

## **SCNC Rebellion in Oku, Bui Division, North West Region of Cameroon**

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the terrific incident that occurred in Oku subdivision in 1997 dubbed in political circles as a 'coup d'état'. This was the attack, the overthrow of the administration, the law enforcement officers and the designation of a new administration that governed Oku for twelve hours unruffled by a separatist movement designated as Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). The study evaluates the *raison d'être* of the SCNC rebellion, the conception, realisation of the coup, the response of the administration, the consequences of the rebellion and further proposes the way out. The author disputes that the episode crippled the social, economic and political life of Oku, created internally displaced persons (IDPs), and that an evaluation be conducted and the innocently victimised masses rehabilitated.

**Keywords:** SCNC, Rebellion, Consequences, IDPs, Rehabilitation

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### **Introduction**

In Cameroon historiography, the term 'Southern Cameroons' refers to part of the country that was administered by the British under the mandate system that was officially confirmed on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1922[1]. This section of the country was governed as part of the Southern and later that of the Eastern Regions of Nigeria by the British under the supervision of the League of Nations[2]. Contrary to this meaning, the SCNC in the work is an illegal political movement[3] aimed at fighting for the independence of the former Southern Cameroons[4]. SCNC fanatics' claimed Southern Cameroons got its independence on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1961, the date the two Cameroons formed a federation and the trusteeship over British Southern Cameroons officially ended[5]. According to Ebenezer Akwanga, the marriage met its demise on "February 4<sup>th</sup> 1984 when President Biya changed the nomenclature of the state from The United Republic of Cameroon to *La République du Cameroun* which to him referred to the former Francophone state prior to unification" [6]. Faced with the violation of the federation, the SCNC was then created in 1993 to fight for the independence of Southern Cameroons[7]. Since then it has had the following factions: "Southern Cameroons People Organisation (SCAPO), Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL), led by Ambazonia, Chief Ayamba and Nwahan Thomas respectively"[8]. It had representations in Norway, Canada and in America. SCNC activities have been exercised severally in parts of the North West (NW) and South West Regions of Cameroon against the rule of law. This was the case of

outright rebellion it staged in the NWR. This took place in Kumbo center, Jakiri, Mezam, Mbembi and most particularly Oku subdivision[9]. Our focus is therefore Oku where the SCNC attacked and overran the administration and the law enforcement officers on Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup> 1997[10]. Our main aim in the work is to evaluate the *raison d'être* of the SCNC rebellion in Oku. To meet our objectives, we shall make use of the following questions: Who were the members and how was the rebel movement organised? What prompted the rebellion? What were the objectives of the rebels? How was their mission realised? What were the likely consequences of the rebel hijack? These aspects shall be carefully fathomed subsequently.

### **Conception of the insurgency**

The rebel hijack in Oku was a scheme allegedly designed and nurtured by some unscrupulous members of the Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM). According to this source, the main reason behind this strategy was to completely eradicate the Social Democratic Front (SDF). Charles alleged that in 1997, the SDF was in control of nearly all councils and parliamentary seats in the NWR. Out of envy, CPDM officials planned the coup in order to accuse the SDF and frustrate its electorate in the 1997 twin elections. Accordingly, a delegation of the CPDM leaders met in Banjoun where the plan was conceived. This evil plan was further polished by some high standing CPDM militants of the NWR who then hired mercenaries for action[11]. In a related case, Joseph Mbah Ndam puts it that:

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[...] one begins to wonder the real origin of this calamity. I have been bound to go back and examine the rumour, which was very persistent at the time of this event to the effect that the whole thing was organised by agents of the CPDM regime. In fact rumour holds that certain high-standing members of the CPDM had held a meeting in January 1997 with the head of state complaining to him that their party was not ready for the parliamentary elections initially scheduled for March 1997. They were seeking postponement by the head of state but the latter told them that he could not do so because the constitution of January 1996 permitted postponement only in the case of grave peril threatening the life of the nation and that the country was at peace. So in order to get the head of state to postpone the elections a plan was contrived and executed in the North- West Province to cause grave peril [12].

In the same line with the above, Thomas Eyoum'a Ntoh holds that: "[...] tout au moins à discréditer une opposition dont tous les observateurs disent qu'elle devrait gagner sans coup férir les législatives de mai prochain" [13]. Reacting to this, John Fru Ndi alleged: "[...] It would not be surprising if the government master minds such an incident to use it as an excuse to postpone elections" [14]. Similarly, Maigari Bello Bouba of the UNDP reacting to the same event said: " Enfin, je souhaite que ces incidents ne soient un prétexte pour le gouvernement de différer les élections" [15]. To Augustin Frederick Kodock of the UPC: " C'est pour jeter le pays dans le chaos et ainsi compromettre l'organisation des élections" [16]. In like manner, Christian Obama of the UDC stated that: "[...] if faudrait c'est demander quelle est la véritable raison qui a amené ce état de choses [...] [17]. All the above sources point to the CPDM as the author of the rebellion but so far remain allegations as they have no thorough evidence. It would appear the government was ready for this event because just a week before the attack, security was fortified in Bamenda. This was by increasing the policemen and the installation of Bituku Clement the new provincial police boss by Luc Leo the delegate general of national security on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1997 [18]. Added to this, he promised to send more policemen thus seemingly justifying the claim that the rebellion was premeditated.

To the planners, the strategy put in place was to identify courageous men who could attack and overrun the administration in the name of SCNC. Thomas again confirmed that: "[...] les cibles seraient des bâtiments abritant les forces de l'ordre et l'administration préfectorale" [19]. To succeed in this mission, some of the gendarmes were to be brought into the circle. This is justified by the fact that the gendarmerie station in Oku

was captured by armless rebels even without a single gunshot from *Marechal de Logis Chef* Ellah Samuel who was on duty. Importantly, office documents of the gendarmerie station and some of the arms had been transferred to his residence in prelude to the event declared Ngongang and Longtsi his colleagues. Ellah Samuel confirmed the brigade commander Kengoua Jean-Marie had earlier informed him that something was going to happen that morning [20]. The insurgents were pledged a handsome reward in millions, and a token in cash was handed as proof of more to come. Besides, the rebels were also promised jobs in the civil service after effective realisation of their contract. As for the money, little was disbursed in advance and the rest was to be paid after the event [21].

The labelled leader of the rebels was Kwei Simon Ngek from Kouten (Manchok-Oku). He recruited a handsome number of people who accepted to lend their support to Lucifer. Those selected held meetings in his residence at late hours in the night. Such meetings went on for months before the event on Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup> 1997 [22]. Membership into the cult went through a solemn initiation and incantations of loyalty in exchange for their lives should a member betray the brotherhood. For this reason, the services of a witch doctor called Nkemika Denis from Nkve-Oku were employed. The herbalist served the members with jujus which could prevent them from bullets, arrest, poison and any other harmful attempt [23].

It has to be recalled here that in every situation where the wind of change is about to blow, some wise people are heralded. When John Fru Ndi visited Oku in a question and answer session at Elak Community Hall, Kwei Simon Ngek questioned him on the credibility of the party in which he failed to answer. He however surprised the public by requesting that Simon be expelled from the party if not his presence was likely to endanger the SDF someday. Though, he was later expelled from the party but; it was not immediate and for different reasons [24]. Unlike Fru Ndi, the traditional authority (Kwifon) of Oku just a week before the incident announced of an evil plan in the hands of individuals in Manchok village. It was specified that the sinister act was going to plunge the entire community into serious havoc and those involved were cautioned to drop their scheme.

Simon and his disciples failed to respect the prediction of *kwifon*, stormed and seized the control of Oku in a bloodless coup on Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup> 1997. The members of the rebellion were made up of Kwei Simon Ngek, Margaret Ngek Nyiense, Konseh Emmanuel, Njobara Hyacinth and Nkemikah Denis (witch doctor), Nyamsai Promise, Ndifon Joseph Ndah, Mngo'o Job Bulewah, Tankoh Mohammed Mbowel, Tankoh Salefou, Nyamsai Promise, Ngek Adelbert, Ntanen Daniel, Fonkwa Thomas, Gwei Simon, Bafon

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Samuel, Tafon Mary Yeafon and Tata Roland Mndze (deserted soldier)[25]. Mention has to be made that Kwei Simon Ngek took to the battle field his wife Margaret Ngek Nyiense and son Ngek Adelbert. The least of the rebels was Ngek Franklin Mnkong. This teen of about 15 was initially not part of the deal but was attracted to join the rebels as they paraded the streets firing guns as signs of victory[26].

### Realisation of the Coup

It all began about 5:00 am on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1997 when the rebels stormed the gendarmerie brigade at Elak-Oku. According to Charles, few assailants walked up to the gendarme on duty (*Chef Ellah Samuel*) and tricked him that a certain strange vehicle had entered Elak-Oku at night to transport luggage to Kumbo. Knowing well that he could not resist, they were sure to succeed. With this, Ellah simply followed the rebels to waylay the vehicle by the road side. It was then that people appeared from various angles and then captured him without any latent reaction. At this point, the insurgents freely stormed the brigade, destroyed the communication network and looted valuable item including arms and ammunitions that were distributed among them. They further moved to the cell, burgled it and freed all detainees. After securing the lives of the detainees, the whole structure was set ablaze[27]. Berinyuy and Peterkins stated that: "In Oku, the raids are said to have overrun the gendarme post and seized arms and ammunitions which were ferried away in a new Toyota Land cruiser jeep seized from the Oku D.O."[28]. The burning of the brigade shocked the entire Oku sub-division and considering that Oku is a rural community where communal life was highly practiced, thousands of people flocked the brigade in shambles that morning just to discover it in ashes. Of course the perpetrators of the scene were easily identified since bravo or long live Southern Cameroons was fresh in their lips.

The episode reawakened the request of Ni John to expel Simon from the SDF during his campaign tour to Oku in 1992. Also, the local people immediately confirmed the prophecy of *kwifon* in prelude to the event. The people left the environs filled with panic and imagination of the consequences of the incident as earlier predicted by *kwifon*. However, the worries of the population did not in any way deter with the activities of the insurgents as they continued with their business unperturbed. They arrested the D.O. (Kamdem Rene), some gendarmes like Ngongang who were then imprisoned in Simon's residence (the new seat) of the rebel government. The other gendarmes escaped into bushes and could only return with the quick intervention of the army in the evening. For those detained especially the D.O., he was naked, molested and chained. Some of the rebels for security reasons were stationed at the D.O's office, Simon's residence and others went firing guns as they paraded the streets

of Oku under the command of Tata Roland Mndze. Konseh Emmanuel was named the new rebels D.O. for Oku subdivision. As the D.O., all the valuables in the detained D.O's office fell under his portfolio. In his capacity as the new D.O., he was driven and guarded by the new force in the D.O's service car from his office and round the entire jurisdiction

Immediately, it was concluded that it was an SDF sponsored rebellion. This is confirmed by the fact that all the hoodlums were former and current SDF militants. Secondly, after the capture of the administration in Oku, the new D.O. was driven to Jikejem-Oku the home of Hon. Daniel Faay Mbuh Yang. He was then SDF District Chairperson for Oku and potential parliamentary candidate for Oku-Noni constituency. Though he purportedly rejected acquaintance and knowledge of the rebels but was not seen transparent. To Hon. Daniel, he cautioned the monsters to drop their arms but they could not give in to his advice. Unwilling to welcome any advice, they continued with their patrol. The coup only lasted from 5:00 am to 5:00pm. This was so because information about the events in Oku reached the governor at the regional capital in Bamenda and a military battalion of 50 was immediately deployed to arrest the situation. Charles asserts:

[...] in the Kondengui prison, an open fight broke out between Simon and his subordinates over the partitioning of the money collected from [their sponsor]. It was then that Simon revealed that only part of the money was collected and the rest was to be handed after the rebel take-over as agreed in the deal. He however regretted that during his arrest and torture, the gendarmes robbed him of all the money. He ended that Simon had always intimated that [their sponsor] owes him a heavy sum to pay since he did not fulfil his own part of the deal[29].

It was about 5:00pm when a heavily loaded truck with armed forces reached Oku via Simon Bush village and began moving towards the capital Elak-Oku on foot. It was until the army got close to the rebel's base before they realised that they had been double-crossed in the deal. Sensing danger, the chicken-hearted rebels could not affront the army as some panicked and dropped their arms, some ran away with theirs. It was at this state of pandemonium that D.O. Kamdem Rene and some gendarmes were liberated thanks to the intervention of the army. The horrifying condition in which the army found the D.O. and their colleagues undoubtedly provoked rage. Consequently, Oku was transformed to a war torn-zone. The retransfer of power from the rebels to the army was the greatest purgatory ever witnessed in Oku that could only be likened to the reign of terror during the French revolution of 1789.

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### The Immediate effects

Everyone including children and the ageing were on the run as they saw many with bleeding wounds inflicted by the army. Apart from torturing the aborigines, they break into most homes looting valuable items found. The D.O. and some freed gendarmes led them to Elak health centre where they were lodged. It was from this base that they stormed the Catholic Church looking for some of the rebels especially as they were tipped that Margaret Ngek Nyiense had refuge[30]. In fact, most people were tortured and all the men found were arrested and taken to a new detention camp within the premises of Elak-health Centre. Worst still, every identified militant of the SDF was seriously beaten before being detained. This was the case of Charles who said: "He searched my pockets, removed eighty thousand francs I collected from the meeting of Saint Joseph in our mission, seized my watch, belt, house keys and my shoes"[31]. Charles holds that he was arrested on grounds of his identification with the SDF but that those of the CPDM mistakenly arrested with him were released the next day as Hon. Nforme John Tata (CPDM section president for Bui) visited the cell and identified them as his militants. These included: Fonkwa Christopher, Ngalla Patrice, Mrs. Nkemba, Maghaw Felei, Feghang Ngek, Konseh Ngum Emmanuel, Nforme Jacob, Kemshiy Primus, Ngalla Bailack and the Son of Gwei Ngum [32]. Charles further asserts:

[...] These people were freed by Nforme John Tata the then CPDM section president for Bui now of late and the Brigade Commander. After they were freed the commander said anyone who has money could buy his way out and excluded some especially me for he said I had written about his illegal arrest, torture and detention and money collection from the aborigines and sent to the HRDG as an activist and secretary of HRDG for the sub Division[33].

The capital issue was how to track down the criminals and recover the armaments they seized from the gendarmes. In the Oku *Fon's* palace the army was informed that it was particularly an SDF coup[34]. This immediately freed those who identified themselves with the CPDM. In the due process, the army was busy destroying houses, breaking into stores, looting money and other valuables, raping young girls and women and even ventured into sacred sites. Actually, people were heard screaming during the day like at night either being beaten or women raped by the soldiers. The strange environment scared many who took refuge in mount Oku and others escaped to neighbouring *fondoms* like Babungo, Akey and Kom.

Kilum mountain forest became a new habitat for men and many were not ready to return home. This was again worsened when an helicopter landed at Elak

and the trauma was heightened as the fake news spread that another military battalion had been supplemented by air. At this juncture, most people were determined to stay in the forest for as long as nature could permit. On the contrary, it was Governor Francis Fai Yengo who fled in from Bamenda to access the incident on the ground. He proceeded and held another meeting with the *Fon* which significantly called for the population to return to their homes. The *Fon's* messengers were dispatched to call home all the people on the run. The population under the *Fon's* authority cooperated and those who were still within the frontiers of Oku were caught and handed to the army. Unfortunately, some had already fled out of Oku like their leader (Simon) who was later on caught in Babungo. Still, some ran out of Oku and only return after a decade like Tankoh Mohammed Mbuwel[35]. It was upon the return of the population from their hide out that they then discovered the magnitude of havoc caused by the army.

The return of the population from the woods was a systematic twist in the political history of Oku. We earlier noted that all the rebels were both former and current militants of the SDF. This remark created room for an open war between militants of the two parties that was manifested in every respect of public life. One questions the reason for this kind of unexpected attitude since the actors came out in broad day light and were easily identified. It was then purported that after the *Fon's* meeting with the governor, CPDM leaders met at *Etoudi* (Hon. Nforme John Tata's resident) where they contrived and came out with a strategy on how to eliminate the SDF and its leaders. Accordingly, they agreed to extinct all SDF leaders under the coverage of the army and secondly that all CPDM leaders in their various villages were to forward lists of all acting SDF militants for eventual arrest[36]. The innocent SDFs were to be consequently forwarded to the army as some of the rebels caught on the run. This way, they could be arrested and taken to jail and the CPDM will be better placed to win the double elections in 1997.

Among the SDFs to be eliminated were Hon. Daniel, Faay Mbeibeh, Faay Ndisiangong and Nga-amgom. This is purportedly why the army followed Hon Daniel to Kom but fortunately for him, he was not caught. Faay Ndisiangong testified that *Fon* Ngum III placed a ransom on Hon. Daniel. He further added that he himself was short listed and that he spent a month indoors without which he could have been eliminated[37]. It is however interesting to note that the troops that followed the people short listed were disguised CPDM militants in army uniform. This is confirmed by the confession made by Pa Alias Chacka and Pa Tantoh Kemei that they infiltrated the army, burnt people's houses and hunted their opponents. The plan to implicate innocent persons was not welcome by everyone in the CPDM most especially because of their

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friendly and family ties. This is so because the plan leaked and some of the targeted persons ran away. Such a scheme by CPDM militants in Oku was unorthodox since the rebels were well-known and could easily be fished out. This gave birth to another era which can best be described as the period of absolute panic in Oku.

### **The Reign of Terror**

This period was championed by the combination of the army and CPDM militants. Following the meeting at *Etouidi*, [38] the secret leaked and everybody who had initially militated in the SDF was heartless. This was heightened by the news of eliminating all SDF leaders and the imprisonment of the ordinary ones. It was also worsened by the rumour that *Fon* Ngum III (Samuel Nsackse) had placed a ransom on Hon. Daniel [39]. Hon. Daniel was very smart to have escaped. Having failed to eliminate SDF leaders, they were bent on ensuring that a good number of SDF youth were sent to prison under the pretext that they were some of the rebels and this, they succeeded to a greater extent.

The decision at *Etouidi* [40] was unanimously accepted only on grounds of fear or respect of *Gomen* [41] because some village heads out rightly rejected to apply the *Etouidi* convention thereafter. For example, the village head of Ngashie-Oku refused to enlist innocent SDF militants from his village and stressed that only the rebels who were seen in action with military guns be arrested and handed to administration for trial. He defended his stance when he ordered the entire Ngashie village to go after Mngo'o Job Bulewah (one of the rebels) who had taken refuge in Kilum Mountain Forest with a war gun. The population quickly seized him from the woods and handed to the army together with the gun [42]. In spite of his political preference with the CPDM, he merited a part at the back for standing on true justice and objectivity.

On the contrary, some village heads castigated the above action and were bent on maintaining the *Etouidi* convention. Such was Faay Chung (Mallam UsufouYungse) of Keyon-Oku. According to Faay Ndishiangong of Mbejiameh, he met Faay Chung on his way to *Etouidi* with a list of seventeen persons from his village and he explained, he was forced to provide the list to *Gomen* or be taken as one of the rebels. He further clarified that the list was given to him by Faay Kekoh and Ndong Joseph Mnkong. This information was confirmed for various reasons: Faay Chung was not literate and the accused persons openly admitted and threatened to deal with anyone who attempted to protest. Of course their wish was law since they had the backing of the army and at the height of fear.

Some of those who assisted the army to arrest, torture, rape, loot and destroy were: Babey Nforme, Monteh Peter, Mnkong Ndifon, Bafon Johnson,

Nchinda Peter, Tantoh Kemei, Dom Emmanuel, Nдитеk Felix, Tongle Forsiy, Fai Bailak, Ngek Franklin, Tukah Samuel, Fai Chung, Ngek Pascal, Fai Kayiang, NgekVictor, Fai Kekoh, Ngum Konseh Emmanuel, Fai Ndifon S., Njing Elija, Fai Ndishiangong, Nkemba W., Ful Vitalis, Nkwan Nforme, Jiongwah, Nshom Eric, Keng Simon, Nsua Joseph, Kwe Eric, Shey Ngek, Langji John, Shiantu Eric, Mbundah Ignatious, Soh Patrick, Menang Polycarp, Tambang Martin, Mkong Joseph, Tamfu Kemei, Sah Gideon [43]. It should be stated that most of those shortlisted above were even SDF militants who stood for justice and assisted the army to track down some of the rebels on the run. Since Charles was one of the rebels, he then included in his report that those who assisted the army in the arrest were enemies irrespective of their stance.

In the case of Faay Chung of Keyon, he convened a meeting in the village headquarters in which he disclosed that he had been given a list of seventeen names suspected to be some of the rebels still on the run. Some of those enlisted were: Yongka Emmanuel Yosembi, his daughter Yosembi Morine and son Yosembi Wilfred, Welleh Wilfred Kunghe, Chor Amos Wainyu, Kwi Alfred Mnkong, Ma-awoh Eric Chung and Ndifon Esther. After presenting the names, he stressed that an attempt to escape will be heralded as guilt and the person will individually settle it with the army. He further assured the population that he will personally in his capacity as the village head defend them before the law officers. By the time the procession reached the military base, only four of the seventeen names enlisted answered present. They were: Welleh Wilfred Kunghe, Kwi Alfred Mnkong, Ma-awoh Eric Chung Alias Steady Man and Chor Amos Wainyu.

In the military base, Faay Chung called up these four and shockingly to the aborigines; he presented them as some of the rebels who were still in hiding. Immediately after this cardiac presentation, the four young men were seized with serious beatings and punches of the gun. They resultantly sustained injuries and blood began oozing immediately [44]. The shocking presentation drove all the aborigines' speechless and only sorrow could be read on their faces as no one was able to fathom his strange attitude. Worst still, as the population expressed sorrow, the army flushed out the aborigines asking for more people. Faay Chung's action sent greater waves of terror and the youth who had ever militated in the SDF were on the run.

### **Political effects**

According to Louis, the rebels were playing with fire. He added that: "La première attitude face une telle dérive est-elle de condamner sans équivoque ces actes barbares sanglants et dangereux"[45]. The identification of the rebels as former and current militants of the SDF gave those of the CPDM reason to

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belief that it was an SDF coup. This was further concretised by the rebel's parade to Jikejem Oku where they had series of gun shorts[46]. Though Hon. Daniel claimed denial of any knowledge of the rebel's action, this was never taken serious most especially by militants of the CPDM. Actually, it became an SDF-CPDM affair that was carried to the highest point of disconnecting militants of the two parties. Hatred was openly manifested as brother and sister, husbands and wives militating in opposing parties could no longer sit together to discuss family business. In the same vein, quarter and village gatherings shattered because opposing militants could not sit again and discuss as a common people with a focus. In fact, the conflict nearly brought Oku under apartheid.

Furthermore, drinking sports were also carved on party lines. Vividly, around Elak motor park, there were two major bars named "Bamboo" and "Train" respectively for the SDFs and the CPDMs. A militant of another party could not even attempt to enter or buy from the opposing bar because he could not be served. This was supposedly because it was in these bars that their tactics on how to deal with their adversaries were crafted. This attitude was even extended to dead and birth celebrations. Burials were jointly carried out simply because the departed at times cuts across families but when it came to refreshments, a lot of scrutiny was done for fear of food poisoning. Really, no one trusted the other as long as they were from the opposing parties. There were even cases of women and brothers who eliminated their husbands and brothers because they happened to be militants of opposing parties.

Another effect of the rebellion was that it badly destroyed the defence and relations of Oku and its neighbours. This was manifested during the Mbam-Oku and Din-Noni ethnic confrontation of 1998. It has to be noted that during the military ransack of Oku in 1997, a large number of guns were shipped out of Oku and the Kingdom was left with nearly nothing to defend itself than mystic[47]. At this juncture, there were counter accusations between the CPDMs and the SDFs for being responsible for the loss of their guns and the SDFs equally blamed the CPDMs for sending their youth to prison that could have defended the *fondom*. Worst still, the *fon* had allied with the CPDM and consequently lost his infallibility. His authority over the Oku people was no longer given attention as his call to burry political differences for the defence of the *fondom* only fell on rocky terrain.

The rebellion did not only shatter the *fondom* into two camps but equally destroyed every strata of the entire society. The *fon* in Oku was a symbol of authority and his decisions were undisputable but this was not the case this time because of the various reasons. In the first place, he declared his alignment

with the CPDM and even went ahead to run for the post of the major. At the time of absolute division between the two parties, it definitely meant to an ordinary Oku person that he was already an enemy to all militants of the SDF. The tradition of the people prohibited their *fon* from meddling in politics. As a father, he must be neutral from politics and give his blessing to all political camps in his *fondom*. Unfortunately, his action did not foster the unity expected of him and consequently lost his authority over the people. It was then that the people knew his name as Samuel Nsackse which was a desecration in Oku tradition as the *fon*'s name could only be pronounced after him.

Worst still, the *fon* was allegedly the brain behind the ransom placed on Hon. Daniel. In the face of an ordinary Oku person, this was unheard of their *fon* who was supposed to incarnate unity. Such a controversy distanced many from the palace and the *fon* totally lost his command over the entire *fondom*. This claim was confirmed when the *fon* announced his withdrawal of the title of *Faay* from Hon. Daniel. As this was not enough, *kwifon* also announced his expulsion from Oku [48]. The loss of the *fon*'s authority was seen in various respects. Oku had an old tradition of annual grass-cutting meant for the repair of leaky palace roof. This custom stems from old times when the palace was still thatched with grass. Nowadays, the custom has survived just to teach the succeeding generations of their past, rites, unity and as a sign of the *fon*'s authority. This lesson of the *fon*'s authority and custom was badly affected as the turn out to the annual practice dropped.

Farther, Oku also had an annual custom of raising funds usually to generate income meant for palace repairs and important projects in the land. This was usually done at the level of the villages and collectively in the *fon*'s palace. Following the statistics of the cultural week in 1992 when *Fon* Ngum III was just enthroned, a massive turn out of the Oku population realised a sum of close to 5:000:000 FRS meant to buy the *fon*'s car. Unfortunately, when the *fon* side-lined with the CPDM and worst of all the allegations levied on him made the occasion of 1998 and the succeeding years a total disaster. This time around, the turn out dropped and a sum of less than 500,000 FCFA was realised.

Compared with the previous years, one would conclude that it was a real failure which resulted from the *fon*'s meddling in politics. It has to be noted that the failure was aggravated by the withdrawal of the title of *Faay* and an attempt to excommunicate Hon. Daniel. This is so because he was the chairperson of the Oku cultural and development Association (OCDA), district chairperson of the SDF and a prospective parliamentary candidate. His absence left a vacuum which could not be immediately filled that let to poor organisation and

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apathy coupled with the *fon's* intransigence that ended in the poor turnout of the Oku population.

Far from the above, other palace ceremonies like the funerals of princes, queen mothers, and wives of the *fon* dropped drastically. The Oku population turned out poorly for such occasions because of the insanity expressed by *Fon* Ngum III. It has to be noted that the effects were highly felt because a majority of the Oku population were SDF militants. In all, this did not deter the support of the CPDM to the *fon*, but this met with failure due to their numerical disadvantage. As this was not enough, *Fon* Ngum III aggravated the hatred with the enthronement of village heads and other title holders based on party lines. As a matter of fact, from 1998 to 2004 when he 'disappeared'[49], most titles in Oku were awarded mostly to CPDM militants. This further divided families, quarters and villages because his choice of leaders was in most cases not the will of the people. It was even rumoured that some of the titles were exchanged for money; a situation which is alleged to have become rampant among the *fons* in the region. All these actions added his political opponents, loss of respect and further disintegrated the whole *fondom*[50].

Unlike the *fon*, *kwifon* also lost its dignity because the recruitment of its members, judgments of civil and criminal cases were also politicised. A glaring example was the decision by the sacred society to excommunicate Hon. Daniel which was also challenged by the Oku population. The height of this challenge was observed when *kwifon* appallingly renounced that it had lifted the excommunication placed on Hon. Daniel. It is alleged that a good number of SDF militants were jointly eliminated in the dark by *kwifon* and the *fon*. According to this claim, the following lost their lives in the process: Gwei Mathias, Mbel Christina, Ndifon Joseph Ndah, Tamanjong Isaiah and Nforme Chongwawn. In a related incident, Yongka Simon Babey the acting SDF mayor for Elak rural council escaped a drinking glass smeared with venom in the *Fon's* palace[51].

All these dangerous moves further disintegrated the kingdom living no individual, family and gatherings without suspicion. It ought to be noted here that as this incident occurred politicians reacted separately to it. For instance, when Louis interviewed Joseph Charles Douma the CPDM Secretary General said: "Pour la RDPC, c'est la condamnation, c'est la reprobation total" [52]. Similarly, Maigari Bello Bouba of the UNDP reacting to the same question said: " Il faudrait en effet procéder à l'arrestation des responsables de ces incident pour que la situation soit éclairée" [53]. To Augustin Frederick Kodock of the UPC, he said: "C'est l'avenir du Cameroun qui est mise en cause"[54]. However, the wounds created still

lingered in the minds of many as the effects were still evident in many other fabrics of the *fondom*.

### **Economic impact**

The losses recorded in this domain began when the rebels burnt down the brigade. The local population might have not suffered these losses if the rebels had conserve power but the coming of the army was a turning point in the history of Oku as the soldiers destroyed almost everything they found. The doors and windows of all houses along the streets were destroyed. They also ransacked these houses leaving them with no valuable articles and objects. The looting of these valuables was focused on jewellerys, clothes and most especially money. With this, the population suffered a lot most especially business persons. It was the attraction for money that led some of the soldiers into sacred sites and the destruction of charms which they falsely believed were hideouts for money.

The economic impact was aggravated around the political capital (Elak) and Jikijem village. These villages hosted most of the economy of Oku characterised by supermarkets, ware houses and retail shops. The soldiers break into most of these stores leaving them with no penny in their drawers. For things they could not consume or take along with them, they cruelly destroyed them on the spot. For instance, some of the troops got drunk and went destroying the rest of the beer bottles as they could not possibly take along. In fact, broken bottles were common place at Elak Motor Park and along the streets. According to Yang Eric Ndifon, his father's bar in Jikejem was emptied of money, drinks and what could not be taken away was damaged beyond repairs[55]. In the same vein, owners of stores and supermarkets also suffered the same effects. What could not be stolen from these shops was either destroyed or used to molest mostly children and women. Martha certified that she and other women were robbed in the mud, forced to smoke and eat a mixture of raw rice and *gari* looted from the traders' shops around Elak Motor Park[56].

Besides, money and other valuables looted, most food items were destroyed in the restaurants located around Elak Motor Park. In the tailors' workshops, their machines were broken into pieces and what could not be taken was flung outside. According to Emmanuel, he lost more than five machines and a good amount of valuables that could not be measured in monetary terms[57]. Nonetheless, this economic malaise cannot all be attributed to the soldiers as there is evidence that some unscrupulous people from Oku profited behind the soldiers to cripple especially those that were on the run. It was however alleged that this category of people hailed mostly from the CPDM. Postulants of this claim justified with the fact that the rebels were active and outcast from the SDF and as such, all SDF militants were on the run. It was only the

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rival CPDM militants who freely circulated and collaborated with the soldiers.

In another sense, all the economic installations pillaged around Elak Motor Park belonged mostly to the SDF militants. How then do we explain the fact that an army which knew nobody in Oku could selectively destroy the property of SDF militants leaving those of their CPDM counter parts? Additional area of economic losses was registered in the destruction and burning of houses of SDF militants. Those, whose houses were looted, destroyed and burnt were: Nforme Babey, Faay Mbiybe, Hon. Daniel, Kinkoh Thaddeus, Ngamngom Emmanuel, Mnkong Emmanuel, Konseh Emmanuel, Ngamfon John, Jikijem Health Centre, Itoh health post, Njakoy Charles Chinn, Tamanjong Isaiah, Itoh Market and Kwei Simon Ngek[58]. We also have to note that all economic activities were halted especially farming that led to poor harvest, less food for consumption, high prices of food items and resultantly, hunger was the order of the day throughout the year. Generally, it will be difficult for a single human being to evaluate the amount of losses incurred in monetary value.

### **Social effects**

This began immediately with the arrival of the soldiers as a cross section of young girls suffered rape. Health wise, the rape rendered some of the girls barren especially as most of the victims were adolescents. Some of the victims contracted venereal diseases like gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV/AIDS. In addition, the rape greatly increased the population of Oku. Though, it is argued that the resultant up springs left bad memories to the families for mothering unwanted children from unknown fathers. Worst still, such children in Oku were considered as the handy work of evil and were therefore a curse to the families and an atrocity in Oku society. The sexual abuses were a gross violation of the people's customs as relatives in the face of the gun were forced to have sex with their sisters and the troops. Charles maintained that:

Along the road, these armies [the army] in the moving truck sexually abused one Mary Yeafon, after they [...] raped her, they forced some of the captives 'like' Njobara Hyacinth, Tata Roland Mndze and [Mngo'o] Bulewa Job to sexually abuse her too. One of this men Bulewa Job after the sad sex deal cried that she was his sister and their tradition and costum [custom] does not allow such[an act] [59].

According to Pa Jinne a business baron at Elak, he testified that women were forced to feed on a mixture of uncooked rice and gari looted from his supermarket [60]. Most of the women were rubbed in the mud and forced to smoke cigarettes, a thing they had never done. This molestation left many women ill as they contracted injuries, cholera, typhoid and

dysentery from the bad and dirty food they forcefully ate.

Additionally, the brutality of the army sent thousands of people to refuge in the bush. This was a sad experience to many especially the ageing that immediately dropped ill. Many sustained injuries as they were running away from the troops, some developed fever and others diarrhoea resulting from the bad food they ate in the wilds. Also, some people ran lengthy distances against health instructions from medics and this ended in death. Yongka Emmanuel Yosembi who developed hernia and died in the process is an example. This deteriorated relations between families of the victimised and those who framed them for arrest. For example, the families, lineage and village of Faay Chung were completely shattered during the reigns of Malam UsufuYungse and Ndong Joseph Mnkong. This was so because the population blamed these leaders as mentors for the arrest, imprisonment and death of innocent people in the village. They were considered evil by many who did not just want to interact with them and their families to the extent that their untimely death was even celebrated by those who had been hurt. This state of affairs divided many families and has consequently shifted the hatred to subsequent generations. Besides family division, disunity and hatred could also be observed between the families of Hon. Daniel and *Fon* Ngum III.

The social effects equally created a lot of panic amongst the Oku population particularly between the militants of SDF and CPDM. It is often said that the friend of an enemy is an enemy while the enemy of an enemy is a friend. This was the nature of Oku society. It was based on fear and suspicion of this nature that the militants of both parties fenced specific drinking spots for their partisans. Moreover, the *fon* lost his prowess and utmost authority as an incarnate of authority. Worst still, his charges of the ransom, misdirection of titles and the enthronement of wrong choices jeopardised his rapprochement with the entire community and lost the veneration of the majority. The abortive attempt and the ransom presented the *fon* as a murderer and his palace was regarded as a guillotine to many who were not even interested in politicking.

It is very important to note that those who died of this rebellion were not only aborigines. It is quiet regrettable to mention the dead of D.O. Kamdem Rene. Although, he died out of Oku but the cause of his death purported descended from the abduction, molestation and imprisonment. In a related manner, many soldiers who were deployed for the mission also lost their lives. Barely a month after the return of the troops to Bamenda, many were brought back to Oku with mysterious diseases such as swollen bellies, scrotums, and elephantiasis that ended in death. According to traditional healers, the cause of such diseases was a



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curse which came as a result of their destruction of sacred sites and charms which was an irreparable sacrilege[61].

### Judicial effects

The role of the administration began on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1997 at about 5:00pm. This was marked by the coming of the military that liberated the D.O. and some gendarmes imprisoned in the rebel's stronghold. The intervention and liberation of the prisoners led to the immediate collapse of the rebel regime. At this point the population was ready to collaborate with the soldiers and to easily pick out the criminals. Unfortunately, the army was unfriendly as expected. One would have expected the army to trace only the rebels since they were already identified by the populace. Though, it was purported that not all the rebels took part in the action and this is why some of the rebels were sourced later. Accordingly, some of the arrests were tailored by some rebels who were loyal to the sinister organisation already in the military dragnet. In relation to this, more rebels were arrested alongside the innocent people and many escaped imprisonment because they were able to buy their way.

However, not all the rebels were arrested as the smartest ones escaped. It would appear escape was a common tradition of SCNC activists. This was true of Ebenezer Akwanga who also ran away from Kondengui maximum detention prison under the assistance of the SCNC military intelligence wing (Delta Force)[62]. In Oku, those arrested were detained in the premises of Elak health centre and on the 29<sup>th</sup> March they were taken to Kumbo prison and on the 31<sup>st</sup> to Bamenda prison where they stayed until 31<sup>th</sup> May 1997. These were just in line with the prescriptions of Augustin Kontchou Kouomegni the minister of communications who said: "[...] the authors of these criminal acts are being arrested and shall be promptly prosecuted before the courts and tribunals of the republic"[63]. Charles claimed it was during their trip from Oku to Kumbo and to Bamenda that he discovered that the incident in Oku had taken place in Kumbo, Jakiri, Mexam and Mbengwi since they were all imprisoned together.

After screening, a good number were released in Bamenda. These were: Ndifon John Ngum, Ngek M. Franklin, Kenkoh John, Mary Yeafon, Ndifon Adamou, Mnkong Emmanuel, Omarou Ngek, Bafon Eugene, Tantoh Forsiy, Kune Francis T., Ngum Peter, Kemeka Denis, Ngali Blaise, Kunghe Wilfred, Chor Amos Wanyu, Kenkoh Kengah, Kwi Alfred Mnkong, Ma-awoh Eric Chung[64]. It has to be reiterated that these people were never released free of charge though not all of them paid for their freedom as Charles maintained: "[...] above mentioned were liberated after some paid over 100,000FRS"[65]. The others were forwarded to Yaounde for trial. It should be noted that the rebels' action was a criminal offence involving arms

and following Cameroon's penal code, they were to be judged in the military tribunal. In prelude to their trial, some were detained in the National Gendarmerie and others in Mfou. The Yaounde military tribunal levied the following charges:

Conspiracy to disrupt territorial integrity during time of peace, Illegal possession of arms, set fire on living quarters, caused premeditated death of a gendarme, caused loss of parts to the others, that they went to the divisional officer's premises where they attempted to kill him with his whole family [...] the fact of having shot at the house knowing that people were living inside constituted attempted murder [...] they have equally been charged for arson, false imprisonment of the Divisional Officer and his family and Gendarme Ngongang [...] [66].

In respect of the above charges the following who had been detained for over two years were freed on the 06<sup>th</sup> October 1999. They included Ngum Shey Barnabas, Yaya Grace Kwei, Ndifon Joseph Tangu, Nyamkwe Fidelis, Tankoh Salefou, Njobara Hyacinth, Ngek Fien and Fanfon Samuel[67]. It appears the arrest and imprisonment of SCNC activist had been a regular feature with the New Deal government because there is an indication that those arrested in Oku were not the first as they met some of their militants from the South West Region (SWR). Charles again declared: "On the above date some thirty of the SCNC detained in Kondengui since 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1997 were freed. It should be noted that only those from Oku are listed [...] [68]. Others were sentenced ranging from ten years to life imprisonment. They included Fornkwa Thomas (100), Nyamsai Promise (74), Njakoy Charles Chinn (77), Kwei Simon Ngek (104), Ntanen Daniel (112), Mngo'o Job Bulewa (99), Tata Roland Mndze (103) and Ngek Adelbert (121)[69]. Even after the case of Oku, SCNC activities had continued in other parts of the NW and SW Regions leading to more arrests and detentions. This was the case of Felix Ngalim, Ebenezer Akwanga, Makam Adamu and Nfor, Ngala Nfor on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2013[70].

The above prison terms never elapsed as expected because president Biya by 2007 granted armistice to political prisoners. In respect of this, Kwei Simon Ngek's life imprisonment was trimmed to 25 years and some like Njakoy Charles Chinn, Njobara Hyacinth, Ngek Adelbert and Mngo'o Job Bulewa freed. But Kwei Simon Ngek was transferred to complete his 25 years imprisonment in Bamenda prison. Charles contrary maintained, their freedom was pressured by Amnesty International and not Biya's clemency. In respect of Charles's claim, the A.G.M. from Netherlands in an official letter to the minister of defence (Lauren Ezzo) stated:

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Allow me to draw your attention to the following: In October 1999 a group of 18 Anglophone citizens of Cameroon were sentenced to lengthy prison terms by a military tribunal. Military tribunals in Cameroon have the competence to deal with those who violate the law on acquisition and use of arms; legislation gives the possibility to try civilians under military jurisdiction. This contravenes international fair trial standards such as the International Court for Civil and Political Rights [...] I call upon the Cameroon authorities to ensure that the 18 Anglophone detainees at Nkondengui Central Prison are tried again under civilian jurisdiction, in accordance with international standards[71].

It appears that in the light of this foreign intervention the victims were then freed. It will however be wrong to believe that the liberation was completely pressurised by foreign powers.

Apart from the administration, justice was also applied by the institutions of Oku especially *kwifon* (secret society)[72]. Nearly all the criminals involved in the incident were active and former members of the SDF. With this political identity, public opinion concluded that it was an SDF coup. Based on public view, *Kwifon* succumbed and excommunicated Hon. Daniel from Oku. This custom is highly venerated in Oku but this did not applied to Hon. Daniel. Rather, the injunction attracted sympathisers to his favour because the population judged that he was innocent of the rebellion. He challenged *kwifon* by not leaving Oku, associated with the people and got the support of the population. Such an action weakened the authority of *kwifon* for meddling in politics of which it was normally supposed to be neutral as required by custom. Worst still, when *kwifon* realised its mistakes and the disgraced it had suffered, it then withdrew the restriction placed on Hon. Daniel. Intriguingly, *kwifon* readmitted him and honoured him with a higher title of *abchiofaay*, a distinguished title in Oku custom[73]. This action was intended to regain the people's confidence, but it jeopardised, discredited and relegated *kwifon*.

### Way forward

The purpose of this paper was to examine the genesis of the rebel movement, how it was conceived, nurtured, the implications and the response of the administration. We have learnt that the rebels were just a bunch of stooges used for political gains, the prophesy of *kwifon* and the regrets of some rebels for their involvement in the incident is an indication that they learnt to respect republican institutions. According to the father of history (Herodotus) and the scientific father of history (Thucydides), history is documented for posterity[74]. This is so because the discipline

viewed as an eternal recommencement. For instance, the reoccurrence of World War II was just a repetition of World War I[75]. These lessons are important to help us avoid similar eventualities in future. We therefore insinuate that, the elite of Oku, the *fon* and *kwifon* should initiate a roundtable reconciliation conference and an anticorruption body to investigate those who forcefully extorted money from the victims to refund and be sanctioned. We equally advocate for an independent investigative commission to evaluate the property and lives of the people lost and rehabilitation made to the innocently affected families. These people were not only IDPs but more of refugees in their own country and were supposed to be covered for the losses incurred. How does it sound to here that president Paul Biya made an offer of 500,000,000FCFA to Haitian government following the earth quake in that country[76] while Cameroonians in a similar situation for over decades were abandoned to themselves?

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  22. Interview with Tankoh Salefou, aged 82, Butcher and treasurer of the SCNC in Oku, Manchok-Oku, 29th December 2009.
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  34. Interview with Juongua, aged 49, palace page, Keyon-Oku, 2nd September 1998.
  35. Interview with Chor Amos Wainyu, aged 40, farmer, Keyon-Oku, 29th December 2009.
  36. Declaration made by Faay Chung of Keyon-Oku. He revealed this when an angry mob attacked him to justify for the arrest of innocent people from his village. He again said the victims shortlisted were handed to him by Ndong Joseph Mnkong CPDM sub section president and Faay Kekoh CPDM secretary for Keyon village.
  37. Open declaration made by Faay Ndishiangong in Elak-Oku after the departure of the military, 1997.
  38. Interview with Faay Bailack, aged 67, Village Chief, Elak-Oku, 13th January 2000.
  39. Open declaration made by Hon. Faay Mbuh Yang Daniel after returning from his hide out in Jikejem-Oku, 1997.
  40. Etudi as used in this work is a nickname to a sophisticated mansion owned by Nforme John Tata the former parliamentarian and the CPDM section president for Oku sub division. The reason for nicknaming his residents as Etudi is because the structure was richly built and could only be likened to the Unity Palace in Etudi (Yaounde)
  41. Gomen is the misuse of the word government by the non-educated villagers referring generally to a very high personality of the state mostly particularly the Parliamentarian in this case.
  42. Interview with Faay Bailack, aged 67, Village Chief, Elak-Oku, 13th January 2000.
  43. Njakoy, “Report on Human...” p.6. (Most of the people were not CPDM militants but helped the administration to arrest the rebels. Our informant was one of the rebels and this is why he considered all of them as enemies.)
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  46. Interview with Peter Keming, aged 75, Retired nurse, Keyon-Oku, 30th December 2009.
  47. Interview with Tantoh (male), aged 75, palace page, Elak-Oku, 29th December 2009.
  48. This is a traditional banishment usually meted out to people who commit treason in Oku such as killing, sleeping with the Fon’s wife and other related crimes. Decisions from these two institutions are unchallengeable but their injunction placed on Hon. Faay M.Y.D. was immediately challenged by the Oku population as unfair justice.
  49. The Fon according to the people’s custom is an immortal figure. He does not die but travels or disappears and never dead.
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55. Interview with Yang Eric Ndifon, aged 35, Journalist, Yaounde, January 25th 2010.
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69. The above names are not all of those that were imprisoned in the process; there is evidence that many were not included as Charles declares. These are the eight from Oku among the eighteen sentenced to imprisonment terms ranging from eight years to life imprisonment. The numbers against their names were the room or cell numbers in Kondengui prison
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