

The Decline of *lefua* in Nweh

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In this paper, I posit that Nweh people are at a crossroads of their traditional values with declining institutions. I focus on the observable decline of *lefua* (kingship, royalty, chieftaincy) as the central institution in Nweh, and argue that Nweh people ought to work hard to preserve their heritage jealously because when they lose it, they lose their entire culture and the *raison d'être* of their existence as a people. The thinking in this article is that if, as a people, we do not bring about a cultural rehabilitation, we shall lose our collective identity given that a people's cultural heritage is that mark which distinguishes them from other people. I visit the reign of Fuanthem Asonganyi, a respectable monarch and examine the aftermath of that reign. Thereafter, I attempt to trace the evolution of *lefua* in Nweh, discuss the genesis of its decline, and highlight some indices of such decline. Finally, some suggestions are proposed to help arrest the deplorable trend. My intention in this article is mainly to awaken the conscience of Nweh people to the devastation being wrought on our traditions and culture.

Once upon a *Fuanthem Asonganyi*

The declining trend in *lefua* experienced in Nweh by the end of the 20th century is unprecedented. Nweh cultural history has known glorious moments. These moments have been marked by distinguished monarchs. One example of such kings was *Fuanthem Asonganyi* who reigned in *Lebang* from the mid 19th century to 1951. There is considerable agreement across Nwehland that *Fuanthem Asonganyi* was a great king when considered from a wide variety of standpoints. Many describe him as a very handsome king who was very focused and commanded a great deal of respect among his people, and across the land and beyond. Some people assert that *Fuanthem Asonganyi* led *Lebang* kingdom to the pinnacle of its existence politically and socio-culturally. Historical accounts state that he fought many wars and greatly expanded *Lebang* kingdom chasing the *Mbo* beyond *Efreh* River, and the *Banyang* beyond *Betenten* River. He also established a great name and reputation that extended far and wide stretching all along the Cross River Basin from Calabar in Nigeria to Garoua in the Republic of Cameroun. *Fuanthem Asonganyi*, according to oral tradition in Nweh, was a great friend of many kings of the grassfields region of Cameroun especially the Sultan (king) of the Bamoun whom Nweh people fondly refer to as *Amehm* people, and *Fuandon-a-Fou*.

One other major achievement of this great king was that he resisted European imperialism so vehemently that he earned great respect from German colonial officers who considered the entire Nwehland as *Fuanthem's* country calling it *Fontendorf*. In fact, it is said that he considered Europeans as babies and treated them as such. *Fuanthem Asonganyi* is equally credited with introducing the term *fua* in the politico-cultural literature of Nweh by becoming the first king in his line to have taken the title *Fuanthem*.

Although *Fuanthem Asonganyi's* reign ended only in 1951, it is amazing how *lefua* that he took to its highest level declined so unimaginably by the turn of the century. If *Asonganyi* came back in the year 2000, he would not have recognized his kingdom or those of his

neighbors because practically everyone had become a *fua*.

The decline of *lefua*

Lefua, the pivot of Nweh society and symbol of societal pride in Nweh is in great decline lately. The matter of titles is so abused that if one spends a year or even a few months without meeting someone from Nweh, one had better watch out the way one exchanges greetings with that person. 'What did you call me? Don't you know I am now *Chief X, Nkem Y* or *Mafua Z*?' This has become the new way of life in Nweh where virtually everyone has either become a '*fua*', '*nkem*' or '*mafua*'. The 20th century, unfortunately, ended with this picture of Nweh society. Of late, there has been a general outcry in Nweh that *lefua* has been prostituted, abused, and thrown to the dogs. The outcry has not been mainly among Nweh people. Visitors to Nweh, who had held our customs in high esteem, joined the chorus. A good example here is the Divisional Officer (DO) for Lebialem, Alfred Muluhtakwi Muluh, who has been very critical of the role of *Befua* (chiefs, kings) in the decline of *lefua*. During his tenure of office, this administrator expressed indignation and dismay at what he saw happening to *lefua* in Nwehland. He wrote, *inter alia*, that

incessant reports from all the Sub-Divisions of Lebialem Division indicate that some of you have indulged yourselves in the most unfortunate practice of adulterating the noble and sacred heritage of your ancestral values through the anarchical and indiscriminate crowning of Sub-Chiefs and the award of other traditional titles without due respect to the tradition which you all incarnate (1999, p.1).

He adds,

it is even whispered that some traditional rulers will not hesitate to put a cap on a 'dog's head so far as it is carrying some bank notes in its mouth. (p.1)

How can anyone account for this situation? To understand some of the factors at play, it may be necessary to trace the evolution of Nweh people and underscore the meaning, and emergence of its political leadership.

Evolution of *lefua* in Nwehland

Lefua in Nwehland involves a people, *nche'em*, *belang*, a throne, *acheu*, *bechele*, and *ekekroh* (Tangim, 1990). Some people also consider *lefua* as mainly a family affair (Mbeseha, 2001). Nothing could be truer. Only families grow into *alε'h*. *Fua* in Nweh began with families and it has stayed there. In Nwehland there is no group of people who are carved out and a *fua* imposed on them. *Fua*, is above all, head of a large family.

The terminology *fwa* or *fua* designating chief or king was not in use anywhere in the early days. The earliest developed reference for leadership when it did emerge was *nwet*. The basis for leadership was early settlement and prosperity in family size and material wealth given that there was no money as we know and use it today (Fuankem,1999).

In Nweh society, *befua* (chiefs or kings) served as the people's leaders - political, cultural, religious and otherwise. The chiefs were also custodian of the land and landed property as *bendo'oh* as well as other tangible and non-tangible sources of wealth that can be

exploited from the land. Nweh people, like many other traditional African communities, swore mainly by their chiefs. In addition to overseeing the smooth running of the people's affairs, these traditional authorities also presided at conflict hearings and resolution processes and performed reconciliation rituals. They were also custodians of secrets and values. Whenever someone had something valuable to store, he sought safe-keeping in the palace. Similarly, whenever someone did something wrong or bad, he or she felt comfortable confiding in the *fua*. The *fua* kept secrets, good ones and bad ones and knew what to do with them, how and when. In a nutshell, the chiefs were the keepers of the people's trust. In return, the people paid the chiefs back by according them great respect and also providing several services intended to keep the center strong in the interest of the people.

In the enormous role of governance, every *fua* was assisted by a reigning council. The reigning council was made up of *nkwetta*, *mafua*, *ankwetta*, and *ase'ah*, all off-springs of the deceased *fua*, and designated at the same time a *fua* was enthroned. *Nkwetta* (deputy to *fua*) is in charge of *lefe'm* and performs all the rituals there. *Mafua*, princess royal, is head of the women in the kingdom and represents them in all societies and also organizes the women in playing their societal roles. She is assisted in this role by *Ankwetta*. *Ase'ah* is the commissions person in the reigning council and also serves as link between the council and the *ale'h*. These are members of the inner circle and every *fua* had this council. The role of that council ended when the *fua* in whose council the members served passed away. Each member of the reigning council was assigned a specific role and duty in the reign. The *fua* and the reigning council were, in turn, joined in the overall administration of the land by the leading members of the *troh* (the traditional council of 9), *bekem* (nobles of the land), and respected elders. Succession had no second best options. The successor was custom bound to accept and to embrace the totality of traditional and cultural values. When a *fua* passed away, the members of his reigning council were absorbed by the existing hierarchy given that the new *fua* would be enthroned with his own inner circle referred to in this paper as the reigning council. The members of this council served in the reign as the chief advisers to the *fua*.

The known original settlers of Nwehland, the *Bekecheu*, are almost completely extinct. All other current inhabitants of Nwehland are immigrants from the Banyang in the West, the Mbo in the South and mainly the *Mbelekei* from the East.

Whenever a settler came, he was mainly concerned about acquiring a virgin piece of land that he would explore and exploit without contact with a neighbor. To this end, he went far and set himself the task of cutting down the forest to begin a settlement. To own plenty of land, the new settler went as far as possible from the nearest neighbor. This venture needed courage, hard work, and a following. This following was usually made up of members of the immigrant's family or his friends, and admirers, and sometimes, some of his in-laws. Nweh people value people a great deal and the bigger a man's family, the more respect the man had in the society. When people settled on a piece of land, their greatest ambition was to have several children. It is also worth noting that Nweh people sought to acquire as much land as possible because they were essentially polygamous and had large families. Nweh people were also basically farmers, and depended mainly on the land for their very survival. The need for their male children to settle on the land was equally a very important consideration. As a family grew larger, the family head as leader began to emerge into prominence. As stated before, he became a *nwet* and ran his own autonomous nation. He made treaties with neighbors and sometimes went to war to expand the land whenever the need arose especially if he was blessed with many people. So gradually what started off as a small family or group

could end up in a big place.

Some early settlers first had contact with the area through hunting expeditions. Others immigrated because they were disillusioned with life in their original homes. Yet others came in search of virgin territory to assert their independence in an ambitious quest for autonomy. Those were not the only reasons. There were also those who escaped some form of persecution while others mainly followed their kith and kin that had settled in the area. Whatever the motivation for moving to Nwehland, each immigrant sought greater prosperity in the new settlement. Prosperity was determined by growth in family numbers, and property in terms of land, animals, houses, and crops. There was also material wealth in the form of some culturally esteemed objects that constitute symbols of power, prosperity and authority. Some of these objects or paraphernalia included expensive beads, outfits, dance gear, decoration gear, and other trappings of power and royalty.

As nature would have it, the different immigrants had different experiences and different levels of prosperity. Some families dwindled and almost became extinct. Others grew larger from year to year. These families that experienced considerable growth sought to expand their influence and hegemony over greater space and more people. The more fortunate families and groups began to impose themselves and their hegemony over their less fortunate neighbors. Using different approaches and a combination of strategies, some *benwet* and their families and/or people got cheated, deceived, conquered, outwitted, or subdued. It is common knowledge among Nweh people, for example, that this is how *Nwet Azi* extended his hegemony in Lebang, and *Anyakendong* in Lewoh (Fuankem, 1999). The story is similar in *Ndungated* and other Nweh kingdoms. Over time, the title *nwet* evolved to *fua*. Governing traditions flourished for over two centuries but all of a sudden, there was tremendous decline particularly beginning from the 1970s.

Genesis of the decline of *lefua*

In tracing the genesis of such a decline, a number of issues readily come to mind. I will dwell mainly on four of the issues. These are 1) the giving out of titles as a political weapon to fight peers 2) the award of titles as a lucrative venture 3) excessive subservience of traditional leadership to a new administrative culture, and 4) a reversal of traditional power sources. I will discuss these issues in some detail one after another. First, the giving out of titles was used as a power play. The fact is that when some *benwet* outwitted their peers and assumed leadership, they sought to further diminish the less fortunate peers by creating some other *benwet* (read *fua* today) out of their children, their cronies, and some of their relatives and retainers. This practice came about as a power ploy intended to increase numbers, confuse issues and reign strong through division. This is the origin of the notion of *befua-nteuh* and *befua-nkange'eh*, the latter being the new chiefs created as a power ploy. Unfortunately, the subdued peers (*befua-nteuh*) failed to become aware of the strategy and to act strongly to halt the ploy. Consequently, the ploy has continued to this day and practiced with impunity and abandon.

Second, the reckless award of titles was later done out of sheer greed and sometimes for purposes of vengeance. A certain *fua* in central Nweh was quoted recently as saying that the distribution of titles was the *ndo'oh befua* (a source of income for chiefs). Muluh (1999) describes the situation very aptly when he states that

“worse still, the reasons behind some of these unwarranted crowning range from

material and financial considerations to revenge as a means of settling scores or sanctioning alleged stubborn Sub-Chiefs or notables". p1

This reckless prostitution of titles has continued unabated, and has not known any formal opposition from other traditional authorities.

The third element here is the excessive subservience by traditional leadership to a new administrative culture and its new ways. It may be important to state that the chieftaincy institution in Nweh has had its share of influence from external invasion by other cultures mainly the new French-style administrative culture with its army of officers who, for the most part, have been strangers to Nwehland. This alien administrative culture brought its own leadership approaches and methods. The new culture looked low on traditional authority and saw chiefs mainly as '*les auxiliaries d'administration*' (auxiliaries of administration). In the French administration that became the dominant culture in the land after the mid 1960s, traditional rulers were mainly appendages to help the new administrators. Indeed, the Chiefs became mere political 'apparachiks' hanging tenaciously and helplessly on the apron strings of the ruling regime. Nweh traditional leadership very easily fell under this overpowering structure, and the people shifted their focus away from their chiefs most of whom became corrupt and/or sided with the new administration to repress the people. As would be expected some of the people went the way of the new overlords. Rather than take matters to the elders, the traditional council or to the *fua*, they preferred to travel long distances to the administrator's office, the gendarme office or the police office.

It is a little difficult to determine whether the people who sought these new leaders went back to their homes with better solutions to their problems than they would have had in the traditional methods. What is strange is that some *befua* also joined in the cue for reporting their people to these same strangers rather than seeking to improve on their ancestral approaches. Again, it is difficult for this writer to know what benefits, if any, these *befua* got by resorting to these new leaders rather than asserting their traditional ways as in other respectable kingdoms in the grassfield region. All this writer can say for sure is that experience over the years showed that those *befua* who were in the habit of running to the D.O's office lost a great deal of respect, power and influence with their people. The point in this paper is not to refute the existence and power of external influences on a traditional culture. Rather, the paper decries the ease with which the external influences succeeded in eroding the basis of traditional society in Nweh.

The fourth element is the shift of power and authority from the *fua* and the palace to the periphery with people with money, education and government posts. This new power source is mainly in the hands of a new breed of leadership commonly referred to as the *elite*. A good example to illustrate this point can be seen in a documentary on the *focolare* in Nweh titled "*Anu mbong a mbin*" (Miracle in the forest) (Focolare, 2000). In a reception organized to welcome Chiara, head of the *focolare*, the shift in power structure is very clearly evident where the new power class, the elite, is so visibly seated by the side of *Befua-atemangwat*, Madam Chiara, and the administration. Nweh people, especially the educated ones tend to treat *befua* and *lefua* with considerable scorn. An important explanation here is that the first educated people in Nweh were mainly sons of *belong* and those of some retainers were sent to school because the children of noble birth were considered too important to be sent to school in the early days. If the concept of school was accepted in Nweh at all, it was only fit for those children who did not mean much. These same people constitute the new source of influence and power. Many in this group have used their wealth and influence to greatly

down play the role of traditional authority. This has been done so easily in Nweh compared to parts of the grassfield areas where there is still a great deal of respect for tradition.

Some indices of the decline of *lefua* in Nwehland

There are numerous noticeable indices of change. By the turn of the 20th century, things had degenerated to such a level that a D.O. enacted an administrative decision to nullify the titles of two chiefs made by *Fuantem Njifua* of *Lebang*, (Mbuagbaw, 2001, pp 1-2). Another king, *Fuazi* of *Mmobie* was arraigned before a magistrate's court and humiliated publicly in the case between him and *Fochop-a-Mendia* in June 2001. Yet another king in Nwehland, *Fuato-a-Ndungated* gave the title of *fua* to a woman (Asong, 2001, p.11), and also physically pulled off a cap from a chief's head.

A major observable sign of decline in *lefua* was the exaggerated increase in the numbers of *befua* and *bekem* that resulted in the institution losing its place and significance in Nweh society. As an observer put it "*befua bo ma bekem ebin nza aNweh chia belong*" (title holders now outnumber the ordinary people in Nweh). Many an observer have remarked that in a public event as a *crydie* in Nweh today, the number of *befua* and *bekem* is so large that the commoners, greatly outnumbered, have no place to stand or sit (Mbeseha, 2001). Muluh (1999, p.2) subscribing to this fact, asserts that

there is frustration, confusion, and conflict as mushroom Chiefs sprout up and/or titleholders usurp titles not meant for them as tradition is rubbed in the dust.

Furthermore, *lefua* became a commodity for auction by all standards. Two eye-witness accounts in 2001 are very revealing. One states that an array of Nweh kings transported themselves, the vestiges of their authority and the sacred trappings of kingship in Nwehland to strange lands such as Victoria to hawk kingship titles to strangers. The second laments the kind of utterances that one Nweh king made during a chieftaincy awarding ceremony recently. It is also not uncommon in Nwehland today to find two brothers from the same womb as *befua*. In the year 2001 alone, two cases were reported of incidents where the *troh* was desecrated in public in *Mbindia* and *Essoh Attah*. Such cases and incidents were unprecedented and completely unheard of in Nweh.

Only people make a chief and run a palace. However big a palace may be, it could not function without people. If one visits most palaces in Nweh today with *ntuh beluh* (a calabash of wine), a goat or a tin of oil or even a log of wood, as tradition would have it, one may be surprised that there would be no one, not even a woman or a child to welcome him or her and to take the gift to the palace. Some of the people who pride themselves as *befua* today do not have as much as a compound, others have only a wife and sometimes with no children. Yet they are *befua*! I attended a *crydie* and some three things struck me. One of these new *fua* kept quarrelling with women who sat on his chair when he left his seat to answer a call. To solve his problem, he himself kept carrying his chair around each time he went somewhere. This is not the practice of royalty. The second thing that struck me was the way the chiefs were served food at the *crydie*. In Nweh tradition, chiefs do not eat in public. The third thing was the number of *befua* at that *crydie*. The number was so large that to share a crate of beer that was presented by the bereaved family, about eight chiefs had to share one bottle of beer.

Some *befua* also bring disrepute to themselves and the *lefua* institution by attending every *crydie* and public function for selfish intents. Some even go as far as inviting

themselves. Familiarity, they say, breeds contempt. In the good old days, *befua* were hard to see. Even in their palaces, it was not easy to see the *fua*. That is one reason why palaces were built in complicated stages and forms. In fact, for a visitor to see a *fua* or to be received when the *fua* was not in *lemo'oh*, it took time and well defined protocol arrangements and procedures. The situation was the same for bringing gifts to the palace. Lately, there has been a story where an elite pushed off a chief's headgear at a public event while trying to put some money in it when that chief was performing a dance. It was an abomination, in the olden days, for a *fua*'s headgear to fall off! How did the elite even get so close to the *fua*? The only possible answer is in the decline of the *lefua* institution in Nweh.

Titles have ceased to represent functions. Today, people clamor for long caps not for a role in society but to have access to a seat and a share of food. One man recently told me how it was important for him to take the title of *nkem* in order to have a seat among the clan nobles and partake in the good things up there in the hierarchy.

Some *befua* have also abandoned the traditional mode of law enforcement using the traditional council, *lebueh* and *betroh*. They would rather run to the alien administrative apparatus each time they are confronted by a problem rather than summon the traditional council. Similarly, they run to the D.O's office rather than summon village nobles and elders to seek advice on how to address a problem. Many *befua* have also not only abandoned the sources of power and governance and gone cap in hand after the new power basis found in D.Os, gendarmes and police but go as far as reporting their own subjects to these same civil servants. Nweh traditional society has arrangements for addressing conflicts within the society. These have been abandoned. If the chief claims to be the ruler of a people, how then does he only govern the same people with alien partners and methods?

Similarly, the *acheuh* (headgear), one of the trappings of rank in Nweh society, has been greatly abused. In traditional society only *befua* and some *bekem* could have on their *echeuh* in the palace, in *lemo'oh*, in *lefe'em* or in the presence of *fua* in a public arena. Some *bekem* left their *echeuh* at the *nkuabeti'ih* at the palace gate while others simply lay them on their heads rather than wear them. Today everybody who can afford his *acheuh* wears it just anywhere. The order of things has so changed that everyone who can afford to drive a car or any bootlicker who holds a party or government position wears a cap in the palace or in public manifestations where there are *befua* like *crydies* and cultural festivals. This did not happen before.

In Nwehland, *befua* also had *becheu-fua*. These were retainers who played vital roles in the kingdom. In the indiscriminate award of titles, many *befua* have given titles to their retainers so that there is no one left to play the vital roles that were played by the retainers. In one central Nweh kingdom, for example, the situation has gotten ridiculous. Given the fact that nearly all the *becheu-fua* have taken the title of *befua*, one finds these *becheu-fua cum befua* playing the role of *becheu-fua* and being *befua* at the same time. In Nweh society, a child only succeeded his father in *lefua*. Nowadays, people whose fathers were not even known have become *befua*. Some others have become *befua* and *bekem* when their fathers are still *belong*. By all standards and for all intents and purposes, the trend *lefua* took in Nwehland by the year 2000 has been very disturbing from a cultural standpoint.

Some suggestions to salvage the image of *lefua* in Nweh

This paper will be incomplete if I end it without making a few suggestions aimed at

arresting the situation of *lefua* in Nweh. Many of the suggestions are addressed to *befua* as traditional authorities and custodians of Nweh culture. *Befua* as leaders have to become foresighted and should look up to role models in Nweh and beyond like *Fuantes Asonganyi*. Resorting to role models is a good concept for anyone or group that desires to improve.

Befua should not deviate from traditional norms and values in regard to governance. In Nweh, governance is very closely associated with *lemo'oh* and *lefe'em*. These institutional instruments of governance have been shoved aside for over two decades by the respective monarchs reigning in Nweh. This is a serious mistake and the consequences have been very glaring. To avoid some of the teething controversies that have rocked the land, the respective monarchs have to abandon their current vision of attempting to rule single handedly. They should re-institute the *lemo'oh* and *lefe'em* traditions. Rulership in Nweh is a partnership rather than an autocratic practice. In Nweh, people respect a king who respects his people and respects himself.

Similarly, *befua* should respect the tradition handed down to them by the ancestors. They should respect the reigning council institution and make full use of its members as Nweh customs demand it. A reigning council always assisted the *fua* in his arduous task of governance. *Nkwetta*, *mafua*, *ankwetta* and *ase'ah* are not mere ceremonial and symbolic titles but functions that are clearly spelt out in Nweh society as chief advisers to *fua*. Lately, many *befua* have tended to ignore these titleholders.

Befua nteuh have also virtually abandoned their responsibilities and roles as partners in the governance of the land. A great many of them are either distracted or intimidated to even invoke or play the roles. They have to resume their functions.

Befua should respect their people and partner with them and the relevant traditional institutions for addressing conflicts rather than attempting to partner only with an alien administration and its agents.

The language and vision of governance should be corrected. *Befua* in Nweh were not 'paramount' or 'sub' but partners in governance with a respected leadership. It is for this reason that Nweh culture knows mainly of *fua*, *nkem (nwet)*, *mbe*, *ndong* in its hierarchy of governance. Nowhere in this hierarchy is there any suggestion of descriptives as 'paramount' or 'sub' as are very recurrent in the literature in Nweh in recent times. Nweh language and society recognizes *fua* as head of the hierarchy. Nweh people would normally speak of *Fuantes*, *Fualewoh*, *Fualeke Assoh*, *Fuanjuametaw*, *Fualeke-a-Belluah*, *Fuangung*, *Fuakem*, *Fuache*, *Fuandongbeza*, *Fuambindia*, *Fuabelleh*, *Fuankem*, *Fuatembe*, and so forth. By the same token, terminologies now common in matters of *lefua* and other literature by traditional and administrative authorities like quarters and quarter heads should be discouraged (Muluh, 1999, 2001; Mbuagbaw, 2001; Atem, 1999; Fombindia, 2000; Fontem, 1999; Fobellah, 2001). Nwehland, as per its settlement pattern cannot be said to have quarters and villages per se. The terminology in Nweh is *ale'h* or *lebvoe'h*. These are concepts that cannot be rendered in English by 'quarter' or 'village' as the case has been. Anyone who knows Nwehland well will not describe *Nje'eih*, *Belluah*, *Bellah*, *Tano*, *Mbindia*, *Njenache*, *Leleng*, *Letia*, *Mendia*, *Ateoabechied-Nkongle* as quarters or villages. In Mbindia alone, for example, there is *ndengcup*, *letia*, *ndungbin*, *nchumbroeh*, *atungong*, *achenako'oh*, *atuko'oh*, *nkwinlekong*, *aze'ndem*. If Mbindia is described in the literature as a quarter, what will these other places be? Similarly, *Lebang*, *Legbo*, *Ndungated*, *Njogwi* and others are neither villages nor *fondoms* but kingdoms. The term *fon* which seems to be in competition in Nweh lately is an alien

concept and means the same as *fua*.

The practice of domineering and subordinate ranks and roles in Nweh as a power device has done great damage to the image of *lefua*. This picture of the institution in Nweh seems to be exclusive to Nweh. Around Nweh, a chief is a chief. For example, in Mbo country, a chief is a chief. The situation is the same amongst the Banyang and the Metta. There is no gainsaying the fact that all chiefs cannot be equal in influence, wealth, land, and population. Nowhere in the world is this possible. Even at the UN, small nations as Lesotho have equal voting rights with huge nations like China.

Befua should become a lot more personable and royal. Royalty demands of these qualities. Royalty has to be reflected in the personality of every *fua* in regard to the way they carry themselves around, the way they speak, and in the way they comport themselves generally. They should not invite themselves to every *crydie* and other public functions. They should bring some dignity to themselves and their palaces.

Closely related to this suggestion is the fact that *befua* should endeavor to make their palaces regain their positions as centers of the land where the people can always find refuge, counsel, protection, assistance, and entertainment. Palaces have to be the cultural reference points as in the olden days. Given the several constraints of today's society, *befua* have to work hard to make their palaces attractive in several ways to the people if *lefua* has to continue to have a meaning for the people. To this end, *befua* should cease seeking these same values in the peripheries of their land among the *nouveaux riches* popularly known as *elite*.

Title givers should beware that they have abused the institution by going to extremes. Titles denote functions in society not mere caps and seats. They are not medals that are won and discarded. Consequently, they should not be bought and sold to the next bidder as has become the custom. In this buying and selling, the onus must be with the seller. We all know that ambition is a human characteristic but human beings also know that no one seeks to buy a commodity that is not for sale. In other words, no one would go to anyone to seek to buy anything that is not being sold. This is, by no means, to say that merit and valor should not be rewarded. Reward can take any number of forms. *Fua* is the highest rank in Nweh society. Anybody who becomes a *fua* has reached the pinnacle of Nweh society and can soar to any height. On the other hand, if the givers insist on the indiscriminate award of titles as some are quoted to saying, then they should not be surprised when the ambitious takers want to know no limits in their determination to reach the sky. After crowning someone *fua*, let no one thereafter try to clip the wings of any such *fua*. The title *fua* allows the titleholder to soar to wherever with only the heavens limiting the holder rather than a mortal Nweh person or institution. As history can attest, title givers should beware of the less desirable effects of titles of *fua* and *nkem*. Lots of examples around us are telling enough. If we must salvage the situation, the indiscriminate award of titles has to stop. The onus here is on *befua* who give the titles. The practice of aspiring for them will stop when aspirants realized that their desires and efforts would come to no avail.

In Nweh custom, *nkem* plays the role of conciliator/mediator, adviser to *fua* and also a defendant of the *fua* and the land (Fuankem, 2001 pp. 47-59). In Nweh tradition *nkem* does not have *nkem*. Today, some *bekem* have started creating their own *bekem*, *nkwetta*, *ase'h*, and *mafua*. This abuse of tradition has been allowed to take root. It will grow if it is not

halted. The abuse should be checked.

The respect of hierarchy and *preseance* in palaces and other public arenas should be respected with vigor. Seating was organized in the *lemo'oh* and the *lefe'em* going from the *fua's* left handside in descending order. When people walked into a *lemo'oh* or attended a public function, they knew where they belonged and went there. The story is told of Mbe Atayo, a prince of Azi palace who slapped his son in public in the 1960s for daring to go the wrong way in *lemo'oh*. His son, a graduate of Regina Pacis Grade Two Teachers' College had come home visiting on holidays. Pa Atayo, his father, took him to the palace to pay his respects to *Fuantem*. The son, apparently considering his educational standing, rather than follow his father to the place reserved for *belong*, moved to the wrong side and received instant correction. Nweh Society frowned on its members who went against this arrangement and sanctioned anyone who went against the hierarchy. Can this still happen today?

Conclusion

This paper set out to highlight the fact that *lefua*, the center of society in Nweh has declined at an alarming rate. It argued that the strength of a culture can only be determined by the actions of the owners of the culture when that culture comes in contact with other cultures. The paper discussed the evolution of *lefua*, traced the genesis of its decline and underscored the reign of a king who brought great repute to the institution. It also advanced some indices of the decline and proposed some suggestions to salvage the image of the institution from total collapse. I conclude with a few questions. Why have *befua*, Nweh traditional authorities, been so light to allow alien cultures to erode their indigenous culture? Are Nweh cultural values so light weight? Are Nweh people not proud of their cultural values and so can easily discard them in favor of alien values? Are the new values just too powerful for Nweh people to resist them? Perhaps the time has come for us to mirror ourselves and ask whether we are still recognizable today.

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