

Cameroonian women before,
during and after colonisation

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Ancient women in Cameroon



Ancient women in Cameroon

- women were responsible for gathering and preparing food.
- They were responsible for discovering what to cook and what not to cook and for how long.
- They were responsible for discovering which herbs can heal which diseases and which ones can kill.
- Later market economy through trade by batter



pre-colonial women in Cameroon

- **Women held a basically complementary, rather than subordinate position to men in indigenous pre-colonial.**
- Cameroonian women were relatively independent and much more **powerful** within this period.
- I use the word '*power*' here against '*empower*' which suggests there is an agent or someone giving power as may be the case of contemporary Cameroonian women

Pre-colonial women cont'd

- The family
- Patriarchy and women's place
 - Land and agriculture
 - Market economy
 - Bridewealth
 - Macro-political organisation
 - Public life

Colonial Women



- The erosion of the status of women occurred gradually but was significantly exacerbated and hastened by foreign invasions, particularly European colonialism

Migration

- With the advent of colonialism, urbanization cropped in and men moved to the cities.
- Some men migrated to the urban centres with their women while others left theirs in the rural areas. Either way, women were affected.
- Women who migrated to the urban centres with their husbands abandoned the traditional habitats with all it entails.

Farming

- Women lost their independence. This implied that:
 - They abandoned their farms
- This meant that women completely depended on me for food which was not previously the case

Bride Wealth

- Bride wealth was still paid before colonialism.
- This ensured a bond between the two families involved.
- It also ensured (through marriage advice) that the man was getting married to a companion and not a slave.
- That the man knows that the woman came from a family and was respected in that family.
- Bride wealth did not commodify women as could be the case today

Bride Wealth cont'd

- With colonisation, men moved to the towns and acquired paid labour.
- It meant that they did not have the time again to go to farms
- It even meant they did not have land in the towns to farm on.
- However, the young men who worked in these towns needed wives and it meant they had to go to the villages to get these wives.

Bride Wealth Cont'd

- Bride wealth was goods got from the farms plus human labour (as in the case of the Nso).
- These men could no longer provide these from their farms the case used to be.
- These goods then had to be purchased with the money earned from the cities
- labour was paid for these tasks to be done

- The effect of this was that men started seeing their wives as objects which they purchased with the money they earned just as they purchase other goods
- This led to the treatment of women like objects.
- Wife battering came in

Post-colonial Cameroonian women





- The system of waged labour lived and continues to live after colonisation.
- Such labour, mostly physical then favoured men as they had more energy.
- Formal education in the form of literacy and numeracy became introduced.
- With the commodification of girls, parents therefore saw it as a waste to educate female children.
- The lack of literacy and numeracy skills of girls resulted in backgrounding as they could not hold positions of power which required reading and writing.

- The conservation of this kind of power therefore continued to remain in the hands of men.
- Although rural women had freedom to move about in at night, urban women could do so freely only when with men and when single were labelled prostitutes and punishable by law. Thus women who could not produce a 'husband' – were labelled prostitutes and socially stigmatized. (quote case of call box girl in Douala).

- Women's struggles for rights and entitlements, and their engagements with the state, provide the new cutting edge of a different politics on the continent.
- The Cameroonian law limited women to domestic spheres. It was indicated that ' a woman may not work out of the home if the husband deemed it was not for the good of the family'.
- This therefore meant that a woman may not work not be financially independent if the husband so chooses.
- The SAP played a crucial role in reinventing the identity of Cameroonian women in the late 20th century.

SAP: Strukturanpassungsprogramm der westlichen Regierungen/ Weltbank/ IWF

SAP: conditions to cameroonian government of donors/ governments of western countries

Consequences

- Women who generally depended on their husbands for survival suddenly discovered these men had lost their jobs
- These men could no longer provide for their families.
- Women had to appropriate the independence they had before colonialism.
- They went back into farming or business or whatever they could do to sustain their families.
- A lot more women went to school as they saw a way out of poverty and male dominance through education

Reclaiming identities?

- Education and opportunities for new identities
- Expressions of patriarchal resistance to women's occupancy of spaces of learning showed themselves in the gang rape of female students and the stripping of any young woman who dared to step any further – by wearing a mini skirt or refusing to conform to the expected 'traditional' decorum of a 'decent' woman – the latter being ironically an artefact of colonial (Victorian) invention.

- Women began to enter the middle class in their own right – as bearers of various types of property – mainly in the form of intellectual property and skills.
- Social mobility based on educational expertise enabled women to enter the public as individuals who could engage with the market, albeit constrained by cultural and social taboos and value judgments that limited their ascendancy and relegated most women to lower level professions and lower pay.

- Middle class women, who are at the forefront of Women's Movements, portray the most obvious representations of modern identity and culture within their societies.
- Women's upward mobility now meant they cannot be beaten again and thrown out of the home because they are unable to afford a home for themselves.
- Women can acquire property for themselves and even claim the right to inherit from their parents.

Contemporary women and girls: Conflicting identities?

- Cameroonian women had long had an intimate relationship with culture that a divorce
- How one speaks or addresses others has a direct relationship with the norms of that society.
- Dressing tended to conform to the demands of society (see mobility of style - traditional vs contemporary).

Contemporary women and girls: Conflicting identities cont'd?

- Modes of public behaviour were also regulated by tradition and culture.
- Women still largely believe in motherhood and wifehood.
- They still believe in their primary roles as cooks even when they share the same profession as their husbands
- Men still believe the place of women is in the kitchen.

Contemporary women and girls: Conflicting identities cont'd?

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Difficult questions

- How do women reconcile education and family
- How do they reconcile maternity and career/business
- How do they reconcile being a wife and a career /business woman.
- Must they reconcile these different identities
- Can things not be the other way round?

- WHO IS A WOMAN?
- WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A WOMAN IN CAMEROON?

THANK YOU