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## The Role of Women in the Farmer-Grazier Conflicts in Aghem 1972–2020

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### **Abstract:**

*Farmer-grazier conflicts remain an enigma between communities in the North West Region of Cameroon and the Aghem community in particular. It should be noted that the major agricultural activities in the region are cereal, tuber, and cattle rearing. This accounts for why crop farmers and cattle farmers are at loggerheads for space acquisition for either farming or cattle rearing. In the midst of these activities, the role of women is paramount as they are the principal actors, especially in the farming sector, and thus face the brunt from those of cattle rearing. In Aghem, the arrival of herdsmen in the 1920s posed a lot of challenges, especially to the women who were engaged in the cultivation of crops. As a consequence, they had to take action either through peace talks, protests, the killing of the cattle, and other forms of manifestation. The study used both primary and secondary sources explored and exploited to comprehensively analyse the facts. Also, the use of qualitative analysis was necessary to give a better understanding of the study. The study reveals that the influence of the administration, the problem of stray animals, and the increase in the population of cattle were responsible for the farmer-grazier conflict in Aghem, while women were the main actors in the process of resolving the conflicts.*

**Keywords:** Women, farmer-grazier, conflict, Aghem

### **1. Introduction**

Farmer-Grazier conflicts have been the major issue destroying the economies of many communities and the sustenance of their livelihoods, especially in the North West Region and Aghem community in particular. Generally, the protracted conflict between crop farmers and graziers is a general phenomenon in most agro-pastoral communities around the world. Many factors have contributed to the farmer-grazier conflict that has little or no link to the environment and natural resources. This results from local and institutional failures to genuinely resolve the conflict between the conflicting parties (Ntangti 2019, 217).

In Cameroon, crop farming and grazing were the main occupations of the people that sustained their livelihoods and the development of their rural areas. However, the actions of the government and other stakeholders seem to be minimal in the resolution of some conflicts, while in some cases, complete silence was maintained in the case of conflicts. In instances where interventions were made, it was done through mutual understanding and amicable conflict settlement between the parties (Daniel 2013, 45).

In neighbouring Nigeria, the increase in the frequency of violent farmer-grazier conflicts has been linked to intense pressure on land, especially in rural areas, by cultivators and graziers. Violent clashes between the herders and the farmers in Northern Nigeria in 2012, for example, resulted in the death of an estimated number of more than 1300 people while over 300,000 people were forced to flee their homes (Ntangti 2019, 217).

In the Aghem community, disputes over the use of land resources have remained a common trait. Land demarcation in grazing and crop farming has been a critical issue since all untitled lands are considered, according to the law, communal lands, free to be grazed and cultivated by anyone. The decree No 78/263 of July 3, 1978, regulating the agro-pastoral activities in Cameroon, provides for the mapping out grazing and farmlands.

Actually, an area was designated for grazing or farmland based on an allocation by the agro-pastoral commission. This was the statutory body that adjudicated conflicts between graziers and crop farmers. In Aghem, the competition over scarce land resources had increasingly posed a challenge to peace and community development. In some cases, such conflicts escalated and resulted in a physical confrontation and sometimes bloodshed (Munge Sone, 56).

These conflicts were mostly between women as principal cultivators in the farming sector and the herdsmen. Hence, the women were the most affected in case of damages and land problems. These confrontations in Aghem often resulted in the loss of lives and the destruction of properties (Tse Angwafo 2014, 5). Hence this study examines the role of women in the causes, course, and resolution of conflicts.

## 2. The Campaigns of Farmer-Grazier Conflicts in Aghem

This part of the study set out to examine the causes of the farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem. This is because Aghem is one of the communities in the North West Region that is experiencing these conflicts. These causes, among others, are:

- Conflicts over farming and grazing land,
- No clear demarcation between grazing land and farmland,
- Conflicting administrative decisions, and
- Archaic farming methods

The first major cause of the farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem was the lack of a clear demarcation between grazing land and farming land. Before the 1920s, women and other inhabitants of Aghem had as an alternative to go down to the valley for food crop production or exploit the immediate surroundings and gentle slopes for cash cropping. The coming of cattle rearing in the late 1920s seemed to be no good news to farmers, especially the women, as the hills and gentle slopes gradually and, in some cases, forcefully came under the control of Fulani herdsmen. With this nexus, both the local authorities and the legal administration took minimal measures to clearly demarcate farming and grazing land. In effect, according to Ntangti, farmers encroached into grazing land and set traps with dotted farms without solid proof fences with the perception that the land belonged to them and not to graziers (Ntangti 219).

Most often, farmers were left with only arid or bare land, which hindered food productivity, and by so doing, the farmers encroached into grazing land and created new farm plots; thus, conflict was inevitable. As years passed by, they went beyond the boundaries of the said farm plots, thus causing problems with the graziers. Some women resort to growing crops along cattle tracks on the slopes to the wet valleys. This only provoked an invasion by cattle and a counterattack from the farmers on the cattle, and the resultant effect was the farmer-grazier conflict. (Etung Adeline 2022).

Secondly, conflicting administrative decisions by successive administrators exaggerated the farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem. There existed a great dichotomy in the policy objectives of the successive administrative authorities within the focus area. Under a customary land tenure system, traditional rulers were the custodians of lands and responsible for attributing it to various classes of land users. Decree No. 78/263 of July 3, 1978, established an Agropastoral Commission for the management of farmer-grazier conflicts.

Ami-Nyoh holds that this commission comprised of the Divisional Officer (DO) as Chair, a representative of the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Divisional Chief of Surveys, Chiefs, two notables, one grazier and one farmer representative (Ami-Nyoh, 942). Though with the calibre of members that made up this commission, there was a wider claim that this commission was bisected by corruption and other malpractices, which went a long way to paralyze the conflict resolution strategy and created fresh grounds for conflicts between the women who were the principal cultivators and the graziers.

According to Mbeibi, administrative authorities found themselves caught in a dilemma because pleasing the farmer meant losing out on the much-needed cattle money which the grazier usually promised the farmers during summoned. This corruption and malpractices within such a conflict resolution commission pushed the farmers to the point of mistrust with such a fact-finding and conflict resolution commission. They rather promoted conflicts than softened the grounds (Mbeibi Beatrice 2022). Therefore, some poorly handled conflicts resulted in further clashes between farmers and graziers, which not only led to hatred and the destruction of properties but also to the loss of lives (Chou Fidelia, 2022).

The problem of stray cattle and herds with teenage herder(s) also posed a problem to the cause of farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem. Most informants revealed that the majority of the Mbororo cattle owners were of age and could not contain their herds around. Early morning after milking the cattle, the cattle flock was accompanied midway and further chased up the hills to fend for themselves. In some instances, the herd was controlled by teenagers, though to an extent, it was the passage of their cultural traits down to successive generations.

Most of these teenage herders were inexperienced and lacked a sense of consciousness, and this was further compromised by the large number of animals in a flock. This increased the tendency for cattle to invade farm plots and hence recurrent farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem (Efiang Hilda, 2022). This problem was aggravated by the fact that most grazing households preferred to leave their cattle to pass the night on the grazing fields rather than in fences. According to Esi, cases of night-time cattle invasion of farmlands were very common in both rainy and dry seasons (Esi Evelyn 2022).

Social status syndrome between the farmers and the graziers also was a cankerworm that ate the minds of both parties. Pastoralism in this area was mainly the activity of the Fulani, who believed that they were superior to the farmers in terms of financial resources. According to oral interviews, some graziers, after compensation, considered that they had bought over the whole farmland and, as such, had the right to further destruction of the said farmland. This was done on the grounds that they had already paid for compensation, and nothing would happen to them after that.

According to Nufuh, some of the cattle graziers invaded farmlands, deliberately destroying the crops manually, with the aim of urging the farmer or farmers to quit the area. This was common on farmlands along cattle tracks. Information from the farmers in Esu further revealed that a group of three graziers was caught in Esu destroying crops, and once apprehended, they pretended to be drunk. Most farmers, on their own part, regardless of the location of their

farm, believed that only graziers were to be blamed, thus the reasons for the continued conflicts between both parties (Nufuh Maria 2022).

Lastly, the cruel treatment meted on cattle by some women and the eventual response from the graziers. The behavioural pattern of most farmers was full of hatred, covetousness, and wickedness. In most cases, farmers, due to their quick temper, inflict wounds on cattle, destroying cattle with the use of guns, spears, and machetes. In some cases, they throw stones at the cattle, and in effect, they break down cattle horns while some cut off the tail of the cows, which they take home as a trophy. Oral sources revealed that, on February 3, 2017, some enraged group of women accompanied by their husbands and children armed with machetes, knives, and sticks in Waindo brutally killed 180 cattle and burnt down the house of a grazier who was said to have masterminded the gruesome murder of a cocoa farmer. Today, farmer-grazier conflict manifestations within the area have several ramifications ranging from physical confrontations, protests, battles, and maiming (Nufuh Maria, 2022; Mbih, 2015, 45).

### 3. The Theatrical Role of Women in the Farmer-Grazier Conflicts in Aghem

As principal actors in the course of the conflicts, women contributed a great deal to the animation of the conflict. As cattle constantly went down the slopes to destroy their crops, the farmers developed new strategies to scare away the "new encroachers" and the owners. In 1972, the Aghem women marched naked to the *Fon's* palace as the cattle owners disrespected the demarcation line set out by the law of 1963. In 1973 still due to the failure of the 1963 law and to re-emphasise their agitations, the Aghem women marched to the governor's office at Bamenda to present their grievances. In reaction, Governor Nseke ordered the separation of farmland from grazing land as a temporal measure to curtail the rising tension.

Still as a manifestation, in 1981, Aghem women mobilized in response to excessive crop destruction by unsupervised herds of cattle owned by local elites and nomads. In the course of the confrontations between the farmers and the nomads, nine people lost their lives.<sup>1</sup>In discussion with one of the active women in the 1981 protest, she recounted that:

When these Fulani people arrived at Aghem with their cattle, the *Fon* welcomed them, and we knew that it was already a problem to us, the women, as we were the ones mostly involved in farming activities. The *Fon* started allocating land to the cattle owners, and they started expanding and buying the *Fon's* mind with the money they got from the sale of cattle. We have been having encounters with them, but the one in 1981 was annoying. These herders went to the field constantly, grazed their cattle, and left. These cattle entered the nearby farms and wiped out everything; women constantly warned these cattle owners but proved stubborn. In August, violence broke out between the women and the herders, which led to the destruction of properties and many injured. The security intervened, and some people lost their lives (Kung Emelia 2022).

According to Achung Delphine, they were forced to burn down the house of Malam Yaro and beat his two wives and children due to anger. One of the children beaten was sick for a long time and only died due to the injuries sustained from the beaten. She further said that they could not know who beat the children as many women gathered and stormed the compound (Achung Delphine, 2022).

On January 8, 1997, another confrontation erupted between the women and the graziers. In the course of it, many people were injured as the gendarmes opened fire during the arrest of Damian Ngah, *Fon* of Fungum, in connection with a conflict about land and grazing rights. About five women were admitted to the hospital either with gunshot injuries or with injuries sustained from beating with gun butts.

The latest protest occurred in 2003 when some women besieged the chief's palace in Aghem, boycotting all social and ritual activities. The immediate cause of the protest was an attempt by Divisional Officer Njinwai Muluh Eddy to expel about 600 women from a piece of land they were farming in favour of Ndong Thomas of Waikom and Alhaji Goni of Mbinjam Kesu was objected to by the women. Instead, the women wanted the eviction of the Fulani, whom they have constantly been referring to as strangers in Aghem. Consequently, the women have not been indifferent to these challenges but have resorted to fighting back and defending what they considered an infringement. From July 12-16, 1993, for instance, the Farmer-Grazier Commission for Meichum handled thirty-three different farmer-grazier disputes in Aghem, Bafmeng, Kuk, Nyos, and Zhoa.

Due to this non-respect from both the administration and the traditional authority, the Aghem women decided to stage a manifestation in the *Fon's* palace. They took along blankets and local carpets to stay there till their problems were solved. An attempt by the administration to convince them to go home did not work as the women said that they preferred to stay in the palace and die of hunger than to plant crops that cattle would come and destroy. With this, it was said that the administration took advantage and collected fabulous bribes from graziers; hence the problems of these women were left untouched.

### 4. Burden of Farmer-Grazier Conflict in Aghem

As mentioned earlier, the farmer-grazier conflict had a lot of consequences for both the farmers and the graziers. These effects shall be examined in the paragraphs below:

The effect of farmer-grazier conflict on income and livelihood was a great challenge that affected both the farmers and the graziers. Graziers in Aghem complained that the conflict always prevented them from grazing their cattle adequately. With this, the cattle grow thin and produce little milk and consequently reducing the milk that was consumed by the family. Also, in one of the discussions, it was revealed that sometimes when the conflict was intense, their cattle

<sup>1</sup> A monitoring report of Wum, Meichum division "farmer-grazier conflict," Bamenda, December 10, 2003.

were kept only inside the fence or taken to a field where pastures were not available in good quantity and quality. This action forced some of the cattle to lose weight which eventually affected the cost price to fall (Jija Musa 2022).

Also, the farmers sometimes needed more than one job to make ends meet, and life became very difficult at times. According to Relindis, in 2009, when the cattle destroyed her farm, it was terrible for her that year as there was not even enough food to eat or sell. She went further to say that what they gave her as compensation was not enough to cover up the damages on her farm as beans, corn, cocoyam, and an Irish potato were destroyed overnight by the cattle. Hence, one can see that the farmer-grazier conflict greatly affected the income and livelihood of both graziers and farmers (Kah Relindis, 2022).

Moreover, an open confrontation between the farmers and the graziers often led to the loss of lives and the destruction of properties. This was always seen in the anger of the women when cattle entered their farms. It was said that women sometimes cut the tails of cows when caught red-handed in the farms. Also, women sometimes broke the legs of cattle and also shot some with stones without any consideration. These farmers went as far as burning down the houses of some herders. One of the graziers recounted that:

In 2004, my cattle mistakenly entered Elizabeth's farm in Waindo. Her reaction to this was very cruel as she invited some women, and they joined her against me. When she arrived at the farm in the morning, she discovered that my cattle were in her farm, and instead of alerting me, she called out farmers who came and wounded most of my cattle, and as a result, I lost my 3 cows after I had paid compensation to her (Umarou Bobo, 2021).

Equally, during the 1981 protest by the Aghem women, they attacked and burnt down Mallam Yaro's house beating his two wives and children. This even resulted in the death of one of the children. That same year, eight people lost their lives due to the conflict, and many sustained life-threatening injuries. Hence, one can see that the farmer-grazier conflict in Aghem was gradually turning into a war.

Lastly, the corrupt nature of the administration aggravated the conflict and rendered suffering to many women and graziers. There were many issues relating to land and government at various levels, including the land commission. There were many complaints from graziers and farmers about the administration, whose initial task was to help resolve conflict, but due to corruption, it instead fuelled matters. Instead, they took the money from the victims and enriched themselves with little actions on the ground to resolve the conflicts. Cases that were sent to court were always very costly with little impact on resolution. The graziers complained about the punitive cost of judgment made against them but yet no one came to their aid as they cried. One of the graziers in his word said:

*The Authorities here in Aghem are very cruel in solving farmer-grazier conflicts. They take money from us and enrich themselves. They always assure us that they will take our issues to court, but they end up not calling us to court. Even the few graziers that go to court complain so much of the charges they pay (Umarou Bobo).*

From the above revelation, one can see that the administration was sometimes exploitative as they took advantage of the conflict and added to their riches. Some farmers complained about the corrupt nature of the administration by saying that they were always the marginalized group as their cases were never taken seriously by the administration. This was because they could not offer huge money to them like the graziers.

Farmers complained of encoring unbearable costs and sometimes becoming debtors. This was because they sometimes borrowed money to buy potato seedlings, fertilizer, and cow dung. Destruction of the crops by animals meant they were unable to pay what they owed (Tienufuh Babara).

## 5. Palliatives to Farmer-Grazier Conflicts in Aghem

Conflict mitigation strategies and resolution methods and their level of effectiveness do differ from one conflict zone to another. In the case of Aghem, four main measures were identified to mitigate these seemingly intractable conflicts by both the traditional and governmental authorities. They included: the dialogue platforms, traditional council, agro-pastoral commission, and the judiciary.

Field findings revealed that about 66% of the crop farmers preferred the dialogue platform as a medium of conflict resolution. This led to the identification of two main organizations that had invested in promoting and encouraging dialogue and mutually beneficial alliances between the crop farmers and the graziers. They included: the MBOSCUA (Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association) and the Aghem Development Association. The Aghem Development Association was noted for its role in facilitating the development of platforms that brought together graziers, crop farmers, and traditional rulers. Their coming together was initiated as a leeway to discuss peaceful solutions to the existing conflicts and the development of annual plans that helped regulate crop and livestock activities. Following the dialogue platform as the principal medium of conflict resolution in Aghem, some of the crop farmers preferred the traditional council as a medium of conflict resolution.

The traditional council also had a remarkable function to play in regard to farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem. This forum was made up of the community heads, some notables, chiefs, and the representatives of the pastoralist community in some cases. It had no judicial premise and was, therefore, described by some farmers as "an attempt to resolve conflicts in a friendly way." In areas such as Aghem, the traditional council was the principal medium of conflict resolution, and only cases of mass crop damages were taken up to the crop farmer-grazier commission for settlement.

According to Nchoung, some crop farmers admitted that some custodians of traditions remained nonchalant to their plight while reaching the necessary funds to sustain themselves and the administration. This, therefore, implied that the traditional rulers who formed the traditional council as a medium of conflict resolution had lost objectivity and credibility when seeking solutions to the farmer-grazier conflicts (Henry Nchoung, 2022).

The officially recognized medium for the resolution of the farmer-grazier conflict was the Agro-Pastoral or the Farmer-Grazier Commission. This commission was set up in each sub-division with regard to the 1974 law that regulated farmer-grazier activities in Cameroon. The agro-pastoral commission was the statutory body that adjudicated conflicts between graziers and crop farmers, and yet it had limitations in its interventions, which had more often than not led to outcomes that were ineffective and unsatisfactory to all parties involved.

The commission was made up of the Divisional Officer (DO) as the chairperson, the Delegate of Lands, the representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, the village heads (Fons and chiefs), and the head of the pastoralist communities (Kughe Daniel, 2022). Though the commission more often failed to pay attention to the allocation of grazing land, the permanent control over the grazing and crop farming activities concentrated on carrying out the last function that holds to do with the resolution of crop farmer-grazier conflicts (Tse Angwafo, 128).

The final conflict mitigation opening was the judiciary. Settlement through the court was relatively rare compared to other strategies used in many crop farming and grazing communities. The very low proportion of crop farmers using the judiciary as a medium of conflict resolution can be inferred from the fact that it is expensive with very uncertain outcomes, as the issue of payments (bribery, extortion, and exploitation) was repeatedly raised by both crop farmers and graziers on the field.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of women in the farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem. This was the case considering that women were the main cultivators of the land, and they were the ones most affected by the destruction caused by the cattle. According to findings, the reasons for farmer-grazier conflicts in Aghem were that there were no clear demarcations between the grazing land and the farmlands, poor administrative interferences, problems of stray cattle, and the conflicts arising from the social status of farmers and graziers. With these, the role of women in the animation of the farmer-grazier conflicts was paramount. This was because women were the main victims and actors that they constantly confronted. As a manifestation, they organised protests in 1972, 1981, 1997, and 2003 where they stormed Fon's Palace and accused him of taking farmlands from women and giving them out to graziers. This resulted in the loss of lives, injuries, and the destruction of properties. Several measures were taken to mitigate the conflict, including dialogue platforms, the traditional council, Agro-Pastoral Commission, and the judiciary.

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