

**MUSIC, GENDER AND HISTORY AMONG THE LAIMBWE
URCHIN GROUP OF BU, CAMEROON**

Henry Kam Kah

University of Buea, Cameroon

Abstract. Music among the youths of *Etonghe Bouh* serves the purpose of entertainment, social satire, and creativity of the youngsters. Throughout the process of song composition, transmission to actual performance, the girls are very assertive and the boys complement their efforts. The musical heritage which they carry is also a source for the reconstruction of aspects of the history of Bu and Laimbwe in particular and Cameroon in general. The history of Bu is therefore buried in the melodious songs of the youths begging for construction, reconstruction and greater appreciation.

Keywords: music, youth, creativity, gender, Laimbwe, Cameroon

DOI: 10.3176/tr.2016.2.04

1. Introduction: general observations, significance and objectives of study

Music is life and permeates all segments of life in the African setting. The different genres of music are useful in different ways. They provide a sense of belonging, solidarity, unity, differentiation and nostalgia in the way things ought to be (Onyeji 2004:152). Men and women play different and complementary roles in music. In the case of lullabies, wedding and birth songs women and little girls are very assertive and in war songs men pride themselves in physical strength. The songs cover a wide range of issues. Some of them are on social commentary and criticism and collectively sung by men, women and children (Finnegan 1970:273, Longwe and Clarke 1990:3). Others are on development and leadership and regularly performed on festive occasions. Young boys and girls also produce music to address a number of social issues in society. Other song types and compositions such as those of *Kese'em* in Bu are exclusive to the elderly. In fact, all age groups and sexes are involved in music in one form or the other.

Some categories of music are incomplete without instruments. Instruments like the drum, xylophones and the gourd rattle provide melody and rhythm to music. In

many African cultures, they are played mostly by men even in female dominated social groups. The argument is that they are sacred and should not be defiled by women. This belief which was very strong in the past is beginning to give way in some cultures because of exogamous influences. Women are now playing these once sacred objects. In spite of this, the drum remains in the hands of men in some cultures especially a majority of them in the North West Region of Cameroon. The coming of Christianity has adulterated this tradition. In the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) for instance, women are playing drums in the Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF) and the Christian Women Fellowship (CWF) during church services, rallies and get-togethers.

Different authors have examined the importance of music from different perspectives. Some contend that music is an example of formal cultural expression or the revelation of the cultural fabric of African society (Ifionu 1989:151, Akpan 2003:129, Lewis 2004:28). This therefore means that through this expressive art, the rich and diverse cultural heritage of African societies is brought to the limelight. Music in Africa unlike in the Western tradition which is merely the art of combining vocal and instrumental sounds into an emotionally pleasant unit is a medium where life is expressed in all its aspects using the sound (Tala 1987/1988:102). Nketia (Cited in Tala 1987/1988:102) and Saleh (1985:25–26) also discuss the significance of music in Africa. They are agreed that music and life are inseparable. Through the agency of music the Africans attitude to life, their hope and fears, thoughts and beliefs are made known to the larger society.

Music is also connected to social identities (Feld 2000:145, Palmberg 2002:15) and is the most subtle and refined way of human entertainment for both the young and old, the aristocrat and the commoner (Onyeji 2004:151). In reference to African music, Tala (1987/1988:102) opines that it is a form of pleasure and satisfaction for the aesthetic needs of people. Music serves this purpose and also creates new forms of knowledge, meanings, thinking and documentation. Music is in fact markedly of utilitarian function to different societies at different times (Brusila 1990:35, Tala 1987/1988:102, Bender 1991:xii and xvi and Onyeji 2004:152). This utilitarianism explains why music is life and creates life in the African traditional milieu.

Music therefore permeates the political, economic and socio-cultural milieu of all African societies. The degree of importance varies from one environment to another. In the non-literate societies like Laimbwe, it has served as an important source of historical reconstruction spanning through the politico-economic and socio-cultural domains.

Politically, music is used to create a community spirit. In the African traditional set-up, music and dance are a symbol of solidarity and unity (Tala 1987/1988:102). Others like Finnegan (1970:272–3) contend that songs serve the purpose of reporting or commenting on current affairs. These songs are also used for political pressure, propaganda to reflect and mould public opinion. Still, others use music to indirectly or informally communicate to the leaders. The aim is usually to influence policy while avoiding the consequence of speaking to men openly

(Finnegan 1970:275). When music is used for this purpose, it is intended to put things straight and unite factions for greater action and productivity in different aspects for the good of the society. This is vividly handled in the section on the *Etonghe Bouh*, music and history.

Music in Africa is also used to invoke the 'gods' in traditional religion (Onyeji 2004:149). The outcome of this has often been the establishment of a form of social cohesion. Such music is an indispensable vehicle for honouring, sustaining and edifying the traditional institutions and customs (Ifionu 1989:151–2). When this happens the powers that be are assured of the political stability and security of the society. This is because everyone scrambles to identify with both the supreme spirits of the land and the traditional structures that handle such religious matters. Traditional religion and music have therefore become a very strong uniting force.

Still in the political realm music has been used to assert nationhood (Ifionu 1998:164). Throughout the colonial era, political songs were composed and sung throughout the length and breadth of Africa to marshal a common feeling of belonging and heritage. This was against the backdrop of European colonial administration that needed to be flushed out. During the post independence civil war in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, music became an important tool to arouse nationhood among the people of Eastern Nigeria. This was when they wanted to break away from the Federal Republic of Nigeria to create the state of Biafra. In the present dispensation, singers are composing songs to address contemporary issues like instability and the search for unity as Boni (2000:176) has rightly observed.

Music has and continues to serve an economic interest. Among the Kpelle of Liberia for instance, the best soloist gains prestige but more importantly becomes financially independent. This soloist moves from place to place (Hunt 1993:43) performing for pay agreed with those who have invited him. It is also becoming fashionable that in both rural and urban economic life in Africa, music is explored and exploited for commercial purposes. Marketing or advertising strategies are incomplete without music. This also includes the marketing of music itself (Onyeji 2004:151). Onyeji (2004:152) further elaborates that music keeps company during work or manual labour. This helps to mobilise people to work harder and increase the output of goods and services. It should however be noted that it has also at times acted as a source of laziness to those who take part in it.

In the socio-cultural domain, music is an important accompaniment to the initiation of young boys and girls into adulthood. In the past Sande girls were kept in seclusion and given intensive training in music and dance. This was in preparation for adulthood. Similarly, among the Kpelle, the girls were taught responsorial songs which were in themselves lessons for adulthood. Besides, in Tokoe society of Ghana, the young girls perform in song and dance to indicate the coming –of –age ceremony. This performance takes place in front of the entire village (Hunt 1970:42–43). This important function of music within the Sande, Kpelle and Tokoe has been replicated in other African cultures. Still within the socio-cultural milieu music is used to satirise witches and wizards for their

malicious activities of killing people (Chia 1997:12). These notwithstanding, this study attempts an analysis of gender issues among the youth group of *Etonghe Bouh* in the North West Region of Cameroon laying emphasis on the respective roles of men and women in composing, transmitting and performing songs with a view to unveiling history in them.

2. Gender dimension of music in African traditional milieu

In African societies, there are gender specific dance and music groups especially among the elderly women and men. They are initiated into some of these groups and they spend time and money struggling to attain the highest level in the social ladder. There are in fact clubs exclusive to specific gender and age groups. This aside, some social clubs admit men and women without discrimination; the rationale is that both sexes play complementary and distinct roles in music. In many cultural settings, women are very instrumental in the production of music. They play a pivotal role in music composition, transmission, and performance.

Women have used music to serve special political ends; Suther land-Addy and Diaw (2005:22) posit that women use not only words but also dance to convey subversive messages to society. This approach has offered women an opportunity to be heard by the ruling class on very delicate issues of concern to them and pertaining to the well-being of members of the society. In some African communities like Laimbwe, whenever the women sing satirical songs on the political organisation of society, men will shy away from them. This is because they are usually ashamed and uncomfortable with the subtle criticism of women.

Women of Africa have not only been creative with their hands but more significantly with their voices and minds (Boni 2000:172). In the initiation ceremony of Sande girls, women employ music. The elderly women teach these girls songs and dance techniques and also how they can use cosmetics properly. Meanwhile in Vai society in Liberia, a professional female musician, the *Kengai*, trains the girls on the *Sasaa* or gourd rattle. In the Laimbwe society, women initiation into the *Kefaa* involves music and other instruments which include the gourd rattle, a calabash-like pot and an elongated pipe-like instrument that produces sound into the calabash-like pot.

The female sex also uses music during work or any form of labour. The case of the *Kuu* or work cooperative of the Kpelle is an organised one. Their women sing songs to encourage the workers while at the same time commenting on their hard lives. Similarly, the Luhya women of western Kenya sing songs, which talk about the vicissitudes of their working lives. Women also sing songs during the rice season. This they do together with their children to scare birds away from destroying the young plants (Hunt 1970:41–43). Among the Laimbwe, it is the job of young boys to guard the growing rice from the destruction of hungry birds. The Akan women while working or pounding in the mortar with pestle sing songs as

accompaniment (Sutherland-Addy 2005:22). These songs lighten their work thereby facilitating its completion.

Traditional African women also sing praise songs. Within the Kpelle society for example, the best female soloist will be hired for special events to entertain and more importantly praise those in leadership positions who want to consolidate their grip on power. Meanwhile in the entire Sudanic region of Africa, women often sing praises to kings and other court officials. The professional female praise-singers accompany drummers at feasts especially during the royal dance (Hunt 1970:44). Praise-singing and epic poetry performances are also a male activity in the Sahel countries of Africa. Among the well known praise singers are male bards known as *Jeliew* in the Mande language. These court singers otherwise known as the *Maroki*, *griot*, *Kwadwumfo*, *Umusizi* and *Mbongi* in Hausaland of Cameroon and Nigeria, Mandinka, Ashanti, Rwanda and Zululand respectively are patronised by the ruling class. Their performances are usually for the exclusive service of the ruling class (Tala 1999:42, Sutherland-Addy 2006:13). Some of these praise singers are not able to do a perfect job without women accompanying them and singing the choruses and melodic interludes.

Men and women are always at the centre of songs based on love. The theme of love is recurrent in many songs in African societies. Love songs among the Luo for instance are sung by women. The *oigo* songs of the young girls are performed when they are going to visit young men whom they are courting. As their melodious voices increase, the young men wait eagerly straining their ears for the first sounds of the song. The euphoric arrival of the girls is greeted with gifts. The men then join them in the evening to play the reed flutes as they sing the *oigo* songs (Finnegan 1970:256). Since love and love related songs form an essential component of traditional African music life, it shows that love takes centre stage in the daily interactions and preoccupations of the people.

The songs on marriage are part of topical poetry that is performed mostly by women and serve several purposes. The songs are topical because they address an issue like marriage which has always preoccupied human society. These songs consist of flattery and satire (Tala 1999:63). In some societies the young women performers will envelope the bride in a supportive circle of solidarity, teasing, cajoling and encouraging transition into the state of marriage. Among the Hausa marriage songs for instance, opportunities are created for the young bride to be told very frankly in songs the difficult or tortuous aspects of marriage. These issues may include an anecdote of an old man with a smelly beard as well as the drudgery of fetching and carrying for one's husband. Other marriage songs address the complexities that go with the relationship between co-wives and in-laws (Sutherland-Addy 2006:11). Men however almost always turn out to be the silent listeners to the messages of hate and spite in the songs of women when marriage is being contracted. Songs that focus on husband and wife as Tala (1999:63) aptly describes them, address rancour in polygamous homes and envy in the entire domestic setting.

Women like men used to and still use music as a store house of knowledge about the past. The different songs they compose and sing contain a lot of historical data. Among the Akan for example, women are exceptionally knowledgeable in the texts of verbal art forms including the social and political history behind them. During crises periods, these women are consulted to clarify such crises and disputes on historical facts (Sutherland-Addy 2006:6). The court singers all over West Africa, especially the griots and griottes are living libraries and storehouses of the knowledge of their respective societies. They recite with ease the genealogical history of their societies and the political successes and failures of these societies. Women contribution to local histories is mostly in song which is a compelling force for people to listen and appreciate.

As already stated, in traditional African society men and women use music to satirise one gender or the other and the entire society. In the Zambian situation, men sing songs to warn women to behave themselves. Some of these songs also portray men as not behaving maturely and responsibly. Most of the songs by men, however, target women (Longwe 1998:3). Some women use music to convey very subversive messages (Sutherland-Addy 2005:22). These songs offer routes into the complex realities and challenges of the lives of women. They express not only joy but also suffering and frustration. The many women songs that satirise provide safety valves for women to release their anger on some issues. One of such expressive fissure of women is the lullaby. Fatimata Mounkaila has opined that the lullaby is an African woman's soliloquy which responds to the pressures of family life and motherhood. It is consciously performed as a vehicle for women to examine their own life situations. These according to Sutherland-Addy (2005:14) include the pain of being rejected by their husbands for co-wives.

The issues discussed above notwithstanding, it suffices to state that gender functions in traditional music have evolved with time. Many women can now play the drums in some cultures. Their non-participation in playing the drum in the past was because of the sacred status attached to it. Although these drums are still being considered as sacred, women are playing drums within some traditional associations. The *nkokorok* or clapperless bell is now popularly handled by women of Ibibio, Annang and Igbo in the Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom state (Akpan 2003:127). In the churches, especially the Pentecostals, there is no taboo to women handling the drum and other instruments formally regarded as sacred. This changing gender relation in music holds true in Laimbwe land. At first warlike and critical songs were associated with men, but today women are composing very revolting songs and their gesticulations when singing them are ferocious.

3. Staking the Laimbwe Territory and the *Etonghe Bouh*

This study will not be clearly appreciated without situating Laimbwe and *Etonghe Bouh*. This ethnic group has three principal villages, namely Bu (Eh'

bouh), Mbengkas (Eh mbeka) and Baisoo (Ebuisso). There are other subordinate groups speaking Laimbwe and other related languages. These include Aguli (Kekuli), Mbongkesso, and Mughom. Through Wum the administrative capital of Menchum Division, Bu is the major gateway into the Laimbwe society. It is a twelve kilometre ride on motorbike popularly known as *bendskin* or vehicle. One can also access the territory through the Mentang village to Baisoo. The major exit points are from Baisoo through Mentang to Fundong, the headquarters of Boyo Division and through Bu to Wum (Kah 2005:4). Bu is the largest of the Laimbwe villages with an estimated population of over 10000 inhabitants (Ndo 1999). From a wider geographical setting, the village is located to the South East of Wum and is an important border settlement between Menchum Division on one hand and Mezam and Boyo Divisions on the other. Like the Aghem village groups, Bu is administratively governed from Wum central sub-division. The entire Laimbwe falls within latitude 6° N and Longitude 10° E (Kah 1999:29).

The Laimbwe people according to popular perception are noted for their angelic voices in the whole of Menchum Division. This God-given gift has been succinctly captured in the words of Choves Loh, a government journalist when he said *inter alia* ‘... the Laimbwe people of Bu [are] known to be very friendly, industrious and music lovers. It is believed that one man [and woman] can form an entire choir’ (Loh 2005:16). This observation is no hyperbole but hard reality. Within Laimbwe, there are soloist singers who provide entertainment in occasions with dexterity and soundness of voice. In both typically traditional and Christian music, the Laimbwe have no rivals in Menchum Division. Individual groups are also occasionally invited to grace occasions within and out of the village. Such occasions include installations and death celebrations. Of these groups, the *Etonghe Bouh* youth group is the most prominent and sought after.

Besides, other opportunities have availed themselves to make the Laimbwe perform music and dance. During official ceremonies like the Youth and National days celebrated on 11 February and 20 May annually, they have been invited to perform at the Wum grandstand. Even when ministers visit the area, this group is always invited. Every year also during the cultural week, many Laimbwe groups of different sexes, different age-groups and generations come to perform in the field.¹ At the end of the stiff competition, groups that perform well are rewarded with money and other basic materials.

There are a number of factors to explain the ingenuity of the Laimbwe in composing, transmitting and performing in oral form. The closely knit kith and kin facilitate collective work and the urge to perform in the process. During work, e.g. in the cultivation and harvesting of maize and rice people sing songs as accompaniment and to facilitate work. After work, people respect the traditional resting days of *Uto-oh Mbiekoghe* and *Uto-oh Metshie*. During this time, the people congregate in their social clubs to drink locally distilled corn beer, sing and

¹ The cultural week was revived only several years ago through the efforts of the Bu Cultural and Development Association. This had been abandoned because of the row for leadership which has bedeviled the village since the 1950s.

dance. People also use this time to put their ideas together and compose songs on topical issues in Laimbwe land and Cameroon as a whole.

The history of the Laimbwe is a history of a music loving people. From ancient times, the people came together in very popular dance clubs. The *Kese'em* dance club was one of those very popular dance groups among young boys and girls. Through this club, some of them ended up as husbands and wives. The *ndoong*, a flute blowing dance was also performed at regular intervals by men accompanied by dancing women. Death celebrations were and are still occasions where different sex and age groups performed whether invited or not.² From these humble beginnings, music composition and performing has been popularised among the people and neighbouring groups like the Bafmeng, Aghem, Kuk, Befang and Obang. The Obang and Befang in particular imitate them in their own musical compositions.

The *Etonghe Bouh*, on the other hand, is a derivative which means 'the navel of Bu.' By way of explanation it means that like the link between the navel and the umbilical cord of a new born baby, the *Etonghe Bouh* has a commitment to defend the culture of Bu in music and action. The name is also recognition of the centrality of woman in the Laimbwe matrilineal kinship system. It came about because of the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s and the unending leadership imbroglio in Bu which has lasted for many decades. Before then, the adolescents of the village belonged to one group, the *Meselima*. The above episodes led to the emergence of a splinter but popular group namely *Etonghe Bouh*. Members of this break away group mostly from the Fundong, Usem, Ngohtebeh and Weisoo quarters had taken this *volte face* because of the conflict that emerged between the *Kuiifuai* regulatory society and *Meselima*.

The conflict which was led by young boys and supported by the girls was in fact an affront to tradition. Young men and women in the tradition of the Laimbwe are expected to respect their elders but this episode proved the contrary. According to one of the leaders of the break away faction,³ some *Meselima* leaders (mostly boys) wanted *Kuiifuai* to return a white goat given to them by the group sometime earlier. This was because they were followers of individuals who were opposed to the *Kuiifuai* and so acted the way they did to please them. This was not only a slap in the face of the village notables but a sacrilege to the tradition of the people.

The demand for the return of a white goat was the climax point that led Fangha Samuel Chong to lead a breakaway faction to form the *Etonghe Bouh*. In breaking away therefore the appropriate name they decided to give the new group was to link it to the womb of the woman and child bearing. The new group did not only

² Interview with John Wakem and Moses Ngui, Fundong Bu, 24 August 2006. These are men who actively participated in the *Kese'em* and *ndoong* dances in their early youth.

³ Interview with Fangha Samuel Chong, Bafren Bu, 25 August 2006. He was at the forefront of the breakaway from *Meselima* and ran into problems with sympathisers of this mother group. He was a very popular soloist singer whose services were regularly hired to entertain during big events in Wum. Fangha Samuel was also a very good composer and performer who kept people spellbound whenever he performed. He was an ardent defender of the traditional values of the people and would stop at nothing to compose songs to this effect.

appeal to the women but pledged to part ways with *Meselima* and also to respect constituted authority and the tradition of the people which was coming under serious interrogation from non-conformists. This aroused the wrath of the *Meselima* leaders like Godlove Ndong to settle the score with Fangha Samuel. His clothes and sawn timber were carted away. This action did not demoralise him. Rather, it spurred him to properly organise the new group. This became a success story because of the support of the young girls who followed him.⁴ Today, the *Etonghe Bouh* is a prominent dance group among the younger generation of Bu. The older generation gives them support to prevent the culture of Laimbwe from extinction. The specific mention of the navel is a boost to both men and women to up hold their culture which is likened to procreation that assures the continuity of the human race.

The political basis of the formation of *Etonghe Bouh* needs further analyses. The process of its formation started in 1991, a period when there was a 'head on collision' between the Coordination of Opposition Parties, ARC-CNS and the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) (Ngoh 1996). At this time, the *Meselima* was being patronised by CPDM political elite of the area notably late Dr. Victor Bong Amaazee. The battle lines were gradually being drawn because militants and sympathisers of the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) and other opposition parties decided to opt out of *Meselima*. They also believed that change in Cameroon would provide a solution to the fracas over leadership in the village. After the death of Chu Mbonghekan on 9 September 1981, the claim to the throne by his successor came under interrogation because he had been treated as a foreigner who did not belong to the ruling caucus. His matrilineage had no place in Bu. The women members of *Etonghe Bouh* therefore stood opposed to him and his supporters because they were bent on defending the matrilineage of the ruling dynasty from of old.

The importance of the fracas between *Kuiifuai* and the youths as well as the political developments to this study rests in the fact that without these events, the *Etonghe Bouh* youth group would not have been formed in the first place. Its formation was the result of this. This goes to confirm the maxim that everything happens good for those who seize opportunities to do the right and honourable things. Besides, these episodes provided the historic material for the young girls to compose sounds for entertainment and to satirise the activities of some gullible politicians.

In the midst of this scuffle, *Kuiifuai* as a body stood all along against Emmanuel Bong Muam who succeeded the uncle. Supporters of this regulatory society saw no reason why they should remain in *Meselima* in 1991, which to

⁴ Interview with Mbonghe Chou and Loveline Fueh, Weisoo Bu, 26 August 2006. The former is a composer and very good singer. A good number of the songs that have been recently composed are directly and indirectly her handiwork. She is in fact a library of songs and the history behind these songs. The latter is also very good at singing or leading singing and works in collaboration with other girls to compose songs and perform whenever called up to do so.

them had become one of the lobby groups of Bong Muam's claim to the throne. The new *Etonghe Bouh* group was therefore pro-*Kuiifuai* and all that it stood for. They were keen to remain respectful to the traditional institutions of Bu and to openly militate in the SDF as against the CPDM.⁵ One of the illustrious sons of the village Rtd Justice Nyo Wakai was a founding member of the SDF and needed to be given support by the new group. Members of his matrilineage and associated lineages especially the girls wanted to give him honour and also believe in what he was introducing to them though not directly.

The new group was officially inaugurated on 22nd February 1992.⁶ This coincided with the tumultuous political climate in Cameroon. The group was presented to the mothers and fathers of the village in merriment. Membership of the group was restricted to militants of the SDF who possessed the membership cards of the party. Militants and sympathisers of the CPDM were not admitted into the group. The *Etonghe Bouh* group also threw its weight behind the newly formed Bu Cultural and Development Association (BUCADA) in July 1992. This new association was in replacement of the redundant Bu Cultural Development Committee (BCDC) which resulted from the contested leadership in the village. The dance group has since then grown by leaps and bounds. It can today boast of a membership of over one hundred. It also enjoys the support of many sons and daughters of Laimbwe resident in different towns of Cameroon but some are still opposed to it for political reasons.

This popular social club is managed by an executive composed of boys and girls. The girls and some women are in charge of the positions of treasurer, social secretary, matron and female advisers. The boys serve as president and secretary.⁷ The girls play a very important role in this dance group. For instance, the main compositions of the group are their collective handiwork. This is a mark of creativity and ingenuity. They also do most of the singing and performance whenever invited to an occasion. Without them, the money collected during performances would find its way into the private pockets of boys.⁸ They indeed collect and keep the money safe for eventual rational use. The boys on their part play mostly the instruments to blend the sound with the melody from music. Besides, they are security agents to the girls especially when they are performing far away from the village.⁹ Both boys and girls do odd jobs to raise money for the group. Due to the team spirit between both sexes, they have done much to popularise the group and to remain united in music and action.

⁵ Interview with Ndong Emmanuel and Che Odisius Koi, Bafren Bu, 25 August 2006. Both of them were staunch members of *Etonghe Bouh* and the SDF. They are defenders of the respect for tradition and customs of the Laimbwe people.

⁶ Interview with Che Odisius Koi, Bafren Bu, 25 August 2006.

⁷ Interview with Itung Donatus Wangwo, Mbong Clara, Kendang Vivian, Wakem Victorine, Nyam Rachel, Ndang Rose, Kum Christopher, Usem Bu, 26 August 2006. These are very active members who partake in drumming, singing and performance.

⁸ This view is overwhelmingly shared not even by the girls but interestingly enough by the boys.

⁹ The girls on their part share this view more than the boys do.

4. The *Etonghe Bouh*, music and history

Music as a whole provides data for historical (re)construction of especially non-literate societies of the world like the Laimbwe. In songs of insult, challenge, satirical comment and others for example, there is a rich and long history (Finnegan 1970:273). Many cultural historians and musicologists use music as a source of new forms of knowledge, meanings and ways of thinking by a people (Brusila 1990:35, Bender 1991:xii). Other authors argue simply that music is a source of documentation about the political, economic and social life of a people. Onyeji (2004:152) argues that song texts have been used as primary mode of documentation among non-literate cultures. Court musicians have remained chroniclers of histories and genealogies of their respective communities and kings. The power of music in fact to assist in the recall of memories makes it a preference in many instances as a mode of documentation (Onyeji 2004:152). The historical importance of music is also corroborated by Sutherland-Addy who argues that music constitutes an eye through which the soul of the society is revealed.

The rich musical repertoire of the *Etonghe Bouh* of the Laimbwe handles different aspects of the history of the people. The songs handle chieftaincy and leadership, welfare of the elderly, ingratitude and insincerity, marriage and polygamy, issues of development and family irresponsibility and negligence. The very basis of the formation of the youth group has attracted a lot of verbal ink on the people and community. This means that youths have used the group to compose songs critical of the events happening in the village. These songs contain the history of Laimbwe and Cameroon from the past to the contemporary times.

There are several ways through which music is composed. Following a group interview with composers of music who are mostly girls, it takes an individual to put her thoughts together during moments of solitude or work in the farm. These are carefully 'packaged' and discussed with friends who share similar concerns. There are adjustments to these original thoughts and a melody is then developed for this song. After this exercise, the main song composers meet again and the one who put in the melody sings it out. Adjustments are made especially with regards to the choice of words since music is composed to moralise and correct and not to completely destroy. From this 'laboratory' the song is released. It is propagated by this group of women composers usually during a death or birth ceremony. There is usually no formal teaching of the song but before long the entire community, especially women, are able to sing it because those who learn it teach it to their friends and relatives.

Besides, other compositions are carried out in a group from the beginning to the end. A group of composers and music lovers will come together and brainstorm about the events of society. After this exercise, they come up with a common theme that needs to be developed into music. Each of them is called upon to return home and come up with a song so that in the next meeting the ideas will be harmonised and a song composed. Following several of such meetings a song is

finally composed. In some cases, it should be understood that a song composition comes up spontaneously during a particular activity or celebration. Such a song does not have a defined pattern because the giver in enchanting the song makes additions and deductions. In other cases, it is an individual who asks for a song to be composed on him or her. A small amount of money is given to the composer as motivation. It should be noted that different themes are handled in the different musical compositions.

In addition, from interviews with members of *Etonghe Bouh* youth group¹⁰ they gave different reasons why they decided to join the group. Many of the women said that they joined the youth group in order to propagate the rich cultural heritage of the Laimbwe people. Through the activities of the group like death celebrations, social gatherings, farm work, visitation to the elderly, and participation in national events they argued that they have come to learn and understand a lot of the cultural practices of the people and the place of the women in the traditional set-up. They argued that although women have often been considered to play secondary roles in society, in practical terms this is not the case within the Laimbwe community. Women are at the centre of culture. It is their involvement in this youth group that made them to really appreciate their centrality to the scheme of things in Laimbwe territory.

Some of the women also pointed out that women joined the *Etonghe Bouh* group in order to learn how they could interact with the male sex and prepare themselves for eventual marriage. Others joined because they were married to members of the group and together they could always move together. This was also pointed out by the men who joined the group because they were invited by their wives. For some of them who joined the group to blend with boys and prepare for future marriage, they succeeded because today they are married to members or ex-members of the group. Others have not been successful to get married to group members because they let themselves loose and were taken to bed by as many men as possible. Today they have a lot to regret about their past lives and those who can no longer bear it have opted out of the group.

Ask for the men in the group they revealed in interviews with them¹¹ that they joined the group because they were invited by their wives or girlfriends to do so. Others said that they joined the *Etonghe Bouh* group because they thought that it was incumbent on them to defend the womenfolk whenever they went somewhere and returned late. Others openly boasted that their interest in the group was to get girls with whom to 'play their life' meaning to take them to bed and also go to

¹⁰ Among the women interviewed collectively or severally and who gave varied reasons for women joining the *Etonghe Bouh* group were Ngum Lilian, Mbong Clara, Wakai Victorine, Nyam Rachel, Ngai Gladys, Kpwai Felicia, Ndang Rose, Muh Pamela, Kubuh Onorin, Kan Mercy Njuh Florence, Kendang Vivian, Ndong Rosca, Ngum Regina and Kum Belinda, Bu, 23–28 August 2006.

¹¹ Among the men who shared their views on why men joined the *Etonghe Bouh* group were Akpwei Samuel Muh, Itung Donatus Wangwo, Ngong Jonathan Ngum, Ndong Eric, Wakem Effiance, Muh Griffith and Kum Christopher. Most of them are involved in playing the drum or one other instrument.

night clubs with them. They expected the women to do the work while they took the money from them to drink their locally distilled corn beer. Others came into the group so that whenever they needed support for their farm work they will invite the group and prepare food for them. Still others joined the group because it was important to have men play the drums. In the Laimbwe tradition, women are not allowed to play drums because they are considered to be sacred and besides, during their process of making, some medicine is used. Women are therefore not allowed to play or sit on them because this will adversely affect them which include not being able to give birth to a child.

From the various reasons advanced by men and women concerning their decision to join the *Etonghe Bouh* group, it is clear that the activities of the group have been made possible by the participation of these women and men. They have been involved in handling several contemporary themes in their musical compositions. The recurrent themes include those of chieftaincy dispute, marriage, negligence, family squabbles, love care for the elderly and development related matters.

One of the major themes which have been elaborately handled in the music repertoire of *Etonghe bouh* is that of leadership and chieftaincy related problems. The song below brings out the scuffle for leadership in Bu very clearly.

Song 1: *Ndjanghe Ufuai* (“Song on Chieftaincy Row”)

The Bu people are laughing
Saying that it is amazing
Emmanuel receive your father
The chief of Bu
You are not a chief
We did not crown you chief
We know your father

Emmanuel my child annually
We are in Wum
Every year the entire Bu in Bamenda
Because of a chieftaincy
Dispute with you
I am working money my child
So that we can eat together
But it is all going to Wum
For a chieftaincy dispute

Song 2: *Ndjanghe Ufuai Senghe* (“Another Song on Chieftaincy”)

The chieftaincy problem
Has gone to the sun
A lake has surrounded the village
Where do we hide from here?

The first song is a product of girls and the second composed by a boy.¹² Both songs are rich in the history of the chieftaincy row in Bu. In the first song the supporters of Andrew Ndo Muam are urging his son and claimant to the throne Emmanuel Bong Muam to bow down to the will of the people. The notables and *Kuiifuai* decided to crown the father and not him. It was instead the government that forced him down on the people. The decision to crown his father was because he was of the ruling dynasty in Bu.

The second part of this song is a message from Andrew Ndo Muam to the son. He is asking the son why he takes delight in summoning the *Kuiifuai* and some notables to appear in court in Wum and Bamenda. The son had embarked on this measure to bulldoze his way to the throne. Many are arguing that *Kuiifuai* which is an incarnation of the sacred institutions of Bu should under no circumstance be dragged to court. The attempt to cause the administration to ban it on 2 April 1990 was very shocking to the defenders of tradition and custom. The father is therefore pleading with his son to abandon these court cases to enable him use his salary to feed his family. In spite of this plea, the father finally passed on when the son had not reconciled with him. Rather, he still holds strongly to the view that *Kuiifuai* should cease to exist and some of the notables imprisoned.

Although the second song is quite short, it summarises the greater ramifications of the chieftaincy row that has embroiled Bu for over five decades. The allusion of the sun is heavily pregnant with meaning. The composer tries to analyse the numerous deaths that occurred because of the leadership tussle. The chieftaincy palaver is likened to the sun that dries up everything when it is very hot. Since women turn to the soil for the daily needs of their families, they are always uncomfortable with the sun when it affects their crops. Crops without shelter die under the scorching sun. Considering therefore the problems that have surfaced because of the chieftaincy row, this row is comparable to the devastating effects of the sun with untold suffering for women and children.

The mention of the lake to have surrounded the village is also linked to history. In the folktale of Bu, a lake was said to have been 'forced' out of the village because the gods in this lake were lovers of blood of the Bu people. This folktale goes that once upon a time a lake appeared at the upper section of the River Mehve valley. When the elders inquired to know from the people living in the lake how they would interact with little children when everyone had gone to the farm, a spear was raised from inside the lake with blood. This was interpreted by the elders as an ill omen. Measures were immediately taken to force the lake to 'disappear' from the village. This included singing and playing of instruments too loud for these people to bear.

The Laimbwe people believe this myth which explains why they are not very friendly to lakes. The chieftaincy brawl has been likened to this lake that frightened or scared away the Bu people. The magnitude of the problem is such

¹² Interview with Nyam Rachel, Muh Pamela, Njuh Florence, Wakem Effiance, Usem Bu, 26 August 2006. These are members of the *Etonghe Bouh* Group. People like Effiance act as security officers of this very popular group.

that the people may all perish comparable to people drowning in a lake. The rhetorical question that concludes the song tells of the seriousness of the brawl for leadership. Where indeed can the people hide from the scorching sun of the chieftaincy row and frightening lake of a scuffle that has enveloped and entangled a whole society with ripple effects on the neighbours notably Mbengkas and Baisso?

The oral expression of the leadership fracas in song needs further analyses. According to authoritative oral sources, the ruling family in Bu is Eselemei in spite of contemporary distortions for family and selfish motives. Sometime in history, precisely in the early colonial period, the throne passed onto a son which was incorrect according to the norms of a matrilineally organised society where succession follows the matriline. Matters came to a head in 1942 when Bonghezee passed on. Instead of the throne reverting to the ruling family, it moved from the Uzong to the Kulukang family. Chu Mbonghekang then ascended the throne as a friend of Bonghezee and not a family member. With the ‘quenching of fire’, that is, the passing into eternity of the fon on 9 September 1981, the village was thrown into pandemonium as was long expected while he was still alive.

In the years after 1981 attempts were made to bring the situation under control but these did not yield immediate dividends. Several years were spent in bickering by the two royal families of the village. In later years, they opted to sink their illusive differences, recognised and coronated Andrew Ndo Muam as their legitimate fon. These differences were considered illusive because both families from their history of origin were condemned to work together. Since then, the scuffle for leadership has still not relented. Rather it has been taken to the law courts in Wum and Bamenda. This situation is the one that has been succinctly presented in song as in the case in the two above. The composer of the second song is more figurative in his extrapolation of the situation. He describes the complex cobweb of the chieftaincy row and how it has impacted negatively on the history of Bu and Laimbwe.

Another theme related to the contention for the throne has been handled by the *Etonghe Bouh*. This song is more or less an indictment of hypocrites who feed fat from others but are unwilling to pay back. In an effort to pay back, the hypocrites claim that they are offering but assistance.¹³

Song 3: *Ndjanghe nyi Emmanuel* (“A Song on Emmanuel”)

The house they are constructing Si Meh
This is a debt
They say they are helping me
It is a debt
The house they are constructing
It is a debt they are paying

¹³ Interview with Dorothy Koi, Ndong Eric, Kpwai Felicia, Kubuh Onorin, Kasa-Bu, 23 and 26 August 2006. These are all very active members of the group.

Short as this song may be, it is rich in history, knowledge and wisdom. The song which has been composed by the girls of the *Etonghe Bouh* group tells of the life situation of Emmanuel Bong Muam from 1986 when he was enthroned by the government. He was then a worker with the defunct Cameroon Bank. In an attempt to entrench himself on the contested throne, Bong Muam provided assistance to many of his supporters and sympathisers alike in various forms. Today Bong Muam is no longer with a bank but a barrister at law and without a hut in the village. A cross section of the villagers who should have joined hands to construct a palace for him are opposed to him. This has led to the deterioration of his uncle's compound to the point of ridicule. It is in complete waste and abandonment, although in December 2005, the Bu Village Development Council (BVDC) to which Bong Muam militates publicly promised to construct three houses in that compound. This was easier said than done because although blocks were moulded, sooner than later, the house that had begun to deteriorate in earnest collapsed because of the heavy rains forcing supporters to abandon work. Today one block house stands there abandoned to itself and is home to goats. This is not normal and only explains how the administration in the colonial period changed the ruling dynasty of Bu not for the good of the people.

In the third song above, Emmanuel Bong Muam is telling his mother that any assistance given to him is a debt his supporters are paying back.¹⁴ He had fed and given them things and now expected them to build him houses in the palace in return. This was a reaction to the comments of some of them who argued that they were helping him to reconstruct an abandoned compound. To Bong Muam, the reverse was true because they were helping themselves and not him since he was their creditor. He is therefore insinuating that these supporters should be grateful and respectful of the wise saying that one good turn deserves another.

In the years before when Bong Muam had the resources to rebuild the uncle's compound, he did not because he invested in the chieftaincy imbroglio and in his supporters. Now that he is not as financially sound as before, the people are expected to invest in him or pay him back. The song is premised on the unfaithfulness and disloyalty of some of his supporters who insinuate that they are doing him a favour. Bong Muam is even pained to the marrow because the support they have given him is not quite useful and visible since all have fallen into ruins. Debt or no debt, the absence of support from the entire village in the construction of the compound of the late fon is proof of the contested leadership that has even embarrassed Emmanuel Bong Muam.

The importance of these three songs to the understanding of gender contribution to music among the Laimbwe of Bu cannot be over-emphasised. Of the three songs two were composed by a group of women composers who are very gifted in the art. The very act of composing songs reveals other competences of women in being able to retain the history of Bu and reveal it in carefully crafted songs. Without a sound knowledge of the unfolding drama based on their participation in

¹⁴ Interview with Dorothy Koi and Mbonge Chou, Bafren and Weisoo-Bu, 23 and 25 August 2006. Both are very gifted singers.

it and keen observation they would not have been able to document aspects of the political history of Bu in song. Through songs like the three above, women are largely the custodian of Laimbwe history because through song the history of the village is shared to everyone. These songs like others before them have survived that long enough to keep the history of Laimbwe alive. Whenever these women sing them they invoke memories of things that happened in the past and at the same time attract explanations to those who can not immediately comprehend the issues addressed in song such as the disturbing chieftaincy dispute. The careful choice of words in song composition cannot be fully understood without the interpretation of women who know exactly the issues in their compositions.

Still within the repertoire of the music album of *Etonghe Bouh* are songs on the virtue of care for the elderly women in the history of Bu. Their presence in the midst of the younger generation is a blessing. This is because they advice them on how to behave in every given circumstance. The elderly women and men in the history of Laimbwe are very highly revered for their sense of wisdom and humour¹⁵. The song below is quite telling of this philosophy of life in Laimbwe society.

Song 4: *Ndjang le Zhehwai Ebei le Zei leh hi tueoh* (“Song on the Recovery of Mami Ebei and Zei”)

Mami Ebei get up from bed
Mami Ebei get up
To make us happy
We were in the meeting
But you were absent

Now that you are here
We are happy
When you were sick
We were sad

Mami Zei
Get up from the sick bed
Mami get up
So that our sadness
May turn into joy

This song emphasises the care that is accorded the elderly, especially elderly women among the Laimbwe. This is because once a man or woman is old s/he becomes a child. It is a traditional concept of the Laimbwe people who believe that in the life of an individual s/he begins as a child, grows up to a mature person who

¹⁵ Interview with Ndong Emmanuel, Fangha Samuel, Akpwei Samuel, Ngai Gladys, Bafren and Usem –Bu, 25 and 26 August 2006.

depends on no one but many look up to him/her and then gets old. At old age, s/he returns to the state of a child considering that s/he can no longer take care of self. The concern and care for old women is particularly very intimate because of the matrilineal system of succession among the Laimbwe. The matrilineage has survived modernity and is held in very high esteem by all and sundry which then explains the deep concern and respect for the old.

The two mothers referred to in this song are advisers of *Etonghe Bouh*. The song was composed to wish them a very quick recovery. They were badly needed back in the meeting to turn the people's sorrows into joy because of the doses of advice they always dished out to the youths who are members of the *Etonghe Bouh* group. The youths had always seized opportunities to tap from the rich experiences of their life. In this song, Laimbwe youths are reminding their counterparts to keep the good values of tradition in place and they are also propagating these in a changing traditional social environment which value morality.

Such a composition reveal two main things namely the praise women give to themselves for the important position they hold in society and the reminder to the younger generation to always care for the elderly especially women who include mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. This song has not only been composed and popularised by women but they are making members of the *Etonghe Bouh* group to know that women especially the elderly women are always good advisers in the midst of young people. They often do this because they brought these young people forth to society. They will never stop cautioning them when they go wrong. In fact the female members of the *Etonghe Bouh* group did not only project the importance of women but through song they made society to appreciate their importance in bringing about joy and peace wherever they go. This only goes to confirm the saying among the Laimbwe that without a woman life can be miserable for men. The society is considered to be lively when women go along with men and this is recognised by the men.

Other issues within the sphere of social roles of men and women tackled in music include marriage and its attendant consequences.¹⁶ Below is one such song on a man and two women. One of them was legitimately married to him and the other not.

Song 5: *Ndjanghe Inig wi* (: A Song on Contracting Marriage")

Carol tells Thaddeus Zonghe
 Carol says
 I am not coming
 Carol tells Thaddeus Zonghe
 Carol says
 I am not coming

¹⁶ Interview with Delis Zei, Bamenda, 23 August 2006. She is a very good composer of music especially for pupils of the elementary school system. Apart from being a trained teacher, she was the First Assistant Mayor of the Wum Rural Council under the ticket of the CPDM.

I will not enter somebody's house
 Will not enter somebody's house
 Ndjung hates me
 I will not enter somebody's house
 Will not enter somebody's house
 Ndjung hates me

This song is a classic in the literary music box of *Etonghe Bouh*. It concerns one of the oldest institutions not limited to the history of Laimbwe. Several years ago, there was an extra-marital love affair between Thaddeus Zonghe, a married man, and Caroline Ebei who was unmarried. The wife of Zonghe, Ndjung hated it because she thought that if Caroline Ebei became a co-wife, that might spell doom for her matrimonial home. Conscious of the danger that awaited her if she persisted in her extra-marital affair, Ebei confided in her boyfriend, a married man to forget about the relationship. Circumstances pushed her to this hard decision. There was the threat of Ndjung, the hope to concretise a relationship with Akei, the cousin of Zonghe and hope of a new relationship in future. She however felt that Thaddeus Zonghe was feeble minded and shamed him for this character trait of his.

The very interesting history behind this song is that the future turned out to be a positive one for both Ebei and Zonghe. Thaddeus Zonghe finally got married to Ebei. Today, the man sits comfortably with his two wives without any rancour. Love history teaches us that it can be so strong that the efforts at stopping it become futile. Besides, through music one is brought to the hard reality that polygamy is normal in the history of Laimbwe defying the western concept of marriage. This is exactly what happened with Thaddeus Zonghe and Caroline Ebei. Like his other Laimbwe peers, he got married to Caroline Ebei to become a polygamist which is a sign of prestige among the people. The more wives and children one has the greater the respect and security he receives from society.

The urge to develop or not to develop the village also caught the attention of the *Etonghe Bouh* composers.¹⁷ There exist two rival development associations in Bu each supporting rival claimants to the throne. The song following is not only examining unequal development initiatives of the two associations but give hints on the entire history of development in this Laimbwe society.

Song 6: *Njanghe Fuahkeh* BUCADA leh BVDC (“A Song on the Work of BUCADA and BVDC”)

BUCADA continue your development
 Of the village
 You should not be angry
 You constructed the Metsche Bridge
 You have brought water

¹⁷ The issue of development is discussed by many. Some are not very happy with the BVDC for talking more than they act yet others are appreciative of what it has been doing.

Don't be annoyed
Go ahead doing work

BVDC said she would build a college
And bring light
None of these have they realised
BUCADA develop the village you started
Don't listen to any other person

From the song, what immediately catches the eye is the two rival development associations. Before 1992, the only development association in the village was the Bu Community Development Committee (BCDC) formed around 1979.¹⁸ Its formation was occasioned by the need to obtain money from 'Bread for the World,' a charitable organisation in Switzerland, to construct a befitting health centre for Bu. In the late 1980s, the BCDC became redundant partly because of the chieftaincy dispute that resurfaced after the death of Chu Mbonghekan in 1981 and because of alleged mismanagement of funds by some executive members. There was then need to found a new structure with a new vision but this was not immediately feasible because of the polarisation of society caused by the row for rulership. In 1992 however, a group of elite answered present to invitations given to the effect of forming a new association. This august gathering in the village led to the formation of the Bu Cultural and Development Association (BUCADA).¹⁹ Some elite did not answer present arguing that the formation of BUCADA was a hidden agenda of the Eselemei family to seize power from the Kulukang. In spite of this, BUCADA was charged with uncovering the racketeering in the defunct BCDC and forging ahead with the cultural and economic development of the village.

The new development association then had a lot of hurdles to overcome from the very beginning. It was openly condemned as being an arm of the chieftaincy claim of Andrew Ndo Muam and his 'selfish' Eselemei family. It is a fact that among the rank and file of this association, there are diehard supporters of Ndo Muam, but it remains a development association. Another hurdle was demands from the camp of Bong Muam for the administration to ban BUCADA and help put in place as association that was representative of every family in the executive.²⁰ All these and others did not deter BUCADA from forging ahead with development. One of its first major preoccupations was to rehabilitate the water project put in place by government and which had failed to function. This project became reality with the technical and financial support of the Swiss Organisation

¹⁸ Letter to the Minister of Public Health on the Ownership of Land and Structures of Bu Developed Community Health Centre (BDCHC).

¹⁹ Letter from the Divisional Officer Wum No. 269/L/E.28.02/165/346 dated 13 July 1992 to BUCADA authorising The Development Association to hold its meeting.

²⁰ Letter from Emmanuel Bong Muam to the Divisional Officer Wum on the banning of BUCADA.

for Technical Assistance, Helvetas and the *Kuiifuai* regulatory society. A new and cost effective catchment area was developed in 2005 to back up the existing two and provided water to other quarters because of the expanding population. Maintenance work was also carried out on the farm to market road and the main road linking Bu and Wum the divisional headquarters of Menchum. Other achievements of BUCADA are the annual cultural festivals aimed at rebuilding and maintaining the culture of the Bu people.

It is against this backdrop that the song is urging BUCADA to continue to do the good works begun in 1992 without digressing. One of its major achievements mentioned in the song is the bridge constructed over the River Metsche which facilitated the flow of traffic to and from Wum. The people are urging BUCADA to continue with its good works as these would vindicate the association. It is not by accident that women are those who are appreciating this work of BUCADA as far as development is concerned in the village. They have been keen observers of development initiatives at home and have been involved in development by contributing money and carrying sand towards the construction of bridges and the maintenance of culverts along the main road linking Bu and Wum the chief town of Menchum Division of Cameroon. This particular song was in fact an eye opener to many people who openly acknowledged that it was important to support any development effort without trivialising and politicising it. Once again women have come in through the composition of music to appeal to Bu people to sink differences that help to destroy and promote values that help to unite and build a more successful society.

The people are however disappointed with the Bu Village Development Council (BVDC), which is an arm of Bong Muam's claim to the throne. Their disappointment is exacerbated by the fact that all that BVDC boasted it would do like canvassing for a government secondary school and electricity have been realised but not due to the association. It is however important to note that BVDC succeeded to plaster some classrooms of government school Bu and have paid some PTA teachers of the school for several years. This according to the people is not enough when compared to the visible changes introduced by BUCADA that also enjoys the backing of *Kuiifuai*. A Government Secondary School was opened in the village last August 22 2007 not through the efforts of any one single development association but because the people had voted for the ruling party and were thus 'compensated.' This is however the nature of politics and governance in Cameroon.

There is another category of songs that probe into the behaviour of members of families when a problem comes knocking at their door.²¹ Below is one of such songs concerning one gentleman who ran into a problem with one foreigner and was imprisoned, yet his uncles abandoned him to the point of death.

²¹ Interview with Muh Griffith, Kang Mercy, Ngong Jonathan, Fundong-Bu, 26 August 2006.

Song 7: *Ndjanghe Ngehghe Stephen Bah* (“Song on the Suffering of Stephen Bah”)

Stephen tells Fueh
 I am suffering
 And nobody bothers
 A foreigner hated me
 And imprisoned me
 Nathaniel had money
 But would not help out
 Kumba my uncle had money
 But would not get me out of prison
 Sam a little child was by me
 And the elders sat and watched
 Open the door now Fueh let me enter
 Because I have been abandoned in prison
 And death is my portion

In this song, Stephen Bah is lamenting how he was thrown into prison for no just cause by someone for whom he was working in Melong in the Mungo Division of the Littoral Region of Cameroon. While he languished in prison, none of his uncles came to his rescue. He was abandoned to himself. It took the courage of his nephew Sam Ambei to come to his help. Stephen Bah is therefore lamenting how the elders are abandoning their responsibilities towards the young which was not the case before. He was then calling on his mother Mami Fueh who had since died to open the gate for him to join her than to remain on earth to suffer.

There is much meaning in this song because it reveals that family harmony and cohesion that use to exist among the Laimbwe matrilineage is beginning to give way. Several reasons account for this state of affairs. Firstly, the elderly are unhappy with the young who do not have a listening ear to the advice from the old. They think that they already know too much and this self pride has always made them to take the second step before the first. Secondly, whenever death occurs, the young are not contributing as expected of members of the family. The old who did all these when young end up annoyed that the young are not willing to learn from them. There is also an increasing feeling among some male elders that their sisters are wrongly advising their nephews on matters that should be handled by men. For instance, marriage arrangements in Laimbwe are the responsibility of maternal uncles or fathers but today the young men and their mothers do it themselves. The young also think that some of the elders are irresponsible and demand just too much from them. They however forget that these young people earn money abroad but much of it is spent on food, rents, light and water bills and transportation.

The pathetic song on the suffering of this gentleman is indeed composed by women. They have not only used the song to point out how men especially uncles can be indifferent to the plight of their nephews but how at the same time mothers

are considered to provide solace in times of extreme pain and difficulties. Although the mother Fueh died many years before him, he was calling on her to open the door and receive him. Why will a man suffer and instead of appealing to the living to come to his rescue he instead invokes the spirit of the dead? This may be a puzzle to many listening to the wordings of this song but it is a reality that motherhood remains at the centre of relations in Laimbwe territory. It is represented in all domains of political, economic as well as socio-cultural domains like in song.

The songs examined above are in fact samples of an indication that there is a lot of history revealed and kept alive in musical compositions especially by women. These songs remind society of some aspects of their history, the issues which have been discussed in these songs include care for the elderly, inter-generational misunderstanding, problems of marriage, issues of development and the much dreaded chieftaincy dispute. The songs address gender concerns and involve both sexes from their composition, transmission and actual performance. It is therefore non-written script that however remains in the minds and hearts of the people from generation to generation. While the chieftaincy disputes in practical terms are the major preoccupation of the men, women take an active part in it by way of musical compositions. They are also concerned with issues of a socio-cultural nature.

In this paper we have been able to show how music plays a very important function in all societies and more importantly in the non-literate ones like Laimbwe. It does not only permeate all aspects of life of the people, but it is life in its fullness. Music is performed by men and women alike in different circumstances and times. A majority of the compositions are by women because they remain keen observers of the events and take part in them in most cases to help bring together people who are opposed to one another. It is one of the surest means of preserving history and drawing lessons from history to uphold the values of society as well as a form of social cohesion for the good of all and sundry. The example of the *Etonghe Bouh* youth group in Cameroon is most revealing of how united boys and girls are in music. It also shows that through music one can fully appreciate a lot of the rich history of not only Laimbwe of North West Cameroon but also that of Cameroon often said to be Africa in miniature.

Address:

Henry Kam Kah
Department of History
University of Buea
Cameroon

E-mail: henry.kah@ubuea.cm, ndangso@yahoo.com
Tel.: +237 677 427 499

References

- Akpan, Church S. (2003) "The role of ethno-musicology and ethno-linguistics in modern African communication system". *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* 13, 126–135.
- Bender, Wolfgang (1991) *Sweet mother: modern African music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boni, Tanella (2000) "Women creating: hands, mind voices". In Lisette Ferera, ed. *Women build Africa*, 171–179. Quebec: Musee de la Civilisation.
- Brusila, Johannes (1990) "'Modern Traditional' Music from Zimbabwe, Virginia Mukweshu's Mbira Record 'Matare'". In Mai Palmberg and Annemette Kirkegaard, eds. *Playing with identities in contemporary music in Africa*, 35–45. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Chia, Ndifoin Daniel (1997) "Kom oral poetry: a selection of occasional festival songs (instrumental songs)". B.A. Long Essay, Department of English, University of Buea.
- Feld, Steven (2000) "A sweet lullaby for world music". *Public Culture* 12, 1, 145–172.
- Finnegan, Ruth (1970) *Oral literature in Africa*. London, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hunt, Danica L. Stein (1993) "The changing role of women in African music". *Ufahamu* 21, 1–2, 41–49.
- Ifionu, A. O. (1989) "Cultural influences on igbo traditional music from precolonial times to 1967". *Nsukka Journal of History* 1, 151–168.
- Kah, Henry Kam (1998) *Local government and nation-building in Wum Division 1949-72: a historical analysis*. M.A. Thesis, Department of History, University of Buea.
- Kah, Henry Kam (2005) 'The cutlass my husband, the hoe my wife': women and economic development among the Laimbwe of North West Cameroon in contemporary times. Departmental Seminar, Department of History, University of Buea.
- Lewis, Desiree (2004) "African gender research and postcoloniality: legacies and challenges". *African gender scholarship: concepts, methodologies and paradigms*, 27–41. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Loh, Choves (2005) "Wum land of plenty and disaster". *Cameroon Tribune*, 30 November.
- Longwe, Sara and Roy Clarke, eds. (1990) *Woman know your place: the patriarchal message in Zambian popular song*. Lusaka: ZARD.
- "Music and Song". In *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara* Vol. 3, 210–238. New York: Macmillan.
- Ndo, Muam Andrew (1999) "The Laimbwe people and their culture: traditional way of solving conflict". Paper presented at a workshop in Bu organised by the Ecumenical Youth Peace Initiative Commission, 20 April.
- Ngoh, Victor Julius (1996) *History of Cameroon since 1800*. Limbe: Presbook.
- Onyeji, Christian (2004) "Music and the search for beauty". *Nsukka. Journal of the Humanities* 14, 148–159.
- Palmberg, Mai and Annemette Kirkegaard eds. (2002) *Playing with identities in contemporary music in Africa*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Saleh, C. T. (1985) "The performance or music in Mada society: a preliminary survey" *Nigeria Magazine* 53, 2, 25–26.
- Sutherland-Addy, Esi and Diaw Aminata, eds. (2005) *Women writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel*. Vol 2, New York: The Feminist Press.
- Sutherland-Addy, Esi (2006) "The politics of gender representation in the arts of Africa". Lecture at the CODESRIA Gender Institute, 6–29 June.
- Sutherland-Addy, Esi (2006) "Gender in the arts: a thematic overview". Lecture at the CODESRIA Gender Institute, 6–29 June.
- Tala, Kashim Ibrahim (1987/1988) "Aesthetics from an African perspective: a case of the Mbag'alum of the Mezam people". *Science and Technology Review* 5, 101–106.
- Tala, Kashim Ibrahim (1999) *Orature in Africa*. Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan Press.