



# Ufambe Land and the Conflictual Competition for Agrarian Occupation (Farmers/Farmers) in the South West of Cameroon

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## Abstract

Rightly considered as the immovable source of all material wealth, land has always been an invaluable asset in Africa currently retaining 52% of the world's remaining arable land. Land-related conflicts are gaining grounds in Africa both in scale and intensity. This is well exemplified by the conflict between non-indigenous Ballin and Oliti migrant farmers at Ufambe, in the Messaga Ekol Court Area of Akwaya. Pre-knowledge on the historical background and disapproving socio-cultural behaviors of each group vis-à-vis the other stirred up uneasiness and animosity. Natural solidarity, a fundamental element for customary land security, was inexistent across tribal lines. Insecurity on landownership rights was high irrespective of vastness of unused available forestlands and an accommodating indigenous Assaka host community. In all these, the competition for agrarian occupation of Ufambe was not only in full swing but promised to be inevitably conflictual. The underlying triggering factor of the conflict evidently stemmed from the land-migration relationship and the resultant conflictual competition for agrarian space by two non-indigenous groups. Given the high frequency of rural-rural migration observed within many African communities, the migration factor seems more prevalent than documented. Understanding the interplay between migration, land management and ownership rights of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples within a given geographical space is fundamental to understanding land-related conflicts therein. The study was ethnographic comprising of individual, in-depth and semi-structured interviews with two key informants each from Ballin and Oliti origins.

## Subject Areas

Sociology

## Keywords

Land Conflicts, Migration, Non-Indigenous, Migrant Farmers, Ufambe, Ballin-Oliti, Land Security, Landownership Rights, Assaka Host, Agrarian Occupation

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## 1. Introduction

Rightly considered as the immovable source of all material wealth, land has always been an invaluable asset to peoples of all eras and space. It constitutes the natural context that determines the socio-economic and political activities of every group (Obioha, 1992 [1]). The African continent reportedly possesses about 52% of the remaining arable land in the world (Deininger *et al.*, 2011 [2]). Just like the state, family and village authorities in control of customary land management in most African societies consider land as a political expanse (Berry, 2009 [3]). Land is also a dependable source of Gross Domestic Product and export earnings for most countries (Cotula & Toulmin, 2004 [4]). Culturally, the land is perceived as sacred (Obioha & Molapo, 2007 [5]) and the strong attachment to it by Africans reflects its important role in the construction of local identities (Donge & Pherani, 1999 [6]).

These notwithstanding, when land lacks adequate legal, institutional and traditional or customary protection, it becomes a commodity easily subjected to manipulation and exploitation which frequently pave the way for inter-community conflict. Such land-related conflicts are gaining grounds in Africa both in scale and intensity (Obioha, 2000 [7]). Defined as the conditions under which land is possessed, handled and exploited, land tenure may range from traditional holding rights to leasehold (Cotula & Toulmin, 2004 [4]). The inefficiency of some of these has facilitated grabbing, expropriation, encroachment and many other pitfalls in land tenure management underscored as the origin of multiform land-related conflicts between and within communities. The consequences of these conflicts are far-reaching and include hindrances to economic development (Yamano & Deininger, 2005 [8]) high food insecurity and severe poverty (Andre & Plateau, 1998; Deininger & Castagnini, 2006 [9] [10]). Furthermore, there is a high possibility for small-scale local land conflicts to degenerate into very extensive conflicts affecting even the state security of an entire nation (Andre & Plateau, 1998; Renner, 1997 [9] [11]).

Many causes have been identified and attributed to various land-related conflicts across the African continent. These include natural resource scarcity (Homer-Dixon, 1991; 1994 [12] [13]), population pressure (Ndenecho & Balgah, 2007 [14]), fragile or inexistent recognized land institutions (Donge & Pherani,

1999; Fred-Mensah 1999 [6] [15]), pluralism of land management system (Cotula & Toulmin, 2004 [4]) and migration. This notwithstanding, the indigenous-nonindigenous cohabitation of communities resulting from migration has been at the origin of many undocumented land-related conflicts. Generally, landownership by nonindigenous settlers is a violation of the socio-cultural norms in most hosting communities. The bitterness and tension stemming from this have been attributed to the underlying cause of many land-related conflicts (Platteau, 1996 [16]). Abundance of land is a strong pull factor for immigration by nonindigenous groups or persons (Mutabazi *et al.*, 2010 [17]). With a more frequent rural-rural migration (Bilsborrow, 2002 [18]) particularly for work and relocation (Beegle, 2011 [19]), the migration and land conflict nexus in Africa is worthy of important research endeavors.

Cameroon like many other African countries has been going through difficult moments of tribal movements, cohabitation and land-use conflicts. Though more rampant in localities where livestock and crop production co-exist, land disputes occur in varying degrees throughout the ten regions of Cameroon (Mbuagbaw & Lambi, 2003; Mope, 2004; Nkwi, 2007 [20]-[22]). Tribal identities, alliances and affiliations are thus key aspects behind such land disputes. Land conflicts on inter-tribal grounds have a tendency to grow and become violent. This is well exemplified by our case study between Ballin and Mavas villages in the Messaga Ekol Court Area of Akwaya Sub-division in the South West Region. There has been a long-standing land-related dispute between the villages of Ballin and Mavas, inhabited by the Mesaka and Oliti ethnic groups, respectively. However, in recent times, increased land-related violent incidents between the two communities have been observed. A case in point is the June 27, 2022 incident in Ballin that saw the bloody massacre of about thirty-five natives, many injured cases and massive loss of properties. These occurred in a context with availability of vast unused lands and a consequential low population density and pressure on land. It therefore demonstrates the underlying and determinant role of migration to the conflictual competition for agrarian occupation between rural communities.

It goes without saying that there is an urgent need to investigate and understand this situation if desired sustainable peace and development are to be achieved among communities experiencing land-related conflict. Principal amongst our points of interest for this case study has been the interplay between indigenous and non-indigenous landownership rights, traditional land management and security techniques, the insecurity of rural land tenure, and causes and consequences of land conflict.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Spatial and Human Framework**

To begin with, Ufambe is a vast forest area like many others situated in the Akwaya Sub-division of Cameroon. The absence of significant written materials

about the linguistic, anthropological, sociological and historical domains of Akwaya has been a serious handicap towards tracing the roots of its diverse peoples. However, a few unpublished university dissertations on the sub-division coupled with some oral sources from interviews led us to uncover some reliable details pertaining to the origin and migration of the Ballin and Mavas communities. It is worth mentioning that linguistically the people of Akwaya have been classified as Bantus, semi-Bantus and Bantoids due to their closeness to the Bayang and Ejagham of Mamfe (Talbot, 1967; Crabb, 1965 [23] [24]). Akwaya is a heterogeneous society with five major ethnic groups namely Anyang, Boki, Mbulu, Assumbo and Messaga/Ekol. The Anyang and Boki ethnic groups are the only groups speaking uniquely Danyang and Boki respectfully. Thus, the Mbulu, Assumbo and Messaga ethnic groups are composed of different tribes that have been harmonized to form these groups for administrative purposes. This goes a long way towards demonstrating the diversity in historical trajectories of the Akwaya society.

Generally speaking, there are 99 villages in Akwaya distributed under the following customary court areas: Messaga/Ekol, Mbulu, Assumbo, Boki and Takamanda court areas. During the pre-colonial period, the people lived in clans and each clan was composed of a number of villages. These villages were reportedly founded on the basis of clans. Each village was further subdivided into neighborhoods which were a representation of the different families making up the said villages. Our focus, in the context of this research, has been limited to the Messaga Ekol court area hosting both the Ballin and Mavas communities directly involved in the intertribal conflict under investigation. Messaga Ekol is reportedly the least populated ethnic group in Akwaya and is made up of six villages including Assaka. Bakinjaw, Bagundu, Bombe, Njawbaw and Ballin as headquarter. Across these villages, four different languages are spoken including Ugar, Benage, Tiv and Beba. A large majority of the natives of these villages trace their origin from the Messaga clan.

## **2.2. Origin and Settlement of Ballin**

According to Babila (2013 [25]), the origin of present-day Ballin dates way back into pre-colonial times when the abundance of land encouraged a lot of territorial displacement in search for optimal settlement conditions. The founding father of the Messaga clan is said to be Etc Ka. He reportedly migrated from the Omerongu hill. Together with his family, they journeyed southwards before separating into two groups. The separation was by no means the result of any internal conflict whatsoever. It was rather to ensure proper management of the settlement unit. One of the two groups was led by two of Etc Ka sons by name Eya Sang and Itchebi Egal. They moved North-Eastwards and founded the village of Ballin. Meanwhile, the third son by name Unu Egal continued and moved across river Moane and founded the neighboring village of Assaka. The strong relationship between Ballin and Assaka is testimonial of their common origin. This is confirmed by the following excerpts from the author:

*[—Despite their separation, these clans maintain a strong relationship with each other. They both undertook unbreakable alliance to support each other even during wars. This occurred several times when either of the group was attacked by the Munshi raiders from neighboring Nigeria. This character of unity made this clan one of the most united even at present. The said sense of unity is so strong because this group had been long separated from the other ethnic groups. They were formerly allocated under the Wum community in the then Bamenda Division. It was in 1927 that they were administratively re-classified under the Mamfe Division.]*

### **2.3. Origin and Settlement of Mavas**

To begin with, it is worthy of mention that Mavas is not an independent village of its own. Though populated enough, its legal status is that of a settlement under Njawbaw village. According to Babila (2013 [25]), the founding father of the Ekol clan migrated from the Munshi ethnic group in Nigeria. He was known as Ekol and had four sons namely Ehow, Vitulu, Ewan and Njaw. These sons established families, separated from each other and eventually became the founding fathers of four villages bearing their names. The villages of Ehow, Vitulu and Ewan later moved and settled in the present-day Katsina Alla District of the Benue province in Nigeria. Consequently, the only descendants of Ekol found in Cameroon are the natives of the Njawbaw village in Messaga Ekol court area.

However, the Oliti settlers in Mavas are reportedly those in conflict with Ballin and not the native Ekol people of Njawbaw. The Oliti are said to originate from the Assumbo court area of Akwaya sub-division. Field accounts hold that the Oliti tribe is made up of 6 indigenous villages and is found in the Northern part of Akwaya. The villages include Niyerim, Akwaya town, Mortom, Ngalm, Okirika, and Anomadibo. Given the rapid population growth of these villages and the fact that their soil fertility is not so rich to ensure sufficient crop productivity for effective subsistence, the Oliti are said to migrate a lot. It is in this light that a good number of Oliti migrants moved from Assumbo into Njawbaw in Messaga Ekol. They formed settlements which have now grown into big villages like Mavas, Ekemawa, Mbado, Amenga, and Ogalawem. This is affirmed by the following field accounts:

*[—Because of the vastness of Akwaya, some communities like the Oliti people take advantage to migrate easily. They have the highest birth rate in the whole of Akwaya which has caused their population to grow rapidly. To make matters worse for them, their soil is not so good. This has caused them to have a high migratory tendency away from their original Oliti territory. Neighboring farmlands that were obtained for cultivation many years ago have now been transformed into large Oliti settlements. This is the case with Mavas, Ekemawa, Mbado, Amenga, Ogalawem. These are not indigenous Oliti villages.]*

### **2.4. Data Collection and Processing**

The data collection phase of this research spanned throughout the entire month

of March 2023 in the city of Yaoundé. Some major factors sanctioned the choice of this research site: first and foremost, there is high insecurity within Messaga Ekol stemming from both the inter-tribal land conflict and the ongoing devastating socio-political crisis within the whole region. This has led to massive population displacements away from the locality. Most of these internally displaced persons have sought permanent abodes in major towns of the country like Yaoundé. Furthermore, there was an urgent need to examine, understand and resolve the land conflict in order to minimize or inverse its consequences.

The study was ethnographic comprising of individual in-depth interviews and observations. In view of its capacity to trigger insightful accounts of personal points of view and experiences on the earlier mentioned points of interest for the case study, a semi-structured interview was engaged with four key informants. These consisted of two participants from each of the two tribes in conflict, in view of having a balance in community perspective. Their first-hand knowledge on points of interest was a strong criterion of selection in view of its influence on attainment of research objectives. Given that clearly defined profiles were already spelled out prior to this fieldwork, a purposive sampling method was understandably privileged. To this effect, snowball sampling technique was preferred, in view of its extensively recognized abilities to simplify the whereabouts of many other individuals having common features with a previously accessed respondent. As such, telephone calls were made to friends and family members amongst other acquaintances, on the basis of their possible knowledge of natives from Ballin and or Mavas resident in Yaoundé. This strategy was quite productive given that it led us to obtain contacts and locations of four key respondents with the following characteristics (See **Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of key informant.

Respondents	Village of Origin	Occupation	Stakeholder Characteristics	Date of Interview
1	Ballin	Teaching	*Principal of GSS Ballin	09-03-2023
2	Ballin	Diplomat	*Secretary during Ballin-Mavas inter-community dialogue for peace held in Buea *Vice president of Ballin Cultural and Development Association (Yaoundé branch)	15-03-2023
3	Mavas	Civil servant	*Spokesperson for a collective to defend the rights of Oliti people *One of Oliti representatives at the dialogue and reconciliatory meeting in Buea	16-03-2023
4	Mavas	Farming	*Internally Displaced Person from Mavas *farmer at disputed Ufambe lands	18-03-2023

**Source:** Fieldwork archives of the authors (2023).

Upon expression of participation consent, every potential research participant was well-informed on fundamental information on research purpose, choice to participate, potential benefits and shortcomings. The main research tool was an interview guide. All discussions were conducted in English. The place and time for each discussion were chosen at the convenience of the respondent and the average duration per interview was 45 minutes. Field notes were taken and used to enhance and complete the tape-recorded discussions upon transcription. These transcripts were used to fill the electronic version of the interview guides. The color reference technique was deployed enabling particular colorations to closely related portions of the transcripts. On the basis of color their assigned colors, these portions were then regrouped and categorized. This produced patterns that led to the emergence of themes and sub-themes. A qualitative interpretative approach centered on the grounded theory analysis and the narrative analysis was established.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Causes of the Conflict**

Two discordant versions about the root cause of the Ballin-Mavas intertribal conflict emerged from our field investigations. Understandably enough, this is a reflection of each tribe putting the blame on the other. Each group simply refers to and sides with the official communiqué accusing the other as the offender. As shall be seen, accounts from respondents of Ballin origin concord with the communiqué of the Right Reverend Fonki Samuel Forba; Spokesperson of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon (PCC). Meanwhile, the accounts from respondents of the Oliti tribe of Mavas concord with the communiqué of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense.

For a start, the Ballin people think that it is not even proper for a settler group like the Oliti of Mavas to engage in land disputes of any sort with an indigenous population like themselves. They describe the Oliti as natives of Assumbo Court Area who migrated into Messaga Ekol territories belonging to them. The lands the migrants now claim to possess were granted to them for subsistence purposes only. This directly barred them from rights to landownership and inheritance. However, the Olitis have reportedly ignored this and have shifted from subsistence to cash crop production which is more permanent. This has caused them to own lands that were granted for temporal occupancy. To make matters worse, the Olitis are accused of having a high expansionist tendency. This is said to be the root cause of the conflict with Ballin natives given that the Olitis have reportedly encroached into and occupied portions of Ufambe without authorization.

This was identified as the same Oliti expansionist strategy used against the Yive; natives of the hosting Njawbaw village. The latter was allegedly chased out from their land in 2007 by the Olitis. They came in, refused the authority of the Njawbaw traditional ruler and started chasing natives away from lands that they

eventually occupied. The traditional ruler was killed and it was alleged that the Oliti were responsible given their desire to operate without control. With the creation of a very strong local separatist force in Assumbo, within the context of the ongoing Anglophone Crisis, the situation has worsened. For protection, armed detachments of the said force are dispatched to Oliti settlements out of Assumbo like Mavas. This quickly became a booster to the expansionist tendency of the tribe seeking to reproduce the same strategy deployed against the Yive people. As such, the Ballin believe that they will eventually lose their entire ancestral land like the Yive people if nothing is done. This is affirmed by the following field account:

*[—The Oliti migrated to Njawbaw, one of the villages in Messaga Ekol and occupied a good number of settlements even without the authorization of the traditional authorities. They went about threatening and chasing people from their farms that eventually became theirs since acquisition of land is based on effective occupancy. This seems to be an effective strategy to grab the farmlands of other communities. They are in process of reproducing the same thing with the Ballin people under the strong support from the Oliti armed separatist group in Mavas. This can be confirmed by the military.]*

Conversely, Oliti settlers from Mavas expressed incriminating opinions against Ballin natives. They claim that the rightful owners of the Ufambe disputed land are the Assaka people and not the Ballin. They hold that the Eshimbi settlers from the North West Region were the first to cultivate on the disputed land after obtaining authorization from the Assaka people. Following a land dispute with the Ballin people, the Eshimbi people escaped back to their homeland in the North West. As such, the farms they left behind were eventually occupied by Ballin natives. The latter reportedly came in without any knowledge of the whereabouts and boundaries of farmlands belonging to the Eshimbi people. Consequently, some farms belonging to Oliti people who have long been working alongside the Eshimbi, were also seized and occupied.

Given their air of superiority and inexplicable hatred for Oliti people, farmers who tried to defend their farmlands suffered violent attacks from Ballin natives. This led to the attack and death of some of them right in their farms. Even after it was proven beyond reasonable doubts that certain farms belonged to Oliti farmers, it was reported that the owners were neither given back their farms nor were they given new cultivable lands. As such, they had no choice but to exit the area. It is therefore believed that the Ballin people are not out to occupy farms belonging only to the chased-away Eshimbi people. Their violent actions are thought to reveal their agenda to chase the Oliti people away from Ufambe and back to Mavas. The following excerpts from the field accounts of a respondent are evidence of this information:

*[—It is clear that certain groups in Messaga Ekol like the Ballin people are particularly hostile to Oliti people of Mavas. They believe that they are superior to us since we come from a different court area. Many years ago, we obtained authorization from Assaka people to cultivate on their land just as the Eshimbi*

*people did. They had their conflict with Eshimbi people and decided to own the lands of those who escaped the conflict. Now they are getting us involved by seizing some of our farms. It is clear that they want to chase us away like the Eshimbi people in order to occupy our farms. This is pure wickedness].*

As such, accusations of deadly assaults against Ballin natives were outrightly refuted by the Oliti of Mavas. They rather pointed at the intense resistance to the separatist agenda in Ballin as an important factor. The resistance is said to have caused the killings of many separatist fighters passing through Ballin territories by local vigilantes. The latest incident took place early last year when a separatist fighter was waylaid, killed and robbed of about five million francs by some Ballin youths. He was reportedly on a mission to Nigeria to purchase the needs of his group. Calls from the group for the money to be refunded fell on deaf ears. The group then planned and executed the counter-attack that led to the destruction of many lives and properties. This version is said to be supported by the official communiqué of the government through the Ministry of Defense. This is supported by the following field notes:

*[—I can swear to you that no Oliti man has ever entered Ballin territory for any attack. The massacre of Ballin people was not committed by Oliti people, it was done by armed separatist fighters in retaliation to the killing of one of theirs who was robbed of five million francs. He was on his way to Nigeria to purchase the needs of the armed group. The fighters then launched a retaliating attack at Bakinjaw during a funeral. They infiltrated Ballin under the cover of mourners. The attack started at nightfall when the military had dropped their guards. Only people with fighting experience can operate with so much skill. Oliti people don't have any such military skills.]*

### **3.2. The Type of Disputed Land**

There is a fundamental unanimity of opinion from both sides involved in the conflict about the bone of contention. It is all about a vast and rich forest suitable for agriculture located at Ufambe. Given that a significant proportion of both populations are farmers, the profound interest on the said land is understandable. However, there is a noteworthy divergence pertaining to opinions on rights of ownership and privileges over the disputed land. The Ballin people uphold claims that the land is part and parcel of their vast ancestral territory. Given the smallness of their population, majority of their lands remain unoccupied. As such, their ownership rights have been put into question by Oliti land-grabbing opportunists with a well-known expansionist tendency. This is confirmed by the following field account:

*[—The population of Ballin is one of the smallest in the whole of Messaga Ekol court area. We therefore have vast forest area that has not yet been occupied. Some of this community land is given out to soliciting groups desiring space for subsistence. It was the case with the Oliti settlers of Mavas. They took advantage over time and encroached into unauthorized portions of the land simply because of their unoccupied nature.]*

On the other hand, Oliti people uphold claims that the land is part and parcel of Assaka territory and not Ballin. They admit that it is not a part of their settlement territory in Mavas but uphold their customary rights over their farmlands there. To them, Mavas people found on the other side of River Makura came into the land in question many years ago. They claim to have obtained authorization from Assaka traditional authorities to cultivate the land. They revealed that the first people to cultivate on the disputed land were the Eshimbi or Bishiru settlers from the North West Region. They were granted authorization by the Assaka traditional authorities. The aged nature of their cocoa plant is testimony of this. As such, the Oliti express astonishment vis-à-vis Ballin ownership claims on a forestland not even close to the limits of their Ballin-Bombe territorial boundary. The following field account affirms this information:

*[—Leaving Ballin from the North, one passes through Bombe; the village of the Beba settlers from the North West Region, before getting to Assaka Anyimeniken, then crosses a small stream to Big Assaka village, before getting to the disputed land. So you see that the Ballin people are simply intruding into the land. We know it is not Mavas territory, but we obtained permission from the Assaka chief who has the rightful authority over the land. So we operate in all legality and should not be chased away by Ballin people.]*

### 3.3. The Different Manifestations of the Conflict

Ranging from frequently expressed hate speeches to violent confrontations, the manifestations of the Ballin-Mavas inter-tribal conflict are similar to those of other land-related conflicts around the world. The immigration of some families of the settler Olitis from Mavas into Ufambe was viewed as a threat for agrarian space by the Messaga Ekol native group of Ballin. Fundamental to this was the latter's observation of the land-grabbing and expansionist behaviors of the Oliti settlers within the hosting Njawbaw village. In this light, fear of losing potential farmlands in the future triggered tensions irrespective of the vast unused remaining proportion of the Ufambe forest area. The said tension, expressed in many ways, was reported with increasing levels of violence against the other. Frequent rhetoric emphasizing the "stranger" or settler status of the Olitis was expressed by Ballin natives as highlighted by the following excerpt:

*[—right from the onset, even when there peace the Ballin people never really accepted us as neighbors. They kept calling us names like Oliti strangers, Oliti foreigners, or even Oliti invaders. They were determined on making us feel un-belonging. At the slightest opportunity, we were reminded of our Assumbo origin. Their hatred for us and air of superiority are secret to no one in the area. If it depended entirely on them, we would have been chased away from the area and taken back to Assumbo Court Area.]*

Meanwhile in retaliation, the Olitis called the Ballins lazy and jealous of their hardworking prowess and consequential farming successes highlighted by the following excerpt:

*[—I have never seen or heard of a set of ungrateful people as much as the Olitis. They were given portions for farming since we had vast unused forests. They now say we are a set of lazy people with little interest in developing our lands through hard work. They say the reason we are against them is because we are jealous of their farming achievements. Simply because the land was given to them by the Assaka, they think we have no legal right to the land. They forget that we have a common ancestry with the Assaka people which gives us the same right to the land in question.]*

These verbal insults unleashed by members of one community towards the other gradually led to physical confrontations. The fled of the Eshimbi people from Ufambe, the consequential abandonment of farmlands and their takeover and occupancy by Ballin natives gave room for frequent physical contacts between farmers from both groups. In this light, a number of verbal exchanges on the basis of inter-tribal land-related tensions understandably led to multiform physical violence. Common among these has been crop destruction on disputed farmlands as a dissuasive mechanism against claims of landownership rights. This is affirmed by the following field account:

*[—for some years even before fleeing the disputed area, we went through very difficult conditions inflicted by Ballin people. We tolerated in patience while hoping for peaceful understanding and cohabitation since there is still so much land for everybody. Things kept going from bad to worse. Frequent insults and verbal threats later gave way for destruction of our hard earned farm produce. I can site the names of some Oliti people whose farmlands at Ufambe were significantly destroyed without any fault of theirs. It was a clear indication that nothing was going to stand on their way until we are all chased away from our farms for them to have free control.]*

The continuous cohabitation of these farmers from the different communities under such tense atmosphere led to the inevitable loss of lives from both sites. Small-scale attacks and counterattacks carried out in farms led to beatings, injuries and some loss of lives. The peak of these was the deadly massacre of June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 where about thirty Ballin natives were violently killed in Bakinjaw village, a chiefdom of Messaga Ekol far away from the disputed Ufambe forest. The communiqué of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon on the incident was quite expressive of the responsibility of the Olitis and their motive. It reported that the deadly assault was a retaliation from the Olitis following an earlier unfortunate incident that led to the killings of some of them in their farms. This was not taken lightly. The Oliti people organized and got backup from hired gunmen from Egbekaw and Mbilishie. Ferocious and inhumane attacks against the Messaga Ekol people led to bloody killings and the horrific burning of many houses and the district hospital. Here is an excerpt:

*[—There has been several decades of relative peaceful cohabitation among the different groups and tribes living in Messaga Ekol. But the last decade had seen increasing tension and sporadic attacks and counter-attacks from both Ballin and Mavas people. One of such incident occurred when an unfortunate dispute*

*led to an accidental killing of an Oliti man in his farm. The entire Oliti community took it for an attack against them and retaliated ferociously with the help of armed separatist mercenaries—The burning of the district hospital was quite significant to the number of deaths registered after the attack. I guess it was done deliberately to amplify the damage. The wounded could not be rushed there for medical assistance, people were instead running away from the building set ablaze. The only option was to rush the wounded victims to Nigeria. It was quite unfortunate because most of them died on the way even before arriving at the hospital.]*

### **3.4. Consequences of the Conflict**

The consequences of conflicts, as violent and deadly as the Ballin-Mavas conflict, are always disheartening and far-reaching in many ways. Just the loss of dozens of lives from both sides has had profound socio-economic and psychological consequences that cannot be estimated. However, our research focuses on two main consequences of the Ballin-Mavas conflict. These include consequences in terms of land use and displaced persons.

### **3.5. In Terms of Land Use**

The consequences of the Ballin-Mavas conflict in terms of land use have been enormous given the fact that a significant proportion of both communities involved are farmers. The disputed area is host of many farms for subsistence in terms of food cropping and wealth creation in terms of cash crop cultivation. Their direct dependence on land accessibility for expected output is fundamentally influenced by current state of local security. Following the massacre in Ballin, very high waves of insecurity reportedly caused almost everybody to flee from their farms. The fear of imminent attacks and counter-attacks on farmers while working their fields, as has been the case in the past, is still very present. Farmers could not even afford to harvest their produce. As such, the land has almost completely been deserted by all the tribes working in the area. Except for some armed separatists taking advantage of the situation to loot farm produce, no human activity is going on there. Gradually but surely, the cultivated portion of Ufambe is reportedly being transformed into the dense forest it once was.

### **3.6. In Terms of Displaced Persons**

The consequences of the Ballin-Mavas land conflict have equally been noteworthy in terms of population displacement. More often than not, running away is a prompt and natural reaction to the feeling of high and imminent insecurity to personal safety. These feelings reportedly animated many farm owners in the disputed area be it of Ballin or Mavas origin. As such, almost everyone has migrated from the area to neighboring villages thought to be distant enough from any immediate attack. A good number have fled to refugee camps in neighboring Nigeria. Some others are scattered to other parts of the sub-division and division depending on their financial capacities and availability of acquaintance

willing and able to accommodate. The extent of the population displaced from the area is said to be unmatched by any other in the whole Akwaya sub-division. The Oliti people living in settlements away from Ufambe like in Mavas, Ekemawa and Eribada have reportedly fled for fear of retaliation. This is affirmed by the following excerpts from a field account:

*[—My husband told me that it was just as if an announcement had been made for everybody to leave the area almost immediately after the massacre in Ballin. The news spread like wildfire the following day and the reaction was almost immediate. Good a thing I had long left the farms with the children, it was easier for my husband to runaway alone. He first moved to neighboring Nigeria and stayed there for a few days together with many other farmers from the area. Since his younger brother works in Mamfe town, it was easier for him to get there through Ekok. We hope to reunite with him either in Mamfe or here in Yaoundé. The thoughts of going back home scare us all.]*

### 3.6. Conflict Resolution Bodies

Though described as way too little and too late, some reactions to the conflict have been recorded as efforts towards resolving it. This is understandable, given the magnitude of the conflict and the afflictions of its consequences. These reactions have been categorized under the following bodies:

#### Local responses

Prior to the Ballin massacre, incidents leading to tension and conflicts were managed locally through inter-community dialogues. Land retrocession, rehabilitation and or compensation of victims have reportedly been the outcomes of such dialogues. However, there have been a lot of criticisms on the lack of commitment of local elites towards taking initiatives for resolution of the conflict after the massacre. Local political, economic and traditional elites are not even talking about in public. However, a meeting was convened by Senator Anjah in July 2022 to look at the Ballin-Mavas issue amongst other security issues plaguing Akwaya as a whole. The following excerpts testify to this:

*[—It's like there has been a firm prohibition of our elites from participating in anything that could resolve the conflict. Their silence is shocking and inexplicable. You cannot be a parliamentarian representing a people and you are doing nothing to comfort the population. — Our elites have failed us on this particular conflict. That is one of the main reasons why the situation is not advancing at all.]*

#### Civil society responses to different crisis (including churches)

One of the first and few noteworthy reactions to the conflict from the civil society has been that of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon (PCC). Many people got to know about the June 22<sup>nd</sup> massacre of last year from the official communiqué of the church issued by the Right Reverend Fonki Samuel Forba. Through its well established and accepted moral and neutral statuses, the PCC had taken the lead towards seeking for solutions to the conflict. It has reportedly organized peace talks between the various groups found in the Messaga Ekol

court area where the conflict occurred. Each of these groups was represented by five elites of their choice. The purpose was said to lay ground works for frank dialogue destined to raise awareness on the consequences of such conflict and deliberate on definitive resolutions.

These notwithstanding, it was reported that representatives from neither the Ballin community nor the Oliti community agreed to participate. Information from the field reveals that the Olitis accused the organizer of the peace talks for being biased. It was said that his communiqué and statements during interviews after the massacre openly accused the Oliti people as the perpetrators of the Ballin massacre. The Olitis thought dialoguing was unnecessary since he already considered them as the malefactors. It was equally gathered from interviews that other meetings have been scheduled with promises of massive participation. This information is affirmed by the following excerpts of an interview:

*[—From the communiqué of the moderator, everyone can see that he is convinced that the Oliti people actually committed the massacre in Ballin. You cannot be calling for dialogue and accusing one of the parties invited. So there was no need attending a meeting where the outcome has been decided beforehand. We understand that his mother is from Ballin and that he has close ties with Ballin people, but he would have detached himself from all of that and acted with fairness and neutrality as a real man of God would do. We all want peace, no one is happy with the current situation but we will not accept any nonsense from anybody.]*

#### 4. Discussion of Findings

Principal to our findings is the affirmation that there is a fine line between social conflict and migration, especially on the basis of territoriality. To begin with, it is worth mentioning that several triggering factors can be highlighted as underlying determinants of inter-tribal conflicts around the world. However, there is a preponderance of land-related conflicts, especially within and between rural communities with significant agrarian population. In such contexts, 40 - 60% of disputes are said to be directly or indirectly related to land ownership rights and management (Pantuliano, 2009 [26]). In most cases, the land disputes are between individuals or communities living next to each other within the same geographical space and consequently have common boundaries. Given the undependable nature of customary land securing mechanism usually in application here, there are frequent pitfalls in poor land tenure management such as grabbing, expropriation and encroachment. However, the Ballin-Mavas land-related conflict is fundamentally different from many others: both groups have never lived next to each other and do not have any common historical or geographical boundary.

The disputed but vastly unoccupied Ufambe forestland, said to be highly suitable for subsistent and cash crop cultivation, is unanimously accepted to be the legal property of the Assakas. Non-indigenous immigration into the area by the Oliti and Ballin groups was understandably in pursuit of the optimal agri-

cultural conditions it offers. Prior to their arrival and settlement, land security was logically not a priority. Land was generally owned by families who apportioned it to relatives upon attainment of adulthood. These portions were then handed down to the next generation and so on. In this light, landowners with a common boundary were more or less members of the same family or lineage. The then social and cultural homogeneity easily led to the construction of natural solidarity, considered and relied upon as strong enough against any form of land dispute. Custodians charged with the task of land management customarily relied on oral recites to identify boundaries, notwithstanding the high possibility of change and subjectivity.

However, the desire for increased workforce and community development was increasingly associated to rapid population growth through immigration. In this light, Ufambe became heterogeneous thanks to the immigration of the aforementioned settler communities and protagonists of the different land-related disputes that later occurred within the area. Pre-knowledge on the historical background and disapproved socio-cultural behaviors of each group vis-à-vis the other stirred up uneasiness and animosity. This did not facilitate easy and peaceful cohabitation. The ancient Ballin-Eshimbi border conflict at the borderlines between the North West Region and the South West Region was reignited and transposed into Ufambe. This actually explained the arrival of the Ballin natives in Ufambe wherein the Eshimbi had settled and pioneered successful cash crop cultivation. Furthermore, the Ballin natives were aware of Oлити land grabbing tendencies, expansionist agenda and disrespect for Njawbaw traditional authorities in control of their Mavas settlement camp.

This was not the least reassuring vis-à-vis the Ballin agenda for secured takeover and ownership of abandoned farmlands seized from chased away Eshimbi farmers. Natural solidarity, a fundamental element for customary land security, was inexistent across tribal lines. Insecurity on landownership rights was high irrespective of vastness of unused available forestlands and an accommodating indigenous host. In all these, the competition for agrarian occupation of Ufambe was not only in full swing but promised to be inevitably conflictual. The underlying cause of the Ballin-Mavas land-related conflict was clearly not the usual ones highlighted by available literatures dealing with similar problematic. It evidently stemmed from the land-migration relationship and the resultant conflictual competition for agrarian space by two non-indigenous groups.

## 5. Conclusion

As highlighted earlier from available literatures dealing with a similar problematic, there are some frequently observed causes attributed to conflicts centered on land. Given the high frequency of rural-rural migration observed within many African communities (Bilsborrow 2002) [18], the migration factor seems more prevalent than recognized. Though not widely examined, our research was fundamentally focused on migration as an underlying triggering factor to the inter-tribal land-related conflict between Ballin and Oлити farmers in Ufambe.

This turned out to be confirmed as migrant farmers of both communities indulged in a conflictual competition for agrarian space. This occurred despite large availability of unused suitable forestlands and accommodating indigenous Assaka villagers. Understanding the interplay between migration, land management and ownership rights of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples within a given geographical space is fundamental to understanding land-related conflicts therein.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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