Women and Governance in Bakundu Pre-Colonial and Colonial Society: An Implication for Women Leadership in Post-Colonial Bakundu Society in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Governance in pre-colonial African societies was not left in the hands of the male patriarchy alone. Women actively took social, administrative, and economic roles in which they also performed very well. The hypothetical contention of this paper is that Bakundu women have been relegated to take roles that are insignificant and are completely removed from the governance roles in their traditional societies in recent times. Due to this relegation by men, women emancipation entered into the academic discourse to re-awaken the African women on the need to engage and partake in governance. This aroused these researchers to compare the roles the Bakundu woman took during the pre-colonial period as opposed to the roles they were given during the colonial and post-colonial period. Some studies show that women in Africa were engaged in governance during the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Other studies have shown that Bakundu women navigated the governance structures during the pre-colonial period in those Bakundu societies over the centuries were endowed with powerful women leaders in their various villages. This paper argues that the *nyanga-mboka,* the *maoni, and* the *mokua nwana* titles were valuable roles in governance structures in Bakundu societies in the pre-colonial and part of the colonial periods. These roles which have been ignored in the present dispensation have greatly affected women's quest for political and economic empowerment today.

Oral history with secondary sources, form the basis for our arguments, with qualitative analytical research being the modus operandi. Due to this, the researchers were poised to investigate three historical epochs, using the evolutionary theory that explains how organisms change over time. Methodologically, the researchers used the interview and the questionnaire methods in the field. The study reveals that Bakundu women nowadays are treated with contempt in relation to political governance and economic power as opposed to the power they wielded before. This has resulted in numerous advocacies from women. Looking at the important roles women played in Bakundu traditional societies during the pre-colonial period and how in the later epochs these roles were down-played, the Bakundu women have been rendered economically and politically powerless by men's changing attitudes towards women unlike before, reason why they clamour for change in the domain of governance.

Keywords: Traditional governance, gender discrimination, leadership, women empowerment, traditional Bakundu society

INTRODUCTION

This study examines women in governance in pre-colonial and colonial Bakundu society which has an implication to leadership in post-colonial Bakundu society. There are two concepts which are factors that led to gender inequality in Africa: slavery and colonialism. Other points include the fact that Africans have characterized women as heroines and women as victims per shift in paradigm depending on the position of debate (Ogbomo and Ogbomo, 1993). Traditional governance refers to a system of governance that has been passed down through generations within a particular group or culture. It is often based on customs, values, and beliefs that are unique to that group, and has been proven to be effective in handling various issues and challenges within communities. Traditional governance is often characterized by the involvement of elders, religious leaders, and other represented members of the community in decision-making processes, as well as a focus on consensus over individual interests.

Katharina Holzinger et al. 2021,) traditional governance entails the selection of chiefs and elders, or rules and procedures for decision-making, customary law and dispute settlement, land allocation, marriage, and inheritance. The first school of thought of traditional governance (colonial legacy), is said to have put Africans under the ambit of underdevelopment which explains gender inequality and female disempowerment (Melinda Adams, 2006). An example of such is the type of education which the colonial administrators opened in most colonies. In Kampala (Uganda), African men were mostly educated and later employed by the Europeans to do white-collar jobs at the expense of the female Africans. This created a nexus of inequality in the economy (Bertolt, Boris, 2018). Women in pre-colonial Bakundu society exhibited different governance roles in their various societies. Bakundu women like elsewhere in Africa had held diverse power positions which ranged from princesses, diviners, midwives and even queens, and village social warriors and in one well known case, the Lovedu, the supreme monarch (Sudarkasa, Naira,1986). Their role was mostly seen in the matriarchy system of leadership where women were the rulers of their society. This role gave them the latitude to influence the economic, political, and social life of their communities. The evidence from pre-colonial Africa was short-lived during the introduction of colonial administration in Africa where African women became subservient to their fathers and husbands.

PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Pre-colonial African women played a variety of roles in their societies, which varied depending on the specific culture and region. Some of the roles and responsibilities that women had in pre-colonial African societies include: agriculture and food production agents. As stated by Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong et al, (2019, 1-13) that woman in pre-colonial West Africa was not a homogenous group that lived static lives and was relegated to the domestic sphere. Women contested, negotiated, complemented, and transformed their societies through their contribution in political, social, economic and religious realities in West Africa. Many African women were responsible for farming, tending crops, and raising livestock, and not only bearing children and serving their husbands. Women had significant knowledge of seeds, animal husbandry, and traditional agricultural practices, together with childbearing and child-rearing because women were responsible for bearing and nurturing children, passing on cultural knowledge and tradition, and ensuring the continuation of the community. In the spheres of trade and commerce, women were often involved in trade and commerce, both as traders and as artisans producing goods such as textile and pottery. In terms of spiritual leadership and healing, women played an important role in spiritual and leadership practices in many African societies as midwives, healers and priestesses. For political and social leadership, women often held positions of leadership in pre-colonial African societies such as queen mother or clan leaders and they played important roles in decision-making and governance. Overall, the pre-colonial African women played essential roles in their societies, contributing to the economy, culture, and political structures of

their communities.

The Pre-colonial Bakundu women, though found in the patriarchal societies, had role attribution in which they were often seen in the governance structures. Their representation in the various traditional governance structures influenced their socio-political and economic lives in their communities. Culture and religion guided their roles and gave them that credible value as some were equal to the men in some cultural spheres. The pre-colonial Bakundu women wielded power as both men and women saw them very important in the administrative arm of their communities because they had certain roles ascribed to them, without whom, the disruption of the smooth functioning of their society would be imminent. As corroborated by Anna Lefatshe and Butholezwe Mtombeni (2019,), women were also seen in the political, religious and other areas for the development of the society. However, the coming of colonialism ushered in another system which saw the Bakundu women as mere subordinates in the political and economic lives of their society.

The Bakundu polity over the centuries had formidable and sophisticated traditional political structures which were responsible for the political and socio-economic development of the Bakundu nation just like elsewhere in Africa. Some of these institutions include; council of elders, regulatory societies, and age groups or grades (Tore, 2016,). These socio-political structures were all geared towards governing the society for the benefit of all. The society was built on the principle of male gerontocracy where the elderly males were ruling the polity. Though built on this principle of gerontocracy of males only, women also had their own area of command. There were both men and women political traditional institutions in the village. The women assembly was directly under the leadership of the *nyanga mboka* (mother of the village) and her subordinates who, by their inclination of the tradition, had climbed the social strata of the polity of the village. These women were accorded different traditional titles such as *maoni, iya wa ngobi/ or nyanga mobia* (mother of the family, whose role was to put order in the family) and *mokowa nwana* (traditional midwife, who helped women in the delivery process of their children). These were the women who guided and ruled their subjects in the society. Their role was mostly seen during traditional festivals like *maloba*, *dinwangi, amekoko*, *disongo* and *mosombo* performances. It was during such festivals that they openly performed their duties. They were also seen and consulted on the exigencies of the political affairs of the village by the men in the realms of women and the girl child but that were linked to the overall wellbeing of the society as they were asked to give reports from time to time to the village administrators. These festivals and secret societies, like elsewhere in Africa, created a lot of impact to the political life of the polity.

Women were also seen in their marital homes as playing even greater roles especially in polygamous set ups. In a typical Bakundu polygamous home, the first woman who was married was the lead woman in the house. Her duties were to guide and show good behavior to her co-wives. These roles and others were all forms of traditional governance which the Bakundu women took and enjoyed during the pre-colonial period. However, the coming of colonialism and the modern state government did not look at the exigencies of the role the Bakundu woman played in the past and hardly did the colonial administrators in their reports present the role of women in governance structures and modern state apparatus. This has further kept the Bakundu woman abased in relation to the political life of the clan and nation in that only a limited few have championed the cause of leadership in their various societies. Recent trends of women emancipation have not really gained ground in Bakundu society due to the lack of role models for the girls and women of the society. At the apex, very few Bakundu women have struggled to reach the high political strata with much influence while others are still in their cocoons because society has put them there and are thus reluctant to mount the political scene.

COLONIAL PERIOD

During the colonial period, women's roles were largely ignored and marginalized; unlike as it was during

the pre-colonial period, they were excluded from participation in governance and decision-making processes. Colonial powers imposed patriarchal norms and attitudes, which undermined the traditional roles and leadership positions that women had played in many African societies. The colonial administration tended to engage with male leaders, chiefs, and tribal heads, which were viewed as the rightful representatives of their respective communities than with women. As a result, women were denied access to education, political representation, and economic empowerment. This continued well into the post-colonial era, where women were still marginalized and excluded from meaningful participation in governance and development strides.

The colonial administrators, on their part, in giving the population statistics in the Bakundu society, failed to give statistics of both sexes based on numbers. Their reports were biased and only favoured the male population since the administrators were more concerned with getting male labour from the various villages to work in the various plantations they had created. This explains why their statistics on the population was mostly of the taxed males without giving the same figure of the women in the villages. This can be seen in Garison report tally where women and children were grouped together (Archive 1931, File No. 143, 1937, File No. 143, 1917, No. 1, 1931, No. 143) and other subsequent reports about the Bakundu clan in the then Kumba Division. This type of reporting excluded the women since they were not paying taxes. Thus, this type of census created a feeling of inferiority complex on the part of the women and women started seeing themselves as unimportant members of the society.

More still, the role attribution of the political structures of the Bakundu society did not reflect the nature of the society which the colonial administrator established. The traditional governance structure which they brought to the notice was the male patrimony administrative arm of government. The women's roles were hardly taken into consideration during their recording of the ancient administration in Bakundu land. The exclusion of women's political structure meant that women were inferior, so too were their socio-political structures of conflict management mechanisms and governance. The role of the women societies like the *maloba, dinwangi, mosumbo and disongo* which acted like the judicial arm of the women's government for the welfare of the society were seen and recorded as mere social groups of celebration and entertainment despite their huge role.

Early marriage was another avenue through which women were forced into and which again helped the women to be relegated to the background and regarded as only good for marriage since their services were not much needed in the colonial government. Domesticity which the Europeans introduced greatly placed women at the domestic servant level (Nancy Rose 1990,). The type of schools opened to women were, girl's schools like that which was opened in Bombe for domestic service training only. Bakundu women were taught mainly courses in domesticity which paved their way to marriage instead of becoming employees in the future. Among the women who benefited from such schools from the Basel Mission in Bombe (Paul Jenkins, 2002,), were mostly girls from Bombe and Banga like Mariana Ete and Mary Basaka (Joseph B. 2015, 113). Right up to the 1950s, women were still given instructions on domestic science in various centers in the then Kumba Division, specifically in Kurume, Kombone, and Massaka (UN 1958, 82). Mongo Beti (2007,) did not fail to record this type of colonial education for the women in his *Poor Christ of Bomba* in which a sixa was opened by the missionaries to keep and prepare young girls for marriage only once they attained the age. They were kept in the sixa and exploited to work, not only to serve the missionaries, but also as teachers in the mission schools to propagate the agenda of the colonialists. A similar method was introduced in Belgian Congo in which Nancy Rose Hunt examined the links between gender and domesticity. Describing the *foyers sociaux* established by missionaries, social-service agencies, and colonial women's associations with the support of the Belgian colonial administration, she opines that they are a key component in a "Belgian colonial project to refashion gender roles and instill a Western family ideology into African urban life" (Nancy Rose, 1990, Within the *foyers sociaux,* women participated in classes on sewing, cookery, housekeeping, knitting, and maternal hygiene. They also took part in home visits,

decorating contests, graduation ceremonies, and other public rituals, all of which, according to Hunt, attempted to redefine gender roles and domesticate African women. Women's place in the society was mainly seen in the homes either for household chores or ceremonies. This type of gender discrimination against women stems from the educational system which was a method of continuously reducing the women in the society introduced by the colonialists.

The colonial education in Africa that was introduced by the European colonizers in the African continent during the colonial rule, which lasted from the 19th Century till the mid-20th Century, was to facilitate exploitation. The main purpose of colonial education was to provide education that served the interests of the colonial powers in order to maintain political and economic control over the African populations. The colonial education system had several key features. First, it was heavily centralized and controlled by the colonial authorities. Curriculum, textbooks and teaching methods were all designed and approved by the European educators, with little input from local communities. Second, education was geared towards producing small elite of Africans who could serve as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the local population. These elites were often educated abroad in European universities and upon their return to Africa; they were given positions of power and influence in their communities. It is obvious that Africans have questioned the colonial administrators in French Africa what they wanted to make out of the African women when their drives were to make Frenchmen out of Africans (Diane Barthel, 1985,).Thirdly, colonial education focused largely on subjects that were seen as useful to colonial economic interests, such as agriculture, mining, and industrial production. Little attention was paid to the development of critical thinking skills or the humanities. This limited the Africans in general and Bakundu in particular, especially the women who were not exposed to colonial education which was the centre of attraction for better development. Though agriculture was the basis of the colonial government in Bakundu land, it was mainly a male dominated affair as women were still excluded by the colonial administrators when recruiting workers for their plantations. Gender division of labor was highly visible as women were forced to engage in the food crop economy rather than cash crop production. This alone limited the power of the Bakundu woman and thus hindered them to gain more economic power. This limitation which women faced in agriculture further had a drastic effect on their leadership roles. In that light, they were subjected to male dominating patriarchy leadership without any contestation.

The German educational institutions were mainly to teach boys to gain either literate or semi-literate skills so as to gain employment as clerks while the girls were left out. This created a notion that women could not serve in that capacity as their male counterparts, there again relegating them to the background. The German colonial education which defined the educational system from 1907-1910 gave precedence for the education of the Cameroonian indigenes with special emphasis on the men than the women (Julius Ngoh 1996, 96). Though it did not openly spell out those to attend such schools, the administration in charge of schools during this era was mainly enrolling men rather than women and hardly was the role of women in education found of course with the help of the traditional patriarchal societies' gender roles. The same situation which women in Africa faced regarding education during the colonial epoch was a similar situation that the Bakundu women encountered during the German and the British rule in Cameroon.

The British colonial era came in with a lot of changes towards gender role attributions. This gave a fresh impetus to African women and Bakundu women to an extent. Education during the British mandate was mostly in the hands of the religious bodies in the territory with limited native authorities' schools in Bakundu land. In Northern Bakundu, the first school was opened in Itoki Bakundu in 1922 and in the Southern part another school was opened in Kombone and Bombe. The enrolment in these schools was mostly boys, until 1940s when a few girls started attending some of these schools against the wish of most villagers. Though the colonial administration did not encourage girl child education, the cultures of the people too sometimes hindered the girls from schooling. This explains why Bakundu women were very few in the drive for decolonization in the 1960s. Even those that were working hand in hand with their husbands

were often excluded from politics which further separated women from political and leadership roles.

Women's economic and political rights were infringed during the colonial period in the Bakundu land. Economically, they were acting a residual role to the men both in politics and in economic spheres. This did not only influence the women negatively but created a type of situation where leadership was a form of masculinity even in areas where women were to perform certain roles. The experience of Igbo women can best attest to this fact during British colonial influence in Igbo land (Judith, 1972,).

IMPLICATION OF THE POST-COLONIAL ERA

During the colonial era, the education system was designed to serve the interest of the colonizers and was primarily geared towards producing clerks, administrators, and other skilled laborers who could aid in the administration of the colony. Women were often excluded from formal education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. This education was designed to reinforce patriarchal norms and values in which women were expected to conform to traditional gender roles and subordinate men. As a result, many women were denied educational opportunities and those who received education were often steered towards courses that were deemed suitable for women, such as home economics, nursing, and teaching.

This exclusion of women from higher education had long-term implications for post-colonial societies. Women were often denied access to skills and knowledge necessary for economic independence and political empowerment. This helped hinder their ability to contribute to the development of their societies. This has helped to reduce the number of women in political and economic spheres, thus prompting only a few educated Bakundu women to occupy political positions and to bring in more women to join them in the fight for women equality in Bakundu society. The colonial administrators also opened the way for women to get engaged in public life which later led them to be employed in the native authorities. After World War ɪɪ, the British colonial administration focused greater attention on the education of the girls and women (Callaway, 1917, 278)**.**

Despite some progress in recent years, women's leadership roles in Africa still face significant barriers, including cultural norms and patriarchal systems. Women's voices are often unheard and their contributions are undervalued, leading to a lack of diversity and inclusion in governance structures. The failure to recognize and empower women in Africa has resulted in the continent missing out on the full potential of half its population, leading to stunted democratic and economic progress. It is, therefore, essential to prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment to achieve sustainable development and strong governance in Africa, reason why writers like Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsisti Dangarembga, Molara Ogundipe, etc. stress on gender inequality and advocate gender parity in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The post-colonial era has seen efforts to address these political and educational disparities, with many countries introducing policies and programs aimed at increasing access to education for women and promoting gender parity in education and politics. These efforts have led to an increase in the number of women who are able to acquire skills and knowledge necessary for economic, social, and political participation, and have contributed to the empowerment of women in many post-colonial societies. The Cameroon government has tried to bridge the gender inequality in all socio-political spheres in the country in synergy with other partners like NGOs and international organizations to empower women so that they can participate in the governance of the country. Bakundu women, despite the patriarchal barriers influenced by colonial administration, have been able to empower themselves in the past two decades through several advocacies. Coupled with the post-colonial government policies to empower women in all spheres of lives,

women have not relented their efforts towards economic and political empowerment. A multitude of them have gained access to land and political positions and are acting as models for the younger generations through gender advocacies and parities. Through these advocacies, the presence of a few women in governance is contributing much to the growth of the economy of the clan and of the nation as a whole. Thus, despite their residual role and men's changing attitude towards women, the Bakundu women believe they still have a volatile role to play as they remember how important they were in the shaping of their communities during the pre-colonial period. Bakundu women, therefore, continue to advocate greater opportunities in the domain of governance to bridge gender disparity.

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