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Mbororo under Attack: Extreme Speech and Violence in the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

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Cameroon: Legacies of violence and prospects for peace. New impulses from research

Responding to a growing need to anchor the analysis of current violent crises in historical perspectives, the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) in Freiburg organized a workshop on 16 and 17 June 2021 that had to be held as a webinar due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies on Cameroon slowly begin to expand (again). Academic and non-academic interest has been growing recently - mostly due to the "Anglopone crisis" which is clearly the focus of the mini-series of Working Papers proposed here. During the workshop, eight papers were presented and discussed; offering food for thought to a broad audience of quite different disciplinary backgrounds.

Compared to other African countries of approximately the same size, Cameroon's violent history has for a long time received at best a fair share, but certainly not high scholarly attention. Recently, a good number of Ph.D. and larger research projects have been started and some of the webinar's participants are themselves active in creating international networks of researchers. Some of those individuals, both senior and junior, used the opportunity to share their research results and discuss promising avenues for further research.

The conference organizers identified a number of gaps in the academic literature on Cameroon's legacy of violence. These include e.g., the general lack of a gender-lens on violence and contestation; the underrepresentation of the British UN mandate period, although more archival material should be available today; and the absence of a comparative perspective on Cameroon as an example of 'state failure', arguably because the current violence is still regarded as below the level of a 'major crisis'.

Other under-researched angles to the current Anglophone conflict have been addressed by the papers in this mini-series – all inspired by the 2021 workshop at ABI. These include the underrepresented perspectives of the pastoralist Mbororo ethnic minority (Pelican et al.); the situation of Anglophone youths displaced to the Far North, which in itself is a conflict region due to persistent insurgencies of Boko Haram (Adama); and the little-known self-perception of the separatist fighters and their emic understanding of the rightful use of force (Willis et al.). Digging deeper into the history, consequences and lateral aspects of the current violent conflict between Anglophone separatists and the government remains an important task, and the contributions of the mini-series provide exactly this.

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Mbororo under Attack: Extreme Speech and Violence in the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

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Abstract

Cameroon is currently affected by a violent conflict between military forces of the Biya regime and armed separatist groups that seek political independence for the country's Anglophone minority in the North West and South West regions. While several reports have highlighted the perspectives of Anglophone civilians, this article adds an additional perspective by exploring the so-far underrepresented voices of members of the Mbororo ethnic minority who, individually and collectively, have been targeted by extreme speech and acts of violence by the separatist forces. The Mbororo are a pastoralist group that constitutes a minority in several African countries and is often said to stay out of formal politics. The role of Mbororo pastoralists in this conflict is of particular interest because of their ambivalent relationship with the Anglophone population that has been complicated by farmer-herder conflicts long before the current crisis. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data collected by our team between 2017 and 2021, this article pays special attention to the role of social media in the conflict dynamics and documents the extent to which the Mbororo have been affected by the Anglophone conflict.

1. Introduction

The central African country of Cameroon is currently affected by a civil conflict between the security and defence forces of the Biya regime and armed separatist groups[2]. These seek political independence for the State of Ambazonia, or the so-called Southern Cameroons which is home to the Anglophone[3] minority of the country, mostly located in the North West and South West administrative regions. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2017, over 6000 persons have been killed and about 765,000 have been displaced (ICG 2021). Since 2018, the Mbororo, a pastoralist group and ethnic minority in the Anglophone region, have become targets of extreme speech (Pohjonen and Udupa 2017) and acts of violence both individually and collectively. While the conflict has produced human rights violations committed by the Cameroonian military as well as the separatist forces, the violence against Mbororo is largely attributable to Ambazonian ("Amba") fighters.

Several publications have focused on the perspectives of the Anglophone population and have highlighted the historical and political factors that have contributed to Anglophone discontent with the political and administrative status quo (e.g. Amin and Takougang 2018; Awasom 2020; Kamé 2018; Kewir et al. 2021; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2019; Mehler et al. 2021; Pelican 2022; Willis et al. 2020).[4] Taking into account the complex nature of violent conflict, we believe that having multiple witness accounts from different perspectives recorded during the Anglophone conflict is essential in order to understand the conflict's varying impact on different parts of the civilian population. Importantly, these accounts will also be instrumental in the post-conflict period and to facilitate future reconciliation processes. Thus, the goal of

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[2] In this article, we often refer to Ambazonians as *separatists*, mainly because this terminology is common and also used by our interlocutors. However, we are aware that some Ambazonians prefer the label *restorationist*, since their goal is to restore the territory of the formerly British-ruled Southern Cameroons, and because separatism is often falsely equated with illegitimate violence. We therefore want to stress that, from our perspective, *separatist* is a morally neutral descriptor of a political position and is not intended to comment on that position's legitimacy.

[3] The term pair *Anglophone* and *Francophone* are capitalized to acknowledge their historical and political meanings in the Cameroonian context that go beyond a simple linguistic interpretation.

[4] Following this line of argument, we prioritize the term *Anglophone conflict* over other terms used in public and academic debates. We take issue with the Cameroonian government's continuous effort to downplay and de-politicize the conflict, also reflected in their choice of terminology. Thus, we deliberately choose *conflict* over *crisis* to acknowledge the conflict's gravity and violent character and argue that the term *Anglophone* should not be read as a simple linguistic category, but is used here to refer to the conflict's complex historical and identity political dimensions (see also Pelican 2022).

this article is to add an additional perspective to the existing scholarship by exploring the so-far underrepresented voices of members of the Mbororo ethnic minority.

The Mbororo are a sub-group of the (agro-)pastoralist Fulani people, also called Fulbe or Peul, whose members constitute minorities in several African countries along the Sahel belt. They are often said to stay out of formal politics, apart from siding with power when necessary to protect their livelihoods as pastoralists. The role of Cameroonian Mbororo in the Anglophone conflict is of particular interest due to their ambivalent relationship with the rest of the Anglophone population which has been complicated by farmer-herder conflicts long before the current crisis. We argue that due to their position as an ethnic minority within the Anglophone minority, the Mbororo are exposed to a complex interplay of minority-majority dynamics that complicate their already vulnerable position within the Anglophone region. Furthermore, we hold that the Anglophone conflict is characterized by the interaction of online and offline warfare (see also Pelican 2022), which has been instrumental in spurring violence against Mbororo.

The article is structured as follows: After presenting our theoretical framework and research methodology, we introduce the Mbororo in the context of the Anglophone region. This section discusses the role of Mbororo settlement patterns, farmer-herder conflicts, and contestations over Mbororo citizenship and belonging as possible factors fueling separatist violence against Mbororo. Next, we look at forms of online mobilization against Mbororo as well as counter-efforts by diaspora members. To provide evidence of the scope and patterns of aggression against Mbororo households, we then present quantitative data and provide explanations for temporal and spatial patterns. The article ends with an outlook on the conflict that considers the role of the Cameroonian government as an absentee actor in the conflict's minority-majority dynamics.

Figure 1: Map of Cameroon

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2020.

Figure 2: Map of divisions of North West region of Cameroon
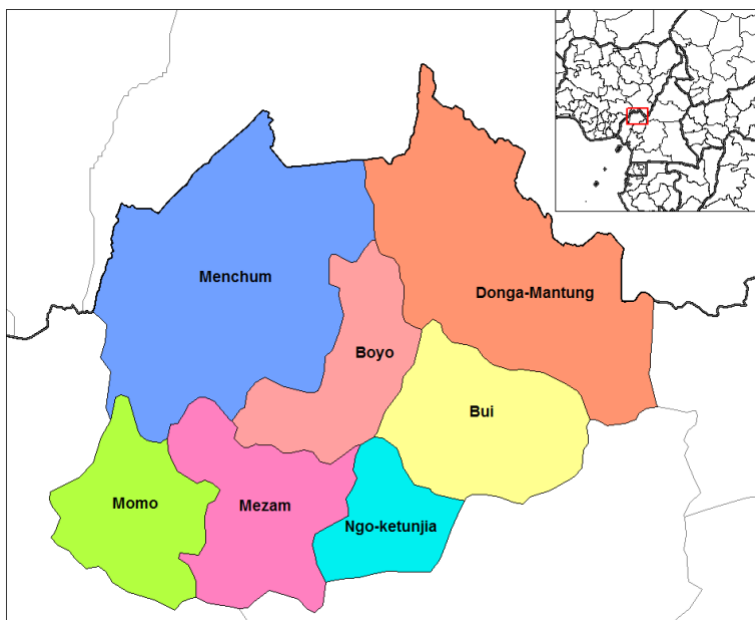
Source: Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Northwest_Cameroon_divisions.png (accessed 16 September 2022)

Copyright information: Map of the divisions of Northwest province in Cameroon. Created by Rarelibra 19:55, 1 September 2006 (UTC) for public domain use, using MapInfo Professional v8.5 and various mapping resources.

2. Theoretical Framework

Our analysis of the impact of the Anglophone conflict on the Mbororo rests on their position as a minority within a minority and on the role of social media in conflict dynamics. The next section provides a brief discussion of minority-majority dynamics in the conflict region, as well as a brief overview of the effects social media has been having on the conflict, which will be helpful to our discussion of extreme speech later in this article.

2.1 Minority-Majority Dynamics

Minority-majority dynamics are deeply entrenched in Cameroon, which is an ethnically diverse country with 275 different languages spoken on its territory (Eberhard et al. 2021: 6). Central to the subject of this article are two intersecting minority discourses that are rooted in the country's colonial and postcolonial history. Firstly, there is a rich corpus of literature on the historical emergence and distinct identity of the so-called Anglophone minority in Cameroon. This refers to the population living in the English-speaking North West and South West regions, formerly administered under British colonial rule (e.g. Agwanda et al. 2020; Kah 2012; Kamé 2012; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019). There have been fierce political and academic debates on the rightfulness of the Anglophones' self-identification as a cultural and political minority that deserves special recognition and the protection of their colonial heritage (Anyangwe 2009, 2010; Eyoh 1998; Mbuagbo 2002). While these debates have been ongoing – at different intensities – since the country's independence period, they are key to the current Anglophone conflict.

Secondly, there has been academic research on the Mbororo in the Cameroon Grassfields, a culturally and geographically defined region that includes the Anglophone North West, the neighbouring Francophone West region, and parts of the Anglophone South West (e.g. Boutrais 1996; Mimche 2014; Mimche and Pelican 2012; Pelican 2015). As discussed in this literature, the Mbororo both self-identify and have been identified as an ethnic minority that is economically and culturally distinct from the region's majority population. This has been coupled with conflicts between Grassfields farmers and Mbororo herders over access to land and crop destruction, that have been prevalent since the Mbororo's establishment in the region in the early twentieth century (e.g. Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Fonchingong and Beseng 2016; Harshbarger 1995; Ngalim 2015; Ngwoh 2017; Pelican 2015). By the mid-2000s,

the Mbororo successfully claimed the status of an indigenous people on the basis of cultural difference and their marginalization by the Cameroonian government and the region's majority population (Pelican 2009, 2010, 2013). Over decades now, the Mbororo have been involved in and affected by minority discourses that intersect but also collide with their Anglophone identity (see also Mouiche 2011). In the current Anglophone conflict, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of the Mbororo have gained centre-stage in relation to their alleged identification with or against the Anglophone cause.

Figure 3: Mbororo dual minority status in Cameroon
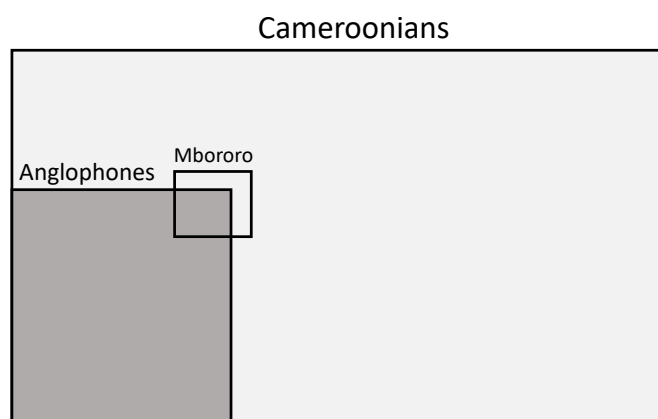
Source: Figure produced by Kim Schumann. It reflects the size proportions of the depicted population groups.

2.2 The Role of Social Media in the Anglophone Conflict

One of our main theses is that the Anglophone conflict has been characterized by an intricate interplay of online and offline warfare, promoted by separatists in Cameroon and abroad as well as the Cameroonian government.[5] We argue that social media has been playing a significant role in the conflict's violent escalation generally, and in spurring targeted attacks against the Mbororo community in particular (see also Pelican 2022).[6]

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[5] The role of the diaspora and social media in the Anglophone conflict is the subject of the doctoral research project of Kim Schumann.

[6] It is important to understand that social media and internet channels have been used extensively by separatists and civil society actors to document the Anglophone conflict and bring it to the attention of the international community. The conflict's media presence radically contradicts the government's general denial of the conflict, which is also reflected in the different terms used by different parties (ranging from *la question Anglophone* and the *North West/South West crisis*, as framed by the Cameroonian government, to the *Anglophone crisis/conflict* and the *Ambazonian war*, as used by Anglophone civilians and the separatists).

To break down this claim, it is first important to point out that social media, and the internet in general, are a newly added factor to Cameroons' long-standing political tensions regarding Anglophone self-determination. Cameroonians have only very recently started to gain access to the internet, as illustrated by Tazanu's 2012 ethnography of transnational communication between Cameroon and Germany. He describes his interlocutors in Cameroon almost entirely relying on non-internet prepaid mobile phone service with very few people visiting internet cafés to occasionally send and receive emails (Tazanu 2012). To this day, the internet penetration and social media use rate in Cameroon remain among the lowest in the world, at 34% and 16% respectively and most users continue to access the internet through prepaid sim-cards on their phones (Datareportal 2021).

While social media is so far mostly accessible to young middle- and upper-class urbanites, Awondo makes the case that their use of apps like Facebook and WhatsApp has already spurred a new public political discourse. According to him, receiving information about Cameroon's problems and controversies, including the Anglophone conflict, makes them feel like "it is their duty to have an option" (Miller et al. 2021: 151). The resulting social media discussions, which often involve graphic images and extreme speech, bare the potential of radicalizing their participants, as we will discuss below. Nevertheless, some of the criticism levied at social media and online political commentators might say more about the critics themselves than about the danger to national security.

The Cameroonian government has a long history of attempting to repress online discourse.[7] Relevant examples include trying to ban Twitter as early as 2011 and chastizing the diaspora for allegedly inciting protests (Tande 2011b); and passing a 2014 counter-terrorism law that allows law enforcement to search civilians' phones without a warrant, thus putting people at risk of arrest for as little as interacting with posts about Boko Haram or Ambazonia (Library of Congress 2014). During the Anglophone conflict, in 2017, the regime cut off internet access in the North West and South West regions for three months, only ending the restriction after international outcry, and then locally throttled the bandwidth again during the 2018 presidential elections (Gwagwa 2018). These actions seem to, at least in part, stem from fear

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[7] Debussi Tande (2011a, 2011b) has compiled a list of examples of the Cameroonian government attempting to limit free expression on and access to (social) media from 2003 to 2011.

of losing hitherto unquestioned – and unquestionable – control of the political discourse. That said, there are reasonable concerns about the radicalizing potential of social media in a conflict situation.

Firstly, Cameroonian journalism scholars have pointed out the risk of fake news being posted and shared through social media apps by people they call "citizen journalists" and criticized for lacking journalistic integrity (Ngange and Mokondo 2019; Nounkeu 2020). While it is true that privately posted information about the Anglophone conflict is both abundant as well as notoriously unreliable and hard to fact-check, it is also worth pointing out that the Cameroonian press is restricted by harsh libel laws and general government hostility towards critical reporting. It is thus hard to blame Cameroonians for gravitating towards alternative means of creating and spreading news coverage. This not only applies to so-called citizen journalists but also to professional journalists, some of whom, while working with regular media outlets, also turn to social media to document the crisis. A prominent example is journalist Mimi Mefo whose social media channel "Mimi Mefo Info" is among the most widely read and trusted sources of information on the Anglophone conflict.[8]

Secondly, the audio-visual nature of social media communication means that users easily find themselves witnessing acts of violence at a level of detail they might not have been ready for. According to Della Porta (2018), bearing witness to perceived injustice is the fastest path of radicalization. Anthropological accounts of social media and armed conflict, from Bräuchler's (2003) ethnography of digital identities in the Molucca conflict to Meis' (2021) study of media practices in the Syrian war, seem to confirm that this pattern holds true even when the shocking events are observed through a screen. With regards to the Anglophone conflict, there is a clear connection between the first videos of state violence against protestors being shared in late 2016 and early 2017 and diaspora communities starting to take to the streets and forming Southern Cameroons associations in Europe and North America. This in turn bolstered civil unrest on the ground.[9]

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[8] Website/Blog: https://mimimefoinfos.com ; facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MimiMefoInfo/
[9] This Information is derived from online interviews by Kim Schumann with diaspora Cameroonians based in Europe and North America, conducted in June and August 2021.

Lastly, social media discourse regularly features what Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) call "extreme speech", often referred to as "hate speech" in legal and public contexts. Extreme speech breaks cultural norms of civil discussion and often serves to dehumanize and invalidate actors the speaker disagrees with. The International Crisis Group (ICG 2020) has confirmed that hate/extreme speech occurs prominently in posts and comments about Cameroonian politics and poses a threat to ethnic integration. With regards to the Anglophone conflict in particular, Barrach-Yousefi (n.d.) has created a glossary of common hate speech terms. Derogatory terms frequently used, also in relation to the Mbororo, include *come-no-go*[10], implying that they do not belong into Southern Cameroons and have overstayed their welcome, and *blacklegs*, a term thrown at anyone seen as counter-revolutionary. As these examples show, extreme speech oversimplifies complex conflict dynamics to a fault and creates justifications for violence against its targets.

In sum, social media has played an important role in facilitating civic engagement and valid criticism of the Cameroonian government. However, since shared content is highly unreliable and often contains graphic images and extreme speech, it has also led to the polarization of the discourse and escalation of violence in the conflict region.

3. Research Methods

This paper is the result of a research group based at the University of Cologne that focuses on the effects of the Anglophone conflict on the Mbororo ethnic minority. The four co-authors bring together expertise in analyzing qualitative and quantitative data as well as long-standing familiarity with the Mbororo and their history of ethnic coexistence in Cameroon.[11]

Importantly, much of the data has been collected in partnership with five research collaborators of Mbororo background who are based in the conflict region and themselves have been affected by the conflict. Based on their experience as community workers, they

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[10] As Pidgin English has no set standard of spelling, the term *come-no-go* is often also spelled *cam-no-go*.

[11] Michaela Pelican is the head of the research group. She is a social anthropologist with long-term research experience in Cameroon, and is an expert on the Mbororo and ethnic coexistence in the Anglophone North West. Kim Schumann is a PhD candidate in social anthropology. Their doctoral research project focuses on the role of the diaspora and social media in the Anglophone conflict. Sina Plücken is a Masters student in social anthropology; she is a student assistant in this project and familiar with social science research methods. David Drew is a statistician with expertise in the analysis of quantitative data. He is familiar with the Mbororo and the situation of farmer-herder conflict in the North West Region as part of developmental work he has been involved in as an external advisor.

are well connected with Mbororo in different parts of the Anglophone region. They have been actively involved in developing the study design, weighing ethical considerations, and in the process of data analysis.

The project has passed through an ethical peer review process based on the guidelines of the German Anthropological Association (DGKSA) and has benefited from the constructive feedback of four colleagues with expertise in conflict research and in psychological and medical anthropology. For personal safety and due to the delicate nature of the conflict, all research collaborators prefer to remain anonymous. The same applies to the research participants who kindly accepted to share their experiences and views with us, and whose voices are central to this paper.[12]

3.1 Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Data

The article draws on three sets of data collected at different moments between 2017 and 2021. The first is observational and interview data collected by Michaela Pelican during a research stay in Cameroon from July to September 2018 and follow-up conversations in 2019. Incidentally, it is during this period that the Mbororo began to be targeted by extreme speech disseminated via social media. This observational data was later complemented by online interviews and email exchanges with Mbororo acquaintances in Cameroon as well as with members of the Mbororo diaspora based in Europe and the USA. The goal of these interviews was to get a better understanding of the strategies Mbororo in the conflict region and in the diaspora have developed to strike bargains in this conflict. Part of this data will be used to illustrate the role of social media in inciting people to make targeted attacks against the Mbororo community.

The second set of data is a quantitative data base on the effects of the Anglophone conflict on the Mbororo minority in North West Cameroon. The data base documents the following events: number of households affected[13], persons affected or displaced[14], homes destroyed,

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[12] To protect the identity of the research collaborators and participants, pseudonyms are used in this paper.
[13] A household is here defined as an extended family residing together in a homestead, including a nuclear family and other dependent members, such as grandparents, grandchildren, uncles/aunts, foster children etc.
[14] In many households, the family members displaced are mainly women and children. As the conflict is still ongoing, no difference has been made between temporary or permanent displacement. Likewise, we did not differentiate between displacement within the conflict zone and to destinations outside the conflict zone.

persons killed, persons kidnapped, amount paid as ransom, cattle seized or killed, other livestock seized or killed. This data has been collected by our research collaborators based in the conflict region. Data collection started in 2017, followed by regular updates; the statistical data analyzed for this paper dates to January 2021. Given the difficulty of collecting data in the circumstances of violent conflict, it is a major achievement to have gotten this far. The data base has been thoroughly analyzed by David Drew and Sina Plücken using the statistical routines in Excel to illustrate the extent of the impact of the Anglophone conflict on the Mbororo. For the purpose of this paper, only a small selection of the statistical analyses is being used; but it shows at the aggregate level the scale of the crisis and its significant impact on the Mbororo.

The third data set is a total of 34 interviews realized with Mbororo men (n=29) and women (n=5) who have been directly affected by the Anglophone conflict. These interviews were conducted and recorded by our five research collaborators between May and November 2020. Depending on interviewee's preference, the interviews were recorded either in Fulfulde, the language of the Mbororo (n=11); Pidgin English, the lingua franca in the Anglophone region (n=10); or English (n=13). The interview questions focused on Mbororo perceptions of the Anglophone conflict, its impact on interethnic relations, assistance to internally displaced people (IDPs), the effects of COVID-19, and visions for the future. 29 interviews were conducted with men (aged between 25 and 65) with most of them heading a household and bearing responsibility for women, children and dependents. Five interviews were realized with women (ages 35 to 48) who had experienced the loss of relatives and property and/or displacement. Of the 34 interviewees, 19 were internally displaced at the time of the interview, many within the conflict region and some to the Francophone West region. The interview recordings were transcribed and anonymized by the team in Cologne. The transcripts were then coded and analysed, using the programme MAXQDA. For this article, we selectively draw on our interview analyses to complement the quantitative data and to illustrate the arguments developed in this paper.

3.2 Shortcomings of Data and Positionality of the Research

Firstly, due to the focus on Mbororo losses, all three data sets privilege the perspectives of Mbororo civilians who have been directly affected by the Anglophone conflict, mostly by

violence committed by the separatist forces. We are aware that there are also Mbororo who fight on the side of the separatists or the military. They did not form part of this research and their voices are not represented in this work. Secondly, the data sets are characterized by an uneven gender and age distribution of our research participants, which is also an effect of the social and demographic characteristics of our research collaborators who are men between the ages of 41 and 60. As a result, the voices of women and youths are not adequately represented in this analysis and deserve further research. We acknowledge existing reports that have explored the role of the Mbororo as potential perpetrators and instigators of violence against the civilian population (Amnesty International 2020; CHRDA 2021a; Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2022).

This research has taken inspiration from the important work of Willis and her co-authors (Willis et al. 2019, 2020) and is complementary to existing research on the impact of the Anglophone conflict on civil society in the Anglophone regions (e.g. ICG 2019; Kewir et al. 2021; Crawford et al. 2022). It stresses the voices and experiences of members of the Mbororo ethnic minority who, so far, have received little attention in the academic and popular debate on the Anglophone conflict. Their voices deserve to be heard as they are part and parcel of the Anglophone minority population and of civil society in the conflict zone.

The need to be represented is also reflected in the following quote from an interview with two Mbororo women who were forced to abandon their homes together with their children, and to take refuge in a nearby town:

> We are very happy because if someone doesn't like you, he wouldn't come closer to know the problems you are going through. So, the fact that you come close and ask, it means you are concerned about us, and we thank you for coming to know what we are going through. (Munyi, Mbororo woman in her late 40s, internally displaced within Menchum Division, 06.12.2020)

Just like Munyi, many of our Mbororo interlocutors felt abandoned by the Cameroonian government and the international community and were supportive of our efforts to document the effects of the conflict.

We acknowledge that this paper is deeply rooted in our interlocutors' subjective experiences and interpretations of the complex processes of inclusion and exclusion unfolding in the context of the Anglophone conflict. As outlined above, we apply an analytical lens that foregrounds minority perspectives and challenges taken-for-granted generalizations on the basis of assessments made by members of the majority population, including academics. At the same time, we are aware of the possible fault line of homogenizing minority voices and cherish an intersectional approach that recognizes shared experiences that cut across ethnic and social groups. With this caveat in mind, we will build on the recent report of Willis and her co-authors (2020) to draw connections with the experiences of members of the Anglophone majority population.

4. Mbororo Economic and Socio-political Integration in the Anglophone North West Region

The subsequent elaborations on Mbororo economic and socio-political integration in the Anglophone North West provide context to section 5 on online mobilization against Mbororo and section 6 in regard to possible explanations for regional variation in separatist violence. We first look at Mbororo settlement patterns and farmer-herder conflicts as factors that may have provided a justification for Ambazonian fighters' assaults. In a second step, we substantiate our argument of exclusionist minority-majority dynamics by analyzing historical contestations of Mbororo citizenship and belonging which serve as precursors of current portrayals of Mbororo as "undeserving guests" and "traitors".

The Mbororo belong to the ethnic category of Fulbe, whose members are dispersed over the Sahel and Savannah belt from West to East Africa. The term Mbororo refers specifically to (agro)pastoral Fulbe. Groups who identify themselves as Mbororo are found primarily in Niger, Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic and Cameroon (Amadou 2018; Bocquené 2002; Burnham 1996; de Vries 2020; Dupire 1970). In Cameroon, they live in many parts of the country but congregate mostly in regions favorable to cattle grazing, including the Anglophone North West. Here, they constitute an ethnic and religious minority accounting for about 5% of the total population. The majority of the region's inhabitants may be termed Grassfielders (*Garafi* in Pidgin English), an umbrella term that refers to linguistically distinct communities with common features of economic and sociopolitical organization.

They are largely subsistence farmers and are organized in centralized chiefdoms and confederations.

Whereas the settlement history of most Grassfields groups dates back several centuries, the Mbororo only began entering the area in the 1910s. Originating from the Kano region in present-day Nigeria, they slowly migrated southward during the nineteenth century, in search of ecological and political conditions favorable to cattle grazing (Boutrais 1996; Pelican 2015). Attracted by the fertile pastures of the North West region, many families settled there and gradually adopted a more sedentary lifestyle. The Mbororo were welcomed by local Grassfields chiefs and the British colonial administration, who saw the opportunity for levying tribute and taxes on Mbororo settlement and cattle (Awasom 1984: 124-127). Land was abundant and Mbororo were invited to dwell on the fertile highlands while farmers concentrated in the valleys and riverine areas.

This spatial arrangement has continued until today, although human and animal populations have significantly increased in the second half of the twentieth century, which has fueled competition over access to land and landed resources. In view of the Anglophone conflict, Mbororo settlement in remote areas is one of the factors that has facilitated their exposure to separatist violence. These remote areas also serve as hideouts for Ambazonian forces, who often suspect Mbororo herders of passing on information to the military. The border zones with Nigeria allegedly serve as transit zones for the import of arms, and therefore are of strategic interest to the separatists.

4.1 Conflict and Cooperation between Farmers and Herders

Despite the spatial separation of farming and pastoral lands, crop damage has been a recurrent feature, and has engendered disputes over the compatibility of extensive farming and herding systems as well as over access to land. Farmer-herder conflicts have been of persistent concern to the colonial and postcolonial administrations which, each in their own way, have contributed to rendering it a pervasive feature in the Anglophone North West (Awasom 1984: 151-196). Furthermore, non-governmental organizations have initiated programs to integrate farming and herding practices and to promote amicable conflict resolution, which show gradual but slow success (e.g. Nchinda et al. 2014; 2018).

The subject of farmer-herder conflicts has also attracted the attention of a good number of Cameroonian and international scholars, who have studied such conflicts in different parts of the region and have analyzed the complex interplay of ecological, demographic, economic, and political factors (e.g. Awasom 1984: 151-196; Boutrais 1996: 722-771; Harshbarger 1995; Manu et al. 2019; Ngalim 2015; Ngwoh 2017; Pelican 2015: 120-127). Much research has concentrated on Menchum and, to a lesser degree, on Momo division, where farmer-herder disputes have a long history and have culminated in instances of public protest and violent altercations. As several authors have argued, gender and status differences within Grassfields groups are a crucial factor promoting farmer-herder conflicts (Chilver 1989; Fonchingong and Beseng 2016; Kaberry 1952; Ottiger 1996). In addition, complicated administrative procedures as well as administrators' partial and corrupt practices have led to deep-seated frustration on the part of farmers and herders (e.g. Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Kum and Takor 2018). The increasing documentation of such disputes has resulted in a pervasive discourse of farmer-herder conflicts as part and parcel of the coexistence of Grassfielders and Mbororo in the North West region.

It is important to note, however, that there is variation in the frequency and intensity of farmer-herder conflicts across the region. In a rare quantitative study conducted by Nchinda and his colleagues in 2014, and edited by Drew as part of a community development project, a total of 618 respondents across five divisions (Mezam, Momo, Boyo, Bui and Donga Mantung) were questioned on their experiences of farmer-herder conflicts. 75% of all respondents reported having been involved in a minimum of one and a maximum of three conflicts over the past three years. Of these, 43.9% were based in Donga Mantung, whereas Mezam had the smallest share with 13.3%. Momo had the highest average number of conflicts reported by respondents, with herders having experienced a mean of 1.73 conflicts and farmers 1.53 conflicts over the past three years (Nchinda et al. 2014: 31-32).[15]

Nchinda and his co-authors note that while these findings may suggest that farmers and herders are continuously at loggerheads, 63% of their respondents agreed that there is collaboration between the two groups, thus implying a more nuanced picture (Nchinda et al.

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[15] Unfortunately, Menchum was not included in this quantitative research. It would have been interesting to see to which degree Menchum's ranking matched the qualitative analyses of other researchers, as the Menchum case has been highly publicized as a prime example of farmer-herder conflicts in the North West Region.

2014: 41). Their cautious remark resonates with the qualitative study of Pelican who analyzed discourses of farmer-herder conflict in the Misaje lowland area, which is part of Donga Mantung. She points out that there is a discrepancy between the relative paucity of actual conflicts as compared to other areas, including other parts of Donga Mantung, and the pervasiveness of the idiom of farmer-herder conflict and of ethnic stereotypes that inform public discourse on farmer-herder relations (Pelican 2015: 120-127).

Farmer-herder conflicts are also used as an argument in the current conflict between Anglophone separatists and the Cameroonian government to justify separatist aggression against Mbororo pastoralists (Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2002). As we will see in later examples of extreme speech, the Mbororo are frequently portrayed as intruders into the lands of Grassfields farmers who consider themselves the rightful "owners" and "guardians" of the land. Thus, Mbororo who do not support the Anglophone cause are seen as not worthy the privilege of being accepted as guests on Grassfields lands. We argue that in certain areas, where farmer-herder conflicts have a long history and are perceived as endemic, they can serve as a motive to sanction violence against Mbororo. In other cases, it may well be the interest in remote border zones, conducive to both cattle grazing and separatist activities, that incentivizes Ambazonian fighters to take action. We will reiterate this argument in chapter 6 when analyzing concrete instances of violence in Menchum and Donga Mantung.

Several of our Mbororo interview partners mentioned farmer-herder conflicts as a regular feature of ethnic coexistence, also present before the Anglophone conflict. In their assessment, however, these conflicts differed significantly in character from the current violence. Magaji, for example, before fleeing from his home in Menchum, had been actively involved in "alliance farming", a project aimed at integrating farming and grazing practices as a strategy to reduce farmer-herder conflicts. He recounts his previous relationship with his Grassfields neighbours as follows:

> We had farmer-herder conflicts, but we resolved them amongst ourselves. […] Even with the farmers, I was staying well with them, until we agreed that when they are harvesting corn, we bring the cattle to stay on their farms. We get the stems they remove, and we give them cattle manure. Our relationship was good. (Magaji, Mbororo

man in his late 30s, displaced from Menchum Division to the Francophone West region, 04.05.2020)

In a similar vein, Ori describes the relationship between farmers and herders prior to the Anglophone conflict as mutually beneficial. However, indiscriminate acts of violence committed by Amba fighters against Mbororo herders have caused Ori to shift his emphasis:

When the world was good, we used to pay children of the land [local farmers] to farm for us and we depended on our cattle. But now, they have refused to help us. They are now wicked towards us. When they started this thing [Anglophone conflict], they said their problem was with the government, and now we know, this thing is not on the government; it is on us, the Mbororo in the village who have cattle. We are the ones they are targeting now. (Ori, Mbororo man in his early 60s from Donga Mantung Division, 26.11.2020)

In their statements, both Magaji and Ori point to amicable relationships and collaboration between farmers and herders as part and parcel of interethnic relations. Their statements echo the cautious remark of Nchinda and his colleagues that farmer-herder relations not only entail conflict but also collaboration (Nchinda et al. 2014: 41). Finally, they also link up with Pelican's findings on the relevance of economic diversification and interethnic friendship as drivers of Mbororo social integration (Pelican 2012, 2015: 114-120). In the second half of the twentieth century, many Mbororo families began to diversify their economic activities and to engage in subsistence farming in addition to cattle herding. They frequently employed Grassfields farmers to work on their farms, and relied on their Grassfields neighbours for many services, such as thatching the roofs of their houses and other craftsmanship. Similarly, a number of wealthy Grassfields farmers took up cattle herding in addition to farming, and often entrusted their animals to Mbororo herdsmen (Dafinger and Pelican 2006). Thus, in many ways, Mbororo and Grassfielders have lived in a close and symbiotic relationship, which has been acknowledged by both sides and is often referred to alongside mentioning farmer-herder conflicts (Pelican 2015).

While Mbororo have long identified with cattle rearing, and the majority still lives in remote parts of rural areas conducive to pastoralism, there has been a growing number of Mbororo

youths who have gone to school or engaged in alternative economic activities that have taken them elsewhere. Today, we find many Mbororo youths driving (motorbike) taxies, which is a popular occupation, since it requires little capital and no formal education. While many continue living in rural areas and combine driving or petty trading with rearing cattle, others have moved to nearby towns or to Bamenda, the capital of the North West region (see also Keja 2009). In addition, some Mbororo businesspeople and a slowly growing number of educated Mbororo have relocated to cities in the Francophone regions (e.g. Bafoussam, Douala, Yaoundé) and have found employment in the public or private sector. Their numbers are still limited, as compared to similar trends among Grassfielders, who have a long history of outmigration to other parts of the country.

The presence of Anglophones in the Francophone regions is also relevant in the context of the Anglophone conflict, as many have provided refuge to displaced relatives (see also Adama 2022). Given the breakdown of schooling in the Anglophone regions, many parents have opted to send their children to stay with relatives and attend school outside the conflict zone. As our quantitative data suggests, this also holds true for the Mbororo, yet to a lesser degree than for their Grassfields neighbours. We partly attribute this to the still limited but growing number of Mbororo who have moved to urban centres and have embraced new paths of social and physical mobility (see also Pelican 2011). Furthermore, while some Mbororo have taken refuge with distant relatives in the neighbouring West region or across the border in Nigeria, the majority of our interview partners are determined to stay put or to return as soon as circumstances allow. They emphasized that the Anglophone North West is their home, where they and their children have grown up, and where they have vested interests in land and property. Yet, they are confronted with separatist leaders who portray them as an unwanted minority and question their belonging to the Anglophone region.

4.2 Contestations over Mbororo Citizenship and Belonging

Contestations over Mbororo citizenship and belonging already emerged during the colonial and postcolonial period. When they settled in the Cameroon Grassfields, they were subjected to the power of Grassfields rulers who treated them as guests on their lands; a system that was endorsed by the British colonial administration. As they counted as "migrants" and "strangers" with ties to Nigeria, they were excluded from suffrage during the referendum in

1961. Only in the context of constitutional changes in 1972 were they granted Cameroonian citizenship (Pelican 2015: 84-85).

In his comprehensive study on Mbororo settlement in the Cameroon Grassfields, Boutrais (1996: 143-148) reports that while some Mbororo sections were in support of reunification with the hope of attaining full citizenship, others favored the alternative of joining Nigeria, as they were already familiar with political and ecological conditions there. However, with the pendulum swinging towards reunification, the Mbororo and other groups perceived as foreigners from Nigeria became the targets of Grassfielders' hostilities, which in consequence motivated a good number of Mbororo to relocate to Nigeria.

Mbororo belonging to the Grassfields region continued to be contested in the post-colonial period. Under the regime of Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, the Mbororo qualified as citizens of Cameroon, but were subsumed under the cultural category of "northerners" due to their Muslim identity and Fulbe ethnicity (Njeuma and Awasom 1990). Consequently, Mbororo who were born and grew up in the North West region still counted as strangers to the area, with limited rights to the region's natural and state resources. This was mirrored in the Grassfielders' enduring perception of the Mbororo as late-comers to the region and as a nomadic people whose allegiances are elsewhere.

The Mbororo's regional citizenship status only changed in the 1990s with Cameroon's democratization process, which brought about a new era characterized by party-political struggles as well as ethnic and minority politics (Geschiere and Gugler 1998; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998; Pelican 2015; Takougang and Krieger 1998). In this context, a new generation of young, educated, and politically engaged Mbororo emerged, who initiated a change in Mbororo self-understanding by emphasizing the length of Mbororo settlement in the region and their integration in its socio-cultural fabric. As a result, Mbororo increasingly self-identified as part and parcel of the Anglophone North West, and successfully claimed regional citizenship and political self-representation to the Cameroonian government (Mouiche 2011; Pelican 2008). While the government acknowledged Mbororo belonging to the Anglophone region and eventually endorsed their recognition as a "marginalized minority" and "indigenous people" of Cameroon (Pelican 2009, 2013, 2015), local Grassfielders continued

to uphold their perception of the Mboror as nomads, late-comers, and strangers (Amadou 2017).

During the Anglophone conflict, these stereotypes have resurfaced and have been reinforced by labeling the Mboror as *come-no-go*. The Pidgin English term is rooted in the colonial and post-colonial context of labor migration within the British-administered regions of Southern Cameroons, when laborers from the densely populated North West were recruited to work in the plantations in the coastal South West. As the demand for migrant labor persisted and many Northwesterners settled permanently in the South West, they became labelled as *come-no-go*, literally meaning "people who came and never went back". The term has decidedly negative connotations and has gained currency mostly during periods of political rivalry and heightened identity politics, such as during the democratic transition of the 1990s (Kah 2019). The application of the term *come-no-go* to the Mboror in the Anglophone conflict follows the same logic, and is used as a mechanism of exclusion, i.e. denying the Mboror the right to Anglophone identity and belonging to this region, including to land and property (see also Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2022).[16] This theme has been repeatedly addressed by our Mboror interlocutors, such as in the conversation between our research collaborator Pateh and his interview partner Mawko:

> Mawko: The future is not the best. It is going to be a very bad future because this separation is going to bring a lot of trouble. Because those people here, those Ambas here, they are always saying that if they separate the two regions, [...] they will drive all the Mboror. The Mbororos will not live here.
> Pateh: So, it means you people, they are not going to treat you like Anglophones or what are you saying?

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[16] The complicated and contested citizenship status of the Mboror not only applies to Cameroon but also to neighbouring countries, in particular the Central African Republic (Chauvin et Seignobos 2013; de Vries 2020). There, Mboror pastoralists have been perceived as "strangers" on the grounds of their relatively recent migration history (arriving the CAR from Cameroon and Chad since 1920) and their seasonal mobility across the border with Chad and Sudan. In addition, they have become involved in the country's complex conflict dynamics as victims of bandits (*zarguina*) and rebel groups who compete over the country's margins. This has caused many Mboror to take refuge in neighbouring Cameroon (see also Amadou 2018). At the same time, there are also Mboror who joined armed rebel groups, several of which have been headed by ethnic Fulbe who claim to protect Mboror interests (e.g. Ali Darassa of the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), Sidi Souleymane of the 3R, or Baaba Ladde of the Uuda'en in Chad). Hence, similar to the situation of the Mboror in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, the Mboror there occupy a difficult position that undermines their claims to citizenship and belonging in the CAR. (We thank Andreas Mehler for highlighting these parallels).

Mawko: Yes, most of them are saying that we are *come-no-go*, that we don't have a place in the North West and the South West regions.

Pateh: OK, so they don't consider you like Anglophones.

Mawko: They don't consider us Anglophones.

(Mawko, Mbororo man in his mid-30s from Menchum Division, 16.11.2020)

Like many of our interlocutors, Mawko feels intimidated by the Ambazonians' exclusionary rhetoric, and prays that the country's separation should not materialize. Besides highlighting the separatists' rejection of Mbororo identity and belonging as Anglophones, he explains the motives of Amba violence with the Mbororo's reluctance to engage in political struggle as well as with Ambazonians' interest in the Mbororo's cattle wealth:

The Mbororo people are targeted because they are not against the government. Those other people they are against the government. But the Mbororo people isolated themselves. They supported neither the Ambas nor the government, they were just living. They were just there. So that's the reason for why these people hated them. And again, those Ambas, they wanted to use this opportunity and get more money from the Mbororo so that they should be buying arms. Like the cows; they wanted to be taking the cows and selling, so that they should be buying arms and [be] fighting the government. So, the Mbororo people never wanted that. (Mawko, Mbororo man in his mid-30s from Menchum Division, 16.11.2020)

As we learn from Mawko, Mbororo reluctance to engage in political struggle is rooted in their pastoralist livelihood which obliges them to prioritize their animals' wellbeing over political interests. In the view of Ambazonians, however, this seemingly neutral stance is interpreted as a pro-government position, which has earned them the labeling as *blacklegs*, i.e. traitors, counter-revolutionaries, or government supporters. These allegations resonate with earlier instances in Cameroon history, when Mbororo were perceived by Grassfielders as siding with the "wrong" side. These include the country's transition to independence, as discussed above, as well as the political struggles of the 1990s, which gave rise to the Anglophone movement and resulted in the declaration of Southern Cameroons' independence by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) in 1996 (see also Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2022). While some actively supported the Anglophone-led main opposition party at the time, the Mbororo

at large were perceived as shying away from siding with the Anglophone cause and as sympathizing with government-friendly factions. These accusations have resurfaced and become a powerful tool in the hands of separatist leaders to mobilize against Mbororo, which will be the focus of the subsequent section.

5. Online Mobilization Against Mbororo

During Summer 2018, a growing number of audio and video messages by separatist leaders in the diaspora and in Cameroon began circulating through Facebook and WhatsApp, encouraging violence against Mbororo and accusing them of being *blacklegs*, i.e. traitors, counter-revolutionaries, or government supporters. Not long after, the first Mbororo person was killed by Ambazonian fighters in Mezam Division in September 2018. This was followed by many more incidents of violence against Mbororo families, their property, and animals throughout the North West region that have been documented in our data base.

5.1 Circulating Extreme Speech on Social Media

The following WhatsApp message by an unidentified Ambazonian fighter was forwarded to Michaela Pelican during her research stay in Cameroon on 02.09.2018. It was recorded in Pidgin English and addressed to fellow Ambazonians. The English translation reads as follows:

> In response to your earlier message, brother[17]: You know, these Mbororo people, they appear to be friendly with us, because they grew up in our places, they don't even have their own village. What our boys need to do now: let them attack all that Mbororo people's cows; anywhere where they have cattle, because they only depend on cattle. While some attack them [the Mbororo], others should attack their cattle, level them all to the ground, so they know they have joined the war. Attack them right in villages where they stay. Wipe them all, because now we have declared war against people who keep them on their land. No merci for them now. Most of them are *okada* [motorbike] riders, most are drivers. I know there are many Mbororo people in Acha, Ngi even more than Acha and Ngi people. Also, for Sagnere. Many of our people took them like family, but they have exposed themselves to us. So, it's just to declare total war against them.

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[17] We unfortunately do not know which previous message the speaker is referring to. Due to the volume of social media content, the pace of discourse, and non-chronological feeds on various apps, it is quite normal for users (and researchers) to see only fragments of longer exchanges or threads. Of course, this contributes to disinformation as people share these fragments and fill in the blanks by word of mouth.

> They need to understand that they have joined the wrong side, they need to join us. After all, where will they go? That means we will chase them from La Republique at the end of the day. Because victory must come. That's what I believe. (WhatsApp message by unidentified Ambazonian fighter, 02.09.2018)

Despite not containing the specific extreme speech terms *blacklegs* or *come-no-go*, the sentiments they represent are clearly present in this example: The Mbororo are described as having "joined the wrong side", i.e. the government. It is implied that they have been graciously accepted by the Anglophone people, but since they do not comply, they do not deserve their cattle wealth – or to exist in the country at all. The speaker very explicitly calls for the extermination of all Mbororo from Cameroon; a scenario many of our interviewees expressed genuine worry about.

The following exchange between our research collaborator Bura and his interview partner Bappa, sums the two points up very concisely:

> Bura: So, what do they want from your people that they are attacking them?

> Bappa: They name two or three issues. First, they say that the Mbororo people are *blacklegs*, meaning that they are sharing their secret, their information to the military. So, they view them as enemies. And secondly, they are saying that they don't even want to see the Mbororo people in those areas where they are. So their mission is to drive away all the Mbororo people down there, to drive them away and their wealth. (Bappa, Mbororo man in his late 40s from Donga Mantung based in Mezam Division, 22.11.2020)

Crucially, these online messages were not only distributed to separatist fighters but to Mbororo as well; either by friends trying to warn them or as direct threats. The following exchange between our research collaborator Durow and his interview partner Pateh illustrates such threats and the demands made by the separatists:

> Durow: The confrontation with the Amba, when did that happen?
> Pateh: It happened when the problem started, some in 2018. Actually, that is when we started having threats from the Ambas. Telephone calls, threats. And we meet with them.
> Durow: What did they really want from you?

Pateh: Well, they used to ask for support and that we should send our children to go and join them so that they should go and help with their fighting.

Pateh said, he turns off his phone whenever he realizes that he is being called by Ambazonian fighters. Later in the interview he added: "And they started even writing about me on social media and threatening me and saying all kinds of things. So, I will say that I've really been threatened." (Pateh, Mbororo man in his late 40s from Menchum Division, 07.11.2020)

It is worth emphasizing that the Mbororo, like the rest of the Anglophone population, are affected by legislation that discriminates against English speakers, and that they have an interest in the accessibility of education and judicial processes in English as well as investment in the development of their home regions. Thus, from our interviewees' perspective, the accusation of being *blacklegs* came as a bitter surprise, considering many described being sympathetic to the initial government-critical protests in 2016. Their perspective changed, however, when they became the target of extreme speech and concerted acts of violence by the separatist forces.

The Mbororo are not alone in being labelled *blacklegs* for being (from a separatist perspective) too comfortable with the status quo: Willis and her co-authors (2020) conducted interviews with Anglophones in the North West and South West regions on their perspectives on the Anglophone conflict (the Mbororo were not part of their sample). They argue that one should distinguish between their interviewees' attitudes towards Ambazonia based on their socioeconomic position. For the disadvantaged rural population, the Ambazonian fighters, also called "Amba boys", represent freedom fighters and one of the only sources of support and safety against military violence. Conversely, many middle-class individuals have become targets of Amba violence for being suspected of supporting government measures to protect their wealth and influence. Obviously, these include civil servants and office holders but also business people and wealthy cattle owners, be they Mbororo or not. Willis and her co-authors provide important evidence for the diversity of positions held by the populations of the North West and South West regions and the resulting complexity of the Anglophone conflict, even

without adding ethnicity to the equation. Nevertheless, the Mbororo's position as an ethnic minority group requires us to take this extra layer into account.[18]

While the online circulation of extreme speech might be worrying, it is often the visual content that deeply unsettles the recipients. Though taking and sharing photos of deceased persons for documentation purposes is generally seen as necessary and appropriate within Cameroon, the Anglophone conflict has led to a stark increase in the number of bodies and injuries users will be exposed to if they follow the events on social media. Additionally, the conflict has given rise to a new kind of documentation that is not intended for news reporting, emotionally processing a death, or securing criminal evidence. Both Ambazonian fighters as well as their opponents post pictures and videos showing violent acts or their results alongside mocking captions, insults, and threats. We do not include visual examples or detailed descriptions of such posts in this paper and recommend against seeking them out for morbid curiosity since seeing real violence online can be traumatizing. To give a general impression of the material with regards to aggression against Mbororo: The posts include images of violated and killed Mbororo persons, including men who have been posthumously decapitated. Some of these shots show the clear intent to create the highest possible shock value, for example by posing the victim's head.

5.2 Counter-Efforts by Online Activists

In October 2018, a video of the torturing of a young Mbororo man in Momo Division, who ultimately died in the hands of separatists, made the rounds through Cameroon and the diaspora. The video's graphic content was deeply unsettling and reinforced the general atmosphere of fear among Mbororo in the conflict region. Mbororo individuals active in human rights circles, mostly based in the diaspora, felt compelled to document this case (Justice and Dignity Campaign 2019a). They also recorded and publicized later incidents of extreme violence against Mbororo, such as the burning down of the Lake Nyos Survivors' camp in Upkwa village in May 2019 (Justice and Dignity Campaign 2019b; Lake Nyos Survivors Association 2019) and the concerted attack on a Mbororo family in Mbuy-Mbem in February

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[18] Most of the Mbororo interviewed in our sample self-identified as middle-class, which broadly translates as "we are managing" in local parlance. The very poor and the very rich were not part of our sample; the first because they are less targeted by the Ambazonians, the latter because they were reluctant to be interviewed.

2020 (Justice and Dignity Campaign 2020a; REDHAC 2020); cases we will discuss in more detail below in relation to the regional variation of Mbororo losses.

Mbororo activists made use of the materials circulated on social media to provide evidence of the atrocities and to alert human rights organizations, the Cameroonian government, and the general public to the Mbororo's exposure to violence in the Anglophone conflict. They arranged for the dissemination of news items on private and state media in Cameroon as well as public statements by human rights organizations.[19] Furthermore, Mbororo activists in the diaspora made links with separatist leaders abroad, some of whom spoke up against targeted violence against specific ethnic groups and got their followers to shift their tone. While their interventions seem to have contributed to reducing violence against Mbororo in certain areas, other locations emerged as hotbeds of ongoing attacks.

In an interview shared by ABC Ambazonia on Facebook, Chris Anu, the diaspora-based spokesperson of one of the factions of the Interim Government of Ambazonia (ICG), commented on the latest human rights report issued by Amnesty International (2021). While the report highlights the position of Mbororo as both victims and perpetrators of human rights abuses, Chris Anu asked: "What is wrong with an Ambazonian killing a Mbororo who is an aggressor? He moved into Ambazonia from another country into our territory. And you [they] attack our people and you [they] kill them, burn their homes, and destroy their farmlands. If we are able to kill them all, we will kill them all, and there will be no regret." (ABC Ambazonia 2021, interview sequence transcribed by Michaela Pelican). To the moderator's question, about why the separatists targeted people from the same region, Anu responded that this was incorrect and that the Mbororo had come to Ambazonia from Nigeria with the complicity of the colonial masters; thus negating their belonging to Anglophone Cameroon. At this point, the interview was ended abruptly by the moderator.[20]

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[19] For example, on 17.02.2020 the Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale (REDHAC) issued a press release, condemning the killing of four Mbororo men and the serious wounding of two Mbororo women and a man in Nwa in Donga Mantung Division (REDHAC 2020).

[20] Allegedly, this interview was originally broadcasted on 06.06.2021 by Voice of America News (VOA), an established American international broadcaster. The moderator of the interview, James Butty, is a managing editor and host of the Daybreak Africa Radio program at VOA. We are unsure if VOA has authorized this audio because the logo displayed on ABC Ambazonia does not match the official VOA logo. Importantly, irrespective of its authenticity, this audio has been shared widely on social media and has received multiple comments.

Anu's statement echoes the contestations of Mbororo citizenship and belonging discussed in section 4. The interview was shared widely on Facebook and engendered supportive comments, as well as critical remarks by human rights organizations, such as the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and the Justice and Dignity Campaign, both of which called on Anu to "withdraw his statement and caution his fighters to deceased [desist] from all forms of attacks against the Mbororo community" (CHRDA 2021b). As this recent example illustrates, social media continue to play a significant role in the Anglophone conflict in general and in mediating violence against Mbororo in particular.

6. Violence Against Mbororo: Scope and Patterns

In this section, we discuss some of the insights we have gained from analysing the quantitative data on Mbororo losses collected by our research collaborators between 2017 and January 2021. In the first step, we present a general overview of the types of incidents, followed by an analysis of their spatial and temporal patterns. In the last section, we provide possible explanations for regional variation by paying special attention to the Menchum and Donga Mantung divisions.

The following quote of Yerma names the types of aggression he and his family have been exposed to:

> Really, the Anglophone crisis is actually something that came, like a sudden. It started like when, it was around, it was on the 12th of July 2018, when those boys, they call themselves the soldiers, the Ambas boys, they ravaged our compound and burned them all. They kept some of our animals and killed them. So, they burned all of our compounds and property. So, we have no way to live. And then we ran away, and then [...] came to [the city] and settled there because they were in our places. There is no safety. (Yerma, Mbororo man from Menchum Division, 26.11.2020)

The assaults mentioned by Yerma match the types of incidents documented by our research team for the North West region (status January 2021). Figure 4 shows the different events, each of which is significant: number of households affected (n=807), persons affected or displaced (n=7182), persons killed (n=132), persons kidnapped with ransom paid (n=97), homes destroyed (n=282), and cattle seized or killed (n=2031). The 807 households affected are home to 7182 persons. These include 807 household heads (including 59 female

household heads), 913 women, 4449 children and 1013 other dependents (including the elderly and extended family members). More than 60% of the persons affected are children, many of whom have been displaced together with their mothers or sent away to stay with relatives outside of the conflict zone.[21]

Figure 4: Tangible impact of the Anglophone conflict on Mbororo in the North West region

Estimated population of the North West region: 3.5 million persons
Estimated Mbororo population in the North West region: 100,000 persons

Mbororo losses	Total
Number of households affected	807
Total number of persons affected or displaced	7182
Number of homes destroyed	282
Number of persons killed	132
Number of persons kidnapped	97
Amount paid as ransom	164,106,050 XAF / ~240,000 EUR
Number of cattle seized/killed	2031 (= ~ 609 million XAF / 927,000 EUR)

Note: These numbers are relatively conservative, as compared to other sources
(e.g. Laimaru Network). They only cover the North West egion and reflect the status
of data collection (and currency conversion rates) by January 2021.

Source: Data base collected by the research team, status January 2021. Table produced by Michaela Pelican.

According to the figures reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG 2021) for 2021, i.e. the time when we compiled the quantitative analysis of Mbororo losses, a total of 765,000 persons had been displaced and 4000 persons had been killed in the Anglophone crisis; 2.2 million were in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2021: 40).[22] These numbers constitute 22% (displaced) and 0.11% (murdered) of the Anglophone regions' overall population estimated at 3.5 million in 2015.[23] The Mbororo population of the North West region

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[21] A note on displacement: Identifying the number of displaced persons is notoriously difficult, as there are different forms of displacement (e.g. within or outside the conflict region), and because displaced persons often continue to be mobile, e.g. moving to other destinations or returning (temporarily or permanently) to their homes. Due to the conceptual unclarities and the nature of our data set, we decided to compile information on displaced persons as part of the more general category of persons affected by the documented incidents, which is equivalent all members of the affected households.

[22] In the meantime, the number of persons killed has risen to 6000 (ICG 2022), while OCHA (2022) now distinguishes between people who have been internally displaced (592,600), those who have returned to the conflict regions (417,500) and refugees (77,400).

[23] The value of 3.5 million inhabitants in the two Anglophone regions is based on the population estimates provided by the Central Bureau of the Census and Population Studies (BUCREP) for 2015. They estimate the population of the North West Region at 1,969,578 and of the South West Region at 1,553,320. These two values

constitutes about 5% of the population, which adds up to an estimated 100,000. Of these, 7182 persons have been affected or displaced and 132 persons have been killed, which corresponds to 7.18% and 0.13% accordingly. These numbers suggest that in terms of deaths the Mbororo are comparably affected, but with regard to displacement less than the general population.[24] It is important to note, however, that violent deaths and displacement among the total Anglophone population are caused by both state military and separatist forces. Conversely, the Mbororo report being almost exclusively attacked by Ambazonian fighters. Only 0.25%, or two cases, of violence against Mbororo households (including the murder of a young man in Mezam division) have been attributed to the military. To still arrive at the same murder rate, the Mbororo therefore must be disproportionally targeted by separatist violence.

6.1 Spatial and Temporal Patterns of Violence

Aside from the scope of losses, we also consider spatial and temporal patterns of violence against Mbororo. As figure 5 indicates, the highest number of assaults has been registered in Donga Mantung with 236 households affected. The results for Menchum (116), Boyo (113), Bui (112) and Momo (111) are relatively equal, while fewer attacks have been documented for Mezam (72) and Ngoketunja (47).

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sum up to a total of 3,522,898 for the two Anglophone regions (BUCREP, n.d.). The population estimates for 2015 are extrapolations based on the latest population census conducted in 2005.

[24] In section 4, we noted that, compared to Grassfielders who have a long history of outmigration, relatively few Mbororo have family members living outside the conflict zone, who could provide refuge. This may be one of the reasons for the lower number of Mbororo IDPs alongside other factors, such as the risk of leaving their cattle unattended.

Figure 5: Number of households affected by division[25]
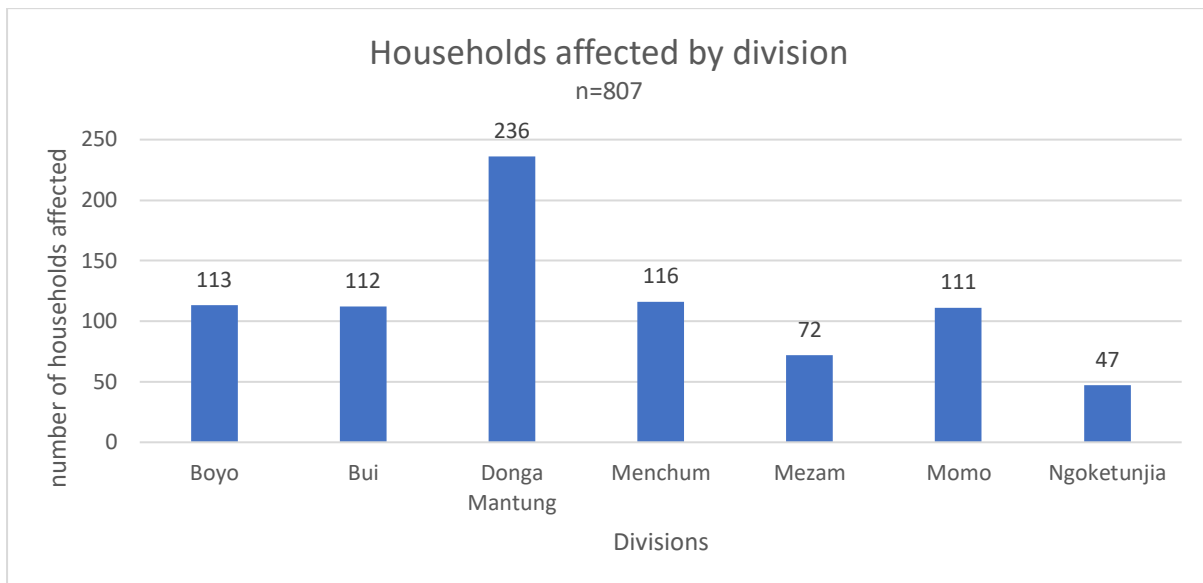
Source: Data base collected by the research team, status January 2021. Graph produced by Sina Plücken.

Figure 6 details three types of incidents in each of the divisions which we consider particularly relevant due to their significant impact on people's lives and the perception of the gravity of the conflict: homes destroyed, persons killed, persons kidnapped. Donga Mantung and Menchum show the highest numbers for homes destroyed (Donga Mantung 163, Menchum 47) and persons killed (Donga Mantung 70, Menchum 19). While the number of persons kidnapped is more evenly distributed over the seven divisions, Menchum still scores the highest numbers (Menchum 22). Kidnaps, mostly for ransom, are a common feature in the Anglophone conflict. Besides wealthy Mbororo, politicians, civil servants, and middle-class individuals have also regularly been targeted (Willis et al. 2020). Similarly, arson attacks and violent deaths have not been limited to Mbororo only, and have been committed by separatists as well as the military (e.g. Amnesty International 2021). The latter two incidents of homes destroyed and persons killed will be central to our later analysis of regional variation in violence against Mbororo.

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[25] Differences between the values of n in the figures 6, 7, and 8 are due to missing values.

Figure 6: Number of households affected by types of incidents
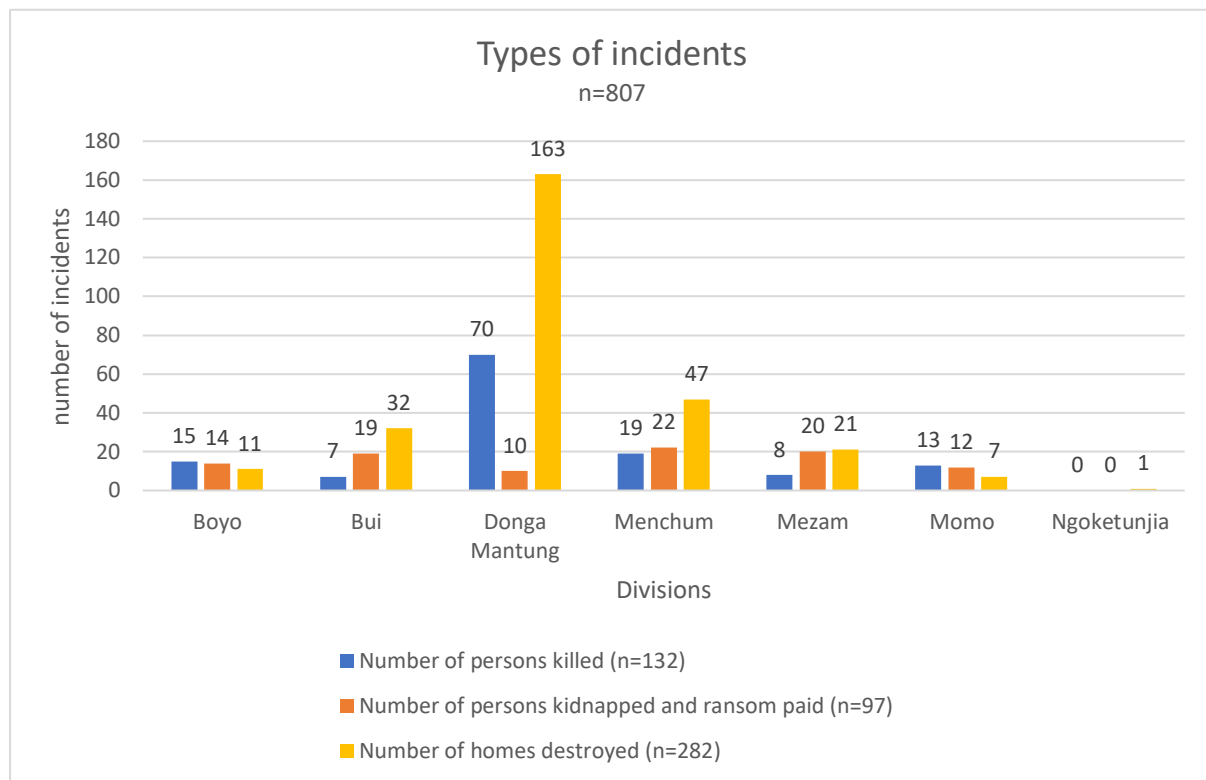
Types of incidents

n=807
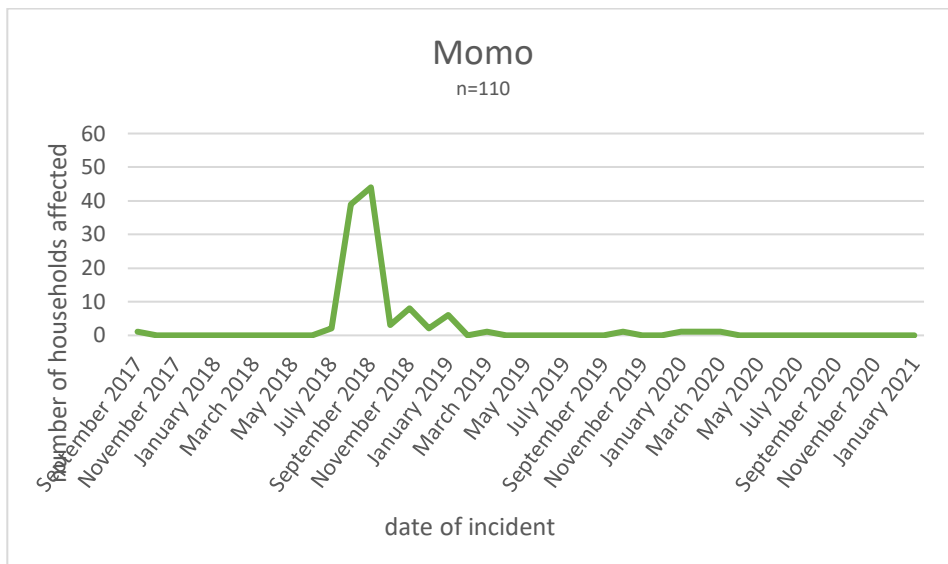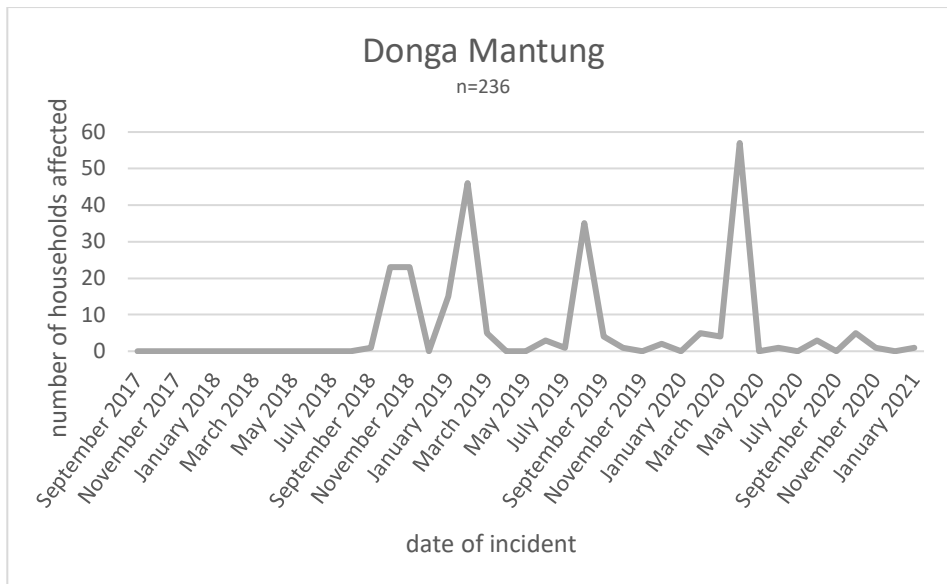
Source: Data base collected by the research team, status January 2021. Graph produced by Sina Plücken.

Figure 7 shows the losses suffered by Mbororo households over time. The graph indicates a very clear spike in August/September 2018 with a high of 103 and 129 incidents. In the subsequent months, the violence stayed rather constant at 60 incidents per month until February 2019, and then gradually decreased. Significant spikes were recorded again in August 2019 (39 incidents) and April 2020 (60 incidents).

We suggest that the initial spike in August/September 2018 is correlated with the timeframe during which separatist leaders had been mobilizing their followers to attack Mbororo compounds. Of course, co-occurrence is not causation. It is difficult to prove that a given attack was motivated by a voice message forwarded through WhatsApp. However, the assessment that messages from diaspora leaders and violence on the ground are connected has also been shared by most of our interlocutors, reflected in the following statement:

> They [the leaders in the diaspora] play a very, very bad role. By supporting those Ambas and directing them what to do, how to attack people. Yes, because they tell them: Kill [this person], do this, attack, burn this somebody's compounds, he's a *blackleg* and so

on and so forth. (Yerma, internally displaced Mbororo man from Menchum Division, 26.11.2020)

We propose that the subsequent counter-messages by diaspora leaders to refrain from targeted violence against specific ethnic groups equally contributed to reducing the degree of violence. To illustrate this, a detailed analysis of the patterns of violence by division is helpful. For this purpose, we have selected the three divisions Momo, Menchum, and Donga Mantung. They stand out by incidents of extreme violence that were publicized widely and that coincide with the analysed timeframe. These include the video-recorded torturing of a young Mbororo man in Momo Division in October 2018 (Justice and Dignity Campaign 2019); the burning down of the Lake Nyos Survivors' camp in Upkwa village in Menchum in May 2019 (Lake Nyos Survivors Association 2019); and the concerted attack on a Mbororo family (with three men killed and two women seriously wounded) in Mbuy-Mbem, a village in Donga Mantung, in February 2020 (REDHAC 2020).

Figure 7: Number of households affected over time and by division
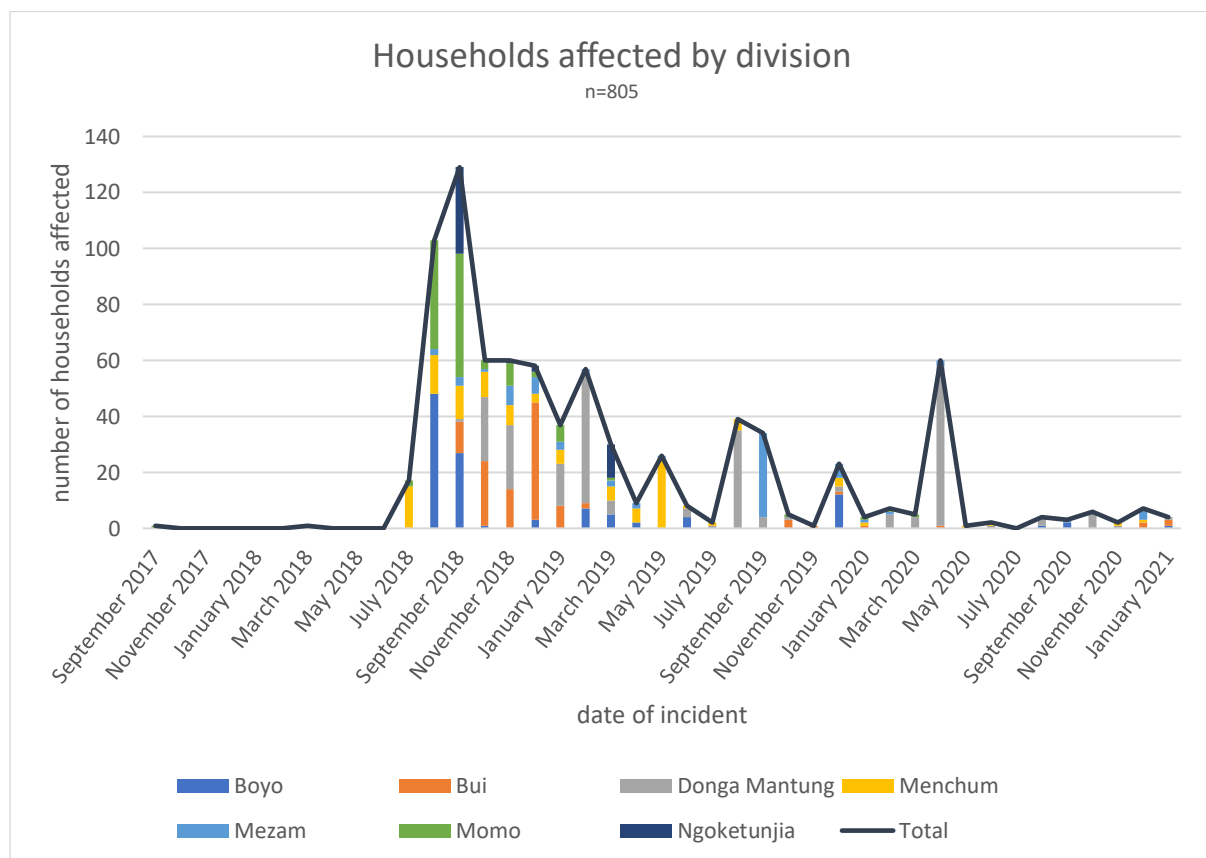
Source: Data base collected by the research team, status January 2021, 2 missing values. Graph produced by Sina Plücken.

Figure 7 also suggests that the various divisions are targeted disparately. For example, Menchum was one of the first divisions affected in the early stages whereas Donga Mantung was targeted more heavily at a later time. Furthermore, it shows that many of the spikes can be explained by incidents in specific divisions, which we elaborate on in the following.

From figures 8 to 10 we can derive that the initial peak in August/September 2018 has been the result of violent attacks committed in all divisions (including those not detailed in the figures). The second peak in August/September 2019 was mostly driven by an increase in violent incidents in Donga Mantung and Mezam, while the third peak in April 2020 can be nearly exclusively attributed to an increase in violent attacks in Donga Mantung.

Figures 8-10: Number of households affected over time by division (Momo, Menchum, Donga Mantung)
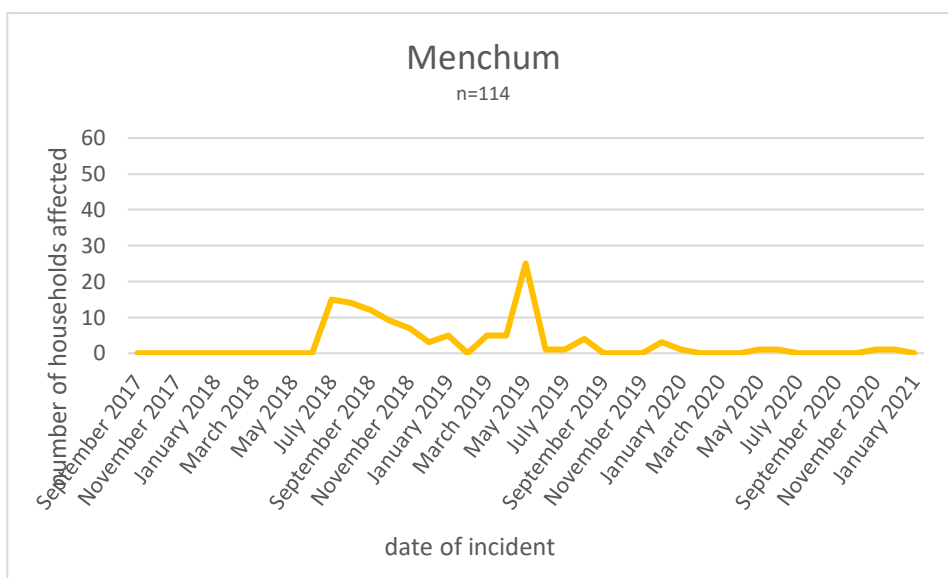
Source: Data base collected by the research team, status January 2021. Graphs produced by Sina Plücken.

The graph for Momo is exemplary of other divisions not depicted: It suddenly spikes up during August 2018 and falls back down in November of the same year. In Boyo, Bui, Momo and Ngokentunjia divisions, this peak is even narrower, only spanning August to September 2018 and in Mezam only the month of September 2018.

In Menchum, the first spike occurs a few weeks earlier, in July of 2018 (15 households were affected). It was thus the first division in which Mbororo were directly affected by the conflict. After the initial spike, cases slowly drop off until the second peak in May 2019 which reflects the attack against the Lake Nyos Survivors' camp in Upkwa village, in which according to the data collected by our team 25 houses were burned and two persons killed.

The graph for Donga Mantung is a complete diversion from the patterns exemplified by Momo division. It features by far the highest numbers (236 households affected in total), and incidents seem to have occurred in four large clusters mostly between September 2018 and April 2020.

6.2 Possible Explanations for Regional Variation

Our analysis of the quantitative data begs the question of how to explain the regional variation observed. In the following, we draw on our earlier discussion of Mbororo settlement patterns and farmer-herder conflicts (section 4) and focus on specific instances in Menchum and Donga Mantung.

Both divisions, Menchum and Donga Mantung, share borders with Nigeria and include rather remote and inaccessible areas that are difficult to govern. In addition, Menchum has a long and fierce history of farmer-herder conflicts that has been compounded by the complex interplay of status and gender dynamics and the divergent interests of farmers, herders, traditional rulers, elite members, and government agents (Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Fonchingong and Beseng 2016; Harshbarger 1995; Kum and Takor 2018; Ngalim 2015; Ngwoh 2017). This situation has produced a strong awareness among farmers and herders of potential conflict over land and property. It has also motivated both Grassfields farmers and Mbororo herders to self-organize and stand their grounds in defence of their landed interests.

In the current conflict, Menchum division is seen as a hotbed of violent attacks despite not standing out nearly as much as Donga Mantung in overall numbers. We assume this to have two reans: Firstly, the Mbororo population in Menchum is seen as more assertive, maybe even as aggressors, by Ambazonian fighters due to their self-defence practices, such as forming a vigilante group, and refusal to give up their land and belongings. This stance is reflected, for example, in the statement of our research collaborator Pateh:

> There is no way, you cannot say that you want to escape from your residence because these people are threatening you. If I'm escaping from my residence, then I'll go to where? That's where I know, that is where I'm born. That is where I am bred. That's where I'm making my life. So, I don't see any reason why I should go to any place. If I'm escaping, then what am I going to do with my children and the little property that I have? I will not carry my cows on my head and go any place. (Pateh, Mbororo man in his late 40s from Menchum division, 07.11.2020)

Additionally, there have been allegations about Mbororo being armed by and collaborating with the military.[26]

Secondly, Menchum has gained a kind of tragic infamy from the aforementioned arson attack against the Lake Nyos survivor's camp in Upkwa village. The burning of the survivor's camp made headlines and shocked Mbororo and non-Mbororo recipients of the news due to the

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[26] Several of our interlocutors rejected such allegations and suggested that the military tries to create rumours to sow further division, e.g., by circulating pictures that show soldiers and Mbororo men congregating at a cattle market.

symbolic and emotional gravitas of the event. The Lake Nyos survivors' camp had been created in 1986 after a CO_2 limnic gas eruption had suffocated humans and animals within a 25-kilometre radius of Lake Nyos. The survivors of this natural disaster, including Mbororo and Hausa people, had to be resettled away from the lake. Community members allege that on the night of the 30th of May 2019, Ambazonian fighters set fire to their settlement, burning down dozens of homes (our records say 25, other sources mention 40) leading to the death of two Mbororo persons. The perpetrators killed livestock and physically assaulted numerous people, including the community leader who was seriously injured in the attack, according to the Lake Nyos Survivors Association (2019; see also Amnesty International 2021; Jator 2019). The targeting of trauma survivors, the arbitrariness of the arson attack and the violence inflicted on the community leader shocked people beyond the Mbororo community and likely still colours Mechum's reputation as a conflict-torn division.

In Donga Mantung, farmer-herder conflicts are also frequent (Nchinda et al. 2014). But here, the nature of the terrain and the proximity to the Nigerian border seem the main factors that have facilitated violence between Mbororo and separatist fighters. Because of its hilly topography and limited road infrastructure, the division is difficult to penetrate and be surveyed by the military. As a result, the area is particularly attractive to Ambazonian fighters who retreat to "the bushes" to organize without military interference. Additionally, Donga Mantung is strategically important from the Ambazonian perspective because the terrain makes the border to Nigeria difficult to control and thus ideal for arms trafficking (see also Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2022: 20). Mbororo, who use the hills as fertile grazing areas, are seen as a threat to Ambazonian activities in the region. Most likely, militia groups are more interested in driving them out of the area, rather than kidnapping for ransom; especially since material resources might be less of a concern for groups close to the border as compared to those further within the country, e.g. in Mezam. This would partially explain the relatively low number of kidnappings (n=10) compared to the high killing rate of Mbororo in Donga Mantung (n=70) and the large number of homes that have been destroyed (n=163). A related factor is that some Mbororo communities have formed vigilante groups to defend themselves and to retaliate against attacks by Ambazonian fighters (CHRDA 2021a). They have also been reported to aid the military; famously, in the case of the Ngarbuh massacre, where Fulani militia were said to have contributed to the killing of 23 civilians, including children (HRW

2020). This spiral of violence may likely have contributed to more confrontations and higher numbers of killings.[27]

An example of this is an attack against Mbororo in Mbui-Mbem on the 16th of February 2020 which took place only two days after and 40 kilometres east of the infamous Ngarbuh massacre. It is unclear whether the attack in Mbui-Mbem was related to the Ngarbuh incident, but the proximity and targeting of Mbororo in the wake of anger about their alleged participation in the Ngarbuh massacre make it seem plausible. Compared to Ngarbuh, the number of killed and injured people (4 and 3 persons, respectively) seems small. However, they include the death of an elderly community leader around 80 years of age and the injuring of two women in their early 70s. In both Mbororo and Grassfields society, the elderly are seen as worthy of respect and consideration. Yet, in the shadow of the Ngarbuh massacre, the Mbui-Mbem attack did not receive much attention (REDHAC 2020). In an attempt to call out the violation of the cultural taboo, a picture of one of the elderly women, in which she is seen holding her bleeding forehead, was edited into a jarring poster and circulated via social media by Mbororo community members (Justice and Dignity Campaign 2020b).

What Menchum and Donga Mantung have in common is that they are remote areas with low penetration of state powers; ideal for both cattle rearing and insurrectionist activities. This conflict of interest can be seen as an extension of past farmer-herder conflicts in the divisions and is bringing to light long-standing misconceptions and ethnic stereotypes against Mbororo (see also Pelican 2015: 120-127). In other divisions, attacks on Mbororo became less after they had been discouraged by diaspora leaders. In Menchum, and even more so in Donga Mantung, strategic motivations, interethnic conflict, and the resulting revenge cycles seem to have taken on a life of their own, which will likely require additional work towards ethnic reintegration in the post-conflict period.

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[27] We take note that several sources have reported the involvement of Mbororo militia on the side of the Cameroonian government in the Anglophone conflict (e.g. Amnesty International 2020; CHRDA 2021a; Dada Petel and Vircoulon 2022). While we have no grounds to contest the specific examples, our research does not support the generalization of such instances to all Mbororo. The interviews we conducted clearly indicate that the Mbororo as an ethnic group are not homogenous in their political orientation or support for the separatists or the military. We may confidently state that the majority stay away from or disagree with violent action against separatists, and more so against civilians.

7. Outlook on the Conflict

The outlook on the Anglophone conflict is grim. The conflict has put Mbororo and their Grassfields neighbours at loggerheads over questions of land, belonging, and survival. It has set in place a spiral of violence, currently in full swing in Donga Mantung.

While taking into account that much of the violence against Mbororo comes from the Amba fighters and in part is reciprocated by Mbororo initiatives of self-defence, we should not omit the elephant in the room: the Cameroonian state and its army that, with its non-recognition of Anglophone minority claims and the denial of genuine dialogue, has been the key driver of the Anglophone conflict and its radicalization.

In this complex interplay of minority-majority dynamics, the Cameroonian government plays a crucial role in controlling the dominant discourse that proclaims the country's unity and indivisibility and is contested by the separatists. Conversely, the Ambazonians lead a minority discourse and call for an independent country and demand effective support to qualify as deserving citizens. The Mbororo are caught between these positions, the dominant discourse of the government and the minority discourse of the separatists. The violence and humiliation suffered at the hands of separatists are driving many towards a pro-government stance; even though they initially shared their tormentors' objections vis-à-vis the political dominance and neglect of Anglophones by the current regime.

The Cameroonian government is silent on the Mbororo case. It is the silence of an absentee actor that sanctions the spiralling of violence. Irrespective of the law put in place in December 2019 to punish inflammatory language against ethnic groups, there has been no statement or prosecution of extreme speech and graphic content circulated on social media. Government assistance to civilians affected by the conflict is minimal. The civilians' frustration and despair are employed to serve the military, which fuels more violence against them.

Our Mbororo interlocutors wish for an end to the conflict and to return to life as it was before. Most recognize that their Grassfields neighbours have been affected equally or even more severely, as they may be targeted by both separatists and the military. Our interlocutors' view of the past may be idealized; yet they recall farmer-herder conflicts as part and parcel of ethnic coexistence. Our research collaborator Pateh, who has been actively involved in dialogue platforms, aimed at resolving farmer-herder conflicts, sees the willingness to listen

and talk to each other as a necessary step to end the Anglophone conflict. We hope that the different conflict parties, from the local to the national level, will see this.

> If this problem has to end, people will have to talk to each other. Why do you think that you should avoid talking to people concerning this problem? […] a crisis cannot just end like that without talking. (Pateh, Mbororo man in his late 40s from Menchum division, 07.11.2020)

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