

Legends of Our Common Heritage 4 Fon Nde Fru II of Mankon

The historical prominence of any society is always marked by one or more of its leaders who distinguished themselves by laying the foundation on which the future grandeur of the society would be built. That is why the South African Zulus Honor Chaka, the Indians are nostalgic of Gandhi, the Chinese revere Mao Tse-Tong, the English respect James II, the French idolize De Gaule and the Americans venerate the days of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy.

The Fondom of Mankon, host to the renown city of Bamenda in the picturesque Bamenda Highlands of Cameroon, owes much of its present-day reputation to one of its former leaders, Fon Ndeh Fru II. In 1919 as world leaders gathered in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, France to chart out the future of the world after the 1st World War, the young Ndeh Fru was enthroned to guide the Mankon people and those of the Bamenda Grassfields (as the region was then known) to a future that was anything but promising to many minds at that time. During his 40 years on the throne, he realized so much in terms of development and unequivocally paved the way for the future prosperity of his people. It is hard to paint a complete picture of the reign of the enigmatic Fon Ndeh Fru in this paper. However, an attempt will be made to highlight some of the salient achievements that distinguished this leader from his peers.

POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY

Once enthroned, the young Fon Ndeh Fru realized the importance of peace and stability in his village. He set out to make peace not only with the new British mandated masters but also with the villages sharing common boundaries with Mankon. The alliance of friendship with Bafut was reinforced and peace agreements were arrived at with the Ba Fren (Nkwen), Ba Menda (Mendakwe), and especially the Bali. All these agreements were preceded by clear delimitation of the boundaries separating Mankon and the respective villages. Infact Fon Ndeh Fru is credited for having initiated the land inspection system in

order to settle land disputes. He was consulted and invited by many other village leaders both far and near to help them settle boundary disputes. The land inspection system has survived to this day. To crown the respect that other fons had for Ndeh Fru, he was made the chair of the South Western House of Chiefs that comprised, inter alia, Moghamo and Ngemba tribes.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Fon Ndeh Fru was neither a worshiper of the White man's religion nor a scholar of the White man's school. But he quickly noticed that the future belonged to those who would be members of these strange societies. Consequently, he promptly welcomed religious denominations such as the Catholics, Presbyterians and Baptists to Mankon. He gave them vast portions of land on which churches were built such as in Bayele, Baptists Center in present day Nkwen, Big Mankon, Atuakom and the Presbyterian Church center in Ntamulung. It is worth noting here that Mankon in the times of Ndeh Fru stretched to Bayele and Ndamukong street as the Mankon names given to these areas testify.

The Fon also spearheaded the building of schools such as Presbyterian School Ntingkag in 1932 and Catholic School Ntambeng on January 1st 1935 complete with dormitories for pupils from Bafut and other distant villages. Secondary schools included the distinguished Sacred Heart College and Our Lady of Lourdes college, Mankon. Thanks to his skillful negotiations with the Catholics through Rev Fathers Woodman and Mac Demot, qualified Mankon children benefited from a tuition free scholarship in Sacred Heart College.

AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE

Fon Ndeh Fru II encouraged farming and animal rearing in Mankon. He allocated land for, and championed the development of the first large scale sweet potato farm in Ntamulung. The harvest from this farm was sold locally and exported to other lands. In fact sweet potato became so reminiscent of Mankon that it was called "Mafe Nkon," (Mankon sweet potato). The fearsome leader also promoted fish cultivation in fish ponds and also the growing of cash crops such as coffee. The Mankon coffee cooperative was one of the most productive in the entire Southern Cameroons.

In the domain of commerce, he was foresighted enough to see the need for a market to cater for the needs of the growing number of civil servants (mostly from Nigeria) working in the administrative center in Tisong (present day Station) which at that time was also part of the Mankon dominion. The Fon built a market in Station and encouraged his subjects to supply food and other items to the administrators. Later, the market was transferred to Ntambag (Old Town) at the site of today's Bamenda Public security. Ndeh Fru II also constructed the Ntarinkon market and attracted traders from as far as Ngien Mbu, Metta and Widikum, much to the detriment of the market in Bali. Nevertheless, Mankon had to be healthy, the Fon realized, so as to be able to carry out his lofty projects.

HEALTH CARE

Fon Ndeh Fru rose to the throne at a time when there was a lot of distrust for the white man. No one wanted to be given the white man's medicine because of the belief that he had an insidious plot to eliminate the Mankon people who had humiliated him in so many wars. But Ndeh Fru knew better. He succeeded in convincing his people to accept vaccinations against chicken pox, small pox and other pestilences that were causing a havoc in the population. He also built maternity centers such as the one in Ntingkag to eliminate the burden of our pregnant grandmothers having to travel to Mambuh Bafut and Bali for childbirth. He finally crowned his achievement in the domain of health care with the granting of land and the construction of the Mankon General Hospital (present day Bamenda General Hospital).

TOURISM

Fon Ndeh Fru II knew just too well that healthy people must live in a beautiful environment. He made land and labor available for the development of the first botanical garden in the region, the forest reserve in Ntamulung (present day GBHS Bamenda hill). In fact some of us were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of this reserve that was so rich in fauna and flora before its destruction by what I will not hesitate to call "shallow-minded politicians." Today, the once attractive garden stands desolate and makes a mockery of the western-trained politicians that currently rule in our village.

Another embellishment of Mankon was the central fish pond located at the site of the now food market. This was a man-made lake well cared for and rich with fish and other aquatic creatures. It was a place every visitor to Mankon stopped to admire. Flanking it from across the street were the popular People's Palace Hotel complete with a live cabaret, the Ringway Hotel and, a little further down, the legendary Mankon Modern Club located at the City Chemist Roundabout. This lay-out gave tourists to Mankon the kind of water front treat that we see only on TV today. How depressing that such attractions could be destroyed to build a sinking, muddy and mosquito infested food market. Couldn't they simply build the food market on land that was not yet developed?

There were also other ponds created in the valley that separates Old Town and Mankon Commercial Avenue. Likewise, those ponds were drained and the area is nothing but a hideout for criminals today. No doubt these realizations attracted many people to Mankon, but the stay of these visitors was determined by how much security and hospitality Fon Ndeh Fru could guarantee to them.

LAW, SECURITY AND HOSPITALITY

A sight was selected, and the Fon supervised the construction of the Mankon Police Barracks which at that time housed the Mobile Wing Police. Its centralized location across from the General Hospital was intended to ensure a timely intervention to protect visitors and traders in the commercial center of town. First, the barracks were built with mud and bamboo and the roofs thatched with grass. Later, the station was converted into the stone fortress that we know today.

The Fon also made sure that he eradicated the ills that were a bane to so many societies at the time. To discourage suicide, any land or property on which such an abomination was committed was confiscated by the royal palace of Mankon. Aggravated assault such as the use of a weapon against the person of another was severely dealt with, and witches and wizards were either killed or banished from the village. To make sure that justice reigned in the village, he established the first ever Customary Court in Ntambag (the Ngeumba Customary Court) whose jurisdiction, as the name suggests, went beyond the borders of Mankon.

These measures turned Mankon into a sanctuary of peace and security. No wonder therefore that Mankon witnessed an influx of people from far and near who came begging for a place to settle. The visionary Fon of Mankon was up to the task. He welcomed everyone, sometimes from as far as Bansa. Even people from Mankon's worst rival at the time, Bali, such as the families of Tita Fonyang, Tita Fokum and Tita Foncham were given shelter in Mankon. Fon Ndeh Fru carved out land in Ntambag (Old Town) and made the Mankon people to build houses for the Housas, Bamouns and Bamilekes most of whom were refugees escaping from the cruelty of the UPC guerrilla war (marquisards) in East Cameroon. At this point, if you think we have exhausted the file of the enigmatic Fon Ndeh Fru, you are definitely mistaken. The best was saved for last.

ROADS AND OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE

It didn't take long to dawn on Fon Nde Fru that all his projects will come to waste if people could not get to, and move around Mankon easily. He masterminded the first (and arguably the only) urban development plan for Mankon. He started by mapping out and building the streets of the first urban center, Ntambag. Once Ntambag started showing signs of congestion, he followed up with a new layout that covered present day Commercial Avenue and the overlapping area stretching from T-Junction through the Mankon Main Market and Mankon Municipal Stadium, down to the defunct central fish pond and ending at City Chemist Roundabout. The Fon's new brain child had nothing to envy from the most planned urban development projects in the most advanced societies today. It was complete with a market, sports center (the stadium), a recreational center (the ill-fated central fish pond) and a commercial street (the Commercial Avenue). To crown this fit, he connected the new development to the "old" Ntambag with two road arteries, Water Side street and Savannah Street. News of the beautiful Mankon town circulated like wild fire and attracted an even growing number of visitors. The Fon noticed the difficulties visitors encountered in coming to this wonderland of a village. He immediately started constructing roads that connected Mankon to the other villages notably Bali, Mbengwi, Nkwen, Bambui and Akum. Forced community labor from Mankon people was used with each quarter having designated days of work and a specified portion of the project

to accomplish. The most trying of these projects was the construction of the road linking Up Station and down town Mankon. Don't forget that Station was part of Mankon at the time. In fact so many Mankon people lost their lives in that project that it was likened to slavery. Hence the expression in Mankon "A tsang a Komminity," in order words, "Community imprisonment."

Even with the hardship of the road construction, Fon Ndeh Fru still organized his subjects under the umbrella of the Mankon Development Association thanks to which such buildings as Roxi Cinema, former Guinness, the vandalized Mankon Rest House on Fon's street, the British Council building, Mankon Municipal Council (today's Bamenda Urban Council), the aforementioned main market, municipal stadium, police barracks and general hospital, just to name a few, were erected. When he finished doing all this, he rested.

THE FON DISAPPEARED, LONG LIVE THE FON!

Just like the Bible says how God rested on the 7th day after accomplishing his work of creation and acknowledging that it was beautiful, Fon Ndeh Fru disappeared (a Mankon Fon never dies, he disappears) in 1959. His body was preserved in the Royal Cemetery in the heart of the palace of Mankon alongside those of his predecessors. But his spirit is said to have gone back to dwell in the personal shrine (a small glittering pond) he had made for himself at the back of the crossing from Water Side street to Commercial Avenue. That was his resting place when he was alive and supervising the construction of his beloved village. The shrine is still appeased today by "Ngang Nfor", an annual appeasement society of the Mankon palace.

Today as we remember this emblematic ruler of Mankon, I can't but regret the damage that has been caused by senseless politicians to our once so beautiful village. Out of ignorance, we allowed the patrimony bestowed unto us by our forefathers (the land from Foncha Street through Ndamukong Street, Bayele, CBC Nkwen, Miss Ngeng Junction and up to GRA Station) to be seized from us and freely given to other villages. We allowed the name of the city to be changed from Mankon Town to Bamenda, which in fact stands for Ba Menda, a truncation of Ba Mendakwe which in itself was the Mungaka (Bali) appellation for the people of Menda (today's Mendakwe). Some of us are embarrassed today when our dialect is

spoken to us. We give strange, meaningless and exotic names to our children forgetting that those names are the tribal names of some other people in some other parts of the world. We have been insensitive when the sites that used to embellish our village are destroyed by politicians who have never known such beauty in their own villages. Worst of all, we all laughed when road names honoring our heroes (Fon Ndeh Fru inclusive) were pulled down and destroyed in front of us in the early 90s. All the houses vandalized following the 1992 Presidential Election in Cameroon have been restored, and most often in a better manner. But the Mankon Fon's Rest House which used to be the most beautiful in the entire country lies in ashes today. We look the other way when drunks from nearby bars pee and poop on the remains of a Palatial rest house that was anointed with the blood of our parents.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

This is not a call for an uprising. Neither is it a xenophobic incitement. We have remained true to the hospitable spirit bequeathed to us by our ancestors. As an example, all Mankon stood firm behind the residents of the town who had clean hands in the politically tumultuous years of the 90s while indigents of other cities around Cameroon chased out "strangers" and called them names like "Cam no go." Even our mothers and grandmothers rallied themselves under the umbrella of the dreaded "Takumbeng" society to protect a non Mankon whom they felt was a victim of injustice in the 1992 Presidential election. This commitment should not only continue, it should be reinforced. We as Mankon people should do what we can both collectively and individually to reestablish the old glory of our village. Let's lobby, call the powers that be and mount the necessary pressure for the reconstruction of the destroyed sites in Mankon. In our associations such as MACUDA, MASSA, NKAH NIKWI etc, let's make donations in any form and begin realizing some of these projects ourselves. Let me start with the Mankon Fon's Rest House. The restoration of that edifice is of paramount importance to the image of Mankon. In this light, I will suggest that anyone who feels touched by this set of things should join ranks with me so we can start correcting these wrongs. I am ready to start with a donation of one thousand dollars. The practical modalities of the organization and management of what ever funds raised will be handled by the donors

as a group. No contribution is insignificant for this project. It might also take years, but the sooner we start doing something, the earlier we will complete it. And when we shall restore the past prestige and beauty of our village, then we can begin to feel like the true descendants of the visionary architect of modern Mankon, Fon Ndeh Fru II.

NJALAH (RIDDLE) PAGE

Last week, the following njalah was posted for answers:

"I am silent when alive, but talkative when dead." What am I?

I appreciate all those who participated in this feature. The right answer was "leaves." We all know that when leaves are alive and fresh, they do not make any noise. But when they are dead, they rustle and crackle to motion.

This week's njalah is as follows"

"I can be pierced, but I can't be perforated." What truly am I?

The correct answer will appear in the next posting. "A nah chi" to everybody and let us forever know that "mbang nilvung a ni muo," in other words, "the child is the support of the old."

N/B: "Legends Of Our Common Heritage" is a literary corner that seeks to remind us of who we are, where we coming from, and where we are heading. Every participation is highly appreciated.

Munyong-Abieri

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