



The Declining Gun Culture of the Bamenda Grassfields amidst the Anglophone Crisis: 2016-2019

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ABSTRACT

Within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, a once thriving gun culture was adversely impacted by relentless government interferences amidst heightening insecurity characterizing the Anglophone crisis since 2016. This article discusses the evolutionary dynamics of gun culture in the Bamenda Grassfields within circumstances dictated by events of the Anglophone crisis. The article argues that unprecedented government policy on guns control within the realities of the Anglophone crisis had several consequences upon the socio-economic and political avenues from where the gun culture was upheld in the Bamenda Grassfields. Both primary and secondary sources were exploited to realize this paper. The interdisciplinary approach was useful in sourcing information for this study while the qualitative, thematic and chronological approaches were utilized in the documentation phase. In its findings, gun culture in the Bamenda Grassfields was sustained by socio-economic and political significance attributed to such weapons. Besides, the sustainability of guns among indigenous cultures in the Bamenda Grassfields was subdued to the path of extinction by implemented government arms control legislations and anti-guns opinions within the community facing the harsh realities of the Anglophone Crisis.

Keywords: Bamenda Grassfields, Gun, Culture, Anglophone Crisis, arms control.

INTRODUCTION

Every human society has a unique identity that represents its culture.¹ The Bamenda Grassfields Chiefdoms of Cameroon were habitual in the usage of guns, which boosted many political, economic and socio-cultural phenomena. The utilization of such firearms in these communities provided economic activities and animated political and socio-cultural rendezvous. Guns symbolized and enhanced remarkably the cultural wealth of all the Chiefdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon and in the context of diplomacy, served as an instrument of deterrence against neighbours' predictable aggressions.² Since the migration of the Tikar from North Cameroon, guns were inextricable elements in the daily lives and culture of Bambili, Bambui, Nso, Bafut, Mankon among other such traditional communities in the Bamenda Grassfields. The fabrication and usage of guns provided many livelihood opportunities. Gunsmithing, wood works, gunpowder vending and hunting were among the cherished socio-economic business opportunities borne out of the gun culture in Bambili, Bamessing, Babungo and Oku Chiefdoms. Cultural phenomena such as the animation of both traditional institutions and traditional ceremonies were also incorporated in the value of guns in this shared culture. The *Lalee* and *Manjong* were traditional institutions that were as dependable on the usage of guns in Bambili as they animated funerals in many corners of the community. In Nso, the *Mfuh* and *Manjong* used guns. In the political sphere, guns constituted the instruments of defense and elements of deterrence in times of dire necessity warranted by inter-tribal armed conflicts.

However, government policies to control the acquisition, possession and usage of firearms evidently wounded the gun culture and economic opportunities hitherto enjoyed by such villages in the Bamenda Grassfields. Such a gun policy was very inconsiderate of such collectively cherished indigenous cultures.

¹Kingsly Ayunifor Yunisha, "*Gun Culture in Bambili, Ca.1800-2016*," Higher Teacher Training College Bambili, University of Bamenda, Department of History, Unpublished DIPES II Dissertation, 2019, 6.

² Njimukala Stephen, 56years, retired Gendarme, Atwe-Bambili, 22 July 2018.

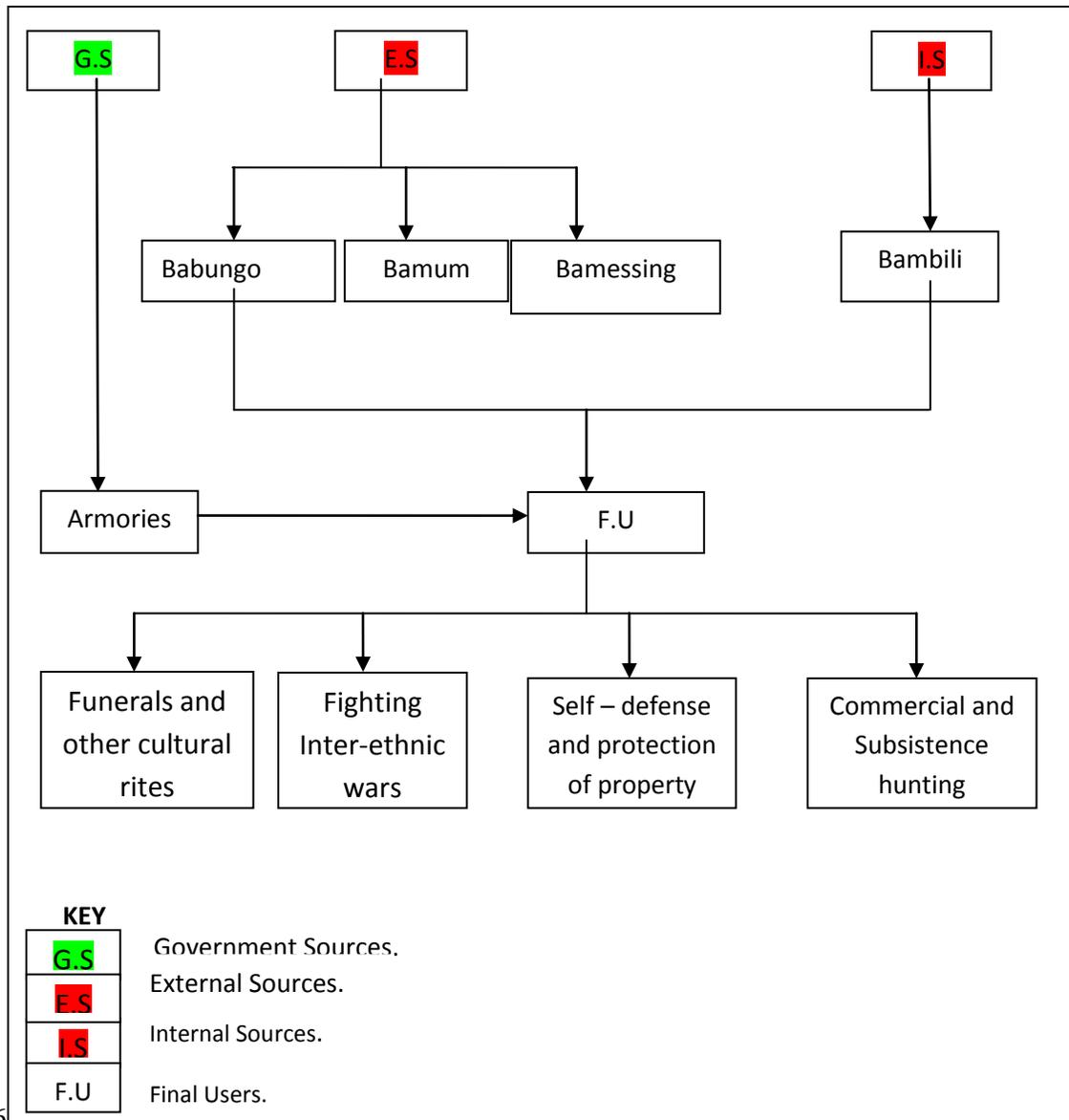
The implemented government measures for national arms control since 1973³ infringed upon the once thriving gun culture in Bafut, Mankon, Nso, Nkwen among other communities of the Bamenda Grassfields. Since the implementation of such uncompromising arms control policies in Cameroon, especially amidst the heights of the Anglophone crisis since 2016, indigenous cultures within the Bamenda Grassfields have been forced to an abrupt end. This study will extensively argue that the once thriving gun culture in the entire Bamenda Grassfields was negatively impacted by government policy, particularly, while aiming for gun control within the further escalating Anglophone crisis.

The Sourcing and Utilization of Guns in the Bamenda Grassfields

Guns and ammunitions that characterized a traditional society in the Chiefdoms of the Bamenda Grassfields during the golden days of a thriving gun culture were sourced from a few of such communities but a lesser proportion came from Bamum Kingdom in the West Region of Cameroon.⁴ An exemplary caption of the sourcing, exchange and circulation of firearms and ammunitions in Bambili before 2016 when the Anglophone Crisis escalated can be presented in the figure that follows.

³ Nchourupouo Isaac Siril, 36years, Assistant Divisional offer for Tubah, D. O's office, Bambui, 09 May 2018.

⁴ Ibid.



2016

Fig. 1: Firearms and Ammunitions sourcing, exchange and circulation in some Bamenda Grassfields villages,

Source: Kingsly Ayunifor Yunisha, “Arms Possession and State Regulation in the Bambili Fondom of the Bamenda Grassfields 1973-2016,” University of Bamenda, Faculty of Arts, Department of History and Archaeology, unpublished Master’s Dissertation, 2019, 53.

Traditional Value of Guns in the Bamenda Grassfields

In the social domain, guns were important for the animation of all funerals since in the pre-colonial period.⁵ All communities in the Bamenda Grassfields shared a custom of compulsory funeral rites for all departed members of the community. During such recurrent occasions, gunshots were indispensable to send departed souls to the land of spirits where they reunited with venerated ancestors.⁶ In the phenomena of indigenous cultures, gun firing was an indispensable characteristic of funerals in all the cardinal points of the community. All funerals unfolded with numerous gunshots from by both members of family and community at large who were mourning and sympathizing respectively. Gun firing at funerals usually differed according to traditional status and economic background of the deceased persons. In the case of traditional titled men and women of the community, more guns were fired at their funerals.

This was even far greater and quite interesting when such a number was overwhelmed during the celebrations commemorating the events of a “disappeared”⁷ Fon.⁸ These rare occasions rallied together all members of community and neighboring villages. In the case of the celebrations that marked the disappearance of Fon Awemo II, uncountable thunderous gunshots sounded daily from 15 November 2013 to 28 February 2014 when mourning officially ended.⁹



Firearms display at the traditional funeral of Fon Awemo II of Bambili, Bambili 2013

Source:https://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2016/NA_2016-04-04_FR_G-BERGHEZAN.pdf

In the case of Bambili, this event remains one of the last occasions where gun culture was upheld in post-colonial years before the implementation of a prohibitive gun policy in 2016.

There were some traditional institutions in Bambili whose existence was indispensable of guns. *Lalee* featured with gunshots at funerals always at night. The time of their exhibition rested on the myths of the institution as a reincarnation of gods who could not be seen by anyone, much less by a woman.¹⁰ The numerous gunshots that sounded in the nightly hours of either the first or second days of a funeral kept

⁵ Mbunkah Yekikang Lucas, 60years, member of *menjong*, Bambili, 20 June 2018.

⁶ Nchotidoh Robert, 78 years, member of *lalee*, Bambili, 12 April 2018.

⁷ The peoples of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon prefer to say a Fon disappeared rather than saying that he died. This is due to the belief shared by all such communities that a Fon does not die but simply disappears and reincarnates in another body. That is why the death of a Fon is never announced until a new one has been enthroned.

⁸ Nche Samuel, 66 years, member of *menjong*, 3 corners Bambili, 10 July 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

distant listeners awake in their beds and mats as mourning households and all adult members of the community were able to determine the shots of *Lalee* from a possible event of armed robbery. The intense, thunderous and quite disturbing nightly gunshots of *Lalee* were synonymous to none in nightly hours of a day. The gun-filled exhibitions of this traditional institution became its tag and symbol that many traditionally affiliated subjects mastered and adored in Bambili.

Among the rest of the Bamenda Grassfields, *Menjong*¹¹ was another traditional institution that prioritized gun usage in its catalogue of activities, especially during funerals. There existed two types of *Menjong*. The *Menjong-Fuo* was a group of selected armed abled body males of the community to fire gunshots at funerals or battled fields under the auspices of the Fon.¹² This was not very recurrent in the community because the Fon rarely took part at funerals and inter-ethnic armed conflicts were not too regular. There was also the *Menjong-Nwen* that comprised selected and assembled members of the community to assist an individual in exhibiting gunshots as mourning went on.

Maturity and manhood were also symbolized by the ownership and usage of guns in the context of cultural perceptions.¹³ In all of these communities, every emerging young man could only be well appreciated from the ability of such an individual to own and fire a gun during traditional occasions, especially funerals. Gun firing differentiated lesser men from abled men.¹⁴ Lesser men as non-gun owners were commonly referred to be, were equated to women who lacked the boldness to fire a gun. This could be a topic for another debate.

At funerals, youngsters who were turning in their teen ages were cajoled to fire guns. Such show of boldness qualified them as men and in rare occasions were characterized by showering of gifts unto the individual, especially by parents and guardians.¹⁵ In similar circumstances, some women displayed bolder attitudes as they fired guns with just one hand.¹⁶ This unexpected trend of events that was very much cherished in this part of Cameroon downplayed on sexist comments and pejorative opinions about women.

From a careful glance at some negative opinions about the liberal gun environment that thrived in the Bamenda Grassfields, the implementation of national arms control laws in 1973 and 2016 successively by Cameroon government were saluted with euphoria. Those who saw guns only as instruments of social trauma and disorder continued to dispute contrary arguments that project guns as inextricable components of culture and economy of Bamenda Grassfields villages. However, largely shared anti-gun opinions gave more credibility to government intentions to push for guns control legislations prioritizing collective safety in the post-colonial era.¹⁷ This posed evidently challenging threats to the sustainability of a once thriving indigenous gun culture the Bamenda Grassfields.

Government Firearms Control Legislation before 2016

On 22 October 1973, President Ahmadou Ahidjo signed law number 73/658 for the purpose of arms control in Cameroon.¹⁸ This was the most decisive law in the history of arms control in post-reunified Cameroon.¹⁹ It targeted the importation, sale, acquisition and ownership of firearms and ammunitions of war, defense and hunting. It established different types of authorizations indispensable for any individual who sought the ownership of firearms within Cameroon frontiers. Specifically, there was unconditional

¹¹ Also known as *Manjong* in Bafut, Nkwen and Mankon.

¹² Abobu Jonathan, 51 years, member of *menjong*, Bambili, 30 May 2018.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with Nwatum Atanga John.

¹⁷ Ashongdang Taniform, 39 years, victim of Bambili-Babanki war, Bambili, 12 April 2018.

¹⁸ Interview with Isaac Cyril Nchourupouo.

¹⁹ Germany annexed the territory as a protectorate on 12 July 1884. In 1916, Britain and France defeated Germany in Cameroon during WWI and partitioned the territory among themselves. These spheres were administered independently until 1961 when the former British Southern Cameroon voted to reunite with the already independent Republic of Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. On 20 May 1972, the Federal system was abolished and a unitary state created called the United Republic of Cameroon.

need for such gun aspirants to seek an authorization of purchase and ownership of firearms and ammunitions for personal usage. In the same context, one could opt for an authorization for importation of arms, their spare parts and munitions for commercial purpose. For non-citizens living in Cameroon, they were indiscriminately compelled to seek an authorization for purchase of arms and ammunitions for strangers.

Penalties to defaulters were mild but very uncompromising.²⁰ Chapter four, article twenty of law number 73/658 emphasized that without bias of application, deviants paid a compulsory fine of 4000 to 25000 CFA francs and an imprisonment term of five to ten days.²¹ Besides, all illegally acquired arms were to be confiscated. Some people opine that the punishments contained therein were not too rigid and appeared to be very loose. Assigning just five to ten days in prison with a 4000 to 25000 CFA francs fine seemed less threatening to illicit arms dealers.

This explains why even after 1973, the phenomenon of firearms and ammunitions in the Bamenda Grassfields was not seriously impacted. Gun usage without prescribed authorizations was rampant in cultural rites, hunting and in sustaining inter-ethnic wars.²² In reality, this law was ambitious but fell short of strong internal provisions to eliminate the proliferation of illicit arms and ammunitions. These weaknesses and the complacency of mandated administrative authorities encouraged continuous local fabrication and usage of firearms and ammunitions in local communities without required legitimacy. These previous shortcomings were supplemented in 2016 with what popular opinions rated as better and timely.

Tightening State Control of Firearms and Ammunitions amidst the Anglophone Crisis

From 2016, Anglophone secessionist attempted to render the Anglophone regions ungovernable through civil disobedience, boycotts, urban terrorism, mass protests etc. National days such as February 11 celebrated as youth's day and May 20 celebrated as national day were boycotted and/or sabotaged. Mass protests were regular and the most popular was on September 22, 2017 when men, women, children came out in all the villages in Anglophone Cameroon and in all the major cities in the world including the UN headquarters, New York to clamour for the independence of the Southern Cameroons²³. On October 1, 2017 they celebrated the independence of the Southern Cameroon thereby violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Cameroon²⁴. The extremists also declared every Monday a civil disobedience day with no work or no activity especially government related activities. Since then ghost towns, lock-ups etc became common methods of fighting the enemy republic.

The new modus operandi this time was the use of arms or warfare to liberate the Southern Cameroons. Several armed groups were created by the various factions of the Anglophone liberation struggle. The most prominent were; the Southern Cameroons Defense Force (SOCADEF) of Ebenezer Akwanga, the Ambazonia Defense Force (ADF) of Ayaba Cho, the Lebialem Red Dragons controlled by Chris Anu, Ambazonia Self-Defense Council, Ambazonia Restoration Army led by Paxson Agbor, Southern Cameroon Defense Forces (SCDF) controlled by Nso Foncha and Manyu Ghost Warriors (World Bank, 2019). These groups acquired weapons through and from Nigeria and even used young men and women from the Cross River State of Nigeria as machineries²⁵. From the use of Dane guns, knives, cutlasses at the beginning of this phase of the war, the "Amba Boys" as they are called later acquired AK47s and the

²⁰ Kingsly Ayunifor Yunisha, "Arms Possession and State Regulation in the Bambili Fondom of the Bamenda Grassfields 1973-2016," University of Bamenda, Faculty of Arts, Department of History and Archaeology, unpublished Master's Dissertation, 2019, 67.

²¹ Law number 73/658 of 22 October 1973.

²² Interview with Isaac Cyril Nchourupouo.

²³ N. Okereke, "Analysing Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol.10, no3, 2018, pp.8-12

²⁴ M. Ayim, *Former British Southern Cameroons Journey Towards Complete Decolonisation, Independence and Sovereignty*, Bloomington, Author House, 2010, p.87

²⁵ E.Sombaye, "Inside the Virtual Ambazonia: Separatism, Hate Speech, Disinformation and Disapora in the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis", MA Thesis, the University of San Francisco, 2018, p.6.

deadly M21 which they used against the soldiers and civilians. The government had to react to check the misuse of guns in the Bamenda Grassfields.

President Paul Biya endorsed law number 2016/015 on 14 December 2016 to lay down general regulations for weapons and ammunitions in Cameroon.²⁶ In section eighty-three of part IV, this law repealed all provisions (the 1973 law included) earlier intended for the purpose of arms control.²⁷ The law clearly defined a weapon or arm as any object or device that can be used to kill, wound, knock, incapacitate or cause bodily injury. It identifies a Dane gun as any indigenously made barrel fireman capable of firing lead, bullets or projectiles using an explosive charge as a propellant that can kill, injure or incapacitate the victim. More so, it defines a native gun as any traditionally made object or device that can be used to kill, injure or produce a sound effect. This law specifies a hunting gun as a firearm used for game and sport hunting and not classified as a weapon of war or a defensive firearm.²⁸ Most importantly, this law prohibits any local fabrication of such local firearms and ammunitions.

It holds that whoever manufactured, sold or used traditional firearms got an imprisonment term within the range of two to ten years and a fine between five hundred thousand to ten million CFA francs.²⁹ Within this rigid government arms control policy since 2016 blacksmiths, gun lenders, gunpowder vendors, hunters and cultural loyalists were shunned out from their cherished traditional livelihoods across the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. By targeting the prohibition of locally made weapons, the policy makers were indirectly acknowledging the impact of such firearms and ammunitions on the events of the souring Anglophone Crisis.

Furthermore, such a measure was meant to weaken the ability of armed separatists who were aided by illicit firearms and ammunitions fabricated without license.³⁰ To limit the ability of owners to orchestrate wider armed crimes against fellow citizens and most importantly, against the state, section twenty-nine of its chapter two restricted an individual from having access to more than one authorization to acquire, purchase and possess category four and five weapons.³¹ Acknowledging the temperament and clumsiness of young people and disabled persons respectively in handling such sensitive weapons, section thirty prohibited the issuing of authorization to persons less than twenty-one years old, even if emancipated, or to an adult with disability.

Anglophone Crisis and the Changing Value of Guns in the Bamenda Grassfields

Given the growing insecurity in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon, in 2016 government initiated an amendment of the 1973 arms legislation to ban the circulation of arms among uncertified civilians in the Northwest, Southwest, Littoral, Centre, Adamawa and West Regions of Cameroon.³² This triggered unprecedented threats and challenges to the prominence of guns in the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole.

Such government arms control policies undoubtedly infringed on the cultural significance of guns shared by all villages within the Bamenda Grassfields. The use of guns in the animation of funerals was apparently compromised.³³ As from December 2016 onwards, amidst the heights of insecurity within the deteriorating Anglophone Crisis, the ownership of a firearm in Bambili, Mankon, Nso, Bafut among other villages of the Bamenda Grassfields was a crime. Funerals lost the characteristic gun firing tradition that was prioritized by everyone in all villages of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.

The phenomena of gunshots at funerals dwindled as such cultural treasures were put out of sight. This was because the owners feared arrests by the police on charges of defying laws in force, obliging

²⁶ Yunisha, "Arms Possession and State Regulation," 68.

²⁷ Law number 2016/015 of 14 December 2016.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Law number 2016/015 of 14 December 2016.

³⁰ Ali Gabga, 55years, Divisional Officer for Tubah D. O's office, Bambui, 09 May 2018.

³¹ Law number 2016/015 of 14 December 2016.

³² "Decree Number 73/658 of 22 October 1973 regulating the Importation, sale, possession and Usage of Arms and Ammunitions".

³³ Achu Mudu, 54years, former gunpowder vendor, Bambili, 20 August 2018.

voluntary surrender of such weapons to Divisional Offices. The guns molded and rusted in hidden locations, which informants preferred not to mention. The implementation of government arms control laws made funerals boring and very dormant to a majority of gun users and advocates in Bambili.³⁴ As such, the enthusiasm that often characterized gun firing at funerals died an unnatural death.

Besides, guns lost the pride of place in symbolizing traditional institutions such as the *Menjong* and *Lalee*. This was unprecedented. *Lalee* and *Menjongs* went to the funerals of their staunch members without guns unlike before. The excitement usually boosted by thunderous gunshots was absent. Without their guns these traditional institutions were rendered mute and powerless, first to usher their deceased members to the afterlife and secondly to carry out more productive hunting parties. It must be reiterated that these institutions and firearms were inseparable as the former was very dependent on the latter. Most of all, *Abuum* whose membership was dependable on gun ownership and mastery of shooting skills was severely affected.³⁵ The activities of these men were retarded by implemented arms control policies. The use of guns in inter chieftom diplomacy also suffered because no one could risk moving with a gun from one Chieftom to another.

Moreover, the popularity of guns as traditional symbols of maturity and manhood was eroded.³⁶ Previously, the ownership and ability to use such arms determined the ascension to adulthood by a man. This was enhanced by even a severe tag on the number of guns in the collection of a single individual. This pride came under erosion by anti-guns legislations from government on the bases of security and social cohesion. This phenomenon made it impossible to differentiate men from women, children from adults alike.³⁷ The optimism that accompanied gunshots by first-timers was absent then after.

Gunpowder vendors were also unduly targeted by such inconvenient external interferences on the part of government. The sales of gunpowder was a cherished venture in the community for many years many people took pride in it while their services were remarkable to Bambili people. Gunpowder vendors solved the problems of many as they lent guns and made supply of ammunitions guaranteed and sustainable. As seen in chapter two Achu Mudu and James Tabah were among those who took interest in gunpowder vending and guns lending in Bambili. This satisfaction was altered when arms control legislations rebuked the sale of ammunitions and transfer of guns to uncertified persons.³⁸

CONCLUSION

Gun culture was shared by all the Chieftoms of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. The utilization of guns in these communities provided economic activities and animated socio-cultural endeavors. For generations, guns were inextricable elements in the daily lives and culture in the Bamenda Grassfields. Funerals, hunting, individual and communal defenses were among the many avenues from where guns were highly appreciated by all members of the community. Traditional institutions such as *Abuum*, *Menjong* and *Lalee* were sustained within the cherished gun culture shared in the Bamenda Grassfields. After 1973, implemented government policies to control the acquisition, possession and usage of firearms evidently wounded this pristine indigenous guns culture. In 2016, the amended 1973 law made this situation even more serious and invited even greater nostalgic sentiments from all Bamenda Grassfields villages about lost gun culture and a once thriving gun economy.

In its findings, gun culture in the Bamenda Grassfields was sustained by socio-economic and political significance attributed to such weapons. Besides, the sustainability of guns among indigenous cultures in the Bamenda Grassfields was subdued to the path of extinction by implemented government arms control legislations and anti-guns opinions within the community facing the harsh realities of the Anglophone Crisis.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Peter Afegenui, 57 years, Security Guard and member of *Abuum*, *Bambili*, 20 August 2018.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

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