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### **Citation**

Konings, P. J. J. (2003). Religious revival in the Roman Catholic Church and the autochthony-allochthony conflict in Cameroon. *Africa*, 73(1), 31-56. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3503>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE AUTOCHTHONY-ALLOCHTHONY CONFLICT IN CAMEROON

*Piet Konings*

Religious revival movements of various sorts have had a profound impact on the public realm of many African countries in the last decennia (cf. Ellis and Ter Haar, 1998: 193). Although there is a growing body of literature on the subject, revival movements within the mainline churches, as Ranger (1996) has rightly remarked, have been understudied. In this study I focus on a recent revival movement within the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in the South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon that appears to have been inspired by the expansion of Pentecostalism in the area. This movement, popularly known as the Maranatha Movement, emerged in Bonjongo, a remote village located between Buea and Limbe, but it rapidly attracted a large following from outside the village and eventually almost caused a schism within the southwestern RCC. It became a particularly explosive issue when it was exploited for political ends, becoming part of the autochthony-allochthony conflict fuelled by the regional and national political elite during political liberalisation in the 1990s.

Given the dramatic rise and spread of the so-called 'Pentecostal', 'charismatic' or 'born-again' churches among the Christian population in Africa in the last few decades, it is not surprising that they quickly became a source of inspiration for the introduction of certain innovations and the birth of revival movements within the mainline churches. Several scholars have attempted to analyse Pentecostal ideology and practices and to explain the spectacular growth of the Pentecostal churches in Africa and elsewhere (cf. Gifford, 1993, 1998; Haynes, 1996; Meyer, 1999; Van Dijk, 2000; Corsten and Marshall-Fratani, 2001). Despite significant differences in their doctrine, liturgy, organisation and social base, they usually emphasise personal conversion as a distinct experience of faith ('being born again'), the centrality of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual gifts of glossolalia and faith healing, and the efficacy of miracles. Marshall (1995: 245) has highlighted the great appeal and evangelical zeal of the born-again movement: 'its idiom of rebirth is central not only to the individual's experience of his faith and the new opportunities it provides both spiritually and materially, but is a powerful metaphor for its mission within the Christian community and nation'. Pentecostalism has converted an increasing number of 'nominal' Christians and all mainline churches have come under pressure to adopt Pentecostal forms of religious expression in their liturgy.

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It is, however, noteworthy that Pentecostal expansion in Cameroon is a more recent phenomenon than in many other African countries, mainly for political reasons. The Cameroonian post-colonial state used to discourage, to put it mildly, any form of association, in its determined efforts to establish total control over civil society (Bayart, 1979). Unlike the established churches, newly created sects and churches found it hard to be registered as a legal organisation by state security (Mbuy, 1994). It was not until the introduction of political liberalisation in December 1990 that freedom of (religious) association was enacted. Henceforth, the growth of Pentecostalism has gathered pace and was particularly promoted by Nigerian preachers and Cameroonians who had lived in Nigeria. Pentecostalism became most popular in Anglophone Cameroon which borders Nigeria, shares a common language, and has a relatively large Nigerian immigrant population.

In the 1990s, Christians in the South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon witnessed the emergence of some 'born-again'-inspired revival movements within their principal churches, the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and the RCC. The founders of these movements blamed the hierarchy of these churches for being more preoccupied with material concerns than with spiritual values. They therefore decided to create charismatic prayer groups, which appeared to adopt several Pentecostal elements. Their introduction of a more personalised form of spirituality and their claims of faith healing and deliverance from 'demon possession and evil attacks' in particular appealed to many Christians. Although these movements rapidly became a source of controversy within the churches, the hierarchy did not immediately intervene. As in other parts of the world, mainstream churches in Cameroon are by no means uniform bodies; on the contrary, they allow for considerable variety in the articulation and practices of faith and for the incorporation of elements from other religions as long as they are compatible with the basic tenets of doctrine and liturgy. It was not until the hierarchy had come to the conclusion that the new revival movements deviated from orthodoxy and posed a serious threat to the unity and peace within the churches that it decided to ban them.

The PCC revival movement was launched by Rev. Dr. Michael Bame Bame in the English-speaking Bastos congregation in Yaoundé at the beginning of 1990.<sup>1</sup> The founder was born in the North West Province of Anglophone Cameroon and was one of the most outstanding theologians and pastors in the PCC.<sup>2</sup> He claimed that his decision to found a revival movement stemmed from a spiritual experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1987-88 when he and his wife underwent prayer-healing sessions

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1970s another revival had been launched in the same congregation. This born-again movement founded by Dr. Zacharias Fomum, a lecturer at the University of Yaoundé and son of a Presbyterian pastor, caused a split in the PCC. Dr. Fomum then established his Christian Missionary Fellowship International.

<sup>2</sup> For his life story, see Kor, 1997.

in a church manifesting the powers of the Holy Spirit. His movement later came to be called the 'Pilot Revival Prayer Group in Cameroon', soon spreading to Anglophone Cameroon, where it attracted a substantial number of followers. Gradually, the PCC hierarchy became more and more suspicious of the movement's teachings and liturgical practices which appeared to be dangerously close to Pentecostalism (Kor, 1997). Subsequently, in April 1994, the PCC Synod issued 'Guidelines' for revival in which it acknowledged that every church needed revival, but it equally pointed out that PCC revival 'was not to be an imitation of Pentecostalism' nor should it 'adopt Pentecostal mannerisms', and no exclusive claims about baptism by immersion or glossolalia would be permitted (Umenei, 1995: 24-25). Since these guidelines were ignored by the revival's founder, the Synod Committee resolved on 11 April 1995 that 'pastors, elders and other church leaders of the PCC who in the name of "revival" are engaged in doctrinal and liturgical practices which are not in consonance with those of the PCC, shall be asked to desist from such practices, latest 31 December 1995'. Anyone who did not comply would be dismissed if they were a pastor, and would lose their leadership position in the case of elders. This resolution was confirmed by the PCC Synod of 1996 in Bamenda. Consequently, most Christians and pastors who were involved in the revival decided to return to the fold. A stubborn group in the Bastos PCC congregation led by Rev. Dr. Bame Bame defied all directives and pleas to reconsider their ways. Several attempts by the PCC leadership, at various levels, to strike a compromise and establish peace were rebuffed by the group and after all attempts at reconciliation had been blatantly rejected by the Yaoundé group, the Synod Committee, at its meeting in April 1997 in Kumba, decided to ban the group forthwith (Kor, 1997). This signified the end of revival and Rev. Dr. Bame Bame later resigned from the PCC.

Significantly, the PCC has always recognised that there are certain tensions and rivalries in the Anglophone region between the coastal-forest people, the present South West Province and the people from the northern Grassfields, the present North West Province (see below). The church has thus two different women's centres, and two different youth centres – even two different bibles (Gifford, 1998: 281). Its constitution admits this tension in stipulating that the moderator and the synod clerk 'shall not be indigenes of one and the same province'. It has also been a custom that the leadership of the church should rotate between the South West and the North West and serious conflicts have occurred when this custom was not respected. Nasoh (1998) provides evidence that the PCC revival movement in the Bastos congregation, too, largely degenerated into a South West-North West conflict. Southwestern members of the congregation felt that the new revival movement was a North West scheme to rob the southwestern pastor, Rev. Dr. Isaac Elangwe, of his legitimate right to lead one of the most prestigious PCC congregations. Consequently, they were inclined to disapprove of any alignment with Rev. Dr. Bame Bame against one of their 'sons of the soil'. Rev. Dr.

Elangwe and southwestern elders of the congregations actually became the most vocal opponents of the revival movement.

The RCC revival movement, which is the focus of our study, emerged almost at the same time as the PCC one. It was founded by a southwestern priest, Father Etienne Khumbah, in the Diocese of Buea, the only RCC diocese in the South West Province prior to 1999. His Maranatha Movement had a much greater impact in the South West Province than the PCC revival movement, attracting not only a much larger membership but also arousing much stronger regional emotions since it tended to extend the then prevailing autochthony-allochthony discourse in the region from the socio-economic and political domains to the religious domain. Many southwestern faithful came to support the founder not only in his claims of offering spiritual renewal and faith healing but also in his apparent challenge to the allegedly North West-dominated hierarchy in the Buea Diocese. The widespread belief in the South West Province that an autochthonous priest was being ‘victimised’ by a northwestern bishop on charges of having founded a ‘born-again’-like revival movement, tended to transform this originally internal church dispute into a vehement, and often violent, regional conflict about allochthonous domination. The regional elite quickly mobilised in defence of this ‘illustrious son of the soil’. The lavish imagery of war and martyrdom used by the southwestern press to discuss the founder’s struggle with the RCC hierarchy marked the beginning of a process of myth-making which reached its climax when he was forcibly evicted from his residence and home region by the military.

In this study I first briefly discuss the reasons for the current obsession in the South West Province with the ‘autochthony-allochthony’ issue. This discussion serves as the necessary background information for my subsequent analysis of the Maranatha Movement crisis.

## THE AUTOCHTHONY-ALLOCHTHONY CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH WEST PROVINCE

The new emphasis on autochthony and ‘belonging’ in the South West Province is by no means exceptional in Africa. In many regions of the continent one can observe an obsession with roots and origins during political liberalisation (cf. Geschiere and Gugler, 1998; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000). In previous publications I have tried to explain the current obsession in the South West Province with the autochthony-allochthony issue and I want to summarise here my main findings (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997, 2000; Konings, 2001).

I have argued that this obsession has its roots in the economic and political history of the region. Since the colonial period, the regional population has felt dominated in

demographic, political and economic terms by 'settlers' or 'strangers', particularly those originating from the other Anglophone province, the North West Province. The principal reasons for this situation are (i) labour migration and settlement, and (ii) the growing divide between the South West and North West elite.

There has been an increasing flow of labour, particularly from the North West Province, to the South West Province where a plantation economy was established during German colonial rule (1884-1916) (Konings, 1993). The effects of labour mobility on local communities in the South West appear to have been dramatic. While initially most migrant workers returned to their region of origin after short spells of work on the estates, an increasing number gradually decided to settle in the South West after retirement. Settlers were soon joined by fellow members of their ethnic group who wanted to grow food or cash crops on the fertile lands in the region or to become artisans, traders or employees in local enterprises. In some coastal districts, like Victoria Division, the local population 'almost became overwhelmed by these strangers even before the Second World War' (Gwan, 1975: 121).

Initially, settlers were welcomed by the local population and given land in usufruct, thus becoming more or less incorporated in the land-giving lineage. They were usually expected to provide a small recompense in kind as a token of appreciation for the land-giver. Yet, it soon became evident that the local tenure system could not cope with the increasing flow of strangers and that local institutions, in particular chieftaincy - mostly a colonial invention (Geschiere, 1993) - were too weak to enforce the existing norms and rules. The system simply collapsed. A land market quickly developed in those areas with large stranger concentrations (Meek, 1957; Fisiy, 1992). The resulting unprincipled access to land degenerated into numerous land disputes, especially in Victoria Division where land shortages rapidly developed.

Land was not the only reason for the development of antagonistic relations between autochthons and strangers in local communities. The local population envied the settlers' success in agriculture, trade and other entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, it resented their frequent disrespect for local authority and customs, their regular seduction of local women, and their alleged disinclination to invest in local development, preferring instead to transfer their accumulated capital to their region of origin (Ardener *et al.*, 1960; Ardener, 1962). It was generally believed that settlers were only interested in exploiting and dominating the local population, while continuing to remain loyal to their own ethnic group, as was ultimately evidenced by their frequent desire either to return home at the end of their working life or to be buried in the land of their ancestors.

The simmering conflict between natives and strangers exploded at times, leading to various forms of ethnic cleansing. Strikingly, any violent conflict of this nature used to occur between autochthons and settlers originating from outside Anglophone

Cameroon, especially the Igbo from Eastern Nigeria and the Bamileke from the Francophone part of the Grassfields (Konings, 2001: 177-78). The simmering conflict, however, between autochthons and allochthons in the southwestern local communities, however, continued to produce explosive material that could easily be manipulated and used by political entrepreneurs.

In addition to the large-scale northwestern migration and settlement, the growing divide between the South West and North West elite has contributed to the southwestern attack on northwestern settlers during the current political liberalisation. This divide within the Anglophone elite has to be attributed to the South West elite's perception of North West political domination at the regional and national level since the end of the 1950s. While the South West elite had dominated the political scene in the Anglophone territory, the so-called Southern Cameroons, until the 1959 elections, the victory of the North West-based Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) in these elections signalled the start of North West hegemony in the territory, with the North Westerner John Ngu Foncha becoming prime minister (Konings, 2001: 179-81). In pre-empting for themselves the choice jobs and best lands in the South West following independence and reunification in 1961, the North West elite provoked strong resentment among South Westerners (Kofele-Kale, 1981; Ngwane, 1994; Mbile, 2000). South West sentiments have been intensified by the gradual success of the entrepreneurial North Westerners in dominating most sectors of the South West economy, in particular trade, transport and housing (Rowlands, 1993).

Political liberalisation in the early 1990s fanned the rivalry between the South West and North West elite in their struggle for power at the regional and national levels. Out of fear for renewed North West domination, the South West elite, and especially that section of it that was closely connected with the regime in power, tried to stimulate South West identity and organisation, even to the extent of inciting the autochthonous population in the South West Province against the allegedly dominant and exploitative northwestern strangers or settlers.

The South West elite became alarmed when the liberalisation of political space resulted in the rapid growth of both the North West-based opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and several Anglophone movements which contested Francophone domination in the post-colonial state and demanded first a return to the federal state and later outright secession (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997; Takougang and Krieger, 1998). The growing popularity of these organisations immediately raised their suspicions of renewed North West domination over the South West.

From a South West point of view, such suspicions were not without foundation. The SDF was clearly a party organised and controlled by the North West elite. Moreover, although the party, like the former KNDP, enjoyed less popularity among the autochthonous population in the South West than in the North West, it could

nevertheless count on the massive support of northwestern workers and settlers in the region. In addition, it soon became manifest that the SDF's frequent, and often violent, confrontations with the regime had the paradoxical effect of advancing the political careers of northwestern politicians. The year 1992 witnessed first the appointment of a North Westerner, Simon Achidi Achu, as prime minister in an apparent attempt by the desperate regime to contain the enormous popularity of the SDF in the North West, and later the spectacular performance of the charismatic SDF chairman, John Fru Ndi, in the presidential elections.

Understandably, southwestern memories of northwestern domination in the Federated State of West Cameroon (1961-72) created resistance among the South West elite against the Anglophone movements' advocacy of a return to a two-state (Anglophone/Francophone) federal arrangement. Furthermore, although South Westerners dominated the leadership of the most important Anglophone associations, the vast majority of its members appeared to be SDF members. Little wonder then that the South West elite was inclined to perceive Anglophone associations as auxiliary organisations of the SDF. Following their repeated failure to form a party of the same standing as the SDF, the South West elite started to create regional associations to represent and defend South West interests. This gave rise to the emergence of the South West Elite Association (SWELA) and the South West Chiefs' Conference (SWECC) (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998; Konings, 1999).

Given the intensification of the power struggles between the South West and North West elites during the political liberalisation process, the Biya government found it increasingly lucrative and politically expedient to tempt the 'peaceful and conciliatory' South West elite away from Anglophone solidarity with strategic appointments and the idea that their real enemy was the 'unpatriotic, ungrateful and power-mongering' North West elite. So when, in September 1996, Biya appointed the South Westerner Peter Mafany Musonge as prime minister, replacing the North Westerner Simon Achidi Achu, and appointed more South Westerners than North Westerners to key cabinet positions, 'the South West people...went wild with excitement and jubilation and loudly praised the Head of State' for having at last listened to the cry of despair of South Westerners, who for over thirty-six years were 'confined to the periphery of national politics and socio-economic development'.<sup>3</sup>

Government divide-and-rule tactics culminated in the 1996 constitution. While the previous (1972) constitution had emphasised national integration and the equal rights of all citizens, including the right to settle in any place and to move about freely, the new constitution promised special state protection for autochthonous minorities (Melone *et al.*, 1996; Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2000). Not unexpectedly, the new constitution

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Significance of P.M. Musonge's Appointment' by a member of the South West, Kome Epule, in *The Star Headlines*, 20 November 1996, p. 5.



boosted South West identity and fuelled existing tensions between South Westerners and North Westerners.

It was promulgated only a few days before the 21 January 1996 municipal elections and the timing of its release was hardly an accident. The South West elites, especially those who were members of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), were shocked when the SDF won most of the key urban constituencies in their region. South West Province's governor, Peter Oben Ashu, immediately blamed the settlers, who outnumbered the indigenes in most localities in the province, for the poor performance of the CPDM in the urban areas, and on several occasions he and other members of the southwestern elite ordered them to return home. The South West elite immediately started demanding state protection for the autochthonous southwestern minority against the dominant and exploitative North Westerners. Northwestern settlers were likened to scabies, a persistent skin affection commonly referred to in Pidgin English as *cam-no-go* (meaning an illness that cannot be cured or a visitor who will not leave). Appeals to the state for protection were often accompanied by threats of ethnic cleansing and the removal of strangers.

Straight after the elections, the government provided the required protection by appointing indigenous CPDM leaders as urban delegates in the municipalities won by the SDF. It is beyond any doubt that after the municipal elections the Biya regime also rendered assistance to the emerging so-called Grand Sawa movement,<sup>4</sup> an alignment of the ethnically-related coastal elite in the South West Province and neighbouring Francophone Littoral Province on the basis of common feelings of exploitation by Francophone and Anglophone Grassfields settlers (Tatah Mentan, 1996; Wang Sonné, 1997; Yenshu, 1998). The emergence of the Grand Sawa movement signified an important victory for the government in its divide-and-rule tactics. Evidently, it also had a devastating effect on Anglophone identity and organisation, the Francophone-Anglophone divide becoming cross-cut by alliances that opposed the coastal people, the Grand Sawa, to the so-called Grand West, the alliance between the Anglophone and Francophone Grassfielders that constituted the backbone of the major opposition party, the SDF (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2000).

The autochthony-allochthony discourse has not only become an important play for political entrepreneurs in their struggle for power but also appears to have become part and parcel of the people's daily lives in the South West. It has exacerbated conflicts about land in local communities and has even had an impact on marriages. Marriages between South Westerners and North Westerners are increasingly disapproved of, being

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'Sawa' was generally employed by the 'natives' of Douala to refer to themselves as coastal people. The term was subsequently extended to related coastal people in the Francophone Littoral Province and Anglophone South West Province. Of late, ethnic groups in the Littoral and South West Provinces, living at a distance from the coast, have also come to identify themselves with this appellation. See Yenshu, 1998.

seen as political and cultural aberrations. During elections, the southwestern pro-CPDM elites have become accustomed either to excluding northwestern settlers from voting in South West Province or bringing pressure to bear upon them to vote for the CPDM. The autochthony-allochthony issue is also the subject of continuous discussion in the press and in academic circles. The Anglophone private press, which initially encouraged Anglophone identity and solidarity, has become increasingly split along South West-North West lines. The sheer volume of diatribes, commentaries, opinions and reports related to the autochthony-allochthony issue in these papers are an indication of the current obsession in the region with this issue (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2000). The autochthony-allochthony issue has also affected various institutions in the South West. The Buea Anglophone University is headed by members of the local ethnic group, the Bakweri, who have used all means possible to maintain control over the predominantly northwestern students and lecturers. There is constant talk of Grassfields domination to the detriment of 'sons and daughters of the soil'.<sup>5</sup>

For our further discussion, it is important to observe that the RCC hierarchy in Cameroon has regularly opposed the increasing politicisation of ethnicity and the politics of belonging in the country. For example, in November 1996,<sup>6</sup> the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon issued a Pastoral Letter on Tribalism in which it declared:

To love one's tribe is a good thing. However, attachment to one's tribe becomes a real evil when one excludes others, persecutes them, deprives them of their rights, assassinates them, instigates one ethnic group against another for personal or economic ends. Thus we see these days anonymous tracts, bearing clearly tribalistic messages, sometimes supported by biblical quotations, circulating in our country, inciting one group to rise up against another, under the pretext of self defence and the 'protection of minorities'.

Some members of the RCC clergy in the South West Province, too, have strongly condemned the politics of belonging. One of their targets was the governor of the South West Province, Peter Oben Ashu, who was one of its principal protagonists. For example, in one of his outrageous speeches the governor invited the autochthonous people in the South West to transform themselves into elephants, which is part of the southwestern belief system, in particular of the Bakweri (Ardener, 1959), and destroy

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *The Post*, 18 September 1997, p.7. The paper refers to the 'Bakweri Mafia', dominating the University of Buea.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Cameroon to Christians and to All Men and Women of Goodwill on Tribalism', Yaoundé, 16 November 1996, reproduced in *Cameroon Panorama*, 422, (February), 1997, pp. 20-22.

the farms and food crops of northwestern settlers.<sup>7</sup> Some priests stationed in Buea, the capital of the South West Province and residence of the governor, were particularly in the habit of severely criticising the governor's xenophobic remarks during their sermons. The governor, who is a Catholic himself, was so offended by these criticisms that he refused to attend church services for a while.

Given the RCC leaders' persistent condemnation of the autochthony-allochthony discourse, it was both a shocking and traumatic experience for them when the politics of belonging pervaded the church itself during the Maranatha Movement crisis, the wounds of which will take a long time to fully heal.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE MARANATHA MOVEMENT CRISIS IN THE BUEA DIOCESE

For those familiar with the situation within the RCC in the South West Province, it did not come as a complete surprise that the Maranatha Movement crisis opened a Pandora's box with the expression of underlying South West-North West contradictions.<sup>8</sup> There was already a widespread feeling among southwestern Catholics that their region was dominated by North Westerners not only in the political and economic domains but also in the religious realm. Although the RCC had started its missionary activities in the South West during German colonial rule, it eventually established firmer roots in the North West (Mveng, 1990; Njeuma, 2000). In 1996, when the Maranatha Movement crisis arose, there was only one Catholic diocese in the entire South West Province, the Buea Diocese, while the North West had already two dioceses, those of Bamenda and Kumbo. Even more significantly, the Buea Diocese was not fully autonomous, being part of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda where the archbishop resided. Moreover, compared to the North West, the South West had few indigenous Catholic priests and as a consequence, a considerable number of northwestern clergymen were active in the Buea Diocese and actually occupied various strategic positions there. In 1996, the four top positions in the diocesan hierarchy were still held by North Westerners: firstly, His Lordship Pius Suh Awa, bishop; secondly, Mgr James Tobia, vicar-general; thirdly, Father George Nkuo, Catholic education secretary; and fourthly, Mgr Lucas Atang, the most senior priest.

Understandably, the dominant position of the northwestern clergy in the diocese created a potentially explosive situation when the government and the regional elite

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<sup>7</sup> Governor Peter Oben Ashu's xenophobic remarks were given wide publicity, notably in the northwestern private press like *The Post* and *The Herald*.

<sup>8</sup> This section is based on my reading of numerous letters and newspaper articles concerning the Maranatha Movement conflict, as well as on interviews with participants in the conflict.

started fanning the autochthony-allochthony issue in the South West during political liberalisation. The conflict that developed in the course of 1996 between the southwestern founder of the Maranatha Movement, Father Etienne Khumbah, and his northwestern bishop, His Lordship Pius Suh Awa, sparked off South West-North West arguments in the diocese.

Father Etienne is a Bangwa, an Anglophone subgroup of the Bamileke (Brain, 1972; Dongmo, 1981) that resides in the present Lebialem Division of the South West Province. The RCC forms the major mainstream religious organisation in the area and most southwestern priests hail from there. Father Etienne is the most senior Bangwa priest, having been ordained in 1975 and was actually the first indigenous priest to be ordained by Pius Awa following his installation as bishop of the Buea Diocese in 1973.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until 1991 when he was stationed in Bangem that Father Etienne founded the Maranatha Family of Jesus Prayer Group, popularly called the Maranatha Movement, 'to protect the Bangem youths against the invasion of sects'.<sup>10</sup> He presented his new movement as one of the numerous charismatic bible prayer groups that had in the meantime emerged within the RCC in Cameroon and elsewhere to bring about a religious renewal in the church by encouraging individual spirituality through bible reading, prayer, fasting and so on, and to stem the growing influence of sects, in particular the Pentecostal or born-again movements (Haynes, 1996; Gifford, 1993, 1998). Although Bishop Awa never signed any document to express his official approval of the Maranatha Movement, he nevertheless allowed it to function, trusting that Father Etienne would stick to the RCC teachings and rites and strengthen individual spirituality among the faithful.

A few years later, in 1994, Father Etienne was transferred to Bonjongo to act simultaneously as parish priest and principal of St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College. This transfer can be seen as proof that Father Etienne was still enjoying the full confidence of his bishop at that time. Bonjongo is a village of great historical significance to the RCC in Anglophone Cameroon and Bishop Awa maintained a special relationship with this locality. Bonjongo or *Engelberg* (Hill of Angels) Parish was founded by the Pallotine Fathers in 1904 as the first Catholic mission station in Anglophone Cameroon (Mveng, 1990; Njeuma, 2000) and Bishop Awa invested a lot of money in the construction, expansion and renovation of a number of Catholic institutes there, including St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College, the Novitiate of the Brothers of St Martin de Porres, and a convent for the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. He also made arrangements for his own retirement there. Since 1984, he had transformed Bonjongo into a diocesan pilgrimage centre.

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<sup>9</sup> For Bishop Awa's life story, see Nkea, 1996; and Njeuma, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Oracle*, 3 (1), 1998, p. 32. For the RCC battle against the 'sects', see Mbuy, 1994.

It was in Bonjongo that Father Etienne's Maranatha Movement started to become well known and its fame spread throughout the South West Province and even to other provinces in Cameroon. The change in its official name from Maranatha Family of Jesus Prayer Group to Maranatha Family of Jesus Healing Ministry shows the increasing importance of faith healing in the movement. Father Etienne soon built up a reputation as a 'healing priest', attracting many followers, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. A growing number of his followers claimed to have been healed by the priest of various sorts of illness, devil attacks and witchcraft through prayer, fasting and the use of holy water. Like the Pentecostal churches, Father Etienne appeared to take deliverance from evil and occult forces more seriously than the mainline churches (Meyer, 1999; Van Dijk, 2000). His followers also stressed that his innovations in the church services, which appeared to incorporate some born-again elements such as clapping, dancing, speaking in tongues and ecstasy, and his teachings were effecting a spiritual renewal within the RCC and their personal conversion. They quickly began to condemn the allegedly materialist outlook and amoral behaviour of the RCC authorities and clergy. This led to a growing division within the RCC in the South West Province. Several (violent) clashes between Maranatha and non-Maranatha members within the Catholic community were reported in Bonjongo and elsewhere in the South West. The growing popularity of the 'Apostle Founder' and the crisis that his movement brought about in the RCC in the South West show some striking similarities with Archbishop Milingo's healing ministry in Zambia (Ter Haar, 1992).

Confronted with frequent charges that his movement deviated from RCC doctrine and liturgy, Father Etienne wrote a letter to his bishop in June 1995, in which he described the objectives and practices of his movement and requested the bishop's written approval. A month later the bishop returned all the documentation provided by Father Etienne without any comment or approval. It became increasingly evident that the bishop and clergy were opposed to the continued existence of the movement, which had divided the faithful in the diocese into two hostile camps. Becoming painfully aware of this situation, Father Etienne no longer sought the advice of his bishop and refused to attend any meetings of diocesan clergy organisations.

Strikingly, on 22 September 1996, a diocesan committee of eminent Catholics chaired by Dr S.N. Lyonga that was asked by the bishop to investigate the matter submitted a generally positive report on the founder and his movement.<sup>11</sup> It stressed that Father Etienne was a dedicated priest who had strengthened the spiritual life of the faithful and had won back many Catholics through the innovations he had brought about in his church services. It even attacked the bishop for 'anathematising the Maranatha Movement's much cherished innovations' which had increased the

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<sup>11</sup> This report can be found in *The Star Headlines*, 16 January 1998, p. 5.

participation of the faithful in the liturgy, while he himself had introduced several northwestern cultural elements into southwestern church services, like gun firing, the wearing of northwestern vestments, and the use of the northwestern peace branch at lectionary processions. The committee demanded more tolerance and understanding from the bishop.

Apparently, the committee's positive report had no effect whatsoever on the bishop's determination to intervene. On 26 December 1996, the bishop wrote to Father Etienne, informing him of his transfer to Bishop Rogan College, the minor seminary in Buea, without any indication of his function there. The following day, he sent Father Etienne another letter, announcing the suspension of the Maranatha Movement. There were many reasons for this suspension, including the fundamentalist use of the bible and the introduction of certain innovations in the liturgy which, according to the bishop, were not only more born-again than Catholic but also 'offensive to the decorum and sacredness of the liturgy'. He stressed that Father Etienne had never received any authorisation of the competent ecclesiastical authority to execute his self-proclaimed healing ministry nor had the rites for such a ministry ever been approved. He accused the priest of pretending that he himself rather than Christ was healing people and prohibited him from receiving consultation fees for his healing ministry, 'even if they were spontaneously offered'. He also blamed the priest for devoting more time to healing than to administering the college. Finally, he requested that Father Etienne discourage any form of 'superstitious' use of holy water: 'water is blessed in large quantities and distributed indiscriminately to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and people have come to believe that only water blessed by you is valid and effective'. In conclusion, the bishop stated that the Maranatha Movement had caused a split among the faithful and turned its members against the hierarchy.<sup>12</sup>

When Father Etienne communicated the bishop's message to his followers on 28 December 1996, they were outraged, claiming that the bishop's arguments for suspending the movement were completely unfounded. They interpreted Father Etienne's transfer as a disciplinary measure aimed to encourage his withdrawal from the movement. They alleged that the hidden motive for the bishop's action was the hierarchy's envy of Father Etienne's growing popularity: his success had not only led to a substantial decline in the number of parishioners and in the incomes of the various parishes but it also constituted a challenge to northwestern hegemony in the diocese. More and more South Westerners, they said, would like Father Etienne to become the first southwestern bishop in the Buea Diocese.<sup>13</sup> Southwestern papers and journals such as *The Star Headlines*, *The Weekly Post*, and *The Oracle*, notorious for their anti-North

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<sup>12</sup> *The Oracle*, 3 (1), 1998, pp. 32-33. See also 'Pastoral Letter to All Faithful of the Diocese of Buea on the "Maranatha Prayer Group"', in *Cameroon Panorama*, 422, February 1997, pp. 8-13.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Star Headlines*, 31 October 1997, p. 9.

West editorial line, devoted much attention to the issue. They strongly sympathised with Father Etienne, calling him a southwestern martyr who was being persecuted by his northwestern superior.

On the same day, chiefs in the Bonjongo area and Maranatha members protested in various ways. In a letter to the bishop, the chiefs stressed that Father Etienne had not only raised the quality of teaching and the number of students in St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College to an unprecedented level but also revived Catholic worship in the local community in an inimitable way. They requested the bishop listen to the voice of his flock and act as a father by exhibiting tolerance, patience and understanding at all times. The Maranatha faithful acted in a less conciliatory way. Some besieged Father Etienne's residence to prevent him from leaving Bonjongo. A tight security network was set up, comprising young local men. Although the priest frequently claimed that he was being held hostage by the local community, prohibiting him from obeying his bishop, he was apparently paying the security guards himself and the thugs intimidated any outsider who dared to approach the priest. Other Maranatha faithful stormed the bishop's house in Small Soppo, Buea. The situation was only brought under control by the timely intervention of the South West governor, Peter Oben Ashu, who organised a conciliatory meeting a few days later, on 30 December, attended by the bishop, four Maranatha delegates and himself. During the meeting, Bishop Awa appealed to the delegates to be peaceful and wait for his final decision on 4 January 1997. In the meantime he would discuss the matter with Father Etienne.

The bishop, however, did not keep his promise, for two reasons. First, a delegation mandated by him to advise Father Etienne was mishandled by the priest's security guards on 2 January. The delegation consisted of three major southwestern Catholic leaders: His Lordship Cornelius Fontem Esua, bishop of the Kumbo Diocese in the North West Province, who is a Mbo, an ethnic group sharing boundaries with the Bangwa, and is generally known as Father Etienne's age mate and spiritual mentor; Mrs Dorothy Atabong, a relative of Bishop Esua and leader of the Catholic Women's Association in the Buea Diocese; and Mr Gabriel Mbua Mofoke, a Bakweri and chairman of the Bonjongo Parish Council. The latter two had also been members of the Lyonga Committee that had previously recommended Father Etienne and his Maranatha Movement (see above). The delegation tried to convince the priest to obey his bishop and move to Bishop Rogan College. Suspecting at a certain moment that the delegation wanted to kidnap the priest, the security guards started attacking its members physically and forced them to leave Bonjongo. While Father Etienne initially denied any mishandling of the delegation, he later apologised to Bishop Esua. Remarkably, one of the delegation members, Mr Mofoke, nevertheless continued to deny that such an incident had ever occurred. His denial and his increasing identification with the Maranatha Movement were particularly painful to Bishop Awa. Mr Mofoke had been

his close friend for a long time and as a result of this friendship, Mr Mofoke had become chief contractor of the Bonjongo parish, chairman of the Bonjongo Parish Council, and a member of the board of governors of St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College. In fact, nothing could be done in the Bonjongo parish without his involvement. It was only after his public denial of the security guards' attack on Bishop Esua that Mr Mofoke fell out of favour with his friend Bishop Awa. He then openly took Father Etienne's side, assuring him of his support. It is widely believed that he was largely responsible for the prolongation of the crisis by encouraging Father Etienne not to comply with the bishop's demands. Apparently, he expected his new alliance with Father Etienne to be advantageous in economic and political terms.

Second, there was the subsequent day's flight of Father Celestine Diang, the priest in charge of the brothers' novitiate and the spiritual leader of the sisters' convent in Bonjongo, from the village allegedly following threats on his life. He had also convinced the reverend brothers and sisters to leave because of the prevailing insecurity in the area for non-Maranatha members. According to Maranatha members, Father Diang, a North Westerner, had been posted in Bonjongo by Bishop Awa to spy on Father Etienne's activities. They also accused him of regularly insulting local women during his sermons, calling them dirty and immoral for having 'ten children by ten different fathers'. They even alleged that Father Diang had once remarked that 'if Father Etienne continued to refuse to go to Bishop Rogan College, he would arrive there one day in a coffin'. Alarmed by the continuous threats on the lives of the clergy and himself, Bishop Awa asked the commander of the gendarmerie at Buea to take up the matter.

The situation escalated rapidly. On 8 January 1997, the Association of Diocesan Priests (ADP) unanimously decided to dismiss Father Etienne as its chairman and suspend his membership until he had reconciled himself with his bishop and his ADP colleagues. The ADP expressed its support for the bishop's intervention which, it said, was long overdue. Strikingly, it elected another Bangwa priest, Father Charles Leke, as its new chairman. Since the latter was neither the most senior nor the most qualified priest to succeed Father Etienne, it was evident that he owed his election mainly to his ethnic identity. Bishop Awa had already previously employed a similar strategy. In reaction to threats by the Bonjongo community on the life of Father Etienne's successor, he had appointed another Bangwa priest, Father George Jingwa Nkeze, as parish priest and principal of St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College in Bonjongo. Father Nkeze came not only from the same village as Father Etienne but was also his cousin. Clearly, this policy of appointing Bangwa priests in positions previously held by Father Etienne aimed to show the outside world that even his own ethnic brothers fully supported the hierarchy's punitive measures. In addition, this policy sought to secure the protection of the Bangwa population against any attempts on



the lives of the newly appointed priests by Bonjongo people and Maranatha members. The most dramatic action of the diocesan hierarchy, however, occurred on 18 January 1997 when Bishop Awa wrote a pastoral letter to all the faithful in the diocese in which he announced the banning of the Maranatha Movement and the placement of the Bonjongo parish and Father Etienne under canonical interdict.<sup>14</sup> This was the first time in the history of the RCC in Cameroon that the hierarchy had employed such drastic measures against a priest, a parish and a revival movement. The same day the bishop informed the South West governor, Peter Oben Ashu, of these measures. He pointed out to the governor that access to the Bonjongo Catholic Mission had been blocked by a large group of vicious thugs. He therefore sought the governor's assistance in 'weeding out this painful situation so that peace and normal life may return to the Catholic Mission in Bonjongo'.

#### VEHEMENT SOUTH WEST RESISTANCE AGAINST THE VICTIMISATION OF THE AUTOCHTHONOUS FOUNDER OF THE MARANATHA MOVEMENT

Following the interdict, the Bonjongo community and the Maranatha Movement intensified their campaign of threatening the bishop and the diocesan clergy. They also sent numerous petitions to President Paul Biya, the southwestern Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge, the Minister of Education, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio and the Pope. In their petition to the Pope, they accused the bishop of managing the diocese 'along ethnocentric lines', 'discouraging reconciliation as much as possible', and 'displaying unwarranted power drunkenness and favouritism towards his northwestern accomplices'. They urged the Pope 'to take a stand, advise and instruct in the biting issue, consider erecting two dioceses out of the Buea Diocese and elevate the present Buea Diocese to an ecclesiastical province, and to grant Bishop Awa a deserved retirement before he has time to destroy our diocese any further'.<sup>15</sup>

Unsurprisingly, such virulent attacks on the bishop and the clergy did not help solve the issue. On the contrary, they made the bishop even more determined to show his authority. Since Father Etienne still refused to leave Bonjongo, the bishop approached the South West governor again for assistance. On 22 January 1997, he requested the governor assist him in having Father Etienne 'surrender anything of Bonjongo parish as well as of St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College to the competent Ecclesiastical Authority of the Buea Diocese and move out of the premises of the parish as well as that of the college with immediate effect'. Increasingly concerned with the

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<sup>14</sup> See 'Pastoral Letter to All Faithful of the Diocese of Buea on the "Maranatha Prayer Group"', in *Cameroon Panorama*, 422, February, 1997, pp. 8-13.

<sup>15</sup> See *The Oracle*, 3 (1), 1998, p. 34.

threat that the Maranatha Movement crisis posed to public order, the governor reacted positively to the bishop's request. Instead of using force, he attempted to convince the priest of the need to obey his bishop, as demanded by canonical law. He subsequently wrote to Father Etienne twice, appealing to him to comply with the instructions of his bishop and leave Bonjongo peacefully before 10 February 1997. The two letters were simply ignored by the priest.

Given the deteriorating situation, the southwestern elite decided to intervene and appeal to the bishop to resolve the crisis through dialogue rather than through canonical law and punitive measures. Two of its eminent members, Mola Njoh Litumbe, son of the first Presbyterian pastor in Buea and chairman of the South West-based opposition party, the Liberal Democratic Alliance (LDA), and Fon Njifia of Lebang, Fontem, a first-class Bangwa chief and a devout Catholic, took up the mission. At first, their intervention appeared to be successful. On 19 February, Litumbe came to the following agreement with Bishop Awa: Father Etienne's transfer to Bishop Rogan College would be annulled and he would instead be transferred to a parish of his own choice. In a meeting with Fon Njifia the following day the bishop confirmed his agreement with Litumbe but when the chief subsequently brought Father Etienne to the bishop for a final settlement of the long-standing conflict, he was embarrassed to learn that the bishop in the meantime had unilaterally changed the agreement. Father Etienne would now be required to go on leave for some three or four months before choosing a parish suitable to him. And, even worse, the bishop left for Rome the same day without granting Father Etienne leave.

The South West governor, who had awaited the results of this conciliation attempt, was no longer prepared to seek a peaceful solution. On 27 February, he issued an order that Father Etienne was to be evicted immediately from the Bonjongo Mission premises by the forces of law and order. He warned that any person who attempted to oppose the 'inevitable' expulsion would be arrested and detained for fifteen days renewable. His order also banned Father Etienne from ever setting foot on Bonjongo soil again without the explicit permission of his bishop.

The governor's stern order shocked the South West population. Furious about his disgraceful alignment with a northwestern bishop, South Westerners questioned whether such an order could ever have been issued in the North West Province. In a petition addressed to Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge, Chief Ephraim Inoni, Mr John Ebong Ngolle and other top southwestern government officials, the Bonjongo chiefs and their subjects strongly protested against the colonising attitude of the North Westerners in the Buea Diocese and blamed the governor for his use of force in settling a religious crisis, an action they said they would vehemently oppose. They pointed out that Father Etienne had an estimated following of 60,000 people who would be prepared to show their anger about government behaviour in the forthcoming parliamentary and

presidential elections. With the apparent approval of the head of state, Chief Ephraim Inoni, a Bakweri chief and deputy secretary general at the Presidency who had studied at St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College, then decided to overrule the governor's eviction order. Inoni is said to have faulted the governor for his inconsistent conduct in the diocesan crisis, trying to settle the issue at one time through dialogue and at another by force. He also cautioned the governor against meddling in church matters.<sup>16</sup> Following Inoni's intervention, crowds thronged the streets of Bonjongo, Buea, Limbe and other localities in the South West, chanting songs of praise to Almighty God. While thanking Chief Inoni for his timely intervention, the Bonjongo chiefs called on him to order an investigation into the Bonjongo crisis and arrive at a lasting solution.

Subsequently, on 4 July 1997, Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge sent a delegation to the South West to investigate the Bonjongo affair and make recommendations acceptable to both parties. The delegation, however, failed to find a solution to the conflict. In its report, it stated that Father Etienne continued to be held hostage by the Bonjongo community, which prevented him from obeying his bishop. On the other hand, Bishop Awa had refused to adhere to the delegation's recommendation to let the priest stay in Bonjongo for another eighteen months so that tempers could cool. The prime minister was obviously not pleased with the failure of his intervention.

Following this failure, Bishop Awa brought even more pressure to bear upon Father Etienne and the Bonjongo community. In a diocesan communiqué issued on 8 August 1997, he extended the canonical interdiction to St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College and transferred it from Bonjongo to the Catholic Mission Diocesan Centre in Mutengene. Father Etienne strongly opposed its transfer and sought to run it as a community venture. He made a desperate attempt to dissuade parents from sending their wards to Mutengene.<sup>17</sup>

It was not until a visit by the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio that the bishop was prepared to make some concessions. In a diocesan message on 4 September 1997, the bishop lifted the interdict imposed on the Bonjongo parish, 'out of pastoral solitude for the many ordinary and innocent Catholics of Bonjongo', but he added that the Maranatha Movement continued to be banned. He also announced that Father Etienne's transfer to Bishop Rogan College had long been revoked. He had addressed a letter to the priest, informing him that as of 1 September 1997 he could take leave in a parish of his own choice anywhere in the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda. After his leave and the subsequent lifting of his interdict, he would be given a new appointment outside Bonjongo. Father Etienne, however, disregarded his bishop's offer.

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Herald*, 4-6 April 1997, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Post*, 8 August 1997, p. 3.

Since prospects for a final settlement of the protracted conflict appeared to be bleak, the diocesan priests eventually decided to make an attempt to end the stalemate. In a letter read in all the parishes of the diocese on 11 January 1998, the ADP requested the parishioners join the diocesan priests in a sit-in prayer session in Bonjongo on 17 and 18 January. This action aimed to force Father Etienne to leave. The Catholic chaplain of the University of Buea called on students to come out 'in jeans'. This appeal was interpreted by the Bonjongo chiefs as an invitation to students to prepare themselves for a battle with Father Etienne's militia and to evict the priest from Bonjongo forcibly.<sup>18</sup>

Straight after the announcement, the South West Governor Peter Oben Ashu, and two leading diocesan priests - the bishop's secretary, Father Andrew Nkea, a Bangwa, and the Catholic education secretary, Father George Nkuo, a North Westerner - went to Yaoundé to brief the government authorities on what the Buea Diocese had resolved to do should Father Etienne not leave, voluntarily or forcibly, by 17 January. The two priests met the prime minister, Peter Mafany Musonge, and the deputy secretary general at the Presidency, Chief Ephraim Inoni, who were regarded as supporters of Father Etienne. They also met the recently appointed minister of territorial administration, Mr Samson Ename Ename. Fearing a violent confrontation between pro-Bishop Awa and pro-Father Etienne factions in Bonjongo and elsewhere in the South West, Mr Samson Ename Ename instructed the South West governor to evict Father Etienne from Bonjongo 'through the use of reasonable force'.<sup>19</sup>

One day before the ADP-planned day of action, on 16 January, 300 soldiers invaded Bonjongo. Convinced that the government had sent troops to stop 'Awa's Reverend Fathers' from taking away the healing priest, Father Etienne's followers and sympathisers started celebrating. They soon realised that they had been mistaken. Father Etienne, who offered no resistance, was evicted from his residence and escorted to the house of Bishop Esua in Kumbo in the North West Province.<sup>20</sup>

The South West elite immediately started mobilising after this dramatic event. On 22 January, they held a stormy meeting in Yaoundé to decide on an appropriate response to the military eviction of Father Etienne from Bonjongo, which, they alleged, was mandated by Bishop Awa. Inspired by the initiative of the Lebiallem Cultural and Development Association (LECDA) it was proposed, as an initial measure, to boycott all Catholic church services in the province 'until Father Etienne was returned to the Buea Diocese'.<sup>21</sup> The next day, southwestern Maranatha sympathisers met in Muyuka. In an ultimatum issued at the end of the meeting, they gave the bishop a deadline of 15 February 1998 to reinstate Father Etienne as parish priest in the South West or face the

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<sup>18</sup> See *The Post*, 14 January 1998, pp. 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Post*, 20 January 1998, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Herald*, 28-29 January 1998, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Herald*, 23-25 January 1998, p. 3.

consequences. The participants indicted him for his lack of concern for the Buea Diocese as well as for South Westerners. They maintained that he had a secret agenda to bar South Westerners from entering the major and minor seminaries. This, they claimed, was done to ensure the continued hegemony of North Westerners over South Westerners. They appealed again to the Holy See 'to raise the Buea Diocese to the level of an Ecclesiastical Province headed by an indigenous archbishop'.<sup>22</sup> Many Sunday masses throughout the South West Province were subsequently disrupted by angry Maranatha members, especially those originating from the Bangwa area, who threatened the officiating priests and accused the bishop of conniving with the governor.

Since the eviction of Father Etienne, the Bangwa chiefs and elite became the leading force in southwestern resistance. On 5 February, the Fon of Lebang, Fontem, requested the Catholic authorities return Father Etienne to 'where he belonged', or else he would find it hard to control any form of agitation by his subjects.<sup>23</sup> A few days later, the Bangwa chiefs and elite held an extraordinary meeting in which they resolved to ban Bishop Awa, Father George Nkuo (the Catholic education secretary), and three Bangwa priests - Fathers Andrew Nkea (the bishop's secretary), George Nkeze (principal of St Paul's Higher Technical and Commercial College), and Charles Leke (Kumba Town parish priest and ADP chairman) - from executing any priestly functions in Lebialem Division.

Faced with increasing Bangwa protests, the South West governor, Peter Oben Ashu, held a 'peace meeting' on 31 March 1998 to reconcile Bishop Awa and Father Etienne. The meeting was attended by Bishops Awa and Esua and a considerable number of Bangwa elites. Father Etienne, who had not been invited by the governor, was conspicuous by his absence. During the meeting, the governor lamented that 'the many recent threats on Bishop Awa's life were the handiwork of Bangwa people', and he cautioned against any further actions: 'Enough is enough. The time has come for me to crack down on Bangwa elements who get themselves involved in this matter'. He said he was well aware of the great popularity Father Etienne enjoyed within the Bangwa community but he stressed that 'it would be in the interest of the priest and the Bangwa community to maintain calm and peace'. He threatened to arrest Father Etienne 'if he continued to write apology letters while inciting his people from behind'. The meeting ended in a fierce confrontation between the governor and the Bangwa elite. The latter challenged the governor's right to intervene in a basically internal Catholic affair and strongly condemned his attempt to single out the Bangwa community for his wrath on a matter that affected the entire Buea Diocese.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See *The Herald*, 11-12 February 1998, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Star Headlines*, 5 February 1998, pp. 1 and 3.

<sup>24</sup> See *The Herald*, 3-5 April 1998, pp. 1 and 3.

Curiously, in the months following Father Etienne's eviction from Bonjongo a relatively large number of deaths occurred among the diocesan clergy, including that of Father Sylvester Suh Ngwa, rector of Bishop Rogan College in Buea and a cousin of the bishop. His death, like that of his colleagues, was generally interpreted as the result of witchcraft practices by Maranatha members. While Father Charles Leke in his homily during the requiem mass left no one in any doubt that some Christians were responsible for Father Ngwa's death, even going as far as accusing the grieving congregation of 'shedding crocodile tears', medical authorities in Yaoundé attributed it to the laissez-faire attitude of the diocesan hierarchy in handling the treatment of the priest.<sup>25</sup>

In June 1998, Father Etienne was transferred from the bishop's house in Kumbo to the Cistercian monastery in Mbengwi in the Bamenda Archdiocese. In correspondence to Bishop Awa and the South West administration during his stay in Kumbo and Mbengwi, Father Etienne appeared to be prepared to reconcile himself with his religious and worldly superiors. He apologised for 'the assault on Bishop Esua' and for 'not heeding the kind advice of the South West governor, Peter Oben Ashu'. In letters addressed to Bishop Awa in April 1998, he dissociated himself from those who used the Bonjongo crisis 'to settle their individual or collective scores': 'I found myself used as a scapegoat or stepping-stone to their ends'. At the same time, he requested the bishop lift the canonical sanctions and pledged in principle to 'renew my loyalty and obedience to the teaching, sanctifying and governing authority of the Catholic Church as a whole and you and your successors, in particular I ask Your Lordship Pius Awa to forgive me for any wrong caused you'.<sup>26</sup> As a result of all his 'confessions, apologies and regrets', Bishop Awa lifted the interdict on Father Etienne on 29 August 1998 but he still maintained the canonical penalty of suspension on the execution of priestly functions.

The lifting of the interdict was greeted with relief by most Catholic faithful who were eager to have peace and unity restored in the diocese. Still, there is some evidence that not all diocesan priests were happy with the bishop's new reconciliatory attitude. Some 15 of the over 30 diocesan priests met secretly in Mutengene soon thereafter and expressed 'dismay about recent events which have shaken so many of the Catholic faithful and Catholic religious persons and clergy alike'. The solution was 'not to welcome Father Etienne again in our diocese as a priest'. 'He should rather be sent to Rome for discipline' and 'severe sanctions should be given to all his supporters in our diocese'.<sup>27</sup>

The bishop nevertheless continued with his conciliatory efforts. On 1 October 1998, he informed Father Etienne of the willingness of the new South West governor, Peter

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<sup>25</sup> See *The Herald*, 15-16 April 1998, pp. 1-2; and 28-29 October 1998, p. 4. The author attended Father Ngwa's funeral.

<sup>26</sup> *Cameroon Panorama*, 444, December 1998, pp. 16-19; and *The Herald*, 27-29 November 1998, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *The Herald*, 18-20 September 1998, p. 2.

Acham Cho<sup>28</sup>, to allow him return to the South West as long as ‘it would not constitute an occasion for new upheavals and disturbance of public peace’. Unfortunately, the priest refused to heed the bishop’s request of sending a letter to the governor in which he would guarantee that on his return he would refrain from all activities that could directly or indirectly cause a breach of peace in the province. Having realised that there was a deadlock, Bishop Awa wrote to Father Etienne on 28 January 1999 that he was no longer prepared to continue with his reconciliatory efforts:

Enough is enough. Therefore by this letter, I permit you to have your freedom, to go wherever you want, stay there for as long as you like until you feel ready to submit and to do what you are told. I take no further responsibility to follow you wherever you go. You are free to discuss the place of your residence with the Minister and Governor who took you out of the diocese. [Ngoh, 2000: 141].

This shows that the Maranatha Movement crisis that had almost led to a schism in the RCC in the South West Province was not yet over. Still, prospects for a return to normality in the diocese are not totally bleak. Father Etienne was eventually allowed by the administration to return to the South West, where he is quietly living in his father’s house in Bolifamba near Buea. And, even more importantly, on 22 February 1999, the Pope created a new diocese, the Mamfe Diocese, in the South West Province. He later appointed a South Westerner, His Lordship Francis Teke Lysinge, as its first bishop. Evidently, these events gave rise to great celebrations in the province. Although many South Westerners were inclined to perceive the creation of the new southwestern diocese and the appointment of a southwestern bishop as a direct result of the Maranatha Movement crisis, it was Bishop Awa himself who had submitted the application for another diocese in the South West Province as far back as 1985, during the Pope’s maiden visit to Cameroon.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have attempted to show that the emergence of the Maranatha Movement and its increasing politicisation were closely connected with the process of political liberalisation. Political liberalisation provided space for Pentecostal expansion in the South West Province, which had previously been blocked by the extremely repressive Cameroonian post-colonial state. Pentecostal teachings and practices seemed to provide an adequate answer to the widespread quest for a more personalised form of spirituality

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<sup>28</sup> The new governor was a North Westerner. He was determined to stop the autochthony-allochthony discourse in the South West Province fuelled by his successor. Apparently, he considered this discourse to be harmful to the advancement of the ruling party’s interests in the region.

and soon gave rise to a 'Pentecostalisation' of the principal mainline churches and the emergence of some revival movements within these churches, including the Maranatha Movement. This movement appeared to adopt several Pentecostal elements such as charismatic prayer sessions and faith healing which strongly appeal to the faithful. It soon became manifest that mainstream Catholicism and the revivalist Maranatha Movement were viewed by both parties as incompatible and thus unable to co-exist under one and the same authority, almost leading to a schism within the RCC in the South West Province

Political liberalisation also provided space for the voicing of long-standing autochthonous grievances about domination and exploitation by northwestern settlers fanned by the government and the regional elite. The Maranatha Movement was increasingly perceived in the region as an autochthonous protest movement against northwestern domination over the RCC in the South West Province, its founder being supported by the regional elite and population in his struggle against the RCC hierarchy. It is beyond any doubt that the close link between the born-again-inspired revival movement and the autochthony-allochthony issue was responsible for the deep and protracted crisis in the southwestern RCC.

It is important to observe that this autochthony-allochthony issue has not only affected the RCC in the South West Province. Despite repeated statements of condemnation by the Cameroonian bishops, the 'politics of belonging' has also cropped up in the RCC in the Francophone part of the country where there have been vehement autochthonous protests against the appointment of allochthonous bishops. That particularly Bamileke bishops have been the object of autochthonous protests is mainly due to the fact that, just as the ethnically-related North Westerners in the South West Province, the mobile and entrepreneurial Bamileke (Dongmo, 1981; Warnier, 1993) are perceived by the indigenous population in various areas of Francophone Cameroon as dominant and exploitative invaders. As early as 1987, a group of indigenous priests was strongly protesting against the appointment of a Bamileke auxiliary bishop in the Douala Archdiocese (Bayart and Mbembe, 1989). Again, in July 1999, the appointment of a Bamileke bishop, His Lordship André Wouking, the then president of the National Episcopal Conference, as archbishop of Yaoundé was greeted with indignation by the autochthonous Beti elite, clergy and faithful, and various attempts were made to postpone his enthronement (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2000). Apparently, the autochthonous Douala and Beti clergy and elite were determined to forestall the extension of alleged Bamileke domination from the economic and political domains to the religious domain.



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the reasons for, and the repercussions of, a virulent and protracted crisis in the South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon during the 1990s caused by the emergence of a Pentecostalism-inspired revival movement within the Roman Catholic Church. The so-called Maranatha Movement and mainline Catholicism were viewed by both parties as being incompatible, almost leading to a schism within the church. The originally internal church dispute gradually became a particularly explosive issue in the region when the politics of belonging fuelled by the government and the regional elite during political liberalisation became pervasive.