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***INTRA-PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CAMEROON CONFLICTS: THE CASE OF
THE WEH CONGREGATION IN NORTHWEST CAMEROON***

Abstract: It is surprising how little attention has been given to the multiplication of conflicts which have plagued and continue to plague the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) since 1957, when it gained independence from the Basel Mission. In most of her departments, presbyteries, parishes and congregations, conflicts relating to tribalism, revivalism and mismanagement of funds are common. These conflicts have cost the church spiritual and socio-economic growth. In the light of the precedent, it is time that these conflicts be investigated as a leeway to heightening the urgent need to contain the present appetite for disputes in the PCC.

The conflict in the Weh Congregation in the 1980s between Rev. Simon Asang and the elders is one such eminent case worth discussing. This paper, based largely on data from archival and oral sources, is concerned with the causes, manifestation, resolution and repercussions of the conflict in the Weh Congregation.

Keywords: *conflict, Weh, Cameroon, congregation, Presbyterian Church.*

***BISERICILE PREZBITERIENE ÎN CONFLICTELE DIN CAMERUN: CAZUL
CONGREGAȚIEI WEH, DIN NORD-VESTUL CAMERUNULUI***

Rezumat: Este surprinzător cât de puțină atenție a fost acordată înmulțirii conflictelor care au afectat și continuă să afecteze Biserica Prezbiteriană din Camerun, începând cu anul 1957, când aceasta a devenit independentă față de Misiunea din Basel. În cele mai multe dintre departamentele, parohiile și congregațiile sale, conflictele legate de aspectele tribale, de nevoia unei revigorări spirituale și de administrarea defectuoasă a fondurilor sunt foarte des întâlnite. Aceste conflicte au afectat creșterea Bisericii, atât din punct de vedere spiritual cât și socio-economic.

Conflictul apărut în congregația Weh, în anii 1980, între Rev. Simon Asang și prezbiterii congregației este un caz care merită discutat. Această

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lucrare, care se bazează în principal pe materiale de arhivă și pe surse orale, are în vedere cauzele, manifestarea, soluționarea și repercusiunile conflictului din congregația Weh.

Cuvinte cheie: *conflict, Weh, Camerun, congregație, Biserica Prezbiteriană.*

Introduction

The history of Christianity from its birth to our time is characterized by conflicts. Conflicts in the PCC have never reached the proportions that they have attained in the Cameroon Baptist Convention¹. They exist, nonetheless, for the PCC, since its birth in 1957, has been marred by this old tradition of religious feuds. Building on the crux of the globalist school², the conflicts within the PCC emanated, quite often, from man's natural hostile nature, doctrinal differences, materialism, personality struggle, and tribalism. Generally, the sharpest controversies usually arise out of situations in which each party to the crisis sincerely believes he is right. These conflicts have been manifested in the different ascending administrative units of the PCC (Synod Office, presbyteries, parishes, congregations and departments). But the conflict witnessed by the Weh Congregation in Menchum-Boyo Presbytery³ (former Wum District) in the 1980s, as argued in this paper, was caused by personality struggle and tribalism.

But one has to define one's terms. The term conflict, according to Funteh, refers to "the confrontation between one or more individuals aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or ends, and the coming together of a people to

¹ For a complete discussion of the conflicts that have plagued and continue to plague the Cameroon Baptist Convention, read M. B. Funteh, "Intra-Cameroon Baptist Convention Conflicts 1954-2002: A Historical Investigation", Ph.D. Thesis in History, University of Yaounde I, 2008.

² According to the proponents of this school (W. King, J. Foxe, F. S. Mead and Carl Meyer), religious conflicts are caused by a combination of variables like man's natural hostile nature, doctrinal differences, materialism and the quest for change. For more information on the globalist school, read, for example, W. King, *The Effects of Wealth in the Church*, Ibadan, Comex Company Ltd., 2005.

³ The PCC is administratively divided into Presbyteries spread all over Cameroon. Each Presbytery is comprised of Parishes within which are found congregations. The church is headed by a Moderator who is based in Buea (seat of the Synod Office). The Presbytery and Parish are respectively headed by the Presbyterial Secretary and Parish Pastor. See J. N. Dah, "The Vision and Challenges of an Autonomous Church", in *Presbyterian Church in Cameroon: 50 Years of Selfhood*, ed. J. N. Dah, Limbe, Presprint, 2007, pp. 34-49; M. K. Lang, "The Menchum-Boyo Presbytery-Goppingen Deanery Partnership 1968-2008: A Historical Investigation", Undefended Ph.D Thesis, University of Yaounde I, 2011.

strike a common enemy”⁴. However, borrowing from Funteh and other scholars’ ideas, this paper regards conflict as the struggle between men over identity, power, interests, aims and resources. So far as our case study (Weh Congregation) is concerned, an important question to ask at this stage is: What were the bases of the conflict and to what extent did it perturb the growth of the PCC? This paper, therefore, discusses the origin of the conflict by exposing the grievances. It further examines in detail the evolution of the conflict and the measures that were designed to restore peace. Finally, the paper looks at the consequences of the crisis on the growth and influence of the PCC. It argues that the continued survival of the PCC depends on the importance the church’s authorities will commit towards the eradication of the appetite for conflict in the organization.

Origin of the Conflict: The Grievances

The antipathy within the Weh Congregation in the Wum District of the PCC emanated from varied sources. The gross neglect of the Weh Congregation in the PCC since the 1960s was one of the contributing factors to the surfacing of the rift. Before 1957 when the PCC was born, Weh was the seat of the Weh District. It started in 1926 as a Basel Mission outpost until 1932 when it was raised to a station; the third of its kind in the Bamenda Grasslands⁵. In 1935, Weh Station was renamed as Weh Presbytery alongside other stations of the Basel Mission. The Presbytery was placed under successive white missionaries (Revs. Schneider, Burki, Furst, Bachman, Hanselman and Rhim). Thanks to these missionaries, Weh emerged as the main centre from where the gospel was spread to other parts of the Presbytery. When the PCC emerged in 1957 due to the independence granted by the Basel Mission, Weh was still maintained as the seat of the Presbytery.

Unfortunately, the authorities of the Synod Office of the PCC took measures from 1968 which made Weh to lose her position as the seat of the Presbytery. As a matter of fact, the General Synod renamed presbyteries as districts in 1968. Consequently, Weh Presbytery was renamed as Wum Presbytery and its headquarters was moved from Weh to Wum in 1969⁶. The elders of the Weh Congregation together with the stationed white missionary (Rev. Rhim), objected the decision by arguing that it was a sign of neglect. They went as far as saying that the decision was influenced by the Moderator of the PCC, Rt. Rev. J. C. Kangsen (a native of Wum). The Synod Office, however, attempted to justify why the seat of the district was changed. In Moderator Kangsen’s letter to Rev. Rhim of December 1970, he explained that the seat was moved to Wum because the latter

⁴ Funteh, “Intra-Cameroon Baptist Convention Conflicts”, p. 32.

⁵ M. K. Lang, “A Study of Basel Missionary Activities and its Contributions to the Development of the Wum Region 1903-1957”, Masters Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2005, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

was the headquarters of Menchum Division⁷. But the letter failed to satisfy the Weh people since the Session of the congregation ended up not appreciating the decision. Consequently, ill-feelings were introduced in the hearts of the Christians of the Weh Congregation thereby nursing the seeds of a future conflict.

Apart from transferring the seat of the Wum District from Weh to Wum, the newly appointed authorities of the District transferred all important equipment from the Weh Congregation to Wum. That was not all. Even the equipment left behind by some of the missionaries in the Weh Station which served as office of the District were taken to Wum in spite of the opposition from the white missionary, Rev. Gerhard Rhim. The Weh Presbyterian Christians, especially the elders interpreted the move as a means of backtracking the spiritual and socio-economic growth of the mother congregation in the Wum District. Elders like Lucas Akwa Ning and Joseph Mebeng openly accused the Moderator of the PCC, Rev. Kangsen (an indigene of Wum), for attempting to develop Wum to the detriment of Weh⁸. In 1978, such accusations became multiplied due to the appointment of a son of Weh, Rev. Simon Fuh Bame, as the pastor in charge of the Weh Parish. In fact, Rev. Bame worked in collaboration with his nephew, Mebeng, to end the neglect of Weh orchestrated by the authorities of Wum District with the backing of Moderator Kangsen. With the passage of time, a majority of the Christians in the congregation were dragged into the rift between Wum District and Weh Congregation. The Christians were poised to end what they referred as “the gross neglect of their congregation”⁹. But Rev. Rhim successfully prevented the crisis from heightening.

Unfortunately, Rev. Rhim returned to Germany in 1982 when the authorities of the PCC had not taken any serious measure to resolve the conflict. The unchecked ethnic feelings that lingered in the minds of Weh people increased possibilities of a serious conflict in the congregation. But Rev. Rhim was quite aware of the danger of an imminent crisis between Wum District and the mother congregation, Weh. It was for this reason that Rev. Rhim, in his departure speech to the Weh people, identified the need for peace building in these words:

*There will be much blessing from God on a place where Christians live peacefully and faithfully to his commands. On the other hand, if they are unfaithful and disobedient to Him, they will provoke his anger and displeasure. Both Christians and non-Christians alike have together the task to build up a better future for Weh. Let peace and unity among yourselves be highly treasured. The elders and authorities of the district should commit themselves to leaving in peace. This is my parting wish and advice to you all.*¹⁰

⁷ Menchum-Boyo Presbytery Archives Wum (MBPAW), Rev. J. C. Kangsen’s letter to Rev. Gerhard Rhim relating to the neglect of Weh, 6 December 1970.

⁸ Interview with Joseph Che Mebeng, 85 Years, Elder in Weh Congregation, 14 May 2010.

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ MBPAW, Rev. Gerhard Rhim’s departure speech to the Weh people on 8 August 1982.

It appears the above advice did not serve any good purpose. Immediately after the departure of Rev. Rhim, the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Elias Cheng, carried the remaining equipment in the Weh Station left behind by Rhim to Wum. Worse still, he appointed Anthony Chi as Care-taker of the station without consulting Rev. Bame and the Session of the congregation. Since the elders and pastor protested the move, Rev. Cheng proposed to the Synod that Rev. Bame should be replaced due to old age. In order to prove his point true, the Secretary recounted Rev. Bame's weaknesses in these words:

Rev. Bame was pensioned from Befang Parish in 1977 due to old age and a low output in parish work. The Synod asked him to go and serve in the Weh Parish in 1978 pending the securing of an energetic pastor. He has not changed six years later. Your presence in the Weh Congregation when Rev. Bame is asked to officiate will be telling enough. There will be murmuring, jeering and noise making. This Christians feel uncomfortable with his presence. It is in the light of the above that I propose his replacement.¹¹

The above citation leaves us with the understanding that Rev. Cheng was trying to push aside all those who battled his neglect of the Weh Congregation. The Synod Office's response to the above letter was immediate and positive. Indeed the Staffing Committee of the PCC, on the proposal of Rev. Cheng, appointed Rev. Simon Asang as the new pastor in charge of Weh Parish. It is worth indicating that Revs. Asang and Cheng were all of Bu origin. Consequently, the elders of Weh Congregation alongside the retired Rev. Bame, saw the appointment as an attempt by Cheng to connive with his tribesman to continue with the neglect of Weh. In their opinion, Rev. Asang's appointment was worked from Buea (seat of the Synod Office) by Rev. Cheng. This explains why they were determined not to work together with the new pastor¹². Thus, Rev. Asang's arrival in Weh on August 23, 1982 helped in heightening the friction between Weh Congregation and Wum District. It also prepared the way for a serious internal rift between the Session of Weh Congregation on the one hand and Rev. Asang on the other. This was to be expected as the Weh Presbyterian Christians were prepared to check the neglect of their congregation and to cause the departure of the new pastor.

Evolution of the Conflict

The manifestation of the conflict between Weh Congregation and the Wum District due to the already discussed grievances effectively began on 23 August 1982 when Rev. Asang arrived in Weh. Upon his arrival, the elders and the outgoing pastor, Rev. Bame, though aware of Rev. Asang's coming, refused to

¹¹ MBPAW, Rev. Elias Cheng's letter addressed to the Synod Clerk of the PCC on 1 November 1983.

¹² Interview Joseph Cheng Mebeng, 85 Years, Elder in Weh Congregation, 14 May 2010.

welcome him¹³. The latter actually arrived in Weh on a Sunday when the Christians and Rev. Bame had just finished a memorial service for late Lucas Akwa Ning. The Christians and elders refused to unload Asang's property from the vehicle probably due to the influence of the outgoing pastor. This evidences not only Rev. Bame's unwillingness to hand over to the new pastor, but also exposes the desire of the elders and Christians not to see their son pastor replaced. In other words, it can be interpreted as the people's commitment to block the implementation of the appointment and to check the neglect of the Weh Congregation. On his part, Rev. Asang saw it as a refusal of the Weh people to work with him¹⁴.

Apart from failing to welcome the new pastor, Rev. Bame refused to officially hand over. He insisted handing over only in the presence of the District Secretary. When the Latter finally arrived in Weh for the handing over on 1 September 1982, the elders and outgoing pastor maintained that all church property (station, houses and land) shall be controlled by the Session and not by the pastor. This was a signal that the Session was determined to protect the church property and to check the neglect of the mother congregation. During the handing over ceremony, Rev. Asang revealed that his predecessor left the pastors' house without cleaning it. Even though the handing over was finally done, it was clear that the Session would become an obstacle to the work of the new pastor¹⁵.

In order to heighten the hatred of the Christians against Rev. Asang, the Session, probably under the influence of Rev. Bame, often told Christians that the new pastor was out to promote the neglect of Weh. It is worth noting that Rev. Bame was elected as the Chairperson of the Session shortly after handing over to Asang. During church services, the elders told Christians that in spite of the fact that Weh is the mother congregation, it has been neglected and abandoned over the years. They also insisted that Rev. Asang's transfer to Weh was intended to put into practice the anti-Weh decisions taken by the district authorities. Further, the pensioning of Rev. Bame was interpreted by the elders as an attack on the mother congregation. They exposed this to the Christians so as to turn them against the new pastor. In his annual report to the Secretary of Wum District dated 2 February 1984, Rev. Asang explained how the Session turned the Christians against him shortly after taking over the parish in 1982. He maintained that:

Due to the pensioning of Rev. Bame, the Session of the Weh Congregation opened a campaign, not against the authority of the church who gave him the pension, but against me who was posted here to take over from him. As a native, his voice is being heard and obeyed. The elders (Session) who are the backbone of the congregation are firmly behind him, and this has put the congregation into confusion and into parts. It is now

¹³ MBPAW, Report by Rev. Asang Simon on the Conflict in Weh to the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Cheng, 2 November 1983.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Presbyterian Central Archives in Buea (PCAB), Minutes of Crisis Resolution, Meeting of 27 November 1983, p. 3.

frequent to hear Christians here and there saying that 'Weh Congregation, the mother of all congregations in Wum District is dead'. Their campaign to make my work here impossible is being carried out seriously.¹⁶

Consequently, as evidenced by the above, the Weh Congregation was turned against the new pastor by Rev. Asang and the elders. In January 1983, another opportunity was provided for the opposing camps to further manifest the conflict.

The new pastor went to the station left behind by Rev. Rhim and obtained a farm from the Care-taker, Anthony Chi, without the knowledge of the Session. After clearing the piece of land at the cost of CFA 2,500 francs, Rev. Asang ordered his wife to cultivate it. The Weh Christians (Buin Buh, Marbel Ning, Sophie Bang, Susan Tem and Margaret Nji) who were working in the newly opened Presbyterian Health Post in the station did not welcome the Care-taker's decision. In fact, these workers had already been dragged into the rift between the Session and Rev. Asang. Consequently, the immediately informed Rev. Bame about the new development since the latter's residence was adjacent to the station. As the information was spreading among the Christians, the elders accused Rev. Asang for cultivating church land without authorization from the Session. As earlier mentioned, the elders insisted during the handing over ceremony that all church property belonged to the Session and not to the pastor. It was within this backdrop that Susan Tem and Margaret Nji went and cultivated the farm already cleared by the pastor. They went as far as planting the portion already cultivated by the pastor's wife, Hannah Asang¹⁷. During information gathering, J. C. Mebeng reported the women were encouraged by him and Rev. Bame on behalf of the Session to cultivate the farm. He further explained that the Care-taker of the station, Anthony Chi, who was appointed by the Secretary of Wum District was warned never to take decisions relating to the station without informing the Session¹⁸.

The reaction of the Care-taker and the pastor to the seizure of the farm was immediate. The Care-taker visited the Fon of Weh and recounted how his wife, Margaret Nji, has seized the pastor's farm. Unfortunately, Fon Nji I did not take any action to resolve the farm problem involving his wife. The Fon's inaction toward the farm problem, argued Anthony Chi, was evidence of his siding with the elders. By all probability, Fon Nji I, a Presbyterian, had gradually been dragged into the conflict by the elders. Now convinced that the Fon and the Weh Traditional Council could not objectively address the problem, Chi and Rev. Asang forwarded separate reports to the District Secretary, Rev. Cheng. The reports, apart from informing the Secretary about the farm issue, also exposed that the elders were claiming ownership over the Presbyterian Station and have connived with the workers of the Health Centre to render the work of the Care-taker and pastor

¹⁶ PCAB, Annual Report by Rev. Asang on the Weh Parish, dated 2 February 1984, p. 1.

¹⁷ MBPAW, Minutes of Reconciliation Meeting held by Wum District Executive, with the Weh Session, Rev. Asang and Health Post Workers, on 8 April 1983.

¹⁸ Interview with Joseph Che Mebeng.

difficult. The reports went on to remind the Secretary how the Weh Session had ranked him among those promoting the neglect of Weh¹⁹.

Before bringing to the fore the Secretary's reaction, it is worth mentioning that Chi and Rev. Asang carefully by-passed the Session. A problem of this nature would have first been discussed in the Session before involving the Secretary. Quite simply, they feared that no credible hearing could be made by such a body dominated by elders harboring the urge to disrupt the work of the pastor. But the Chairperson of the Session, Rev. Bame, preferred that the matter be discussed in the Session.

However, the reaction of the District Secretary was almost immediate. He arrived in Weh on 8 April 1983 at the head of a Wum District delegation comprising J. M. Boja (District Chairman) and D. Gouh Muaiki (District Treasurer). After holding separate meetings with the Weh Traditional Council, the Session and the Health Centre workers, the team quickly understood that the crux of the matter was the unhappiness of the Weh elders about the transfer of the seat of the District to Wum²⁰. Unfortunately, the visiting team did not address this problem. Rev. Cheng, although he handed the farm to Margaret Nji, did everything to restore the authority of the Wum District and the PCC as a whole over the Presbyterian Station in Weh. Therefore, when the team revealed its handiwork on 17 June 1983, the elders were shocked and expressed their determination to undermine it. As a matter of fact, the final report of the peace makers maintained that:

*The Care-taker and Rev. Asang are directly responsible for all the station property and will be answerable to the Wum District of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon in matters of compound property, trees and land.... In order to avoid the misuse of PCC land, farming should cease on the said station land as soon as present crops were harvested. In spiritual matters, all the health post workers and the Care-taker's family should henceforth address themselves to Rev. Simon M. Asang and the Wum District Authorities in counseling and any problems arising from the Presbyterian Station Weh.*²¹

The above report clearly indicated to the elders of Weh Congregation that the Care-taker, Anthony Chi, and the Parish Pastor, Rev. Asang, were agents of the District authorities. Prior to the release of the report, it was Rev. Bame who catered for the spiritual needs of the health post workers and Care-taker's family. Rev. Bame therefore saw the transfer of such duties to his rival, Asang, as a humiliation. In addition, the decision to end farming in the station land deprived the Health Post

¹⁹ MBPAW, Minutes of Reconciliation Meeting, held by Wum District Executive, with the Weh Session, Rev. Asang and Health Post Workers, on 8 April 1983.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ MBPAW, Report (resolutions) of the Wum District Executive on the Crisis in Weh Congregation, 17 June 1983.

workers of their farms. This explains why the Session decided to undermine the resolutions of the District Team. The conflict was therefore given a new dimension.

In fact, from 17 June 1983 onwards, elders of Weh Congregation employed other strategies aimed at disrupting the work of Anthony Chi and Rev. Asang. In late June 1983, Rev. Bame frowned at the cutting down of trees in the station by Anthony Chi. The latter visited Chi's boss in Wum, Rev. Cheng, and declared that the entire Weh Station was a property of the Weh village. Further, Bame accused Asang for baptizing children born out of wedlock. On 30 June 1983, he refused to jointly administer baptism with Rev. Asang, stating that his colleague counseled outcasts²². As if this was not enough, the Session decided to assign Rev. Bame to cater for the newly opened Presbyterian Church at Kumven quarter in the outskirts of Weh. Constitutionally, the Church was under the control of the parish pastor, Rev. Asang. The Session wanted the sidelined Rev. Bame to exercise authority over the young congregation as a means of also turning the Christians there against their pastor, Asang²³.

The months of July and August 1983 were marked by repeated attempts by Rev. Bame to handle the Kumven Congregation. It is worth indicating that Christians of Kumven worshiped in the main church only when they had to receive Communion. But whenever Rev. Asang announced Communion, his rival instead went to Kumven and prevented the Christians from joining the others in the main church. As reported by Rev. Asang to the Secretary, the elders and Rev. Bame spread the false information that the latter was assigned to the Kumven Congregation by the Synod Office. But Rev. Bame's name featured in the 1983 diary of the PCC as one of the pastors in the Weh Parish, though it was only an error as it later turned out to be²⁴.

The crisis over the Kumven Congregation reached boiling point on 3 September 1983 when Rev. Bame went to Kumven to administer baptism and to serve Communion. When the Christians resented, he told them that Rev. Asang was ill and had commissioned him to handle the sermon and the baptism. Rev. Bame's presence at Kumven on the above date is evidenced by his absence in the church service in the main congregation on 4 September. This caused the holding of the Congregational Meeting on 11 September 1983. During the meeting, Rev. Bame explained that the Synod assigned him to the Kumven Parish. But the information was refuted by Asang, arguing that no such thing was said when he took over from Bame on 1 September 1982. Although Bame was strongly backed by the elders, the Congregational Meeting resolved to find out from the Synod Office whether Bame was truly assigned to Kumven. Consequently, a committee of five persons led by Elder D. D. Geh was put in place to draft and send a letter to

²² See, MBPAW, Rev. Elias Cheng's letter addressed to the Synod Clerk of the PCC, on 1 November 1983.

²³ MBPAW, Report by Rev. Asang Simon on the Conflict in Weh, to the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Cheng, 2 November 1983.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

the Synod Clerk of the PCC, Rev. Thomas Ediage²⁵. In his closing remarks during the meeting, Rev. Bame raised the already forgotten farm crisis by saying that Asang and his wife caused the problem since they by-passed the Session and demanded a farm from the Care-taker of the Weh station. As a result, Asang and his wife left the meeting unhappy as evidenced by the latter's post meeting reaction.

While the committee was preparing the letter, Hannah Asang addressed a controversial letter to the Weh Session on 14 September 1983. She accused the Session for instigating the seizure of her farm in these words: "The Session instructed the health post workers secretly to cease [sic] the farm from me after having planted my corn....As such, I have seen that the Session did not like our coming here."²⁶ After receiving the letter, the elders resolved to forward it to the Synod as evidence that Rev. Asang and his wife were fueling the crisis in Weh. Amazingly, the above committee, after drafting the enquiry letter, commissioned Rev. Bame to take it to the Synod Office in Buea. The letter did not carry the signatures of Rev. Asang and Rev. Cheng. Hannah Asang's letter was attached to the enquiry letter. According to the constitution of the PCC, letters from congregations to the Synod Office must bear the signatures of the parish pastor and the district secretary. It further holds that such letters are channeled to the Synod only by the district secretary. As a result of this constitutional violation, the Synod Clerk returned the letter to the District Secretary without addressing its content. But in his letter to the Secretary, the Synod Clerk frowned against the lukewarm attitude of the former in the crisis in Weh. In fact, these injurious conflicts had not been reported to the Synod by Rev. Cheng.

Now aware of the disrespect of his authority by the Weh Session, the District Secretary's analysis concluded that "The elders of the Weh Congregation are determined to systematically undermine my office. It is time for me to officially inform the Synod Office about the events in Weh."²⁷ On his part, Rev. Asang argued that the elders never wanted him to be aware of the content of the letter. He added that they never showed the letter to him because the letter written by his wife was attached to it. But in its report sent to the Moderator on 30 January 1984 titled "Weh Congregation problems", the elders accused Rev. Asang for refusing to sign the letter. According to the report:

*A letter was sent through him to the Synod Clerk and he refused to read and sign it. He addressed the envelope and ordered that it should be sent. The letter went as if it did not pass through him. The District Secretary questioned why we did so. The envelope was presented before him*²⁸.

²⁵ PCAB, Minutes of Weh Session Meeting held in Weh, on 11 September 1983.

²⁶ PCAB, Hannah Asang's letter addressed to the Session relating to the farm crisis, 14 September 1983.

²⁷ MBPAW, Rev. Elias Cheng's letter to the Weh Session, dated 1 November 1983.

²⁸ MBPAW, Report by Weh Session addressed to the Moderator of the PCC, on 30 January 1984.

That was not all. Before sending Rev. Bame to Buea with the letter, the Weh Session issued a decision which called on all Christians not to come for the Lord's Supper until the rift between Asang and Bame was settled. On Sunday 25 September 1983, the decision was read in church during the service by J. C. Mebeng, Treasurer of the Session²⁹. Consequently, the antipathy in Weh was intensified. It was for this reason that Rev. Cheng and Rev. Asang resolved to take the Weh elders to task for what they had done.

Compelled by the foregoing situation, Rev. Cheng addressed letters to the Weh Session and to the Synod Clerk on 1 November 1983. The letter to the Session warned the elders never to act unconstitutionally. Apart from frowning against the forwarding of Hannah Asang's letter to Buea, Cheng told Weh elders that "This is a strange unconstitutional behavior indeed from Presbyterians like you"³⁰. By so doing, Cheng yearned for his authority to be recognized by the elders in Weh Congregation. As concerns the letter sent to the Synod Clerk, Cheng stressed that the conflicts in Weh were masterminded by the retired Rev. Bame and J. C. Mebeng. Apart from bringing to the fore Bame's weaknesses due to his old age, the letter maintained that:

*The Weh Parish is conservative and opposed to any innovations. In Weh Congregation, the Session behaves unconstitutionally and needs a change when new elections come up. The root cause is the Rev. S. F. Bame and his nephew, Mr J. C. Mebeng....They have stopped Christians from taking part in the Lord's Supper.*³¹

As the Synod Clerk's reaction to the above letter was awaited, the crisis between the elders and Rev. Asang in Weh heightened. Throughout the month of November, the elders blocked the Christians from receiving Communion. In protest, Rev. Asang decided to abstain from preaching. In mid November, a Christian died and Rev. Asang refused to perform the burial ceremony. He also used Sunday Church services as forums to read out the petitions he sent to the District Secretary. Further, the pastor refused to carry out preparations for the Presbyterian Church Day in November. On the day of the event, the preaching and reading of the Moderator's speech was done by the Congregational Secretary, Jonathan Kum³².

²⁹ MBPAW, Report by Rev. Asang Simon on the Conflict in Weh to the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Cheng, 2 November 1983.

³⁰ MBPAW, Report by Weh Session addressed to the Moderator of the PCC, on 30 January 1984.

³¹ MBPAW, Rev. Elias Cheng's letter addressed to the Synod Clerk of the PCC, on 1 November 1983.

³² The information relating to Rev. Asang's refusal to perform his duties is found in a report sent to the Moderator by the Weh Session, in 1984. For a further discussion of this point, see MBPAW, Report by Weh Session addressed to the Moderator of the PCC, on 30 January 1984. The information was also confirmed by Rev. Asang during an interview carried out by the author, on 1 May 2010, in Bu village.

On 20 November, the rift entered a new phase when Asang failed to preach during the harvest thanks giving event organized on that day. The elders accused him for refusing to spur the minds of the people who came from the towns to offer. However, the sum of CFA 155,290 francs was raised at the end of the event. When Rev. Asang asked for the money, the angry elders quickly retired into an unusual secrete meeting and resolved not to give the money to the pastor. The Congregational Treasurer, Mebeng, was asked to keep the money until the conflict was resolved. At the close of activities, Rev. Asang who was not aware of the resolution of the brief and secrete meeting asked Mebeng to hand over the money to him but the latter refused³³.

In the next morning, Rev. Asang went to Mebeng's house to collect the money at all cost. The latter did not only refuse, but also informed the pastor about the secrete meeting and its final resolution. The pastor, according to Mebeng, became furious and engaged a quarrel with him. In spite of the pastor's shouting, Mebeng maintained that the money would be handed directly to the authorities of the District only after Rev. Cheng must have resolved the problem in the congregation. On that same day (21 November), Rev. Asang reported the matter to his boss, Rev. Cheng. Asang's letter reached Wum just at the time when the Synod Clerk, Rev. Ediage, responded to Cheng's letter to the Synod Office dated 1 November 1983. Ediage's letter instructed Rev. Cheng to resolve the problems in Weh as fast as possible. These two situations (the withholding of money by the elders and the pressure from the Synod Office) forced the leaders of the Wum District to bundle their efforts towards looking for a solution, considering the injurious effect of the conflict on the growth of the District in particular and the PCC as a whole.

Resolution of the Conflict

The resolution of the conflict between the elders of the Weh Congregation and their pastor, Rev. Asang, was the product of the combined efforts of different groups: the parties, Weh Traditional Council, Wum District authorities and the Synod Office. It should be remarked that before the Synod Clerk, Rev. Ediage, ordered Rev. Cheng to take concrete measures for the resolution of the conflict, varied attempts had been made at different times to restore peace. When the farm crisis between Rev. Asang and health centre workers broke out in the Weh Station in March 1983, the Weh Traditional Council and authorities of the Wum District made moves to resolve the dispute. The Weh Traditional Council after receiving a complaint from Margaret Nji convoked Rev. Asang to attend a council meeting on 2 April 1983. Apart from refusing to attend the meeting, Rev. Asang referred to the

³³ Interview with Rev. Simon Asang, 86 Years, Retired Pastor, Bu, 1 May 2010. See also MBPAW, Rev. Asang's letter relating to the dispute in Weh addressed to Rev. Cheng, on 21 November 1983. Our separate interviews with Rev. Asang and Mebeng also yielded the same information.

council as a pagan society. Worse still, he failed to return the *ikeng* (peace plant) sent by the council to him as convocation. This angered the Weh people, especially Mebeng who doubled as Treasurer of the Session and Traditional Council. In the latter's letter to the Moderator dated 30 January 1984, Asang's disrespect of Weh tradition was summarized in these words:

*This attitude has set the congregation and the village in misunderstanding with the church. According to tradition, such a warrant cannot remain with the accused indefinitely. Is he out to discredit tradition of the Weh people? No collaboration, no coordination and total dispise [sic] of the whole Weh people.*³⁴

The above serves as enough prove that the Traditional Council's attempt to end the conflict was fruitless.

On 8 April 1983, the District Secretary, Rev. Cheng, led a fact finding team to Weh to investigate the conflict and explore ways of ending it. After consulting Fon Simon Nji II and listening to the protagonists (elders, health centre workers and Rev. Asang) in an enlarged meeting as earlier mentioned, the peace makers released final resolutions on 17 June 1983³⁵. Since the resolutions suspended farming in the station and reasserted the authority of the District Secretary over the station, the elders of the Weh Congregation quickly rejected them. Led by Rev. Bame and Mebeng, they argued that the Secretary was taking advantage of the crisis to further neglect Weh. Consequently, the elders remained defiant and committed to undermining all the resolutions. Hence, the rift dragged on despite the efforts of the District Secretary. However, other groups intervened to resolve the conflict.

Informed of the stalemate in Weh, the Synod Office decided to step in and restore peace. On 28 June 1983, the Moderator of the PCC, Rev. J. C. Kangsen, visited Weh unannounced. In an effort to resolve the conflict, he held an emergency meeting with Rev. Asang, Rev. Bame and the health post workers. But during the meeting, the elders took Rev. Asang to task for conniving with Rev. Cheng to further neglect Weh. For Rev. Bame, who spoke in his capacity as Chair of the Session, the transfer of the seat of the district from Weh to Wum negatively affected the growth of the village³⁶. When the parties promised to live in peace, the Moderator said he was going to look into the neglect of the Congregation. Rev. Bame was told to work in collaboration with the Parish Pastor for the spiritual growth of the Weh Parish as a whole. The transformation of the Weh Health Post into a health centre by the Synod Committee in July 1983 was intended to satisfy

³⁴ MBPAW, Joseph C. Mebeng's letter to the Moderator, dated 30 January 1984 and Oral Evidence, Buin Buh, 84 Years, Weh, 8 May 2010, Taiheart Akwo, 87 Years, Weh, 7 May 2010.

³⁵ MBPAW, Report (resolutions) of the Wum District Executive on the Crisis in Weh Congregation, 17 June 1983.

³⁶ MBPAW, Report by Rev. Asang Simon on the Conflict in Weh to the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Cheng, 2 November 1983.

the Weh elders³⁷. Unfortunately, the immediate post-meeting era was marked by renewed crisis between Asang and Bame over the Kumven Congregation as already mentioned. Thus the Moderator's peace efforts were futile.

Despite the Synod Office's fruitless efforts at restoring peace in Weh, it did not give up pursuing peace. On 21 November 1983, the Synod Clerk, Rev. Ediage, instructed the District Secretary, Rev. Cheng, to take concrete measures aimed at restoring peace in Weh. Besides, Rev. Asang had also reported the withholding of money raised during the thanks giving ceremony by the Weh Session to Rev. Cheng. The latter, certainly spurred by the pressure from the Synod Office and from Rev. Asang, invited all the parties to a crucial reconciliatory meeting to hold at the Presbyterian Church Weh on 27 November at 9:00 a.m. Although the meeting did not start on time, it did take place as planned. The meeting was attended by all the members of the Session including Rev. Asang. Presided over by Rev. Cheng, the meeting commenced at 11:30 p.m. with a brief sermon and prayers by Rev. Asang. After welcoming members and exposing the meeting's agenda, Rev. Cheng pressed that the purpose of the meeting was to end the long standing differences between the Session and Rev. Asang in particular.

At this juncture, the Chair gave the floor to Rev. Bame to talk first. Rev. Bame brought to the fore all the aforementioned grievances and concluded that Weh was in need of a new pastor since Rev. Asang decided not to perform his duties since 11 September 1983. When given the floor, Rev. Asang declared that his coming to Weh was not welcomed by the elders, especially Rev. Bame. He went on to explain how the elders encouraged Christians not to participate in the Lord's Supper. Further, Asang exposed how J. C. Mebeng quite often refused to provide Communion wine³⁸. However, he expressed the wish to reconcile with Rev. Bame in particular and the Session as a whole. After him, Esther Sei Tah (elder) stood up and frowned against the constant quarrels between Asang and Bame in these words: "Since I was baptized, I have never seen pastors quarrelling before Christians."³⁹ Other elders who spoke during the meeting (Mebeng, D. D. Geh, Veronica Kum, Jonathan Kum, Sophie Bang, Joseph Fokum and Margaret Nji) focused more on the rift between Asang and Bame over the control of the Kumven Congregation. At this point, the Chairman then called on the parties to forgive one another. After openly declaring that they have forgiven each other, the elders shook hands with Rev. Asang and promised to live in peace. The Treasurer of the Session, Mebeng, handed the thanks giving money he withheld to Rev.

³⁷ The Presbyterian Health Weh was opened in 1982 to check the health problems of the people. Shortly after Moderator Kangsen's meeting with the parties in conflict in Weh, the health post was transformed into a full health. It can be deduced that the move was intended to erode the feelings lingering in the minds of Weh elders that the mother congregation in the Wum District was being neglected.

³⁸ For a full discussion on the meeting, see PCAB, Minutes of Crisis Resolution Meeting of 27 November 1983, p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Asang. But the elders' reaction shortly after the meeting was a signal that they were not committed to the reconciliation.

It is important to note here that the peace makers during the 27 November peace talks focused more on reconciling the parties in conflict without addressing the crux of the crisis. Indeed, the fight between Revs. Asang and Bame over the Kumven Congregation was not resolved. Although the neglect of Weh was not raised during the peace talks, we cannot cancel the fact that the elders still saw the leader of the mediation team, Rev. Cheng, as somebody who supported the gross neglect of Weh. What is true is that the peace makers did not employ appropriate methods to promote peace in Weh. This, of course, caused the crisis to take the course that it did during the immediate post 27 November peace talk's era.

In fact, after the peace makers sent by the Synod Office had finished the meeting and left, the elders began grumbling among themselves. Rev. Bame and Mebeng particularly argued that Rev. Cheng failed to do what the Synod Office commissioned him to do. The persistence of the stalemate is evidenced by the refusal of Bame and some elders to have Holy Communion. On 3 December 1983, Rev. Asang travelled to Bamenda, he told the elders to announce in church the following day that Christians should come for Communion on 11 December. But the elders refused to make the announcement. As a result, the Lord's Supper was not served on the above date⁴⁰. However, Rev. Asang made the announcement himself after shifting the Lord's Supper's day to 18 December. But to the latter's surprise, Rev. Bame immediately stood up and told the Christians not to come for the Communion. He argued that the rift between Rev. Asang and the Session was yet to be resolved. This was a sign that 18 December was going to be eventful.

On the above day, about 200 Christians attended the Church service. When it was time to receive Communion, the congregation was split into two. The Session together with their supporters (about 121) walked out of the church in protest. Worse still, they refused to provide the wine demanded by Asang for the Lord's Supper. Consequently, only 69 Christians (Asang's supporters) received Holy Communion in spite the absence of the wine⁴¹. In his letter to Rev. Cheng of 19 December 1983, Rev. Asang recounted all the above events and raised the need for another reconciliatory meeting. Unfortunately, Rev. Cheng did not take any immediate action to restore peace.

The sustenance of the stalemate finally pushed Rev. Asang to see his transfer out of Weh as the only solution to the conflict. On 18 January 1984, he addressed a petition to the Staffing Committee of the PCC entitled "A Petition for Transfer". Apart from recounting all the sad events in Weh, Rev. Asang concluded his petition with these words:

⁴⁰ MBPAW, Rev. Asang's Letter Relating to the Weh Conflict addressed to Rev. Cheng, on 19 December 1983.

⁴¹ *Ibidem* and MBPAW, Report by Weh Session addressed to the Moderator of the PCC, on 30 January 1984.

In order to fulfill my religion [sic] obligation satisfactorily, and in order not to be a stumbling block to the elders of this Weh Congregation as the case has been up to now, I will welcome a change.... Considering the ill-feeling of the Weh Elders right from when I was transferred here, I personally have no zeal to continue serving people who cannot appreciate my work at all. The only help in such a situation is transfer.⁴²

It was the above request for transfer that enabled the Synod Office to understand that the conflict in Weh was still ongoing. When the Synod authorities were still reflecting on the appropriate peace building measures to adopt, news relating to Rev. Asang's transfer request trickled into the ears of the Weh elders. Since the latter were afraid that Rev. Asang might have raised some issues against them in his letter of transfer to the Synod Office, they decided to inform the Moderator about the crux of the crisis. Consequently, the Session of the Weh Congregation wrote a rather long letter to Moderator Kangsen on 30 January 1984.

The Session's letter brought to the fore the major grievances and accused Rev. Asang for under looking the Weh congregation. In concluding their letter, the elders called on the Moderator to transfer Rev. Asang to a different parish. They declared that: "...With his attitude, our conscience is not and shall not be free to continue with him. We feel that pastor Asang was not chosed [sic] for Weh Congregation by the Lord Almighty else what more when no unity and harmony exist in this congregation under Rev. Asang.⁴³" After carefully studying the two letters (that of Asang and the Session), the Moderator concluded that the persistence of the conflict was caused by the misunderstanding between Revs. Asang and Bame.

It was with the above in mind that measures were taken to completely disengage Rev. Bame and to transfer Rev. Asang elsewhere. On 6 February 1984, therefore, the Synod Clerk of the PCC, Rev. Ediage, addressed a letter to the Secretary of Wum District, Rev. Cheng, in which he issued an official statement and some clarifications relating to Rev. Bame. The letter maintained that:

Rev. Asang is the pastor fully in-charge of Weh Congregation and Parish as a whole. Rev. S. F. Bame being on pension has ceased to be a pastor on active service and should have nothing to do with Church work in Weh Parish.... We wish that peace and reconciliation can now come in the congregation after this clarification.⁴⁴

Following the reading of the above clarification in Church, calm started returning to the congregation. However, the conflict finally came to an end when Rev. Asang was transferred out of the Weh Parish by the Staffing Committee in

⁴² PCAB, Rev. Asang's addressed to the Staffing Committee of the PCC, entitled "A Petition for Transfer", on 18 January 1984.

⁴³ MBPAW, Report by Weh Session addressed to the Moderator of the PCC, on 30 January 1984.

⁴⁴ PCAB, Rev. Thomas Ediage's Letter addressed to Rev. Cheng, on the Conflict in Weh, 6 February 1984.

September 1984. But, just like the other conflicts within the PCC (especially in the Bastos, Buea I, Batibo, Etug-Ebe and Bonaberi congregations) as well as the crises within the Cameroon Baptist Convention (The crises that hit the Cameroon Baptist Convention were those of the Ndu, Bansa, Belo and Yaounde fields), the rift between the Session and Rev. Asang in Weh Congregation had injurious effects.

Consequences of the Conflict

The conflict that hit the Weh Congregation from 1982 to 1984 had devastating effects on the spiritual growth of the congregation in particular and the PCC as a whole. The hatred, discord, distrust and bitterness that characterized the crisis in Weh influenced many Presbyterian Christians to either backslide or to join the Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal churches. In 1988, Rev. S. F. Bame's son, Rev. Prof. Michael Bame Bame (a PCC pastor in charge of the Bastos Congregation in Yaounde), created the "Pilot Revival Prayer Group" in the name of spiritual reawakening. Without properly investigation the *raison d'être* of Rev. Prof. Bame Bame's revival group, the Synod of the PCC adopted punitive measures against the pastor and his followers. As a result, he resigned from the PCC in 1997⁴⁵. Just like his father, therefore, Prof. Bame was involved in a serious rift with the PCC. After leaving the PCC, Rev. Michael Bame founded the Pathmost Church. In 2003, a congregation of this church was established in Weh village. Many Presbyterians left the PCC and joined the Pathmost Church.

In fact, who doubts the fact that the departure of these Presbyterians (more than fifty) was dictated by the conflict of the early 1980s, especially the poor treatment given to Rev. Simon Bame. During information gathering, many former PCC Christians declared that the PCC poorly treated Rev. Bame and reduced Weh from a district to a parish headquarters. Felicia Ndum and Joseph Deghe, Pathmost Christians, during an interview with the author said that their grievances against the PCC and their eventual departure were caused by the sad events of the 1980s. They maintained that PCC authorities failed to properly and objectively address the crux of the conflict in Weh⁴⁶. It is worth noting that these Christians might be representing a picture of how the other breakaway Christians view the PCC's resolution of the conflict in Weh Congregation. Thus, the conflict disfavoured the PCC in the race for souls with the mainline and Pentecostal Christian churches in Weh village.

Conclusion

The conflict in the Weh Congregation between the Session and Rev. Simon Asang from 1982 to 1984 is just one of the many crises which plagued and

⁴⁵ S. N. Ejedepang-Koge, "Expansion of the Presbyterian Church into Francophone Cameroon", in *Presbyterian Church in Cameroon: 50 Years of Selfhood*, ed. J. N. Dah, Limbe, Preprint, 2007, pp. 77-79.

⁴⁶ Interview with Felicia Ndum and Joseph Deghe, 46 and 52 Years, Weh, 8 May 2010.

continue to plague the PCC. This paper has attempted to bring to the fore the bases of the conflict and the effects it had on the Weh Congregation in particular and the PCC in general. The roots, evolution, resolution and consequences of the conflict have been examined. The study has identified unchecked tribalism and personality struggle as the causes of the conflict. In fact, the emergence and persistence of tribalism (caused in the main by the neglect of Weh Congregation by the PCC authorities) and personality struggle (resulting principally from the struggle between Revs. Asang and Bame over the control of the Kumven Congregation) led to the two-year crisis in Weh. The study also exposes the view that the authorities of Wum District and Synod Office failed to commit enough resources and time to check these frictions at their early stage. As a result, the conflict became complicated, and rendered its resolution difficult. Although the conflict was finally resolved in February 1984, it had horrifying repercussions on the spiritual and physical growth of the congregation and the church as a whole.

In the light of the above, given the imminence of future crises in the PCC, evidenced by the current revival conflicts in the Etoug-Ebe Congregation in East Mungo Presbytery and the current mismanagement related conflicts in Menchum-Boyo Presbytery and the Synod Office, it is time for the authorities of the PCC to act timely and courageously in the face of such crises. Through this paper, therefore, intra-PCC conflicts can become increasingly recognized as a significantly destructive phenomenon and can help to spread such a negative judgment of it. In essence, a full comprehension of the underlining causes, course and repercussions of these rifts as a leeway to paving the way for their elimination remains a dire necessity.

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