

Revisiting Community Development in Cameroon: The Bali Community Water Project - A Historical Perspective.

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History figures in two forms in this [article]. On the one hand it is an analytical category of how historical legacies of colonial rule, power struggles, legislative changes after independence..., impinge on local dynamics. On the other hand, history as an object of study, as a central part of the idioms and logics of local contestation where people conjure up historical interpretations to back certain claims to power and property (Lund 2008, 3).

4.1 Introduction

Bali subdivision (hereafter referred to as Bali), is situated approximately 16 km from Bamenda, the chief town of the North West Region of Cameroon. It is one of the seven sub-divisions that make up Mezam Division. Unlike most towns in Cameroon, Bali owns a potable drinking water supply system which was constructed by the community in 1957. This water project has gone through a number of transformations over the years. Before reunification in 1961 it was managed as a non-profit scheme by the community. Following reunification, the project fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Mines, Water Resources and Power.

In 1984, the ministry handed over the water project to a state-owned parastatal; *Société Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun* (SNEC). According to Page (2003, 492): "What the shift from Mines and Power to SNEC undoubtedly did signify was a determined marketization of water supplies." The marketization of the community water was very much at odds with its founding principle as a self-help project. Tired of being exploited, the population of Bali violently expelled SNEC in January 1994. The aim of this paper is to unearth and document the historical narrative of the Bali Community Water project as a showpiece of community mobilisation and self-reliant development in Cameroon. It also presents the perspective of key players involved in the events leading up to and after the expulsion of SNEC from Bali.

4.2 Background

*You are by this letter notified that your role of distributing Bali water ends at midnight (12:00 HOUR), on Saturday 15th January 1994 and that the Bali population will resume the distribution of their water with effect from Sunday 16th January 1994.*¹

It was by this ultimatum on January 11, 1994 that the population of Bali, under the auspices of the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC) and the Bali Traditional Council, issued marching orders to the local chief of SNEC to return the water installations to the community. At the time SNEC had been in charge of distributing water in Bali for a decade. The company was accused, among other things, of "infrequent shutting up of public taps and/or supplying muddy and untreated water."² The violent expulsion of SNEC from Bali came at a time when Cameroon was undergoing profound socio-political change. The 1990s was marked by opposition calls for civil disobedience campaigns, dubbed 'Operation Ghost Towns' (Konings 2006; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Takougang and Krieger 1998). At the time, the government was widely unpopular amongst Cameroonians and its legitimacy seriously undermined in many parts of the country because of its perceived failure to tackle the economic crisis (Mentan, 1998). The economic crisis also laid bare the ineptitude of the government to meet the needs of many Cameroonians. As a result, people in Bali, taking their cue from precedents set three earlier-on in Kumbo, violently dislodged SNEC. To better comprehend how Bali acquired a potable water supply system it is imperative to dig deep down memory lane, to unearth how Bali Nyonga found

¹ Ultimatum issued to the local the chief of centre SNEC, by the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC), and the Bali Traditional Council on 11 January 1994.

² Ultimatum issued to the local the chief of centre SNEC, by the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC), and the Bali Traditional Council on 11 January 1994.

itself in the present location; and to recount why its presence unravelled a chain of conflicts which engendered the community water project.

4.2.1 The Bali Chamba: Migration and Settlement

The Bali Nyonga are a Chamba³ group that migrated southwards from the Benue and Adamawa plateaus in Northern Cameroon into the Grassfields (DeLancey, Mbuh and DeLancey 2010; Rubin 1970 and Johnson 1970). The broader Chamba group originated around the borders between Cameroon and Nigeria at the foot of the Alantika Mountains (Fokwang, 2009). The Chamba are said to have begun their exodus around 1770 and settled in the present site around 1830. The south-westerly migration of the Chamba was described as ‘an army on the move’ in which all able-bodied men and some women were involved in fighting (Nyamdi, 1988). In their downward march, the Chamba incorporated other chiefdoms such as the Dagha, Muti and Tikali (Fardon 1983; Chilver and Kaberry 1970; and Jeffreys 1957).

After failing to conquer the powerful Bamoum Kingdom with the aid of the Bati,⁴ they continued their southward march, further swelling ranks with chiefdoms that sought freedom from Bamoum domination (Geary 1988 and Warnier 1980). Upon arriving in the grassfields, they attacked already established communities, permanently altering the settlement patterns in the area (Argenti, 2007). I will now proceed to examine how colonial officials attempted to deal with the repercussions generated by the presence of Bali-Nyonga in the Bamenda grassfields and its ramifications beyond the colonial era.

4.3 Bali under German Colonialism

Colonial administrators devoted considerable time and attention to demarcating administrative boundaries to define their own jurisdictions; territorial boundaries to resolve competing claims to land and office and social boundaries to define arenas of authority and obligation for chiefs and commoners alike (Berry 2001, 7).

The impact of the migration on Bali-Nyonga in the late 19th century was such that by the time it settled on its present location its society consisted of people of varied backgrounds, brought together through confederation, conquest or assimilation (Fokwang, 2009). By the time the first German explorer, Dr Eugene Zintgraff, arrived in the Grassfields, Bali-Nyonga was already firmly established in the area. Zintgraff arrived in Bali on 16 January 1889, opened a German post and also signed a ‘blood pact’⁵ of brotherhood with the traditional ruler, Galega I. Unlike the people of Kom, Bafut, Mankon etc., who resisted the Germans (Nkwi, 1997), Galega welcomed the Germans and used an alliance with them to expand his sphere of influence over vast expanses of land, to the indignation of its neighbours (Mbah 2009 and Geary 1988).

German actions therefore consolidated Bali-Nyonga’s position in the grassfields. German missionaries adopted Mungaka⁶ as the medium of evangelisation. Mungaka was also introduced into formal schooling and gradually became the common language in the grassfields (Fokwang, 2009). Finally, the alliance with the Germans also enabled Galega to transform Bali-Nyonga from a tribe of mounted Chamba raiders into an effective mini-state surrounded by a string of tributaries and a wider sphere of commercial and diplomatic influence (Fisiy 1995; Chilver and Kaberry 1970; Fowler and Zeitlyn 1957).

Galega died in 1901 and was succeeded by Fonyonga II. In 1905, Fonyonga was formally proclaimed paramount chief of 37 villages and was officially installed by German emissary, General Hauptmann in the presence of 47 Grassfields chiefs (Fokwang, 2009). Meanwhile, “colonial governments developed alliances with chiefs to secure labour and taxes” (Amanor 2008, 132). Such understandings were a common practice during the colonial era and things were made easier in situations where there was collaboration between the colonial authorities and a local chief. Just like other grassfields chiefs, notably those that were nominated ‘auxiliaries’ by the Germans, Fonyonga II exercised the functions of tax collection and forced labour recruitment agent (Rowlands, 1979).

Fonyonga’s function as auxiliary was a mixed blessing because it worsened relations with neighbouring communities and eventually degenerated into conflict with the colonial administration whose actions were at times clumsy, if not confused. For example, in 1906 the Germans forcefully uprooted and

³ The greater Chamba group consisted of Bali Muti, Bali Gham, Bali Kumbat, Bali Nyonga, Bali Gansin and Bali Gaso and Bali Kontan that was subsequently absorbed by Bali Nyonga (Fokwang, 2009 & 2011 and Nyamdi 1988).

⁴ The Bati were settled around the Noun valley and were constantly harried by the Bamoum (Nyamdi 1988).

⁵ This blood pact was a prelude to a formal treaty signed in August 1891. Under this treaty Galega was to surrender to Zintgraff all his powers of ‘life and death and of peace and war within the Bali empire’ and he will implement all decisions in those matters taken by Zintgraff, in return Galega’s position as the paramount chief of the surrounding tribes of the Northern Kamerun hinterland was to be assured’ (Nyamdi, 1988, 99-100).

⁶ This is the language spoken by Bali Nyonga, which sharply contrasts with Mubakoh, the original Chamba language spoken by the other Balis. One of the causes was the dilution of Mubakoh by the languages of the different tribes that Bali Nyonga absorbed during its migrations (Nyamdi, 1988).

resettled⁷ eleven Widikum chiefdoms into Bali-Nyonga for the smooth collection of taxes, thereby adding to the number of disgruntled tributaries under Fonyonga's belt (Nyamdi, 1988). From 1908, agitation by the Widikum chiefdoms boiled over to the point where the Germans were forced to rescind their incorporation into Bali-Nyonga (Fokwang 2009, Fisiy 1995; Kaberry and Chilver 1961). This among other issues was the state of Bali-German relations on the eve of the First World War. The frosty rapport between the two erstwhile allies continued its downward spiral until the Germans were defeated and their military garrison in Bamenda Station captured in 1915.

4.4 The First World War and the Partition of 'Kamerun'

The British and French partition of the former German protectorate into two spheres was carried out within the framework of the Simon-Milner Agreement (Achankeng, 2014). Both territories were governed as League of Nations Mandates and Bali came under British administration. The arrival of a new colonial administration reinvigorated the Widikum agitation. In October 1915 the chiefs of three villages (Bambunji, Bamenjong and Bamyensi) left Bali and moved into the nearby hills, where they were joined by others (Nyamdi, 1988). The British promptly sent out an expeditionary force which brought back the 'runaway' chiefdoms into Bali. These chiefdoms were however determined to remain free and soon left again. In response, the District Officer (DO) personally led another patrol bent on forcing them back, but despite storming their hilltop villages, they refused to return and instead went further afield. A third expedition achieved little (Nyamdi, 1988). It is important to note that the Widikum's occupied this area prior to the arrival of Bali-Nyonga in the 19th century. Widikum opposition to Bali-Nyonga occupation gave the British pause for thought. At the time it was fashionable for colonial authorities in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa to commission anthropological studies and surveys to identify and describe 'customary polity and law' (Lund, 2008). The British ordered an enquiry into the exact nature of the relationship between Bali and neighbouring chiefdoms. The investigation was carried out by the DO, W.E. Hunt, who concluded that the main cause of constant friction was the ill-conceived German policy of forcefully resettling the Widikum people into Bali (Nyamdi 1988). The report omitted the fact that most of these chiefdoms were still very bitter at the fact that Bali-Nyonga was occupying what they considered 'their' ancestral land.

4.4.1 Native Authorities in British Cameroons

Britain governed the Southern Cameroons via indirect rule which, according to Mandani, (1996, p. 17) represented a form of "mediated decentralised despotism." Out of political expediency, indirect rule did not radically alter the traditional status-quo of indigenous societies in the Grassfields (Johnson, 1970). Instead Native Authorities (NA), which formed the basis of the traditional institutions colonial officials met in the grassfields were legitimated (Vubo & Ngwa, 2001). It is important to note that most of these NAs were headed by powerful hereditary traditional chiefs who controlled hundreds of people and vast territories.

In 1949, Bamenda was carved into 23 Native Authority areas. Twenty two out of twenty three agreed to pull together into a federation of four groups.⁸ Bali remained outside this federation because no other NA wanted to be part of a group to which it belonged. The reason for the animosity against Bali was that most chiefdoms in the federation were still bitter about events in the last century when Bali conquered their lands, exacted tribute from them and was declared 'suzerain power' over them by Germany (Kaberry 1962). They were fearful of continued domination, as summed up in the words of a local leader; "if you federate with Bali, you might just as well cut your own throat" (Kaberry 2004, 3). The creation of NAs marked the entry of chiefs and other local people into the colonial administrative structure. Likewise, NAs also served as 'incubators' for the promotion and dissemination of progressive ideas and veritable arenas for community participation in local development in the grassfields (Page 2007 and Rubin 1970). On the other hand, the NAs also imbued a feeling of unity amongst the Widikum's. This served as an impetus for them to combine forces and resources to attempt to recoup what they lost to Bali-Nyonga in 1908 and possibly what they had lost many generations back. In the 1950s, they sought redress first, through petitions to the colonial administration, then through applications to the courts, and eventually through force (Bejeng, 1985).

4.5 Widikum Action Against Bali

The first attempt at administrative redress was launched by Baforchu immediately after the British took over in 1916. They laid claim to the land they had been occupying in Bali, following their forceful incorporation by the Germans in 1906. Because of the First World War and the time it took the British to settle down and administer the territory, the outcome of the dispute was only pronounced in 1923. The verdict was not to the

⁷ This was not an unusual practice by the German colonialists in the area; for example in 1912 the Germans uprooted the Kedjom Keku people from their hilltop settlements into the valleys purportedly for easier administration (Diduk, 1992).

⁸This grouping was known as the Bamenda South Western Federation.

satisfaction of Baforchu.⁹ Years later, the Ngyen-Mbu brought another action against Bali. However, the inquiry ordered by the DO found that; “the Mungen Mbo [Ngyen-Mbu] people had lost all rights over the land in dispute with the Bali people who had acquired the land from them by conquest sometime before 1890 and therefore it was not possible to fix a boundary between them.”¹⁰ Not satisfied with DO Goodliffe’s response, they moved a step higher and appealed to the Chief Commissioner who upheld the decision of the DO, but opened a window of opportunity by suggesting that they seek legal redress for a declaration of title over disputed land via the courts. In 1950 the Ngyen-Mbu and other chiefdoms launched a series of legal actions against the *Fon* of Bali, commencing at the Bali Native Court, which ruled itself incompetent and shifted the matter to the Supreme Court of Nigeria’s Calabar Judiciary Division (Nyamdi, 1988).

In the joint suits they claimed title over large expanses of land, sought an injunction prohibiting Bali from entering the said land and requested damages amounting to £1000 sterling. The case was heard in February 1952 and immediately collapsed on a technicality. The court ruled that they had not filed their motion over a title to land under the ‘Land and Native Rights Ordinance’ and as a result their claims to an injunction and damages could not be entertained. The court dismissed the case and asked the plaintiffs to pay Bali £150 pounds sterling in costs. The court further informed the plaintiffs that the land title they sought could only be obtained from the colonial Governor (Nyamdi, 1988). Having exhausted all legal avenues to obtain redress, they sought to recapture territory through violence.

4.5.1 The Bali-Widikum ‘Disturbances’

The term disturbances, as applied by the colonial authorities, represents a ‘typically British understatement’ to the actual events that occurred in Bali on 3 March 1952. Events of that day set off violent clashes during which surrounding Widikum chiefdoms went on the rampage against Bali-Nyonga. For several days, armed with Dane guns, machetes, spears and other implements, they launched a ferocious assault on Bali-Nyonga. The immediate outcome of the conflict was significant property damage and loss of life and livelihoods on all sides. (Nyamdi, 1988). The colonial government drafted troop reinforcements from nearby stations and also from Nigeria to stabilise the situation. It immediately set mechanisms in place for a ‘post-mortem’ of the conflict by appointing Justice A.G.B. Manson to investigate the crisis. According to the report, “the Widikum communities have been ill-advised, misguided and misled by unscrupulous agitators who have for personal motives persuaded the great majority of simple Widikum people by encouraging false hopes of re-acquiring all or part of their land from the Bali.”¹¹ The commissioner further stated, “the Widikum claims of occupational rights over the area in dispute cannot be entertained as there are no grounds either legal or equitable or compassionate which justify any such rights being granted to them” (Nyamdi, 1988, p. 150). Colonial officials therefore accepted the Commissioner’s findings and imposed a collective fine of £10,000 sterling. A significant amount (£9000 sterling), was paid to Bali as compensation for damages incurred during the violence. The compensation money was put to collective use in the form of a potable water supply project.

4.6 Self-Help in Anglophone Cameroon: The Bali Community Water Project

Community Development was enormously successful in Anglophone Cameroon. In no sector was this truer than water supply (Page 2003, 486).

During British rule in the Southern Cameroons, native authorities were the main source of local decision-making. According to Johnson (1970), Britain’s limited moral commitment to radically altering the traditional status-quo of indigenous societies meant colonial policy was tailored to ensure that local needs did not constitute much of a strain on the financial resources of the crown. As a result, local people funded community development through local taxation and other income-generating schemes.

Around 1950, the British authorities began implementing a “new welfare-oriented colonial development policy” (Page, 2002, p. 16). Community development through ‘self-help’ initiatives was the *modus operandi* of this policy. The scheme initially focused on mass education and adult literacy, but later evolved to include projects in the domains of agriculture, healthcare, infrastructure, buildings, and road construction (Page 2003). Community development was a trade-off mechanism whereby local people provided labour and materials and colonial officials sometimes provided cash and technical support. In the view of colonial officials, community development through ‘self-help’ was to “induce in the people a desire for progress and the will to achieve it by their own efforts” and by cultivating a ‘work ethic’ which in the process “preserved an historic African tradition of co-operation” (ibid, 486).

⁹ A.D.B Manson (1953), Government Notice No 794: Report of an Inquiry held under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance (Chapter 37): Nigeria Gazette Extraordinary p 565-57

¹⁰ A.D.B Manson (1953), Government Notice No 794: Report of an Inquiry held under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance (Chapter 37): Nigeria Gazette Extraordinary p 565.

¹¹ A.D.B Manson (1953), Government Notice No 794: Report of an Inquiry held under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance (Chapter 37): Nigeria Gazette Extraordinary p 565-57.

Missionaries also played active frontline roles in developing infrastructural projects in the Southern Cameroons. According to Nkwi (1997, 72), “they raised funds from their home parishes and with labour supplied by Christians were able to build these institutions and improve the quality of life of the people.” In Bali, missionaries were prominent in evangelisation and also in the realisation of social projects, including schools and hospitals. The Basel Mission, for example, was well-established in Bali, having arrived there during the German colonial period.

4.6.1 Historical Timeline of the Bali Community Water Project

During fieldwork in Bali in 2013, I sought to fill gaps in the history of the water project. Specifically, I attempted to piece together the process that led to the decision to use the £9000 sterling damages awarded to the Bali Native Authority in this way. I consulted documents (some handed to me by frontline members of the movement to expel SNEC from Bali), conducted interviews and held informal conversations with various personalities. These included managers of the water project, current and former members of Bali Council, traditional notables and some people living around the original site of the water pumping station. From their recollection, the decision to use the compensation money to carry out the water project was reached by the *Fon* in collaboration with the traditional council and with inputs from some missionaries stationed in Bali.

It was also during my investigations that I was learned that the main sources of water for the population were a number of naturally occurring springs dotted around different areas of Bali, wells or boreholes and a handful of streams. However, the unreliable nature of these water sources meant people in some places had difficulty accessing water, particularly during the dry season. Meanwhile, there was one major stream that cuts across the entire length of Bali and, unlike the others, it flowed all-year round. The stream or *Tsi* in *Mungaka* was named differently depending on the neighbourhood through which it flows; thus, at a place called *Mbat Matua*, it is known as *Tsi Matua*, at Mbatmandet it is known as *Tsi Munyam*, and at the main water pumping station it is called *Tsi Gola*. This stream constituted the main water source for many people. It was accessed at many points and was used for diverse purposes, including drinking water for humans and animals, laundry, bathing and other household purposes.

4.6.2 Construction of the Community Water Project

Once the decision to use the money for the water project was reached, a German engineer was charged with the actual construction work. The bulk of the cash was therefore used to purchase material and some to pay the engineer and his crew. True to the spirit of self-help, the population of Bali eagerly participated in the construction process. This was done by way of manual labour for transporting construction material and digging trenches to lay down asbestos pipes which transported water from the pumping site to the main storage tank in *Jamjam* neighbourhood. The tank was strategically placed on a high plateau and, once full, water could easily be resupplied to other areas by gravitational pull. In addition to labour costs, the storage tank and asbestos pipes, among other equipment purchased for construction, everyone I spoke with who grew up in Bali around that time vividly remembered the sound of the hydraulic rams,¹² which were purchased from the UK and were used to pump water. Purchasing the hydraulic ram was appropriate considering that at the time Bali did not have electrical power. Construction was completed in 1958 and the project handed over to the Bali Native Authority where it was managed as a not-for-profit scheme. The community constructed a number of standpipes that were dotted around Bali from which people collected water for free. Individual connections were possible; but the vast majority of the population used the public standpipes. Many informants commended the ‘charitable’ nature of the project, although some argued that it was not entirely free because people paid poll tax to the NA which used part of it to run the system. Other informants wondered how feasible it would have been for the NA to treat the water with chemicals, maintain the equipment and network of pipes without a regular source of income, especially from the much dreaded poll tax. The above discussion pretty much sums up the situation that prevailed in Bali prior to the arrival of SNEC.

4.7 ‘Modernisation’ and Expansion of Bali’s Water Supply: Enter SNEC.

Created on 13 May 1967, SNEC was a state parastatal with a monopoly to manage water resources in predominantly urban areas. Other organisations such as the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA-HELVETAS), the Cooperation for American Relief Everywhere (CARE), the Cameroon Industrial and Civic Contractors (CIACC), and SCANWATER were active in rural areas (Nchari, et al., 1997). Following the

¹² A hydraulic ram, or hydram, is a cyclic water pump powered by hydropower. The device uses the water hammer effect to develop pressure that allows a portion of the input water that powers the pump to be lifted to a point higher than where the water originally started. The hydraulic ram is sometimes used in remote areas, where there is both a source of low-head hydropower and a need for pumping water to a destination higher in elevation than the source. In this situation, the ram is often useful, since it requires no outside source of power other than the kinetic energy of flowing water. Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydraulic_ram

reunification of Cameroon, the Federal government sought to supply potable drinking water to urban and rural areas. This involved the creation of the Ministry of Mines, Water Resources and Power, the Rural Engineering or Public Works Department, and the Community Development Department (CDD) (Nchari, et al., 1997). The CDD mostly operated “in the English-speaking part of the country, where most of the successful self-help and community-managed projects [were located]” (Nchari, et al., 1997, p. 2).

The circumstances surrounding SNEC’s take-over of the Bali community water project was quite controversial. One very acrimonious issue was whether SNEC paid compensation to the people of Bali. Some informants said that SNEC actually paid damages prior to taking over the water project, but the money was syphoned off by the Divisional Officer and the Municipal Administrator of the Bali Rural Council. This version of events was hotly disputed by others who claimed that, if any negotiation about handing over the water installations was ever contemplated, it had to be with the *Fon* who at the time was Galega II the reigning monarch, and founder of the project. As one informant recalled:

*SNEC came in and compensated Bali people, by paying money to the Fon, because according to tradition the Fon is the head of the community. If he took the money and ate it, we couldn’t question him. Hence, if we had found out that SNEC paid compensation to the Fon or to the Council, which was the local government, then we would not have taken back the water. But what was the basis of SNEC managing the water and making profit out of the property of Bali people? None!!! This is why we decided to take back our water.*¹³

No claims of compensation was raised during talks between Bali, state officials, SNEC and representatives of the Ministry of Mines, Water Resources and Power, following the violent takeover of the water installations by the community in 1994.

Another grievance people in Bali expressed about the circumstances surrounding the takeover, was that they had requested the authorities to help them explore possibilities of extending the water supply network, not to appropriate it. Some people were still fuming over the fact that SNEC completely changed everything, including the canalisation system, even though with hindsight it was a good decision because the asbestos pipes that were used in transporting water was found to contain cancerous properties. SNEC replaced the standpipes with metered public taps, it moved the pumping station from Mbatmandet to Gola, where it constructed an ultra-modern water catchment, treatment and pumping station that is still in use. SNEC controversially removed the much-vaunted hydraulic rams and replaced them with electrical engines. Unlike the hydraulic rams which were mechanical and incurred minimal costs, the use of electricity to power the engines at the water treatment plant could only mean high water bills, which as expected were passed on to the council. The municipal authorities became alarmed at the exorbitant amount they were regularly charged by SNEC. It got to a point where the council could no longer afford to pay the water bills. This resulted in SNEC shutting down public taps in Bali, leaving many people to fetch water from unreliable sources. This generated great resentment against SNEC in Bali.

4.8 Build-up to the Revolt Against SNEC in Bali

While piecing together the story of the expulsion of SNEC from Bali, I visited the North West Regional Delegation of the Cameroon Water Utilities Corporation (CAMWATER) in Bamenda. Created in 2005,¹⁴ CAMWATER is a parastatal which took over from SNEC after it came out of ‘temporary administration’ in 2002. Because SNEC offices in Bali were ransacked and razed to the ground during the violent uprising, I wanted to find out from CAMWATER officials in Bamenda whether they had files relating to SNEC operations in Bali. There were no records available however, I was directed to Mr Kongnyuy (pseudonym), who had been posted to Bali as a clerk in 1989. Originally from Kumbo, he said he felt at home in Bali and interacted well with the people. Unlike the chief of centre, who lived and worked at the water treatment site in Gola, he was at the SNEC administrative offices in Bali central town, where bills and other customer service issues were handled.

Not long after arriving in Bali, he started getting complaints about high water bills. Many people were unhappy about SNEC’s management of ‘their water’ and resented the exorbitant bills they were charged. People were also fuming that water supply was intermittent, often muddy, and unfit for human consumption. According to Kongnyuy, “every encounter I had with a Bali man, even outside my workplace, the issue of water came up, and they always reminded me that this is their water and not SNEC’s. People often threatened to kick out SNEC because of the exorbitant bills.”¹⁵ To buttress this point, when the Governor visited Bali following the ouster of SNEC, he was told that despite persistent appeals by “the population against poor services, including provision of muddy water, frequent water cuts, reduction of public stand-taps, and frequent shutting of the public taps to

¹³ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

¹⁴ Presidential decree N° 2005/495/ of December 31 2005.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Mr Kongnyuy in Bamenda, on 18/12/2013.

force people to connect water into their homes, the administration never sent anybody to resolve the problems.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, the management style of the local chief of centre did not help improve SNEC’s image in Bali. The rash and somewhat cavalier attitude of Mr Nguenang (pseudonym) precipitated the revolt. According to Kongnyuy, the incoming chief of centre, like his predecessor, was a Bamiléké. Just like his colleague and fellow Bamiléké in Kumbo, where the population rioted against SNEC and took over ‘their water’ in 1991 (Page, 2003), the chief of centre in Bali also recruited fellow Bamilékés to perform menial jobs such as mending broken pipes, digging trenches and reading water metres. This greatly incensed many locals who resented the fact that SNEC not only usurped their property and was making profit out of it while delivering poor services, but also excluded them from any potential spin-offs.

In the 1990s, Bamenda was the centre of opposition against the regime of President Paul Biya. *Ni* John Fru Ndi the main opposition leader at the time was loved and loathed in equal measure by some Cameroonians, because he had defied the government and launched the SDF party in Bamenda, an action that stunned many and presumably angered the likes of Mr Nguenang. Generally, prejudice against Anglophones and people from the North West in particular was translated into phrases such as *les Bamenda*, *les Anglos*, *came no go* etc. For admirers this was synonymous with bravery and defiance, and for haters it symbolised insubordination to established authority. Upon taking charge of the treatment centre in Bali therefore, Nguenang dismissed a key staff member at the Gola treatment site. According to Kongnyuy, the new chief of centre erroneously thought *Ni* Fogam was a relative of the SDF leader *Ni* John Fru Ndi.¹⁷ The story goes that *Ni* Fogam from Batibo was the sole qualified person in charge of water treatment at the Gola station. Without much ceremony and in complete disregard of his pivotal function, *Ni* Fogam was fired on the presumption that the prefix *Ni* automatically meant he was a relative of the SDF party chairman, *Ni* John Fru Ndi. It is quite possible that there was more to the dismissal than this; but, unbeknown to Nguenang, the repercussions of this action were very dramatic.

Apparently, the chief of centre was in no hurry to find a replacement for *Ni* Fogam. This created acute water shortages in Bali and the water that occasionally flowed through the taps was untreated and dirty. According to Kongnyuy, the chief of centre, who lived on site, could have acted promptly to save the situation by standing in temporarily for the dismissed colleague, while seeking a replacement so as to ensure uninterrupted drinkable water supply in Bali. However, he “completely abandoned his responsibilities and spent his time drinking beer in *Ntanfuang*.”¹⁸ To make matters worse, the water crisis occurred in December at the peak of the dry season when alternative water sources were scarce.

To confound things further, the previous chief of centre had prior to his departure issued what one informant described as a “fantastic bill” to the *Fon* of Bali and also sent a notification threatening to cut-off water supply if the *Fon* did not pay the bill. Because traditional rulers in the Grassfields, and Bali in particular, are “near-deities and containers of ancestral spirits” (Awasom, 2003, p. 103), this threat to stop supplying water to the palace, the highest institution of the land and incarnated by the *Fon*, was deeply offensive. In fact, many saw it as a “slap in the face of Bali people”,¹⁹ something they could not tolerate. For all these reasons, the ultimatum mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was issued. This not only threatened to forcefully expel SNEC from Bali, but also requested it to pay damages based on the following claims:

1. Damage to 250 standpipes and concrete protective slabs amounting to the sum of: 170.000.000 francs.
 2. Damage to our network of pipelines amounting to the sum of: 150.000.000 francs.
 3. Depriving the Bali people of their water supply (a basic necessity of life), and frequent inconveniences for the duration of 10 years amounting to: 200.000.000 francs.
 4. Rent for our water tank for 10 years, amounting to: 100.000.000 francs (up until now you refused to pay either royalties or compensation).
 5. Exploitation of our quarry at Njenka quarters amounting to: 50.000.000 francs.
 6. Cost of 3 rams collected by SNEC after taking over, amounting to: 30.000.000 francs.
 7. Destruction of Bali water office when you took over, amounting to 7.000.000 francs.
 8. Compensation for damages to property in Bali during the construction of High Tension line for SNEC system of water pumping, amounting to 31.000.000 francs
- Total sum due: 748.000.000 (seven hundred and forty eight million Francs CFA).²⁰

¹⁶ Welcome address to the Governor of the North West Province (Region) by the Chairman of the Bali Water Committee on 7th June 1994.

¹⁷ In the midst of the political upheavals that shook Cameroon in the 1990s, there was a popular anecdote about why the SDF chairman *Ni* John Fru Ndi lost the 1992 presidential elections to Paul Biya. It was believed that the authorities felt, ‘*Ni* John, *Ni* Fru, *Ni* Ndi,’ or Neither John, Nor Fru, Nor Ndi, was qualified to govern Cameroon. *Ni* being the French equivalent for neither or nor.

¹⁸ Personal communication from Mr Kongnyuy in Bamenda, on 18/12/2013.

¹⁹ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

²⁰ Ultimatum issued to the local chief of centre SNEC by the Bali Community Water Committee (BCWC), and the Bali Traditional Council on 11 January 1994.

The expiration of the deadline on midnight 15 January 1994 passed without reaction. On Monday 17 January 1994, the population ransacked and burnt down the SNEC branch office in Bali town. It appeared that the chief of centre and his staff were 'tipped off' and discretely fled over the weekend, not without "breaking doors, and windows, pulling off toilets, wash basins and electrical fittings."²¹ According to Mr Kongnyuy, the slogan adopted by the movement to oust SNEC was dubbed 'the global fight' and the leaders of this movement issued clear instructions that no staff member of SNEC was to be physically harmed. This was so as not to give the government an excuse to intervene forcefully and reverse the people's gains.

The actions of the people of Bali came in the wake of the devaluation of the CFA which took place on 12 January 1994. The CFA was devalued by 50% to the French Franc so as to boost Cameroon exports by making them cheaper on the world market (ODI, 1995). Devaluation of the CFA occurred at the peak of austerity measures that were implemented within the framework of the Structural Adjustment Programme. Some of the measures required privatisation of state-owned companies including SNEC. However, privatisation of SNEC was quite intractable and only occurred decades after the structural adjustments (Page 2002).

The action by the population of Bali therefore occurred at a time when the legitimacy of the government in most parts of Cameroon was at its lowest ebb and quite possibly its moral authority too. This was due mainly to its perceived failure to tackle the economic crisis and its blatant refusal to meet popular demands for a national conference (Takougang & Krieger, 1998, p. 125). The government's lack of credibility presumably sapped its will to use force on this occasion, unlike what had happened in Kumbo.

4.8.1 Triumph over SNEC: The Aftermath

Following the triumph over SNEC, the population of Bali did not leave anything to chance. On January 19, 1994, two days after the expulsion of SNEC, several meetings were held at different locations in Bali to draw up plans to manage the water project. Short of avoiding a bloodbath, I wonder how the security measures (outlined below) taken by the population could have stopped the state from overrunning Bali with troops and forcibly reinstate SNEC. The key issues discussed included security of facilities, finances and alternative water sources. According to the minutes of one such meeting, the prime objective was the '*Resumption of Water Distribution by the Bali Population,*' (my emphasis). Several themes were discussed under the rubric General Affairs; these included; work on alternative water sources, and general maintenance of facilities. The following issues were also discussed:

Anti-Gang/Vigilante: This plan had two main objectives, first to station six guards at the Gola site (two during daytime and four at night), three guards at the storage tank in Jamjam (two at night and one during daytime). Second, to mobilise all vigilante groups in Bali and put them on maximum alert. The neighbourhood watchers and guards at Gola were to "be equipped with all necessary instruments suitable for the execution of their duties. They were to be provided with alarm instruments to alert the villagers in the event of any confrontation."²² This was probably because at the time there were wild rumours that the government was planning to send in troops to retake the water installations and hand them back to SNEC, as it did when the population of Kumbo made their first attempt in April 1991, only to be thwarted by massive troop deployment from a military base in Koutaba in the West Region (Page, 2003). The people of Kumbo nevertheless successfully retook 'their water' in October 1991.

Strategy for General Mobilisation: In the 1990s, Bamenda was highly militarised. This was because it was the bastion of the main opposition SDF party and also the epicentre of the civil disobedience campaign, dubbed 'Operation Ghost Towns', which aimed to force the government to organise a 'Sovereign' National Conference and carry out electoral reform. This campaign urged citizens to stop paying utility bills (water, electricity, and telephone), civil servants to desert their offices, and markets/businesses to open only on weekends. This campaign was largely effective in Bamenda and other opposition strongholds, notably Bafoussam and Douala. There were also weekly rallies and regular protest marches organised by the SDF party. Bamenda, located about 16km away, it meant troops could be deployed to Bali within a twinkle of an eye. Fearing a repeat of the Kumbo scenario, the people of Bali decided to take preventive measures to alert the population in such an event. The strategy went thus: "Alarm instruments should be installed in all quarters of the village, which have to respond to [any distress signal] from Gola, Jamjam or the *Fon's* palace in the event of any confrontation."²³ Upon the alarm signal going off, the population was urged to come out "in readiness for necessary action."²⁴ Other measures were taken to address possible or even imminent financial constraints.

While the general affairs meeting was taking place, another conclave was brainstorming about the immediate and long-term modalities to raise funds for the smooth functioning of the water project. The members

²¹ Welcome address to the Governor of the North West Province (now Region) by the Chairman of the Bali Water Committee on 7th June 1994.

²² Minutes of the Bali Nyonga Elites meeting held on 19-01-1994 at the Bali Community Hall.

²³ Minutes of the Bali Nyonga Elites meeting held on 19-01-1994 at the Bali Community Hall.

²⁴ Minutes of the Bali Nyonga Elites meeting held on 19-01-1994 at the Bali Community Hall.

of the finance committee were drawn from people with a wide range of backgrounds, including ‘economists’, ‘accountants,’ and businessmen. In the short term, they sought voluntary donations from individuals and from all Bali meeting houses throughout the country. The committee also recommended the production and sale of support badges with the slogan ‘I SUPPORT THE BALI WATER PROJECT.’ In the long term, they proposed sending out letters appealing for funds to Bali elites at home and abroad, foreign embassies and consulates, donor organisations and the elites of the other communities in Bali, i.e. Bawock and Bossa. They also envisaged a scheme whereby individuals and groups would pay annual subscriptions.

The price per unit of water consumption was significantly reduced from CFA 286 francs per cubic meter (cm³), as charged by SNEC, to CFA 100 francs per cm³. It was decided to continue with the metered public taps installed by SNEC with the bills to be footed by the Council. They also scrapped the CFA 545 francs that was charged monthly by SNEC for meter rent to households with private connections and instead recommended a once-off fee for meters’ payable during the first installation. On the vexing issue which evoked enormous passion and outrage, the ‘fantastic bill’ to the *Fon* of Bali, it was decided that; “the paramount *Fon* of Bali will enjoy 25 cm³ free every month.”²⁵ Finally the committee recommended opening accounts with “banks over which the government has little or no control.”²⁶ This indicates that faith in the state was at this juncture in very limited supply among the population of Bali.

4.8.2 Government Reaction to Community Action

Unlike in Kumbo where a “Government minister, Francis Nkwain, was sent from Yaoundé to try to persuade the people of Kumbo to allow SNEC to return, and operate the water supply” (Page, 2003, p. 493), no such high state official was sent to Bali. Instead the local authorities, notably the Governor, summoned the population for a meeting in his office on 1st February 1994, to discuss what he termed the ‘SNEC-Bali Water Problem.’²⁷ Delegations at the meeting included members of the security forces, representatives of SNEC, SONEP and the Ministry of Mines, Water Resources and Power. Unsurprisingly, the main item on the agenda was a request by the authorities for SNEC to be allowed to return to Bali.

Before this encounter, the people of Bali held a meeting and designated Mr Ndangoh (pseudonym), a frontline leader of the movement to oust SNEC, to speak on their behalf. They also opted to send a delegation instead of attending the governor’s summons en-masse. As recounted by Ndangoh, the governor used the opportunity to demonstrate state authority and power. “They brought in colonels, lieutenant colonels, and even generals, some of them from Bafoussam..., they were there in their uniforms, looking fierce. Then the governor entered the hall, introduced the matter and totally condemned the action of Bali people.”²⁸ References to military generals in this instance could be a gross exaggeration on the part of Ndangoh. However, during the 1990s, the government mobilised the military and carved up the country into operational command units (Mentan, 1998). The North West and West Provinces (now Regions) were headed by a military general based in Bafoussam, roughly 60km by road. Given that the actions of the people of Bali was seen in official circles as a ‘treacherous challenge to state authority’, it was highly probable that the presence of senior military officers was solicited to intimidate the people of Bali, and cow them to back down.

After delivering a rather fiery sermon, the governor ‘calmed down’, but not without demanding that the Bali Water issue be resolved forthwith. He then rhetorically asked the delegation from Bali: “So what is the solution...?”²⁹ It seemed as if the governor’s remarks ‘threw a cat amongst the pigeons’, because in disregard of the arrangement that one person would speak on behalf of the delegation from Bali, the local Member of Parliament (MP)³⁰ from the governing CPDM took to the floor and, according to Ndangoh, controversially stated that “he wants to join the government and the governor to condemn what happened..., for people should not think they can re-enact what happened in Nso.”³¹ He went on to dissociate himself from what happened and stated that the people of Bali were prepared to return the water project to SNEC.”³²

A visibly elated governor quickly jotted down the MP’s remarks with some satisfaction and then asked the audience if anybody had something else to add. At that juncture, Mr Ndangoh raised his hand and was asked to speak:

I said the governor is saying we should sit here and decide that we are handing over this water...? He said yes. I said no, it’s not possible because we are here as a delegation representing the people of Bali and in

²⁵ Minutes of the Finance Committee (Committee No 2), during the Bali Water Supply General Meeting 19th January 1994.

²⁶ Minutes of the Finance Committee (Committee No 2), during the Bali Water Supply General Meeting 19th January 1994.

²⁷ A brief Report by the Steering Committee Secretary of the Bali Community Water Supply, (undated).

²⁸ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

²⁹ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

³⁰ The SDF party boycotted the 1992 legislative elections citing the refusal by the government to reform the electoral code. As a result, the CPDM party won all 20 seats in the North West Province (now Region) including Bali. The North West therefore had CPDM MP’s in an area where majority of the population supported the opposition SDF. This rift was certainly at play in this meeting.

³¹ Nso or Bansa is commonly used to refer to people from Bui Division in the North West Region; the chief town of this division is Kumbo.

³² Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

order for us to do that we have to consult those who sent us here. They said voila, you are leaders, you take the decision here then go and tell your people that you have decided on their behalf. I was still standing and said your Excellency, no we will do it the other way. We will go back, call the population of Bali and tell them what you have proposed. If they say yes, then we will hand it over. I also said we are not going to hold the meeting in private. It will be held in public on a specific date at the Fon's courtyard. You can send your representatives and your security people to watch how we put the matter to the public. So he accepted my suggestion and we agreed on a date.³³

Soon after this meeting, the authorities issued radio communiques which stated that the people of Bali had agreed to hand back the water and the forthcoming meeting was simply to get the population to endorse a decision agreed upon by their leaders. It also appeared that the local MP had secretly reassured the governor to this effect.

It was against this backdrop that on 25th February 1994, the Fon of Bali summoned the population to his main courtyard. The agenda of the meeting was to examine the issue that was raised at the meeting with the Governor on 1st February, i.e. whether the population wanted SNEC to return and continue managing the water project. In the weeks preceding this meeting, information about the 'understanding' with the governor spread like wildfire in Bali. Early that morning, the population thronged the Fon's courtyard determined to take a final stance on the matter. According to Mr Ndangoh:

When the crowd had assembled, I stood up and narrated exactly what happened at the meeting with the governor. Then I said as a spokesman of the delegation that met him we are here to publicly present you what happened. So I said, the governor told us that it was better for us to hand back this water, do you agree...? Before I finished my statement they started shouting, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...!!! I pleaded with them to stay calm and stated that we have to decide whether we are handing back the water or we are keeping it. Do we want to hand back the water, they shouted no way, no, no, no, no!!! I asked three times, and they said no. Then I emphasised, is there anybody who is in favour of handing back this water to SNEC. Nobody spoke. I also asked this three times and everyone stayed quiet. At that point, I said we had told the governor to send his representatives to this meeting, I hope they are around. They should write their reports of this meeting and submit to the governor, we will also submit ours.³⁴

It is clear from the above that the resolve of the population of Bali to oust SNEC was a "laudable action against corporate exploitation of man by man."³⁵ The authorities were not impressed. Curiously, they seemed somewhat powerless to do much about it. Why? Remember they had sent troops to reinstate SNEC in Kumbo in April 1991, albeit temporarily, so why didn't they do the same in Bali?

4.9 Discussion and Conclusion

When the people of Nso took back their water supply from SNEC, the Governor of the N.W. Province rushed from Bamenda to Nso, and held a meeting with the people there. The Minister of Mines and Power drove from Yaoundé to Nso and held meetings with the population and the Fon of Nso. By contrast, after the people of this subdivision took back their water supply from SNEC, they and their Fon have been summoned to Bamenda thrice now. What an insult to a peaceful people!!!³⁶

Judging from the above, from the outset of the Bali water crisis the authorities underestimated the tenacious will of the people to retain control of the water supply and also their capacity to manage it sustainably in the long term. The authorities presumably felt that sooner or later the people of Bali would come begging for SNEC to return, so they waited with bated breath, ready to celebrate the capitulation of the Bali people.

On 25th March 1994, exactly a month after the population overwhelmingly turned down the request by the governor to allow SNEC to return, the SDO of Mezam Division visited Bali. The chairman of the community water management committee prepared a welcome address to be read for the event. The issues highlighted in the speech included a brief history of the water project, as well as motivation behind the decision to retake it from SNEC.³⁷ However, the SDO refused to listen to the speech that was prepared for him and categorically rejected any suggestions about visiting the storage tank in Jamjam or the treatment and pumping station in Gola.³⁸ As if refusing to visit the water installations was not enough, the authorities also embarked on a smear campaign. According to Mr Ndangoh:

Suddenly, we heard rumours that the government had taken samples of the water we were supplying to the public, got them tested and the results showed that the water was horrible. According to reports from the

³³ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

³⁴ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

³⁵ Resolutions of the Third Plenary General Assembly of the Bali Sub-divisional Population on the Self-Reliant Management of their Water Supply held on 25 February 1994.

³⁶ Welcome address to the Governor of the North West Province by the Chairman of the Bali Water Committee on 7th June 1994.

³⁷ Welcome Address Presented to the SDO Mezam by the Chairman of the Bali Community Water Committee on 25 March 1994.

³⁸ Welcome address to the Governor of the North West province by the Chairman of the Bali Water Committee on 7th June 1994.

laboratory, if this was the water people in Bali were drinking, then there is an imminent risk of an epidemic. They wanted to use the results as a pretext to arrest me. I conferred with a number of lawyers and we concluded that, if the water that was purportedly from Bali was indeed from here, did the government get anybody to witness when it was collected? Did they actually test the water? And if so, can they make the results public? This was our position and when they heard this, the whole matter just died.³⁹

Despite this apparent setback, the authorities were still hoping the population of Bali would eventually capitulate. Their trump-card was the high cost of electricity needed to power the engines for pumping water. In fact SNEC admitted in the course of the meeting with the governor that it was running the centre at a deficit.⁴⁰ Moreover, SNEC also strenuously argued that what happened in Bali was a spontaneous act by a handful of disgruntled individuals who could not afford to settle outstanding bills. However, what the authorities failed to realise was that ousting SNEC was not a spontaneous action by a disgruntled segment of the population eager to take advantage of the volatile socio-political situation in the country to challenge the state. In fact, during the expulsion of SNEC, “pro and anti-government factions united to drive the water corporation out of town” (Page, 2002, p. 12). Consequently, the views expressed by the local MP during the meeting with the governor was described by one informant as similar to the act of the biblical Judas, even though nobody knew whether he was bribed to sell out.

The revolt was born out of frustrations following SNEC’s stubborn silence and administrative officials’ refusal to heed the complaints of the people of Bali. Further, managing the water project, especially in the immediate aftermath of the takeover, was a rather daunting task, not least because of a lack of skilled staff, finances and the constant fear of the government sending in troops to retake it forcefully. What SNEC and the authorities failed to realise was that the community previously managed the water project for over two decades and were determined to return it to its founding principle as a not-for-profit scheme. Hence, when the governor visited Bali later that year, he heard the following: “If the government truly stands for ensuring that its citizens have potable water, then we expect the administration to stand by the population of Bali in their self-reliant effort. After all, the Bali Water supply was constructed in 1957 as a self-reliant project.”⁴¹ The government finally backed down, leaving the community to manage the water project until 2013 when it was handed to Bali Council amid controversy over whether it was another prelude to a takeover by government and by extension CAMWATER, because the Bali municipality was now under the control of the ruling CPDM party.

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³⁹ Interview with a frontline member of the uprising against SNEC in Bali on 19/12/2013.

⁴⁰ Resolutions of the Third Plenary General Assembly of the Bali Sub-Divisional Population on the Self-Reliant Management of their Water Supply held on 25 February 1994.

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