The role of Bali Chamba Women in Inter-Ethnic Conflicts: A pre-colonial to post-colonial situation

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Abstract: Wars and conflicts have played a tremendous role in the structural setup of the Bali Chamba societies and it has shaped the mentality of the people. This study provides an insight situation of the military elements of history with special focus on the contributions made by Bali Chamba women during inter-ethnic wars which correlated with various generations. The origin of these conflicts can be stress from Bali Chamba from the course of their migration, settlement and expansion in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Women’s role in conflict has contributed a solid formation of a valuable Bali military prowess and tradition based on organization, tactics and transmission. The military aptness has been transmitted from one generation to another, with adaptation to new realities based on the various historical epochs. An analysis of both primary and secondary data exploited for this study reveals that, women, though considered low-graded, were a vital force who made themselves a visible part of the Bali Chamba military history. This paper will
examine the causes of conflict, women as food providers, moral support, porters of booty and care providers.

**Keywords:** women, inter-ethnic conflict, Bali Chamba, Bamenda Grassfields.

**Résumé**
Les guerres et les conflits ont joué un rôle énorme dans l’installation structurelle des sociétés de Bali Chamba et transformé la mentalité des populations. Cette réflexion analyse les aspects militaires de l’histoire en mettant l’accent sur les contributions apportées par des femmes de Bali Chamba pendant les guerres interethniques qui se sont déroulées à travers diverses générations. L’origine de ces conflits peut être la pression Bali Chamba au cours de leur migration, peuplement et expansion vers les Grassfields de Bamenda au Cameroun. Le rôle des femmes pendant ces conflits a contribué à développer une formation solide relevant d'une prouesse et d'une tradition militaire précieuse de Bali basées sur l'organisation, la tactique et la transmission. L’aptitude militaire a été transmise d’une génération à l’autre, avec l’adaptation à de nouvelles réalités basées sur les diverses époques historiques. L’analyse des données primaires et secondaires exploitées pour cette étude indique que les femmes, bien que considérées de peu de valeur dans le domaine militaire, constituent une force in contournable dans l’histoire militaire de Bali Chamba. Cette étude examinera les causes du conflit, les femmes comme fournisseuses de nourriture, d'appui moral, les portiers du butin et les fournisseuses de soin.

**Mots-clés :** femmes, conflit interethnique, Chamba Bali, Grassfelds de Bamenda.
Introduction
Among the Bali Chamba people and in other communities in Africa, the occurrence of war has been an aged old culture. The Bali Chamba people saw war as an art, and thus their political structure was geared towards their military preparedness. War was the only means through with a *Fondom* can attain fame and glory. The Bali Chamba Leko constituted part of the Chamba ethnic group which left their homeland at Koncha Tignere in the northern part of Cameroon and embarked on a south ward migration. Their movement was precipitated by Bata raids, Fulani attacks and climatic hazards. The Chamba Leko became a veritable band of wanderers who raided and defeated many villages as their forced their way into the Bamenda Grassfields. The Bali *Fondoms* are found in different geographical locations of the region but the share a common historical origin, similar migration tendencies, cultural practices and the tradition of warfare although they are independent *Fondoms*. The implantation of the various Bali groups in the area caused instability among the aboriginal communities. After the establishment of the Bali *Fondoms*, they organized a strong and centralized authority. Their societies were highly stratified in which they existed the nobles and the commoners. The king was at the apex of the political hierarchy who had prerogatives over his subjects and property. Although the Bali Chamba *Fondoms* were patriarchal, women exercised some degree of authority over their subjects. The *Kah Fo-Ngwì* (crowned princess) and the Queen mother played advisory roles to the *Fon*.

Nonetheless, the main characteristic of the Bali people was subsistence agriculture in which they made use of traditional methods such as rotatory crop cultivation, mix farming and shifting cultivation. They made used of rudimentary tools such as hoes, cutlasses and axe. Bush fire was used as a means to clear their farms. Women cultivated a variety of crops to feed their families. The crops produced were maize, beans, tubers and plantains. They equally harvested wild spices
from the bushes which was necessary for food preparation. Besides the agricultural aspects, the Bali Chamba women were actors in the domain of conflict and conflict management within the study local. In this paper, we are thus going to examine the different roles played by the Bali Chamba women in different domains. After a view on the causes of the conflicts, we shall attempt to discuss the weapons used by women during the wars, the role of women as food providers, porters, care providers, peace builders and their assistance to the displaced people in the study area.

**General Causes of Bali Chamba Wars**

The causes of the Bali Chamba wars were many but differ from one period to another. These differences started far back from their migration and settlement in the present locality (Bamenda Grassfields).

The genesis or root cause of the Chamba Leko migration from their homeland was\(^1\) attributed to the Bata invasion in the present day Adamawa Region of Cameroon. The Chamba Leko suffered frequent attacks from their neighbours, especially from the Bata tribes. The Bata tribes invaded Koncha-Tignere (Chamba homeland) because this group of people was blessed with very fertile soils which provided them with abundant harvests. The prosperity of the Bali Chamba Leko provoked the jealousy of their neighbours who invaded them from time to time. The Chamba Leko being small independent chiefdoms could not withstand the people of Bata and so migrated further to Diddo in Adamawa\(^2\). Few years later, they embarked on a southward migration precipitated by the Fulani attacks commonly known as the

\[^1\] Chamba Leko was a group of Chamba people who left their home site under the leadership of their leader Gawolbe to the south and eventually, into the Bamenda Grassfields.

Jihad wars which forced them to leave Diddo. The energetic and fearsome Fulani, under the banner of the jihad, swept through and ravaged many villages converting the indigenes into Islam while looting valuables and raided for slaves. Ngwochu explains that “Under the banner of the holy war (Jihad) these Fulanis moved, with fearsome drive and energy, swept everything in front of them, converting the Adamawa into series of Moslem states”. Thus, both the Chamba Leko and the Bata villages were victims of Fulani attacks and raids more especially during the 1880s.

Also, the Chamba Leko was plaque by harsh climatic condition worsened by prolonged drought due to the effects of the Sahara Desert. This led to poor harvest and famine precipitated by overpopulation and over grazing. Owing to these, the Chamba Leko saw migration as the only remedy to their calamities. Thus, they decided to embark on a south ward migration in search for food and a peaceful settlement.

From Diddo, the Chamba Leko became a wandering group which invaded and raided villages as they migrated. Their migration was equally characterized by instability and looting of valuables. Thus, the only means to satisfy their desire by attacking other settled groups. Through such attacks, war booty was obtained which served as food and other provisions. Russel postulated that “the need for food necessitated Bali wars. He argued that Gahgwanyin I of Balikumbat attacked the villages of Ndop plain (Bamunka, Babungo, Bambui and

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Bambalang) for food and slaves”\textsuperscript{7}. The Chamba Leko, under the leadership of Gawolbe, launched a war on the people of Bafu-Fundong near Dschang in the present day West Region because the area had abundant food especially maize and tubers which could feed the group. This attack on Bafu-Fundong was very devastating to the Chamba people as their leader Gawolbe was captured and beheaded and they suffered a serious defeat at the battle of Kolm around 1830\textsuperscript{8}. The year 1830 is remarkable in Chamba Leko history because it was within this period that they lost their military leader and chief priest. These lost greatly affected this group who failed to produce a successor. It led to the disintegration of the group and the creation of seven Bali villages under different princes and a princess which became independent from each other. The Fondoms were: Balinyonga, Balikumbat, Bali-Gham, Bali-Konntan, Bali Gangsin, Bali Muti and Bali Gashu\textsuperscript{9}.

From the above split, the Chamba needed captives which were transformed into slaves to increase their population and to boast up the number of looters and porters. Slave raids were a cause of war and it was a common practice in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries in this locality. Slave business was very lucrative to the parties concern. The Chamba people were in serious need of captives to increase their population since many of the original Chamba warriors lost their life in expiation wars. In the course of migration and settlement, some were faced with tropical diseases such malaria, sleeping sickness just to name but these that caused human ravaged on their side. This explains why the Chamba had to incorporate weaker groups of people they meet on their way. Some became integrated into the various Bali Chamba Fondoms

\textsuperscript{7} D.W.Russel, “Aspects of the Development in Rural Cameroon: Political transition among the Bali of Bamenda”, PhD. In Anthropology, Boston University, 1980, p.56.
\textsuperscript{8} Chilver and Kaberry, Traditional Bamenda, p.17
with the exception of Balikumbat which was more a conservative group and discriminated against the captives despite their tremendous contribution to the establishment of the Fondom. In the other Bali villages, industrious captives were given titles and represented in the traditional administration of their communities.

The victories recorded by the Bali Chamba people in the course of migration were principally based on the use of horses in their attacks. The Chamba left their home land with horses which facilitated the actions of the warriors. Horses provided the warriors with a swift means of movement and the transportation of booty. Horses constituted an important aspect of their warfare tactics. Horses were a strange animal in this part of the country which caused fright in the area and the people. As time evolved, some of these horses strayed into farm lands and destroyed the crops of the old settlers’ and which often led to out right arm confrontations\(^{10}\).

Due to constant raids, the Bali Chamba left their home land in search for a peaceful settlement site. In the course of this pursuit, they lost their leader and coincidentally, the disintegrated band went through different directions but headed to the western Grassfields. In the course of migration and settlement, the Bali Chamba fought many wars and subdued many villages. These wars were aggravated because, the Grassfields region was already inhabited by many non Chamba groups who became potential source of political conflicts in the area. These groups out of many included: Tikars, Mbembe, Widikums and Aghems. The Chamba being the last organized group to arrive the area, made wars inevitable as a means of obtaining land for settlement\(^{11}\). In this regard, the Bali Nyonga group fought ferocious battles against the Bafreng, (Nkwen), Mankon, Bafut, Bamendankwe and Widikum people before establishing their

\(^{10}\) Ibid.

\(^{11}\) E.M.Chilver and P.M.Kaberry” *Traditional Bamenda*, 1967, p.12.
permanent site at Kufam\textsuperscript{12}. In the same light, Balikumbat equally attacked and waged wars against Bambui, Bambili and later on displaced Bamumkumbit and settled in their present site up the plateau. The Bali people equally needed strategic sites for their defense and security and so most of their palaces were constructed up the hills. For example, Balikumbat evicted the Bamumkumbit people from the plateau which earned them the name Nepkolobi (meaning people of the hill). In the same vein, after many attacks from neighbours and Balikumbat, Balinyonga strategically transferred its capital from Kufam to the mountainous area called Ntanka. From these mountainous areas, the search for fertile lands was eminent and could only be acquired through territorial wars. With their military might, the Bali people were able to acquire vast fertile lands and were able to carve out large territory for themselves. The issue of fertile land was very important as the traditional societies and economy largely depended on it for their survival.

From the aforementioned points, another cause of wars between the Bali people and other groups was the expansionist policy adopted by Balikumbat and Bali Nyonga after their settlement. After the 1840s, the Bali villages had forcefully established themselves in the Grassfields and sorted to acquire more space. They desired to expand their territory, exert tribute, homage, labour, taxes and prestige. In this case, Balikumbat carried out many sporadic attacks on Babanki because she refused to pay homage and tribute to Balikumbat. The expansionistic phenomenon of Balikumbat made them to dominate over the villages of the Ndop plain. This gave them the impetus to carry out several attempts to dominate the entire Bamenda Grassfields but was repelled by a joint Balinyonga, Nkwen and Mankon resistance in 1875 which had great devastating effects on Balikumbat. Thus,

Balikumbat became a dominant state in the Ndop plain and the main rival to Balinyonga\textsuperscript{13}.

In the same light, \textit{Fon} Galega I who took over from Fonyonga expanded his territory to a larger extend. He became known in Balinyonga history as the father of conquest and expansion. \textit{Fon} Galega I attacked conquered and forcefully incorporated the Widikum, Meta, and Nghemba villages into Balinyonga. This sowed the seed of constant squabbles between them resulting to more wars. The Balinyonga hegemony got to its apex in the early years of German rule in the Bamenda Grassfields, around 1891 with the signing of the Germano-Bali treaty making Balinyonga the paramount ruler of the Bamenda Grassfields\textsuperscript{14}.

The recruitment of taxes and the creation of tax centres under the German rule in 1903, promoted wars between the Bali Chamba villages and their neighbours. The making of Balikumbat and Balinyonga as centres for the collection of taxes and recruitment of labour was resented by their surrounding villages. This was because it empowered these Bali villages more coupled with their ruthlessness nature. This gave the Bali \textit{Fons} the opportunity to settle ancient disputes with their rivals as such transferring much of the tasks to other villages\textsuperscript{15}. It was through this that Galega I used as an excuse to attacked Mankon and Bafut. This explains why the Bali villages influenced the Germans to subdue other communities in the western Grassfields. Besides that, tax was levied on land, head and sale of liquor just to name a few. Chamba rulers gained enormously from the 10\% revenue collected. The \textit{Fons} carried out more raids on their recalcitrant neighbours to make more gain. Balikumbat mounted continuous pressure on her neighbours especially Bafanji which

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{chilver} E.M.Chilver and P.M.Kaberry, \textit{Traditional Bamenda}, p.19.
\bibitem{ibid} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
resulted to a war between Balikumbat and Bafanji in 1906. The act of labour recruitment emptied villages with their grown-up male population which has a negative impact on the economy of the area. The Fons had as responsibility to provide labourers for the German plantations and administrative tasks which usually led to severe conflicts.\(^{16}\)

The principal economic activity of the people was farming and women played a vital role in the sector. Their desire for farm land precipitated most of their conflicting actions. Women’s health was measured by the number of fertile farmlands she had as it produces more crops and income. The high demand for fertile land was triggered by over population and farming methods. The traditional woman gave birth to many children and so, needed a proportionate amount of fertile land in other to produce crops and feed her children. The traditional method of bush fallowing made women to leave plots of land to regain its fertility within a period of three to five years. This forced woman to farm in the periphery of their community and later laid claims of ownership of such plots. This act usually led to ethnic confrontation during farming season. A well-known case of confrontations over farm land was between the Balikumbat and Bafanji war recorded in 1910, 1925 and 1933. On the other hand, Balikumbat and Bambalang farm land confrontation was equally recorded in 1926. In the same spirit, Bali Nyonga and Baforchu went into confrontation about farm land in 1914. She further went and fought another war with Widikum in 1952 and Chomba in 1956.\(^{17}\) With the outbreak of inter-ethnic conflict, the Bali Chamba women participated both passively and actively as analyzed in the subsequent phases.

\(^{16}\) N.A.B, Duncan, Memorandum No. 24/82/21, to the Resident of Buea, 1922, p.28.

\(^{17}\) Ngwochu, *The Bali Chamba*, p.60.
Weapons used by Women during War

The weapons used by women during the wars were rudimentary weapons which equally served as farm tools which had the ability to ruin the economy of their enemy. These weapons were sticks, hoes, matches and cutlasses which were used for destruction. Hoes and cutlasses were used to destroy food crops on the farms of their adversaries. As the Bali warriors repelled or pushed their enemy further, the Bali women followed their men as they destroyed all the crops on their way. Crops such as coco-yams and yams were hoed into pieces. Women used cutlasses to cut down plantains, bananas and fruits trees such as pineapple and paw-paw. This was to ensure that the effect of the war should be long lasting and to increase their misery as their opponent would have virtually nothing to feed on after the war. The intensity of crop destruction equally depended on the number of women who followed the warriors to the war zone. The more the number of women, the greater the damages like in the case of Balikumbat and Bafanji in 1998\textsuperscript{18}.

The sticks and matches carried along by women were also used for destructions. Women used the matches to burn down houses including some property of their enemies. Food crops that were preserved in the barns in their enemy’s camp were burnt to ashes. These food stuffs included groundnuts, maize and beans. Women used sticks to push down the walls of houses which were already burnt by men. It is important to mention that the burning of houses was a common characteristic of the indigenous warfare in the Bamenda area. With the burning strategy, the territory of the vanquished was brought to near extinction. The burning of houses and property has been a very efficient method to inflict untold hardship and suffering on the

\textsuperscript{18}Interview with Kemende Magerate, Age 66, Retired Nurse, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 19-09-2017.
vanquished who may evacuate the zone of war as it rendered them homeless\textsuperscript{19}.

With the establishment of the iron and steel industries within and out of the Bali villages, it led to the production of farm equipment. The Bali women were able to carry large scale production and to diversify their economic activities. For example, trade was expanded. After the sale of their goods, women bought more farm tools for the members of the household. Cutlasses and hoes had a dual function as used in farming as in wars. The purchase of farm tools was an indirect way of buying weapons necessary for wars as the function of these tools was transformed into war weapons\textsuperscript{20}. Hoes and cutlasses were manufactured by the local blacksmiths in and around the Bali Fondoms. Balikumbat women bought hoes and cutlasses from their neighbouring villages especially from Bafanji and Babungo who were the dominant villages in the iron industry in the Ndop plain. Bali Nyonga on her part was equally noted for smiting skills with which they manufactured iron objects from which women bought their hoes and cutlasses.

The expansion of trade coupled principally brought by the Germans with the introduction of the money economy, some Bali women were able to realise money from their trading activities with which they supported their husbands in the purchase of dane guns from external traders. Malah Agnes testified that she contributed immensely for the purchase of her husband’s guns from the extra revenue she obtained from her trading activities. However, women did not go to the war front with guns. Dane guns had a triple function as they were used for

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 85, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2017.
\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Manyi Kobe, Age 56, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 05-02-2017.
hunting, during wars and celebrations. Some of these guns were produced in Bali Nyonga. With the revamping of the trade routes between Bali Nyonga and Mamfe during the German colonial era, Bali Nyonga people were able to purchase gun powder used in dane guns which supplemented spears, cutlasses and bows and arrows. It was a prestige for a woman to be identified as the wife of a man who owned a gun. Thus, wives supported their husbands morally and financially in the purchase of dane guns especially during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Apart from women’s personal and family war equipment, the Bali women contributed physically and laboriously to the purchase of war weapons. This was done through a rotatory quarterly participation on the pieces of plots reserved to be cultivated for the up-keep of the palace. Women worked on these plots in shifts and some of the crops harvested were sold and weapons were bought, such as dane guns and gun powder which were kept in the palace warehouse. Some of the revenue gotten from the sale of crops was equally used in repairing spoiled weapons for their military preparedness. Excess revenue was kept in the palace treasury for any eventuality. It is therefore apt to say the Bali women contributed enormously in financing the purchase of war weapons which were a necessity for any warfare.

**Women as Food Providers during War time**

Women were the main providers of food to warriors during wars. The food crops they cultivated were indispensable for any defensive or offensive military operation. Women were the main cultivators of food crops. Women took upon themselves to prepare huge quantities

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21 Interview with Ladji Stephen, Age 78, Retired Civil Servant, Nyambu Quarter, Balikumbat, 08-02-2017.

22 Interview with Doh Gwani, Age 72, President of Culture in Bali Nyonga, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 02-02-2017.

of food for the warriors of the community\(^\text{24}\). Most of the wars were fought in the dry season which was a period in which women had just completed their harvesting.

Thus, women had enough food stuffs stocked at home which they could prepare for their warriors with ease. The types of food given to the warriors included tubers such as boiled coco-yams, yams, cassava and sweet potatoes which were at times eaten without soup\(^\text{25}\). Tubers were preferable because they were easier to transport, shared and eaten in an environment characterised by tension. Women equally fed the warriors with grains and nuts such as parched or boiled ground nuts and boiled maize. Women also provided the warriors with kola nuts since it was part and parcel of a Bali man. The chewing of kola helped to keep the warriors awake and vigilant\(^\text{26}\).

Also, corn \textit{fufu} being the staple meal of the Bali people was made available to warriors by women. The Bali corn commonly called the red corn was not only noted for its red colour but equally for its rich nutritive content and its durability. The Bali people were equally noted for the cooking of very hard corn \textit{fufu}. The red corn \textit{fufu} gets stronger at a relatively short period of time when compared with the commonly cooked white corn \textit{fufu} in the Bamenda area\(^\text{27}\). Women prepared hard corn \textit{fufu} as it was believed to sustain the warriors for a relatively longer period. Nevertheless, the hard corn \textit{fufu} prepared by women could last for many days and could easily be eaten with a variety of soup including fruits such as bush plump, plump and raffia seeds

\(^{24}\) Interview with Esther Labiah, Age 69, Farmer, Nyambu Quarter, Balikumbat, 04-08-2017.
\(^{25}\) Interview with Bobga Tudia, Age 72, Farmer/ Businesswoman, Bonanjo Quarter, Balikumbat, 19-09-2017.
\(^{26}\) Interview with Bisanga Florence, Age 57, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 02-02-2017.
\(^{27}\) Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 85, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2017.
known as *Njikook*. Bali warriors equally ate corn *fufu* with roasted dried fish or meat which was very appetising\(^{28}\).

The responsibility of the supply of food was shouldered by all the indigenous women in the locality. Women were grouped under their various quarters and the provision of food was done in an organised manner and it followed a particular network. There was a point of convergence, transportation and distribution. Particular women were appointed in their various quarters and given the task to assemble food stuffs at an agreed point and time. Some of these women who played domineering roles in 1995 and 1998 conflicts were Bobga Tudia, Dohwanvom Christina, Esther Adamu, Frida Nyah, Sema Nuyit and Manah Justina of Balikumbat\(^{29}\).

With the collection of the food from the various quarters, some female volunteers and young boys transported the food items to the war areas where they were distributed. Apart from the supply of food made available by women, warriors equally caught animals such as goats, sheep, pigs and fowls in the enemy’s territory which they slaughtered, roasted and distributed among themselves to quench their hunger\(^{30}\). This was only done when the warriors suffered from hunger and the tension at the zone of conflict was less.

**Women as a Source of Moral Encouragement**

The morals of the warriors and the population in general were indispensable for a military expedition and to secure victory\(^{31}\). The moral encouragement was made available by the womenfolk. When the warriors assembled at the village square to match to the war front,

\(^{28}\) Interview with Madalene Nahbum, Age 69, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 04-02-2016.

\(^{29}\) Interview with Bobga Tudia, Age 68, Farmer, Bonanjo Quarter, Balikumbat, 19-09-2013.

\(^{30}\) Interview with Bobga Tudia.

\(^{31}\) Hongwe, “Bafanji Women in Native Warfare”, p.22.
women were not allowed to cross in front of their path as it was believed to bring ill luck. That notwithstanding, women gathered by the side of the road shouting words of encouragement and chanting patriotic songs of victory which boosted the morale of the warriors. Some of the songs were heroic, reminding the warriors of their past glories while others were religious songs which evoked the intervention of the gods and the ancestors to favour them. Women shouted the following statements to the warriors:

You are our heads, hands and legs.
Fight and brings us victory.
Spare them not.
Destroy all their properties and burn their houses.
Who asked them to dare a Bali Chamba man?
Let us teach them a bitter lesson they will never forget.
Our gods and ancestors are in support of us
They will bring you people back to us safely.

With these words of encouragement, the warriors became more determined than ever to obtain a positive and the most desirable result. As the warriors matched to the war front, Chamba women shouted and yelled at the top of their voices because they knew that if the morals of the warriors were low, success was compromised as they embarked in such a daring venture. Groups of young brave and energetic women followed the warriors to the war front but stopped kilometres away from the war front. When they saw clouds of smoke in the air in the

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32 Interview with Bobga Ser Louis, Age 57, Farmer/Warrior, Foumangum Quarter, Balikumbat, 15-05-2012.
33 Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 81, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2014.
enemy’s camp, these group of women yelled at the tops of their voices in jubilation which was an added impetus to the warriors 34.

The shouting and ululating were done in an organised manner. As women cheered up the warriors, this gave them the encouragement not to retreat from the battle field unless they found themselves in a frustrating situation. Each time a dead or wounded warrior was bought from the war front, women cried traumatically 35. In the event of death, the entire village took part in the burial of the warrior whom they referred to as a fallen hero. In fact, the Bali Chamba culture considered the fallen heroes as martyrs because they died for the sake of their mother land and they were given noble burials. The Fon or his delegation was usually present bearing a royal message to the deceased family. In 1914, Fonyonga II sent a delegation to all the families who lost a member during the Bali Nyonga/Baforchu intertribal war. In 1925, Fon Galabe II of Balikumbat visited the homes of those who lost their family members in the Balikumbat/Bafanji war and this culture has been transmitted from one Fon to another.

**Women as Porters during war**

Women transported food and weapons to and from the battle fields. They equally transported ammunitions such as gun powder, spears, bows and arrows 36. Women transported these ammunitions on the head over relatively long distances from the point of departure to the zone of distribution. Although the warriors had their individual weapons, those brought in by women were mostly to replace those which got bad in the course of their usage. The additional weapons were gotten from the palace warehouse and from some titled men who

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34 Interview with Bobga Tudia, Age 68, Farmer, Bonanjo Quarter, Balikumbat, 19-09-2013.
35 Interview with Madalene Nahbum, Age 64, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 04-02-2014.
had many weapons. Women and young boys transported weapons because a bulk of the male folk was in the zone of war involved in the actual fighting. Women equally collected weapons which got bad and took them to the village for repairs. Thus, due to the gender division of labour, it was the duty of women and young boys to transport arms.

In the same light, women transported water and cooked food to the war zone. When food and water was made available, it was men who did the actual sharing. Water and food was important as it replenished them with strength to fight. Water was carried in calabashes while food was transported in baskets or bags. The transportation of water and food was done in a group\(^{37}\). The provision of food and water equally prevented the warriors from food or water poisoning. Food or water poisoning was an aspect of traditional warfare in which retreating victims poisoned their food and water sources as they retreated. This act of poisoning was effective as it killed some warriors who drank or ate them. For this reason, it was the duty of the warriors to resist such tempting items and to control their hunger or thirst at difficult moments. It was the responsibility of the Bali women to provide the required quantity of food necessary for the sustenance of war\(^{38}\).

Looting was the general characteristic of traditional warfare and so the defeated village greatly experienced a loss in their property. In the Balikumbat-Bafanji war of 1933 and in the Bali Nyonga-Widikum wars, Bafanji and Widikum suffered a great loss of property. The most common things that were transported by women were groundnuts, beans, kitchen utensils and animals. Women carried as much quantity of valuable items as they could. This practice of looting by women was an element which attracted the involvement of many women as

\(^{37}\) Interview with Christopher Nubia, Age 57, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 03-0217.

\(^{38}\) Ngwochu,“The Bali Chamba”, p.277.
they had much to benefit. Looting was not only limited to women as both sexes were involved. Some of the looted items eventually became personal property of the individual\textsuperscript{39}. Most women benefited from wars to obtain for themselves items which they had long desired but had limited means to purchase\textsuperscript{40}.

Some of the Bali women who stumbled on valuable property were able to raise money from their sale which enabled them to indulge in business and they later became prosperous. An example was Kah Kotem Mary in Balikumbat whose wealth was attributed to the 1933 Bafanji-Balikumbat war\textsuperscript{41}. Some of the booties were assembled and taken to the palace which was eventually sold. The money obtained was used in the repair of war equipment and the reserve kept in the palace treasury for eventual use\textsuperscript{42}.

**Women as care providers**

The Bali Chamba women acted as health care providers. During war time, the Bali Chamba women were in charge of the sick and those wounded at the war front. Prior to colonialism and during colonialism, there were neither hospitals nor health centres in these villages. So injured war victims were treated traditionally by women\textsuperscript{43}. Light cases were handled by any woman while severe cases were handled locally mostly by female traditional healers who possessed a higher knowledge of traditional medicine. Wounded victims were treated with natural herbs, leaves, bark of trees and roots. Victims who sustained severe injuries were admitted in the homes of female healers

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\textsuperscript{39} Interview with Manyi Kobe, Age 57, Farmer, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 05-02-20117.

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Galabe Mary, Age 78, Farmer, Nyambu Quarter, Balikumbat, 02-08-2016.

\textsuperscript{41} Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 84, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2017.

\textsuperscript{42} Ngwochu, “The Bali Chamba”, p. 281.

\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Billa Jullie, Age 71, Traditional Healer, Mbaknepkat Quarter, Balikumbat, 20-02-2017.
who effectuated their treatment. Some influential healers in the Bali history were Wopong Janapu of Balikumbat and Nah Abosso of Bali Nyonga. The Bali Chamba female healers had the responsibility of neutralizing poisons in the warriors which was caused by poisonous arrows and spears\textsuperscript{44}. They were able to stop excessive wound bleedings, repaired fractured bones, and treated sprains on the various parts of the body. They equally had the potential to liberate warriors who suffered from supernatural attacks from their opponents.

The treatment of wounded war victims was done free of charge because the victims incurred these injuries trying to either defend their territory or for the interest of the entire community. Thus, it was the responsibility of women to treat war victims indiscriminately. The indigenous wars were fought with rudimentary weapons. Although most arrows and spears were poisoned to be deadly, the death rate of warriors in wars was however less due to the use of rudimentary weapons.

Female traditional healers were very instrumental in the Bali Chamba villages and were commonly known as\textit{asnkemshi} in Bali Nyonga and \textit{venepba} in Balikumbat. Superstition was a common phenomenon in the Bali Chamba villages. Superstition was the belief that certain people or creatures had more powers than they actually possessed or were attributed\textsuperscript{45}. Female traditional healers equally played the role of judges and that of counsellors. In addition to the above abilities of the female soothsayers, they were equally involved in the preparation of war medicines and in the fortification of their relations.

Female soothsayers forecasted issues that concerned the entire community. Through their divination they emphasized on issues

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Nah Abosso, Age 80, Traditional Healer, Jam Jam Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 28-01-2017.

\textsuperscript{45} Interview with Galabe Christina Age 68, Princess, Foncha Street Quarter, Bamenda, 24-02-2017.
which needed to be redressed, if it was a problem they would offer a solution to it. For example, before any Bali ruler declared a war, he usually consulted prominent soothsayers, be they male or female to predict if his objectives would be met. This was to know if their gods and the ancestors were in support of such a daring venture. Also, the soothsayers were able to tell the Fon or his representative the necessary rites to be performed. Nkwi affirms that, “[…] no war was ever fought in the western Grassfields without proper justification. The consultation of the gods, diviners and the magicians, the offering of sacrifices and the performance of rituals were all the constitutive parts of any war venture.”

Female soothsayers prepared both individual and collective protective magical charms. Individually, female soothsayers or traditional doctors prepared war charms for their children, brothers or sisters. While in the collective sphere, most of the male members of their family were assembled for fortification. These charms were able to neutralize the bullets, stagnate dane guns and weakened their enemies. It equally neutralized other charms used by their opponents. With these magical charms, the Bali Chamba warriors matched to the enemy’s camp with much confidence. Even when the warriors were shot at, these charms rendered the bullets ineffectual. Soothsayers and traditional healers prepared magical charms to be won on the waists, arms, necks, wrists and ankles. Some of the medicines were concoctions to be drunk or rubbed on their body before the actual fighting. The concoction was a mixture of different kinds of herbs, roots, back of trees and some grains. It was called in *mubako* as

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47 Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter/Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields North West Province of Cameroon*, University of Yaounde, Publication of the Department of Sociology, 1989, p.76.
“bumtee” (War medicine). Some of these concoctions and pastes prepared by native doctors had the ability to transform warriors into dangerous animals or invisible to the opponents but capable of devouring their enemies\textsuperscript{49}.

According to Dohwankisi Louis of Balikumbat, his maternal grandmother Nah Kisi was the brain behind his father’s spectacular performance during the Balikumbat-Bafanji war of 1933. His grandmother gave his father protective charms which made him invisible in the eyes of their enemies. With this protection and with confidence, he penetrated further into the enemy’s territory to facilitate their defeat\textsuperscript{50}. Taiti Denis of Bali Nyonga also told the researcher that his father who is a native doctor inherited his skill from his mother who was in charge of fortifying the men of his family before they went out to join the men folk of their village for a war venture\textsuperscript{51}.

The charms prepared by traditional doctors possessed dual effects on warriors; it protected them and destroyed the adversaries\textsuperscript{52}. War charms had the ability to weaken the enemy. Female traditional healers fortified some brave women who went into the enemy’s territory in the very early or late hours of the night to spread these weakening pastes or concoctions at the major junctions and main entrances, unseen\textsuperscript{53}. The superstitious belief attributed to this act was that any male from the enemy camp who crossed any area on which the charm was spread was reduced to the level of a woman. Such a

\textsuperscript{49} Ngwochu,“The Bali Chamba”,p.136., Interview with Legha Terence, Age 67, Farmer/ Warrior, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 15-05-2012.
\textsuperscript{50} Interview with Louis Dohwankisi, Age 76, Farmer, Wapuh Quarter, Balikumbat, 17-12-2017.
\textsuperscript{51} Interview with Denis Taiti, Age 66, Businessman, Old Town Quarter, Bamenda, 25-10-2016.
\textsuperscript{52} Nkwi, Traditional Diplomacy, p.74.
\textsuperscript{53} Ngwochu,“The Bali Chamba”,p.138.
man would become weak and his heart would be full of fear\textsuperscript{54}. Women were most often preferred for this venture as it avoided suspicion from their enemy. Since inter-marriage was common between neighbouring villages and so the presence of female strangers in a foreign land did not draw attention as the indigenes considered women as being harmless. Coupled with the darkness, these women were hardly seen.

Also, the Bali Chamba women were believed to have the ability to transform into their clan totem which was a frog. Women mostly had this totemic mark which was said to protect and fortify them against their enemies. Most often, this totemic mark was tattooed on their jaws. Oral tradition holds that during times of war, women could transform into frogs and penetrate the enemy’s camp as spies and collect secret and valuable information necessary for such an adventure\textsuperscript{55}. With the availability of this vital information, the Bali warriors could better plan for their military campaign.

**Women and Peace Building (Kawalo Secret Society)**

The launching of a war was difficult to decide and when a war broke out, it was difficult to bring the situation under control especially when the victor derived pleasure in ruining the economic and infrastructures of their enemies. The stoppage of a war depended on the issues at stake and the casualties sustained. It equally depended on the objectives of the war and their attainment. The victor was usually determined to totally subjugate the enemies and to expand the territory. This was because the winning side was overwhelmed with the victory and the excitement it brought. In order for peace to be established, one party

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\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Doh Pelo Napoleon, Age 81, King Maker, Bagam Quarter, Bagam Quarter, Balikumbat, 01-07-2017.

\textsuperscript{55} Interview with Micheal Fonyonga, Age 87, Prince, Nsang Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 06-02-2017.
must sue for peace talks. In this situation, it was the vanquished who normally asked for peace.\footnote{Ngwochu, “The Bali Chamba”, p.269.}

The Bali Chamba women played a predominant role in suing for peace. The building of peace was an activity in which all affected sectors of society had a responsibility to work. Women were given special attention because they represented a vital potential for sustaining peace from the grass-root level. Women were very active in conflict prevention and sustaining peace as the impacts of wars were greatly felt by them. Women were always vulnerable during wartime and even after. They faced new challenges and inherited additional responsibilities in the post-conflict period.

Before the coming of the missionaries and the colonial administration, there existed a female secret society which was an association of aged women (women who had attained menopause). The secret society of aged women was a common group found in the Bamenda Grassfields. In Kom, it was called the Anlu, in Pinyin the Ayha’a, in Mankon as the Takumbeng and the Kahwaloh in the Bali villages. This female secret cult was independent from male associations, but it had great influence over the activities of men as they stood up for their rights. This group was a serious force to reckon with, especially when they wanted to act against societal ills or to oppose their marginalization. They also acted against certain decisions of the Fon or the colonial administration. From creation, the actions of these women were not answerable to anybody or association. However, this secret society stuck to a peaceful approach and that of non-violence. This was because; women were fundamental to the reproduction of human life and thus, sought not to destroy it.\footnote{NW/Sald.2000/1/BK, M.S.H.Awa, “Gender Fundamental and Contemporary Issues, A Religious and Historical Perspective”, 2000, p.19.}
Oral tradition in Balikumbat holds that the *Kahwaloh* women staged a rebellion against Gaahgwanyin II because of his tyranny rule. They staged a peaceful match from the village square to the palace and back to their homes. This created panic in Gaahgwanyin who then redressed his steps. Also, the *Kawaloh* women were able to influence the decision of Galabe II in the 1950s when he wanted to launch a war against the Bamali people. This was achieved through a peaceful talk between the members of the *Kawaloh* secret society, the *Fon* and his cabinet members in which the Fon was made to understand that, the timing was wrong as it was in the month of April which was the beginning of the rain. Thus, peace was necessary to carry out farming which if not, the community will starve.\(^{58}\)

This association was feared and respected by all within and without the community and even the *Fon* who was the highest authority was not an over seer of their activity. The association of the elderly women were a group of old women who took upon themselves to act as one in the face of certain situations and circumstances. It was the strongest female organisation that existed within the Bali Chamba people. It was believed that if these elderly women exposed their nakedness to a person, that person would suffer from a curse which manifested as madness and eventually death.\(^{59}\) However, this was not only attributed to the association of the elderly women but to any elderly woman in or out of the association. Thus, the anger of elderly women was usually avoided. These women were normal women in the society and were normally dressed. They only threatened to or exposed their nakedness

\(^{58}\) Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 84, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2017., interview with Doh Foang, Age 83, Deulu Quarter, Balikumbat, 15-05, 2017.

when their demands were not approved. With such a threat, men simply subdued to mediation or simply absconded.

The respect given to the elderly women became fundamental in the construction of peace\(^{60}\). The *Kahwaloh* secret society often demonstrated their ability to mobilize large number of women, and to translate their grievances. Their activities made remarkable contributions in the Bali Chamba history. This female secret society sensitised women during war times to understand the need for peace. When men were killed in wars, women became widows and were left with the burden of catering for their family\(^{61}\).

When a war broke out, the elderly women went to the war front and interpose themselves between the fighters. This action was made possible because women and children were not killed during wars and thus it was an abomination for a warrior to kill them. If their action was not respected, they would threaten to expose their nakedness\(^{62}\). It was believed among the villages of the Bamenda Grassfields that if the old women stripped themselves naked, there was a very serious consequence on the offenders. It was thus a curse for anyone who was not a member of this secret society to see the nakedness of these women\(^{63}\). The authority of the secret society of elderly women was not only a Bali Chamba affair; it was also common in the Tikar warfare.

Knowing the consequence of their action, the warriors would then retreat from the war front. Thus if the warriors did not retreat the


\(^{61}\) Interview with Bobga Tudia, Age 72, Farmer, Bnanjo Quarter, Balikumbat, 19-09-2017.


\(^{63}\) Lawyer, “Female Missionary Activities”, p.67.
consequence of their action was grievous. This strategy was usually used effectively to stop unacceptable behaviour of men. In post war situations, whether in groups or individually, women probably contributed more for reviving local economies. Without peace, their economic activities would come to a standstill and the entire communities would eventually experience hardship.

During a war period, a peace delegation was sent. After these women had carried out a critical evaluation of the situation, they harmoniously agreed on their actions and objective. The kawaloh secret society carefully chose few of its members whom they could send as peace envoys. Those selected were believed to possess a wide spectrum of qualities and competencies, sense of responsibility, patience and other abilities necessary for such an undertaking. It was women who studied the situation, assessed the prospects for peace and facilitated contact and communication between the two warring parties. They were well versed in customary law, and were required to know exactly what the problem was and what was at stake. They usually capitalized on their neutrality and the privileges bestowed on them by culture and age.

Malah Agnes explained that the old women mobilized themselves and encouraged the warriors from both sides on the need for peace. This was made possible due to the fact that Women were the only ones who could move across the zones of conflict without much danger. This was because the killing of children and women was forbidden in the culture of the Bamenda area. So this group of women could easily make their way into the zone of conflict. Warriors who accidentally or deliberately shot at women were ritually purified as it was termed an

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64 Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 86, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2016.
ill omen. The presence of a group of old women who appeared on the scene was somehow a mystery. These women bore the peace plant in their hands commonly known as *Nkeng nkeng* as an emblem of peace. According to her, the *Kahwaloh* secret society had never gone to the war zone to stop a war. This was due to the fact that most often, the Bali warriors were victorious and so it was the duty of the vanquished camp to sue for peace\(^{67}\).

Thus, the attention of the warriors was directed towards these women as they were anxious to know and hear what their mission was. These women then made their intension known and equally threatened the warriors if they failed to succumb to their objective. With this plea, the warriors of both camps put down their arms as requested by the women who called themselves “their mothers”\(^ {68}\). These women were able to calm down tension as they proved their neutrality. If the warriors refused to heed to their demands, the old women would throw themselves toward their direction while exposing their nakedness thereby laying a curse on the persisting fighters. However, this was a very risky and dreadful venture undertaken. These women employed a lot of courage as they could be misinterpreted and shot down by the opponents\(^ {69}\).

Ngwochu explains that:

> In the suing for peace, women played a preponderant role [...], in Bali-Gashu, the massive appearance of women at war front with the peace plant, usually called Nkeng symbolized the search for peaceful solutions. Thus, when the advancing warriors saw a group of unarmed women, tension lessened

\(^{67}\) Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 86, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2016.

\(^{68}\) Lawyer, “Female Missionary Activities”, p.67.

and attempts were made to inquire their mission. Such attempts to investigate their mission were done with caution to avoid being tricked. When they were bearers of peaceful messages, hostility temporarily stopped. The messages they brought included words from their authorities to accept the initial ultimatum, wish to accept subordination and promise to pay tributes.70

Thus, their presence at the war front with these plants indicated their desire for peace and reconciliation. These aged women could act with or without the knowledge of the Fon who gave them his blessings and if he refused, they could proceed with their action or stop based on their conviction. When the warriors saw the unarmed old women advancing into the war zone, tension lessened and their intention was made known. This was made possible due to the fact that the killing of women and children was unacceptable in wars. However, it was not an easy task for these women as most often their actions were considered as a trick employed by opposing camps. These women bore peaceful messages and at times chanted songs of peace and uttered many peaceful slogans.71

These women equally bore messages from their authorities who promised to pay tributes and accept subordination.72 Through the pace set by these women; it paved the way for both authorities to come to table for peace talk. Through their intervention, the cause or causes of the war were figured out; the aggressors acknowledged their mistakes, and submitted themselves to a peace talk.73 These women acted as a

71 Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 86, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2016, interview with Fonyonga Gaso, Age 98, Elite, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 08-02-2017.
centre from which peace was restored. That notwithstanding, the advent of Christianity has led to a decline in the impact created by the female secret society as their activities have experienced a great decline. The teachings of Christianity which were against secret societies and the manjong groups led to the withdrawal of some of its members who considered this group as paganism, outdated and archaic. This was because female converts were advised to join Christian groups which would promote their spiritual development.

**Women’s Assistance to the Displaced**

The Bali Chamba villages had also felt a significant effect of war. Families which lived closer to the borders were usually victims of war and most of them became homeless. This was because the warriors were determined to destroy anything or everything in order to make life unbearable for their enemies. Families simply fled from their homes because of fear of being attacked and captured by their enemies. In Balikumbat, the Pasiah family migrated from the Balikumbat-Bafanji borders because of the outbreak of war in 1933. In Bali Nyonga, the Fontachi family fled from their home because it was burnt down by the warriors from Chomba in 1956. In 1945, the Dingha’s family also left their home at the border because of the outbreak of the Bali Gasho and Bafanji wars. The family of Doh Buma migrated from Foumangum which was at the border of Balikumbat and Bambalang in 1926 and established a new compound in the interior of the Balikumbat village. In such a circumstance, the Bali women took upon themselves to cater for the displaced families. Women made adequate supplies of food to such families as they relied on their society for their survival. It was therefore the responsibility of all women in the community to make provisions for the displaced

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74 Interview with Legha Terence, Age 57, Farmer/Warrior, Tikali Quarter, Bali Nyonga, 15-05-2017.
75 Interview with Malah Agnes, Age 86, Farmer, Barrack Quarter, Balikumbat, 13-12-2016.
as anyone could be in their situation. Family members, friends and quarter members provided shelter to the displaced as well as people of good will.

The Bali women were noted for their act of charity and solidarity, thus what affected a woman and her family during war affected the entire womenfolk. This was because a woman understands better the pain of her fellow woman. Women did not only provide the displaced with food provisions, they gave them clothes to wear, equipment such as pots and other kitchen utensils to start with. With the monetary economy, women supported the displaced with money to acquire some of their needs.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the role played by the Bali Chamba women of the Bamenda Grassfields in inter-ethnic wars. In this paper, we have traced the main causes of wars among the Bali Chamba from their original homeland, during their migration and permanent settlement in the area under study. Women’s roles as food providers, care takers, porters, and peace builders were all examined. From the above analyses, it would be apt to say, the Bali Chamba women just as women in other parts of Cameroon and Africa in general have contributed tremendously to the numerous victories achieved during inter-ethnic conflicts. Although wars have greatly decline in the colonial and post-colonial eras, the Bali villages had continued to fight wars with their neighbours for territorial protection and expansion. Thus, with the sporadic outbreak of wars, women continued to channel their support to their male counterparts as they considered it an obligation for all the members of their *Fondom*. Base on the societal division of roles, women were obliged to meet up with their expectations. The study concludes that women’s role in inter-ethnic wars has transcended modernity and Christianity as their role remains a vital force in the Bali Chamba military organization.
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