

# The Destruction and End of Yee Village Settlement of Nso *Fondom* in Cameroon, 1975

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the destruction and abrupt end of the Yee village settlement of the Nso *fondom* in Cameroon in 1975. It argues that the event came as a consequence of the government's effort to provide potable water to the entire Kumbo town and its neighborhood populace. The decision to get the inhabitants of Yee (Kumbo water catchment intake zone) displaced was taken by the Technical Commission placed in charge of the water supply scheme and was to be implemented by the Cameroon government. Efforts to get the inhabitants peacefully relocated, compensated, and resettled failed. They rejected all displacement offers and vowed to continue to inhabit the catchment basin. Forceful eviction came as the only option for the full implementation of the decision of the Technical Commission. This paper reveals that the refusal of the inhabitants to quit Yee was dictated by their attachment to their material investments and ancestral rights and that their eviction was done with impunity and then code-named "*Ngwerong* action." The Fon gave the green light but stood with the Divisional Officer at a distance and watched masked *Ngwerong* elements supervising the action. There exists some literature on the circumstances that led to the accomplishment of the Kumbo Water Project, but little attention has been paid to the root causes that prompted the destruction and complete extermination of the once-flourishing Yee village. In researching this issue, we used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. We contacted informants and had personal communication with them especially some of the victims including Nso elites and notables. To ensure credibility of information gathered through oral interviews, we used the quintodiamentional questioning approach. We equally gathered information related to the issue existing in isolated form from published works to complement information from primary sources. Primary data was collected using structured questionnaires. Some credible facts and figures were also collected from both private and public archives.

**Keywords:** Catchment intake, Destruction, Eviction, Fon, *Ngwerong*, *Ngwerong* Action, Water Scheme, Yee inhabitants.

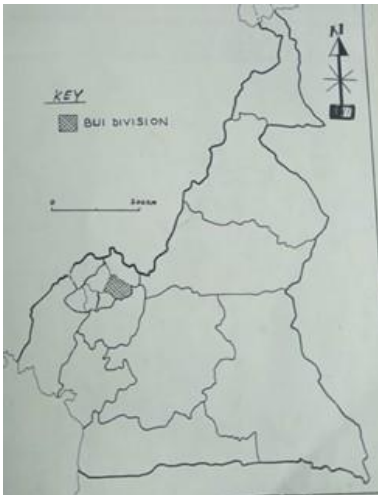
## INTRODUCTION

P. Diaz (, n.d.) argues that one of the key successful factors of development projects is when their planning involves people who will benefit or be affected by the project. This implies that all displaced people resulting from project implementation must also be involved in its realization and should benefit from its operations. In the same light, U. Sahoo and B. Jojo (2020) addressing a similar situation in India point out that while the Indian state has responded to development-led displaced people with promises of 'resettlement and rehabilitation', in most cases, the State has only confined itself to 'resettlement', neglecting the 'rehabilitation' of displaced communities, many of them *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, and marginal farmers. Sahoo and Jojo contend that the action of resettling displaced people without rehabilitating them is tantamount to desperation. It is clear from Sahoo and Jojo's point of view that some development projects often lead to eviction or displacement of local occupants of the project's intended site who must also be

involved in its realization as well as being resettled and rehabilitated to avoid desperation. This was not the case with the Kumbo water project realized in 1975. Both the envisaged attempts to peacefully resettle and compensate the Yee local inhabitants and the inhabitants' readiness to oppose and prevent displacement efforts failed, as the inhabitants found themselves forcefully rooted out, and dumped into desperation without compensation and or resettlement done to them. D. Debasree (2015) thinks that some developmental Projects cannot be achieved without displacement but the displaced should be catered for. This was however not the case with the displaced Yee inhabitants.

Yee is a small village of the Nso' fondom in the Bui Division of Cameroon.<sup>[1]</sup> It is found some seven kilometers north of the Kumbo market square along the Ring Road to Nkambe. Bui Division is one of the seven divisions, including Mezam, Menchum, Momo, Donga-Mantung, Ngoketunjia, and Boyo constituting the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. Bui Division is bordered to the north by Donga-Mantung Division, to the south by Ngoketunjia Division, to the east by Noun Division, and the west by Boyo Division. It falls between Latitudes 5°:6'' and 6°:25'' North and Longitude 10°:20'' and 11°:25'' East (P.N. Mdzeka, 1990). Kumbo is its capital and Yee is one of its villages, which lies to the north of Kumbo (see map 1 and 2).

**Map 1:** The Republic of Cameroon Showing the Location of Nso Fondom



**Source:** Adapted from A.S. Neba, Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, New Jersey, p184

**Map 2:** Nso Fondom showing the Location of Yee Village



**Source:** Adapted from the Map of Bui Division, Divisional Service of Lands, Bui

Yee village was selected to serve as the source of the Kumbo Water Supply scheme in 1972 because of its geographical importance. It serves as a watershed for many rivers. It contains the main intake on the Kinsaan River and two subsidiary intakes on the Noonnga and Rooyee Rivers Mdzeka (1990) and C.T. Jumbam, (2000). These rivers have many smaller tributaries upstream that make the drainage system aptly described as dendritic in pattern with most of the Yee people living above the intakes. The fear that human habitation of the catchment area could lead to the contamination of water posed a major problem to the water scheme. The Technical Commission in charge of the scheme met and it was decided that the Yee people must leave the catchment area and be compensated and resettled before the execution of the water scheme could be operational G.D Njoka, (1993), and Personal communication with Ndzelen Tahnteng, August 11, 1999). The refusal of the Yee inhabitants to respect the decision of the Technical Commission to quit resulted in their being forcefully evicted from the area and their houses destroyed with others and belongings burnt into ashes. This action is what we have termed “The destruction and end of the Yee village settlement” and it was not without root causes.

## ROOTS TO THE DESTRUCTION OF YEE VILLAGE

Had the Yee inhabitants heeded the decision of the Technical Commission to peacefully vacate the catchment area and to accept compensation and resettlement from the government, force might not have been used on them. Manipulation of fact by interest groups usurped all endeavors toward a peaceful settlement and caused Yee inhabitants to refuse to vacate the zone as well as accepting compensation and resettlement proposals made. Prefectural Order No. 20/1975 (DOAK.[\[2\]](#) File No.30/4F/E26/EAB/EAS/44 (1975)), evicting the inhabitants of Yee alongside the Provincial Order (DOAK. File No. 28/A/PNO/SP (1974)) were manipulated by some interest groups. The Prefectural Order called on the Yee inhabitants to evacuate the whole of the Yee basin. However, some inhabitants of Yee interpreted it to mean that the eviction order evicted only settlements close to the intake areas and not everybody in the whole basin (personal communication with Tahnteng, 11 August 1999). In reality, this was a manipulation of fact because it was contrary to the declaration of the Order as spelled out in its articles I and II.[\[3\]](#) Many Yee inhabitants therefore clung to the basin with the feeling that only the areas around the intake were to be deserted despite the call for them to evacuate the whole basin. It was difficult to change the minds of the people who had already accepted the manipulated version of the Order. Another aspect of manipulation concerned Bill Priestner, the technician supervising the scheme. The rumor started circulating in Yee that Bill Priestner was instigating the inhabitants not to leave Yee (personal communication Felix Mbuhtum, interview, 22 August 1999). It was claimed that a similar scheme supervised by Bill Priestner was underway at Binyu village in Donga-Mantung Division but the inhabitants there were never displaced. This might have been true, but that did not mean that Bill Priestner was instigating the Yee people not to evacuate their site. In the first place, the geographical location of the Binyu village catchment area and its settlement and the Yee village catchment area and its settlement were not the same. Secondly, it is doubtful that Bill Priestner the very technician who selected Yee as the best site for the catchment area of the Kumbo water supply scheme and emphasized the necessity of the inhabitants to quit the area could turn around and instigate the inhabitants of Yee not to leave the area. This rumor was just used by the inhabitants to continue their stay in the catchment basin and play for a time. Whatever the case, the manipulation of the eviction Order gave the inhabitants of Yee the courage to reject all the concessions offered to them to leave the area and made them determined to continue their stay in the basin. The outcome of this was the forceful eviction of the people from the Yee Basin, the conflict proper.

The decision of the Yee people to refuse to leave their settlement was explained by their attachment to their investments. According to Alexander N. Ngwa in our communication 16 August 1999), they could not imagine how a well-organized people like themselves would be asked to quit their old settlement overnight. The custom and tradition of Nso’s notion of home in the African context made them highly tied to their

settlement despite the repeated calls by the Fon and the administration they quit the area. Besides their investments, the Yee people rejected the decision to leave because their ancestors, their loved ones, and their umbilical cords were buried in Yee (personal communication with Aloysius Lahfen, 17 August 1999). The custom and tradition of Nso made the Yee people feel that it was not right to abandon their forefathers who had bequeathed to them. Their determination not to quit was thus one of the major causes of the conflict since the Fon of Nso and the Bui administration were determined to see them leave the area.

The disagreement amongst the Yee inhabitants as to whether to leave as instructed or not was another major cause of the conflict. While some of them were peace-loving, accepting all concessions offered to them to evacuate the Yee basin, some rejected all concessions and were determined to maintain their settlement in the catchment basin (personal communication with Lawrence Langwa, 28 July 1999). The disagreement that prevented the Yee people from working co-operatively to settle their problem was between the Yee inhabitants and their elites on the one hand and between the lineage heads on the other hand. First and foremost, the disagreement between the Yee inhabitants and their elites first manifested itself at the meeting held at Tobin on 8 March 1974. The meeting was aimed at trying to persuade the Yee inhabitants to evacuate their settlement. It was chaired by Guillaume Nseke- the then Governor of the North West Province (PFPAK., [4] minutes of the Coordination Committee Meeting, 8 March (1974)). During the meeting, the Yee inhabitants expected much from their elites in defending their course. They thought it was going to be easier for their elites to persuade the Governor to allow them to maintain their stay in Yee. They were convinced that being government workers, their elites already formed part of the government they were working hard to persuade. Thus they considered their elites as their bridge to the administration and expected much from them. Some of these elites were Reverend Pastor Fai (then councillor), and Alexander Ngwa (then government Nurse). It was very surprising to the Yee inhabitants when these elites went contrary to their expectations. They refused completely to plead with the Governor for an alternative decision even when a chance was given to some of them to express their views on the issue (personal communication with Bouba Wirkom, 25 June 1999). For example, when Pastor Fai was called upon to express his own opinion on the problem, he became so brief and even controversial in his opinion that no one could say clearly whether he was for or against the wishes of his people. As he put it himself:

*When the water scheme started, I advised those concerned that it was better to prevent than cure and that knowing right and doing wrong was unwise (PFPAK., Minutes of the Coordination Committee Meeting (1974)).*

Pastor's notion of "prevent than cure" could not be interpreted by the Yee people. Some resolved that he meant they (Yee people) should "wisely evacuate the catchment basin than face force" The general conclusion drawn by the people of Yee was that the pastor and other elite who contributed nothing during the meeting were siding with the administration and the Fon against their wish. Angered by the position of their elite, some lineage heads of Yee who were present at the meeting hall resorted to provocative declarations in responding to some of the questions asked them by the Governor. For example, *Faay* [5] Nkor declared that "I would rather prefer death to go away" and added that he was not prepared to forcefully go against the wish of his forefathers by leaving behind what they left for him for a new settlement. *Faay* Mbiame declared "Having been born at Yee, brought up at Yee, and later installed "*Faay*", I have never noticed the existence of dysentery at Yee". He was responding to the statement made by Dr Lemke of BBH [6] that he recently admitted 250 cases of dysentery of which 65 were of amoebic dysentery. For his part, *Faay* Dom another lineage head stated that: "We prefer being rotten on the spot to suffering the inconveniences consequent upon the move". *Faay* Duy also declared "Rather than leave Yee, it better a bomb destroys all of us" (PFPAK., minutes of the Coordination Committee Meeting (1974)). All these declarations showed the degree of anger on the side of the Yee lineage heads arising from what they perceived as the treacherous position of their elites. It was therefore in this meeting that the seed of disunity between the Yee inhabitants and their elites was manifested.

After the meeting, Pastor Fai and other elite were assigned by the governor to go and educate the inhabitants of Yee on the issue. When they did as instructed, they were brandished as traitors, insulted, and chased away (personal communication with Pastor Fai, 3 August 1999). Anti-elite feelings reached their apex in the Yee basin when the inhabitants performed secret rites against Pastor Fai and Alexander Ngwa (personal communication with Bouba Wirkom, 25 June 1999). In this respect, they buried two white fowls alive in the names of Pastor Fai and Alexander Ngwa. This secret rite was followed by immoral and provocative songs, vows, and oaths against these elites. Touched by the secret rites and other provocative activities of their brothers, the elite who thought they were peacefully trying to solve the problem, decided to favor any negative Government action against the inhabitants. They even pronounced the usage of force if the Government considered it the best way of solving the problem. They however called for immediate compensation and resettlement of the people after being forced out of Yee. The confusion between the elites and their brother inhabitants explains why no dialogue could be reached among them on the issue.

Another disagreement among inhabitants of Yee was one between some of the lineage heads which further aggravated the situation. For instance, *Faay* Nkor, the leader of all the lineage heads of Yee was not on good terms with *Faay* Mbo`kinsaan because of a land dispute. *Faay* Mbo`kinsaan and *Faay* Dom for their part could not forget their differences arising from a land dispute opposing both families in which both sides sustained machete wounds (personal communication with Aloysius Lahfen, 17 August 1999). There also existed social differences related to tradition, culture, and customs. For example, *Faay* Mbo`kinsaan hated the fact that *Faay* Nkor did not respect his rank as “*Faay*”. Due to these grievances, Yee lineage heads found it difficult to act in concert with the administration or examine the situation more objectively and leave the catchment area to prevent the crisis and receive compensation for their property and a new settlement site.

Indeed, the disagreement between the Yee inhabitants and their elites and that among their lineage heads kept the whole village confused, preventing the spirit of cooperation and solidarity in the face of a common problem. No meeting of all the lineage heads of Yee was held since the problem started; rather they met in segments and in different places arriving at controversial decisions that were never accepted by the camp. The result of this disunity was the fact that while some inhabitants accepted the call to evacuate the Yee basin, others asked for immediate compensation as the only condition for evacuating and others went on taking oaths in which they vowed to remain in Yee. This confused atmosphere made things very difficult, for it became clear by 1975 that no dialogue could be reached between the administration and the Yee populace.

The last cause of the crisis involved the contradictory position taken by the Fons of Nso who were more concerned with the project. The Kumbo water supply scheme was initiated and embarked upon during the reign of HRH[7] Fon Sehm III but was later completed and opened for public consumption during the reign of HRH Ngah Bi fon II (personal communication with Ndzelen Tahnteng, 11 August 1999). When work started on the Kumbo water scheme, Fon Sehm III requested the Yee inhabitants to support it wholeheartedly to ensure its realization. He called on them to thank God for choosing Yee as the source of the Kumbo Water Supply. In one of his visits to Yee, he called on the people to come out, Father, Mother, and Children- indiscriminately to offer the needed labor for the completion of the great God-given project (personal communication with *Faay* Liiwong, 15 November 1999). When it was rumored in 1970 that Yee people would have to leave Yee and *Faay* Nkor reported to him, he exclaimed:

*Who will drink the water if you are to leave? It is impossible for a whole village like Yee to leave their settlement because of water [sic]. Nobody should leave! (Jumbam, 2000:18).*

No doubt, he made this statement because of his ignorance of the water issue and because the Technical

Commission in charge of the water supply scheme had not made any official pronouncement on the issue. But his statement was the bedrock of the intransigence of the Yee people.

In 1972 HRH. Sehm III died and was succeeded by Ngah Bi`fon II. This new Fon inherited a very difficult problem vis-à-vis the water supply scheme. His enthronement coincided with the handing over of the technical report which indicated clearly that the Yee inhabitants were to leave Yee. It was a very difficult situation given that the necessity of water in Kumbo Town was great but the decision of the Technical Commission to evict the people from their settlement was harsh and risky taking into consideration the population to be displaced. When the new Fon, Ngah Bi`fon II, accepted the decision, the Yee inhabitants termed him “a wicket Fon” and decided to be disrespectful to him. It was very difficult to persuade the Yee people to leave since Fon Sehm III had earlier told them not to leave. It was from this point that the majority of the illiterate Yee people, who were ignorant of the importance of the Technical Commission decision, started insulting Ngah Bi`fon II and even pronouncing his real name in public, a treasonable act in Nso (personal communication with *Faay Liwong*, 15 November 1999). This behavior of the Yee people made Ngah Bi`fon II and the rest of the Nso very unsympathetic to their course and determined to uphold the decision of the Technical Commission, despite the sympathy they all had towards the plight of the Yee people and towards the need for them to be compensated and resettled. In short, the encouragement that Sehm III gave to the Yee people not to leave their ancestral homes, the willingness of Ngah Bi`fon II to accept the decision of the Technical Commission that the Yee people should leave the catchment area as a matter of necessity, and the rude and treasonable behavior of the Yee people towards the Fon and the state of Nso as a whole all combined to lift the Yee crisis off the ground.

## EFFORTS AT PEACE

When the Yee inhabitants refused to leave and vowed to remain in Yee, the Government of Cameroon and the Fon of Nso made several attempts to make them leave peacefully but failed. Efforts at peace took the form of inclusive dialogue, appeasement, and incessant meetings organized both by the Cameroon Government and the traditional authorities to cause the Yee inhabitants to peacefully leave Yee.

When the decision that Yee inhabitants were to leave Yee was handed down, the Fon Ngah Bifon II, in late 1972, summoned a meeting regrouping all the lineage heads in his palace. The meeting aimed to explain the importance of the decision to the Yee people and to propose to them new settlement grounds. After explaining the importance of the decision, the Fon proposed the area near *Kitiium* that has recently been offered to the Catholic Seminary, *Mbo`mbiim*, and *Bamkika`ay* (personal communication with Charles Nsohtaka, 16 August 1999). The Fon instructed the two *manjong*<sup>[8]</sup> houses (*Gham* and *Ba`*) to be ready for the construction of houses in the new settlement grounds provided for the Yee people. Thatched houses were temporarily to be built by the *manjong* while waiting for modern structures which the Government was to construct later for the displaced Yee population. The Fon equally requested all Nso people to welcome the Yee people, especially those who rejected thatched houses but preferred modern structures which the Government was subsequently going to put in place (Jumbam, 2000:25). Also the Fon gave the Yee people the right to always go back to harvest their crops especially coffee, pears, kola nuts, raffia palm bushes, oranges, bananas, and plantains but prohibited the cultivation any new crop (Personal communication with Shey wo Sarwaiy, 14 November 1999). Fon Ngah Bifon II was confident that the Yee people would be satisfied with all these offers and the problem would thus be solved. To his surprise, the Yee people rejected the offer because the areas offered were insufficient. Desirous of satisfying them, Fon Ngah Bifon II proposed additional grounds to include the village of *Kinko`on*, *Taakija*, *Nkeng*, and *Ngangndzen* (personal communication with Shey wo Ndzenkov, 6 March 1999). To his utter confusion, the Yee people again rejected his offer. Some of the lineage heads even left and went away while the meeting had not ended, charging that Ngah Bifon II had no right to make a decision contrary to those of his predecessor. The

meeting finally came to an end without any solution to the problem. After the meeting, the Fon made many unsuccessful attempts to bring the lineage heads of Yee once more to a common forum. This was followed by his countless visits to Yee to plead with the inhabitants as his sons and daughters to leave Yee for the new sites. In our communication with Felix Mbuhtum 22 August 1999), he stated that some of these visits were not welcomed by the people of Yee who not only bitterly to him but also treasonably pronounced his real name in public and deserted him.

Aware of what had gone so far, the Nso elite and elderly residents in Yaounde decided on 1 February 1973 to write to the Fon of Nso requesting him to convene an enlarged meeting to look into the problem (DOAK., Minutes of the Coordination Committee meeting (1973)). They proposed that the meeting should include all Yee people and the Divisional Administrators.

Consequently, the meeting the Yaoundé Nso elite and elders had requested was organized on 8 March 1974 with Governor Guillaume Nseke of the North West Province in attendance. During the meeting, the Governor pleaded earnestly with the Yee people to leave Yee and accept new settlements but to no avail (DOAK., Minutes of the Coordination Committee meeting (1973)). Realizing that the Yee people were unyielding to his peace mission, the Governor resorted to intimidation to weaken the resistance of the Yee lineage heads and force them to accept the decision to leave Yee. To this effect, he ordered the five aged Yee lineage heads present at the meeting to sit on the front bench facing him so that he could see them properly. As the aged lineage heads took new seats, the Governor told them to accept leaving Yee peacefully or face the consequences. Realizing that the lineage heads were not prepared to dialogue peacefully the Governor warned them stating in clear terms that 48 hours were enough for him to displace the Yee settlement but added that such a measure would be a bitter one (DOAK., Minutes of the Coordination Committee meeting (1973)). He acknowledged that he knew the people had been born and bred in Yee where the remains of their forefathers, their assets, and property were to be found but stressed that the Yee people ought to know that they were 40,000 people at Kumbo who had to benefit from the water supply system against 2,000 inhabitants of Yee then hindering the success of the project. He further added that the 40,000 people could not be sacrificed to the 2,000 people. The Governor then gave the Yee lineage heads the opportunity to express all their views about the issue. The Yee lineage heads as a result contended that the late Fon of Nso Sehm III objected to their leaving Yee. *Shuufaay*<sup>[9]</sup> Nkor, the village head made it clear that he would rather prefer death to leaving Yee after having settled in the area for a long time, for he would not know what to take along and what not to take along. He asked to know why those concerned had not tapped the water from the source but had preferred to build the catchment area in the middle where people lived. Faay Mbiame, another lineage head, asked to know if there was any village in Cameroon where the people had been asked to leave as was the case with Yee. *Faay Dom* declared that “We prefer being rotten on the spot to suffering the inconveniences of such a move.” Faay Duy Yee stressed that they would rather be destroyed by a bomb than leave Yee, and defiantly asked what was going to happen now that they had refused to leave Yee. He opted to continue but stopped when the Governor interrupted by asking him whether he had once seen a bomb. He answered this question by referring the Governor to a one-time meeting where they were threatened by fire. Seeing that no amount of peace or appeasement would help solve the problem, the Governor closed the meeting by threatening gendarme action as the best solution (DOAK., Minutes of the Coordination Committee meeting (1973)).

Three weeks later, on 28 March 1974, the Governor issued a Provincial Order (No, 28/A/PNO/SP, (1974)) appointing commission members to make an inventory of all buildings and farms erected or cultivated in Yee village. The commission started work on 29 April 1974 but its members were beaten and driven out of Yee by its inhabitants. The valuation was thus never carried out (DOAK, File No. PDL3/1/Vol.1/10/MINMEN/PDL, 1984). Due to this violent behavior of the people of Yee, the Senior Divisional Officer for Bui, GC Kisob, decided on the use of force as the best means of solving the problem. He advised that the insolence of, and disrespect for traditional authorities by the Yee people should be dealt with seriously by traditional authorities and the customary court. The Divisional Officer later took his

decision and issued an Eviction Order (Prefectural Order. File No.E26/EAB/EAS/44 (1975)) after he visited Yee with the Fon and was embarrassed by the rude behavior of the Yee people towards them. For their part, Pastor Fai and Vincent Jaff, a schoolmaster who was on the Coordination Committee, suggested that the Fon and *Ngwerong* should severely punish the stubborn Yee people (personal communication with *Faay Liiwong*, 15 November 1999). Thus originated the idea of forcing the Yee inhabitants out of Yee, since the Water System could not be inaugurated with the catchment area still inhabited.

Yet, the water system was inaugurated on 7 November 1974 while the Yee people were still living in the area since the need for water had become acute in Kumbo (Jumbam, 2000:31). The inauguration ceremony was done in the Nso Palace. Six months after the inauguration of the water scheme, the Yee inhabitants embarked on the destruction of the natural forest that protected the intakes. Angered by the action taken by the Yee inhabitants, the Senior Divisional Officer for Bui convened an urgent meeting at his office on 8 July 1975 and the resolution to set the whole of Yee village on fire was taken. Part of the minutes of the meeting read:

*The Prefect [John Ebong Ngole] said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the instructions he had received from the government about the continuous staying of the Yee people at Yee even though the government had ordered them to leave the area. He said the Yee people had defied the Fon, the Administration, and the ruling party [the Cameroon National Union-CNU] and now the government has taken a decision that will normally be implemented by the Kumbo masses under the leadership of the Fon of Nso, Chairman of Area Council and the President of the CNU Section. The Senior Divisional Officer said the Fon will mobilize his traditional Organizations (Ngwerong, Ngiri, Mfu, etc); CNU will mobilize the Young Cameroon National Union (YCNU) militants, and the Chairman of Nso Council Area will mobilize his council labor gang (PFPK [10], Minutes of meeting held in connection with the Yee Water Supply, 8 July 1975).*

From the minutes above it would be seen that mobilization for the invasion of Yee came from three angles: Fon of Nso; Bui CNU Section President; and the Chairman of the Nso Area Council. The role of the Fon was however significant in the planned action. In our communication with Felix Mbuntum (22 August 1999), then Councilor, he stated that the SDO, not being versed with the traditional implications of setting a house/houses in Nso on fire feared and mandated the Fon – custodian of tradition to take the lead in the operation. The precise date for the invasion of Yee village was fixed for 14 July 1975.

It was in this light that the Fon of Nso proposed the mobilization of 300 people, the Chairman of the Nso Area Council proposed 50 people and the CNU Bui Section President proposed 50 people also (PFPK., Minutes of meeting, 8 July 1975). The Divisional Officer then instructed that all the houses in Yee should be destroyed and rendered useless. He assured members that there would be a good number of forces of law and order from Bamenda to protect the people implementing the decision. On 13 July 1975, a day before the operation, the Fon held a secret meeting in his Palace, attended by *Amfoome* [11] (sing. *Mfoome*), Leaders of *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*, and some Great lords. It was decided in this meeting that any action against the Yee inhabitants should be termed “*Ngwerong` s action.*” [12]

## **EVENT OF THE DESTRUCTION AND END OF YEE VILLAGE**

In the early morning of *Ntangrin*, the seventh day of the Nso eight-day week, 14 July 1975, the end of the Yee village settlement came. Before it was 4 a.m., the palace courtyard was already full of active young men from all corners of Kumbo Town eager to move to Yee to force its inhabitants out of the village. By 5 a.m, all necessary arrangements had been made and the Fon gave the green light (personal communication with Mbuntum, 22 August 1999). Shey wo Sarwaiy, an eyewitness of the early morning preparations in the Palace courtyard gave an account of part of the Fon`s order to the mob as follows:



*I am sending you to Yee not to kill, but to destroy all the houses of the inhabitants and send them out of the area. I do not hate them as they are already saying but I am simply applying a decision that the government has seen will benefit not only the Kimbo man but also the Yee man and any foreigner who finds his way into Nso. I provided new settlement grounds extensive enough to the Yee inhabitants as my sons and daughters, yet they refused. A few days ago, I summoned the Afaays<sup>[13]</sup> of Yee in my Palace but none of them turned up. I decided to go there personally and even trekking to plead with them to respect the simple decision taken but I instead received insults and heard my real names being pronounced. It was very shameful when some government officials who had never known my name and who knew it was a defiance of Nso tradition to pronounce the Fon`s name to learn my real name only from Yee. As you send them away, every Nso native should be ready to welcome them in their houses especially those who come in with peace. Those who do not want peace should go to where peace does not exist (Personal communication with Shey wo Sarwai, 14 November 1999)<sup>[14]</sup>.*

Before the Fon ended his speech, council vehicles arrived to help transport the mob to Yee. *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* elements, some masked dominated by young boys got themselves set for the punitive raid. Some hot-headed *Ngwerong* elements in the early morning of the fateful day had decided to move ahead and hid themselves in the thick bush close to Yee waiting for the crowd behind (personal communication with Bouba Wirkom, 25 June 1999). While the council vehicles were helping to transport the mob, some of the people preferred moving on foot singing *Ngwerong* songs. When everybody drew closer to Yee, those in the bush came out and joined them. The plan on how to launch the attack was done with the arrival of the Fon and the Senior Divisional Officer. It was agreed that as soon as the *Ngwerong* song was intoned, the first house would be set on flames (S.L. Wirngo, 1986:10).

Thus as soon as the *Ngwerong* song was intoned, the SDO asked the Fon to give the go-ahead by setting the first house on fire. That he did. As the mob followed Fon`s example, the whole Yee village was put in a state of total pandemonium (See Plate 1 for an illustration).

**Plate 1:** One of the Destroyed Houses in Yee



**Source:** Author`s Collection, 16 August 1999

**Note:** Plate 1 above presents just one of many houses in Yee destroyed by the mob in 1975. While some of

the houses were pulled down with diggers and hands, others were simply set on fire.

The confusion in the village came from the fact that most of the people were still sleeping by the time the mob came in. The palm wine tappers of Yee who left their homes very early and went to their bushes to tap palm wine were forced to surrender their calabashes of palm wine to *Ngwerong* and to run for their dear lives (S.L. Wirngo, 1986). All actions were accompanied by the singing of *Ngwerong* songs. One house after another was attacked. People were forced out of their houses which were then either set on fire or demolished. The looting of property soon started as goats, pots, fowls, money, clothes, and other valuable belonging to the Yee people were carried away by some elements to Kumbo town. Before it was 9 a.m., two trucks arrived from Bamenda loaded with the forces of law and order made of gendarmes, soldiers, and policemen (personal communication with Nsohtaka, 16 August 1999). Their presence was to prevent the operation from degenerating into an open confrontation as it was feared that the Yee inhabitants were to counteract. Rumor was even circulating that the Yee people had brought into their village sufficient gunpowder from Nigeria (personal communication with Shey wo Ndzenkov, 6 March 1999). The presence of these forces of law and order is believed to have paralyzed the Yee inhabitants who had no option to escape for their dear lives. By midday, the Yee village was already deserted by its inhabitants. Some people moved outside of the *fondom* of Nso while others settled within it. Compounds like Nkor, Mbo`kinsaan, Ncikof, Mbiamekuy, Mbiame tsen, Ki`Ntorem, Dom, Duy, and some others were relocated below the intakes further downstream in the Kinsaan valley. This new site later became known as Yee (Jumbam, 2000).

With the Yee village already put to an end, the mob singing *Ngwerong* songs retired to their Kumbo base. They first passed through the Palace where the Fon, after thanking them for a job well done, repeated his call to all Nso natives to be ready to receive any evicted Yee man seeking shelter. From Fon`s Palace, the mob dispersed as people were moving to their houses (personal communication with Lawrence Langwa, 28 July 1999). Thus Yee the village settlement that once flourished was brought to an end though with unbearable consequences.

## CONSEQUENCES

The eviction of inhabitants from Yee left a lot of consequences which for better understanding we classified under political, economic, and socio-cultural consequences. On a political note, tension later developed between the Fon of Nso and the Senior Divisional Officer for Bui over the abandoned land of Yee. Some of the evicted inhabitants of Yee in the early 1990s lobbied for land certificates to protect the parcels of land they left behind in Yee. The noted case was that of *Faay Shiri*. In September 1994, the Land Consultative Board for Kumbo Central sub-Division, appointed by Prefectural Order No., E26/RPB/94, met to assess the developments carried out as laid down in Article 13, section 2 of Decree No.76/165 of 27 April 1976 on a parcel of national land situated at Yee where *Faay Shiri* and others applied for a land certificate. Their applications were registered at the Kumbo-Sub Divisional Office. The inspection then followed. All the members of the Land Consultative Board were present including the representative of the Fon, *Faay Tawong* (prince deputy-high priest). The inspection was properly done and a land title was given to *Faay Shiri*, who now had the right to cultivate his legally recognized plot. It was very surprising when the Fon and *Ngwerong* put a traditional injunction order on the piece of land. *Faay Shiri* was later summoned to the Palace and seriously beaten for attempting to invade the land in Yee (personal communication with Godlove Suh Takwa, 15 November 1999). He took the case to the Divisional Service of Lands where he was advised to take court action. He obeyed but later withdrew his file from the court for fear of the Fon. The Fon on 3 January 1997 wrote to the Senior Divisional Officer for Bui expressing anger for the land title granted to *Faay Shirri* (DOAK, Fon of Nso to the SDO for Bui 3 January 1997). He requested the Senior Divisional Officer to desist from considering any land certificate applications from any individual or family in the catchment area. *Shey wo Sarwaiy* in our communication (6, November 1999) opined that the Fon action

against the Land Consultative Board and the Senior Divisional Officer for Bui was just because granting Land certificates to some evicted individuals or families were going to attract other evicted individuals and families to come for theirs. In this way, a good decision long taken and peace already given the pace would be ruptured.

In economic terms, investments of generations were abandoned or destroyed in one day. For example, not only were houses burnt down with many other valuable belongings, but clay and corn storage containers around houses were also destroyed and corn exposed to rainfall. Also, banana and plantain trees found around houses, amongst other things, were destroyed by the mob using cutlasses. In sum, the invaders of Yee caused inestimable economic damage to inhabitants (personal communication with Bouba Wirkom, 25 June 1999).

Apart from destroying properties and burning houses, the mob left Yee for Kumbo with lots of things stolen from Yee such as clothes, goats, fowls, portable pots, silver containers, and so on. Worst still, the Yee people abandoned their investments of generations and moved to settle in foreign lands. Such investments included kola nut trees, raffia palm bushes, orange trees as well as banana and plantain farms. In our communication with Alexander N. Ngwa (16 August 1999), he insinuated that these crops have now been grown into bushes open only to thieves who regularly invade the deserted settlement from diverse directions.

The Yee people also suffered economically in a self-delusional manner. When it became apparent that the government would compensate them, they were filled with joy and lavishly entertained the valuation commissions, committee members, and other administrative officials in the Nkor compound who visited them. Anthony Lahfen in our communication (20 August 1999), indicated that messages were equally sent to those who moved to settle in remote areas to make contributions for entertainment. It was as a result of this that they formed the “Yee Village Committee.” Members of this Committee met only when official visits were announced. They met more often at the Nkor compound. The Committee was in charge of all contributions made by the various compounds as well as all expenditures made in case of an official visit. In 1987, the Yee Village Committee came up with a statement of account showing the sum of 264,675 CFA francs as the amount got from Bassa, compounds, and the elite as contributions. All this amount was used for entertainment (DOAK, Yee people to the SDO for Bui (1987)). In their minds, the amount spent on the entertainment was to be added to the final sum to be awarded to them by the Valuation Commission (personal communication with Pastor Fai, 13 August 1999). Thus they had high hopes of double compensation- compensation for their property and compensation for all other expenditures made in the course of valuation, none of which was obtained.

In socio-cultural terms, the Yee crisis had several consequences. The education of children was disrupted. As the Yee people put in one of their letters to the Minister of Mines and Energy in 1983. Part of the letter read:

*The Situation in which we find ourselves is deplorable and perhaps worse than that of refugees. All our sheep; cattle farmlands etc [sic] that were destroyed on the fateful night of 13 July 1975 [early morning of 14 July 1975] have totally [sic] rendered us helpless. We have children who can no longer go to school due to no other source of income (PFPAK., Yee people to the Minister of Mines and Energy 20 January 1983)*

The cry of the evicted Yee inhabitants in the above letter gives a glaring picture of a situation described by New South Wales (2020) as “From Road to Refuge”

The invasion and eviction of people from Yee led to the subsequent death of many. According to the Fon of Nso, “Many people died later after the displacement of the whole village.” (PFPAK., Ngah Bifon III, address to the Minister of Mines, Water Resources and Energy (1991). Some sources also alleged that many people who went to Mbiame died. For example, those of them who went to Mbiame and came back to settle

at Shuukay. They went against their oath that they were not to leave Yee and if forced out of it, they would make themselves the subjects to the Fon of Mbiame and abandon the Fon of Nso. When they were forced out of Yee, some went to Mbiame and returned to settle at Shuukay under the Fon they had earlier disowned (personal communication with Aloysius Lahfen, 17 August 1999). Other sources alleged that many people died in Kumbo and are still dying because of the abomination they committed at Yee. It is generally believed in Kumbo that those who stole from Yee were cursed to cleanse themselves, some have been returning items they stole while others replaced them with new ones. They do this by secretly leaving items such as clothes, new pots, cutlasses, goats, and fowls, just to name a few, at the sites in Yee where they got them. Many informants we discussed with held this view especially Bouba Wirkom (25 June 1999), Aloysius Lahfen (17 August 1999), as well as Shey wo Ndzenkov, (6 March 1999) besides others who shared the same view. Many of these items were found abandoned in the area by 1999 scared by many as cursed items.

The Yee crisis also led to the displacement of a one-time well-organized people. The many compounds that existed in Yee like *Nkor*, *Mbiamekuy*, *Mbiametsen*, *Dom*, and so on with *Nkor* lineage head respected as the village head of Yee were disrupted. It took time and much money for these compounds to be relocated to the Kinsaan Valley below the intakes further downstream. These people had one *manjong* house regrouping all adult men. Also, women had special weekly meeting points. *Faay* wo Liwong during our communication, (15 November 1999) opined that the organizations of the village took years to materialize but the invaders took just a few hours to destroy. This is related to what E.Gudrais (2014) described as “disrupted lives.”

Some people moved out of the *fondom* of Nso, while others settled within it. Some of those who moved out of the Nso *fondom* resettled in Gembu, Donga Mantung Division, Banyo, and so on. A good example is Christopher Wirkom and others who left for the Donga Mantung Division with their families. Those who settled within the *fondom* of Nso are found in Mbo`, Dzekwa, Taakuy, Kiyan, Banten, Kumbo, To`oy, Kikaikelaki, and so on (personal communication with Aloysius Lahfen, 17 August 1999). Whether the people settled within or went out of the *fondom* of Nso, the fact is that their one-time well-organized village no longer exists.

The Yee people were forced to abandon their secret totems, ancestral shrines, graves of sons, daughters, sisters, uncles, aunts, and loved ones, sites where their umbilical cords were buried, and family members were displaced and no longer had any sense of belonging together. According to Shey George Kidzeeyuf in our communication (2 July 1999), this situation had a serious psychological effect on the villagers.

The burning down of a whole village by the Nso people was an abomination to be handled with care as its repercussions could be very difficult to resolve. Such an act by implication meant that the Yee people were no longer recognized as Nso people. The deep wounds inflicted upon the minds of Yee people can be seen in the naming of their new-born babies today (see table for some of the names and meanings

Table 1: Some Names Given to Children by Families of Yee Victims with Symbolic Meanings

Name	Symbolic Meaning
<i>Kigha'mo</i>	It is beyond my understanding
<i>Bandin</i>	Hate publicly
<i>Fobir</i>	Donate and become a victim
<i>Fiinila</i>	Who betrayed us
<i>Yiinso'baatoybara</i>	Act of Nso people are blamed on the Government
<i>Alaahbee</i>	Where is our relative or where is the like

<i>Sikuume</i>	It's now remembrance
<i>Ghohla</i>	Who will stay behind when all are gone
<i>Bandmbong</i>	Outright hatred
<i>Veryenni</i>	We have seen it
<i>Nsahdzeyuv</i>	Judgement will be done in heaven
<i>Nsahdzenyuy</i>	The case is with God
<i>Jumfon</i>	The Fon drove us
<i>Fomo Tong</i>	Gift with tears
<i>Jumven</i>	You all drove us away
<i>Riemdunni</i>	The witch has gone

**Source:** Compiled by author from Personal communication with: Lahfen, 17 August 1999, *Faay* wo Liiwong, 15 November 1999, Pastor Fai, 13 November 1999, and Ngwa, 16 August 1999. Also, see (Wirngo, 1986: 13)

**Note:** *Forbir* is the name Yee evicted inhabitants gave to the Water Project, meaning they have sacrificed their settlement as the source of water supply and rather become enemies.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the Yee village settlement of Nso in Cameroon came to an abrupt end in 1975 when its inhabitants were forcefully rooted out of it and their houses and property burnt or destroyed by a mandated mob. This action came as the only option because they rejected the decision of the Technical Commission placed in charge of the execution of the Kumbo Water Supply scheme stating that they must vacate the catchment area and its immediate surroundings before it was put to use. They rejected the decision, refused all concessions offered, and were bent on maintaining their stay in the area because of their investments besides other reasons. Peace efforts to cause inhabitants of Yee to leave peacefully included inclusive dialogue, appeasement, and continuous sensitization meetings on the importance of quitting the catchment intake area, organized by the Government of Cameroon and traditional authorities. The eviction action was code-named “*Ngwerong* Action” and with the Fon placed at the forefront. This was dictated by the fact that *Ngwerong* besides being the owner of Nso land alongside the Fon was the executive arm of Nso tradition with all the powers to evict/exile anyone and at any time within and out of the Nso *fondom*. Had the Yee inhabitants yielded to the resolutions of the inclusive dialogue meetings as well as accepted the new settlement sites accorded to them as a sort of appeasement pending new modern structures promised, force would not have been used on them. The peace process undertaken however was not peaceful enough in consoling the Yee inhabitants to easily succumb to the only option of quitting. By frightening the Yee lineage heads and threatening gendarme action on the 8 of Mach 1975 inclusive dialogue meeting, the governor was in no way helping to build peace in the face of a nervous situation where people had to abandon everything they had worked for to start a new life. The refusal of Yee inhabitants to quit, their forceful eviction, and the burning of their houses was a telling of a tragic action of a situation not well handled or managed.

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[1] The name “Bui Division” was coined in 1972. This was in the framework of constitutional and

administrative changes that took place in Cameroon between 1971 and 1973. Administratively, the Federated State of West Cameroon was sub-divided into two provinces and based on both geographic and ethnic lines. These are the North West and the South West Provinces. Among the seven Divisions that make up the North West Province is Bui Division which replaced the former Nsaw (Nso) District.

[2] DOAK stand for Divisional Office Achieves Kumbo.

[3] Article I stated “That a further period of of one week with effect from the date of the signature of this order has been given to the people of Yee village who inhabits the catchment basins of the following streams which flow through the said Yee village: Kinsan, Nonga, and Royer” Article II on its part stated “That all agricultural activities undertaken by the inhabitants of Yee within the catchment basins of the three streams just mentioned in Article II above which activities are illegal and in defiance of the provision of Article I (b) of Provincial Order No. 42/A/PNO/SP referred to above must also cease at the expiration of the one week ie. on 07/5/75”

[4] PFPK. Stand for Pastor Fai Private Archives Kumbo

[5] *Faay* is a traditional title in Nso tradition given to the head of a Lineage Compound.

[6] BBH is the abbreviation for Bansa Baptist Hospital. This hospital stood to benefit more from the Kumbo Water Project.

[7] HRH. Stand for His Royal Highness

[8] Traditional war club in Nso

[9] *Shuufaay* in Nso Tradition is the title given to the head of large Lineage compound with more population compared to a *Faay*

[10] PFPK. Stand for Pastor Fai Personal Achieves Kumbo.

[11] *Afoome* are traditional war lords in Nso. They are only two of them in number in NSO with each representing a war club house (Lav *Mfuu* or Manjong House).

[12] *Ngwerong* is the executive arm of Nso tradition. *Ngwerong* cannot be taken to court for trial by any subject of Nso. Rather *Ngwerong* passes judgement, execute, punish and exile criminals out of Nso fendom. *Ngwerong* owns and controls all land in Nso and can evict or resettle anybody or a group of people anywhere and anytime in the fendom.

[13] *Afaay* is the plural form of *Faay*

[14] We made the Translation of the speech from Lamnso to English.