Africa

- 65 The activism of the *Takumbeng* can be configured within a continuum of women's protests and social movements in Cameroon and beyond. Female resistance movements have occurred in widely separated areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Ritzenthaler 1960; van Allen 1972; Ardener 1975; Nkwi 1976; O'Barr 1976; Diduk 1989, 2004). The Aba riot of 1929 is a good example. The women's war was successfully deterred, for a while, the taxation of women and in getting rid of the corrupt system of warrant chiefs. Though in the long run, it did little to enhance women's political power and authority (van Allen 1976). This is near similar to the roles and images of women in the Mau Mau war of liberation in Kenya (1952-1957), a landmark movement in the politics of social protest. The war was a nationalist struggle borne of the agrarian and political frustrations of Kenyan peasants, the urban proletariat and squatter labourers in the white highlands. The concentration of infrastructure in settler camps (made up of British colonial government) and inadequate social service provision for other Kenyans was enough to send thousands of men and women to the forest in guerrilla warfare. Significantly, up to about 5% of the guerrillas were women; by joining the men in warfare, women subverted their traditional role-

status and challenged formal and traditional political authority in kikuyu society where political power and decision making were customarily dominated by men (Kanogo 1987).

- 66 Women delivered consignments of food, passed on logistical data, vital information and supplies to freedom fighters. As was the case with the *Takumbeng*, these female protest groups transformed their sanctioning procedures to counter male hegemony, colonial rule, wealth accumulation and excessive show of power in the modern state. The Pare Women's resistance in Tanzania caused the graduated tax idea to be dropped the following year, and the king, Kinyashi, appointed four women to the tribal council in 1948 (Feierman 1990). The Pare women stood firmly behind the men since the controversy had disrupted the normal life cycle between the women and their husbands. The women wanted their men home and the dispute settled. By asking to be impregnated, they vocalized their demand for a continuation of life as it was. Sensing that the situation had taken on new and uncontrollable dimensions the chiefs relented (O'Barr 1976).
- 67 The adaptation of strategies by the *Takumbeng* can be likened to contemporary female resistance in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Protesting women from the Itsekiri and Ijaw communities (mid Eastern Nigeria) have been pressing for concessions from oil companies. One of the defiant women leaders stated this resolve bluntly when she claimed emphatically that the "Federal Government and oil companies... like to oppress us. Since we are already suffering, we did not mind if we died on the flow stations" (Ukeje 2002).
- 68 Women from both communities demanded for better infrastructure provisioning such as roads, schools, electricity and clinics. In one of the demonstrations, there was a mysterious lightning fire on the oil tank of Chevron. It is alleged that, the fire was sent by the protesting women since some elderly women stripped naked to their underpants and performed some rituals. In the Ijaw culture as in Cameroon, it is an ill omen for old women to strip themselves naked. Rituals are performed to put to shame any uncooperative elements. The Lagos newspaper, *Vanguard*<sup>4</sup> reports that the women registered their disapproval with the firm's broken promises of providing jobs, schools, hospitals and micro-credits for women to start small businesses. 72 years old Jahaetan Omadeli, one of the women protestors whose July protest shut down the production and export of 180,000 barrels of crude per day lamented "Our land is being eaten up by erosion and oil pollution. And Chevron is not doing anything to arrest the drift", she said, warning that the battle lines were once more being drawn up against the US-based oil plant.
- 69 An attempt to conceptualise such women's protests in Africa shows women's resolve and poise to protect humanity by virtue of their motherhood and womanhood obligations. They struggle to secure practical gender needs that directly touch on livelihoods. Any attempts to frustrate women's efforts to stave off poverty, famine and economic deprivation are resisted vehemently (Diduk 1989). The *Takumbeng* women's movement is traceable to the organizational structure of female militancy, which existed in the 1950s for the *Anlu* and which still persist today with the *Fombwen* in the Cameroon grasslands. Kedjom women were recently mobilized into action to challenge the encroachment of cattle on their farmlands by Fulani herdsman as they struggle for space for grazing and agriculture. Goheen (1996) describes a similar political action in the *Fon's* palace in Nso where a group of about twenty women were half naked, faces painted white, with long sticks in one hand and hoes in the other, leaves tied around their necks draped down their chests... they were quite a spectacle with their ululating and chanting. They were on



their way to the *Fon* to complain about crop damage caused by cows and goats. These women were able to collectively protest to the palace and win compensation for their crops.

- 70 Much recent research on African women and politics has focused on the patriarchal composition of the state and their resultant policies. Women's experience is portrayed as one of exclusion from state resources, inequality of access, neglect and outright oppression (Parpart & Staudt 1989). Through public singing, verbal insults, dancing, and demonstrating in public and by generally seizing control of resources and directing political outcomes, women attempted to get the offending party to change his or her behaviour (Shanklin 1990). As reported by the BBC focus on Africa, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2003, over 300 hundred elderly women of the Amokpe community in the Niger Delta took over an oil installation by night, heavily guarded by the police and belonging to the Anglo-Dutch multinational-Shell. The women threatened to strip themselves naked if attacked by the police. The protest was against the fencing of a gas flare area which the women were using to dry tapioca. Most of the men were unemployed and depended on the tapioca for sustenance. One of the women leaders interviewed intimated that it is an abomination for a child to see the nakedness of his mother as recorded in the holy book-the Bible. The military was pushed to a tight corner in arresting the situation.

#### Counting the Gains of Women's Public Protests

- 71 Most urbanites in Bamenda are of the opinion that the *Takumbeng*, reconstituted an institutional form of militancy leading to a deeper network of associational life that transcends ethnic frontiers. Even more laudable, are the use of traditional symbolic rituals, mystical powers and the strategy of shaming. Coupled with their collective resolve and sheer commitment to social justice, they have left indelible imprints. These may be insignificant gains but their dedication to the course of social justice is salutary and can serve as an eye opener to the role of people power in Cameroon's botched democratic process.
- 72 Issues taken up by other women's movements such as the prevention of arable lands being taken over by powerful pastoral interests have sounded a note of caution to the local administration that women's land resource rights cannot be trampled upon. Such mobilizations by rural women Diduk (1997b) are popular modes of political action that have helped both women and men to survive economically as subsistence farmers in agrarian economies.
- 73 Women continue to challenge state policies over pastoral and agricultural land and corruption by political elites. Being institutionalised features of every day life in the Cameroon grasslands, the protests are neither episodic nor isolated. Such actions have drawn attention to the issue of land shortage and control, often elevating them to sub-divisional, provincial or even national political matter. They have also raised new questions and challenges about legal and customary land boundaries within and between fondoms, particularly as they apply to competing claims to land by farmers and graziers.
- 74 The transformation of the *Takumbeng* from a traditional institution to a militant group has restored protest as a women's legacy. Their collective resolve and resilience are widely acknowledged by both men and women. They were careful in picking their fights with the soldiers and to vary the scale and form of their mobilizations. The regime in place which is impervious to change is kept on the alert because of the fear of the unknown. Little doubt that Governors, Senior Divisional officers, divisional officers and



other top government functionaries who have served in the Northwest province have risen to higher positions in government based on their ability to forestall any forms of protests, which is commonplace in the North West Province. Those having a debut in the province as administrators usually have trying times because their ascendancy is determined by their capacity to quell down demonstrations that are rampant.

- 75 It is noteworthy that the support for democratic governance by the *Takumbeng* has not yielded substantial dividends in terms of gender sensitivity and a socially responsible government. Most of the opposition parties that they supported are still to reciprocate their gestures. They are still to incorporate more women into their party structures. Women are, in the circumstance, incapacitated from affecting the wider political decision making process. In the context of this study, we argue that the actions of the *Takumbeng* engendered a culture of social protest and political consciousness. Their actions are visible crystallizations of the latent ideas of their predecessors like the *Anlu* and the *Fombuen* in checking the excesses of administrators and actions that touch on livelihoods. This explains their unalloyed support to the SDF opposition party that they considered was staging a relentless fight against the hijacked transitional process in Cameroon in the 1990s. Perhaps, this explains why the SDF has kept a consistent track record of total domination in Council, parliamentary and presidential election results since the 90s in the Northwest province. This may be attributable to the high consciousness of the citizenry engineered by the *Takumbeng*.
- 76 Regrettably, the steam the group had gathered is gradually waning. Due to the fissures within opposition parties and the use of shrinking state resources by the Biya regime to buy loyal elites, to co-opt some into the hegemonic alliance (Konings 1996), state clientelism and patronage character of the state (Fonchingong 2004) Cameroon's multi party democracy is seemingly in a cul-de-sac. The high premium associated with the fallouts of the democratization in Cameroon coupled with the machinations of the regime has had a demoralising effect. This notwithstanding, the *Takumbeng* staged a strong posture of support for the SDF party during the October 2004 convention of the party held in Bamenda to select the party's frontrunner for the presidential elections, a week later.
- 77 O'Barr and Firmin-Sellers (1995) argue that despite the gains and extensive authority enjoyed by women in the pre-colonial era, the colonial era undermined women's traditional bases of power as they became politically and economically subordinated and marginalised. This marginalisation was not reversed by post colonial independent governments, even where women had been active participants in nationalist and liberation movements. Thus, today, women in Africa remain politically under represented and economically disadvantaged. Women's activism in modern times is often teleguided by men and is therefore a disguise instrument of male manipulation (Konde 1991). House-Midamba (1990) argues that most politically active women are members of the African elite. Better educated and wealthier, these women often pursue a political agenda that reflects their class rather than their gender interests. As argued elsewhere (Staudt 1986; Africa Rights Monitor 1990), elite women have become active participants in the creation of ideologies that preserve their elite status but undermine and subordinate them as women.
- 78 Despite these drawbacks, women's collective actions in the grasslands as Diduk (1997b) argues have been central to putting in place standardized procedures for evaluating and judging cases of farm damage by domesticated animals. Women are taken seriously by administrators of the area where such problems are rife. As a result of deteriorating

economic and political conditions, the *Takumbeng* has lost some steam because of the manipulative tactics of the regime, shifting allegiances and a fractured opposition. These events have dampened the disposition of the group in spearheading public protests.

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- 80 This paper has dwelled on the *Takumbeng* female secret society that came into the spotlight in the context of political liberalisation in Cameroon. Their indigenous strategies were re-adapted to suit the exigencies of the period. These actions find semblance in the varying forms of women's protests elsewhere in Africa. Such protests have economic, cultural, social and political underpinnings, aimed at redressing specific problems and establishing a new order of things. The activism of the female society has engendered protest marches as a means of challenging the violation of human rights and other undemocratic activities. Their reinforcement of the civil disobedience campaigns is proof of their resilience and high dedication to the course of social justice.
- 81 The Kenyan state acknowledges the Mau Mau as politically legitimate in recognition of its contribution to Kenya's independence. If such women's resistance movements are recognised and promoted, it will serve as a framework for women's empowerment in the political process. In the context of a fragile civil society in Africa, such movements would certainly prompt state actions, challenge excesses and resist undemocratic practices. It would also go a long way in bridging the gender gap in the political milieu and cancel negative stereotypes of female political inaction. As Walker (2000) notes, the activities and efforts of women world wide are much more likely to be totally left out of the development matrix. By adding "patterns of women's organizing and activism", we could write a whole chapter in development theory.
- 82 During the democratic struggle in Cameroon, the *Takumbeng* demonstrated women's leadership capacity. They assumed several roles including, mobilisation and conscientisation of the public through reinforcement of civil disobedience campaigns, condemnation of acts of injustice through public marches, sensitising the public on human rights violations, confronting security forces, monitoring vote counts and fostering the electioneering process. Such activities can serve as a leeway for women's political participation and representation. It could provide a launching pad in the democratic process if they steer above partisan politics.
- 83 The decline and loss of considerable power by some of these women's associations is a cause for concern. If the *Anlu* of Kom gave the vote to KNDP in the reunification option and also changed the whole course of history as far as Southern Cameroon was concerned (Nkwi 1985; Jua 1993), the *Takumbeng* women's movement has not yet succeeded to bring the opposition SDF to power. Nonetheless, it is evident that the movement has engendered the discourse of public protest and a revival of indigenous democratic values. In the era of feminist outbursts on female marginalisation and attempts at women's empowerment, legitimising such female networks will be a welcome contribution in enhancing female participation without threatening male interests in the continued the search for egalitarianism in the modern state apparatus.

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## NOTES

\*. The authors are grateful to the anonymous referees for their insightful comments and to Shirley Ardener and Caroline Sweetman for proof reading earlier and final drafts.

1. Dead country refers to the ghost town operations that were a notable feature of the civil disobedience campaigns meant to bring economic activities to a halt. This entailed the total boycott of economic activities, refusal to honour the payment for utilities (water, electricity, telephone bills and business taxes etc.). They were strategies used by the coalition of opposition parties to force the government to concede to demands of convening a sovereign national conference.

2. A green leafy plant which is highly venerated in the culture of the grasslands. When it is brandished, it signals overtures of peace. It is used also for marking graves, burial sites and demarcating pieces of landed property. During the civil disobedience campaigns, it was placed at business premises of those who were stubbornly operating to act as a curse. In traditional society, the plant is considered to possess the potency of warding off witchcraft practices.

3. A blank and parochial speech. The opposition parties had been clamouring for a sovereign national conference and expectations were rife that the President would give the issue urgent attention in his address to members of Parliament. But contrary to populist expectations, the issue was deemed by the President to be unnecessary and uncalled for.

4. November 27, 2002.



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## ABSTRACTS

The article focuses on the power women wielded within secret societies and other women's enclaves in Cameroon and beyond. It shows how this power is continuously being transformed in the modern political landscape. Female riots, protests and demonstrations have been recorded in certain societies in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa but this paper looks at the *Takumbeng* traditional female society and its politicisation in the context of multiparty politics and democratisation. In this paper, the transformation of the group is examined against the backdrop of collective agitation and how it impacted on the political scene marked by an atmosphere of disenchantment with the highhandedness and undemocratic policies of the national government in place. The study captures the symbolism and metaphors, the cultural interplay and *raison d'être* behind the group's activism from the lenses of the actors as played-out in an urban milieu. It concludes that the group enhanced the continuing struggle for democratic deepening through a legacy of resistance, restoring the flame of social democracy, raising political consciousness in the Northwest Province of Cameroon, a bastion of the Social Democratic Front opposition party.

*Traverser les espaces ruraux-urbains. Les Takumbeng et l'activisme dans la croisade démocratique du Cameroun.* – Cet article s'intéresse au pouvoir exercé par les femmes au sein des sociétés secrètes et autres « enclaves féminines » au Cameroun et ailleurs. Il montre comment ce pouvoir est soumis à une constante transformation dans le paysage politique moderne. Les soulèvements, protestations et manifestations instigués par les femmes ont déjà été observés dans certaines sociétés camerounaises et dans d'autres régions d'Afrique, mais cet article s'intéresse tout particulièrement à la société féminine traditionnelle des *Takumbeng* et à sa politisation en cette période de démocratisation et de multipartisme. Nous examinerons la transformation de ce groupe dans le contexte de l'agitation collective et analyserons quel impact il subit sur la scène politique actuelle qui est caractérisée par une immense déception face au dédain et aux politiques non démocratiques du gouvernement national en place. Cette étude révèle le symbolisme et les métaphores, les interactions et raisons d'être culturelles qui se cachent derrière l'activisme de ce groupe en se plaçant du point de vue des acteurs en milieu urbain. L'article conclut que le groupe a accentué son combat continu pour la démocratie en s'appuyant sur son expérience de résistance, en ravivant la flamme de la démocratie sociale et en élevant la conscience politique dans la province Nord-Ouest du Cameroun, bastion du parti d'opposition, le Front social-démocrate.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** multipartisme, activisme, société secrète, politique de l'espace

**Keywords:** Takumbeng, activism, multiparty, secret society, space politics

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