



The Role of Rural Women in Agricultural Food Crop Production in Bombe Bakundu, Cameroon, 1982-2012: An Historical Appraisal

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Abstract: *The research was all about the role of the rural women in agricultural food crop production in Bombe Bakundu. This sampled the activities which characterised the full time status of the rural women in rural areas. Agricultural activities have reiterated the effective participation of inhabitants in the rural areas as a significant proportion of the activities takes place in rural areas. Secondary and tertiary materials were utilised to digest the in depth worth and role of the rural women in combating food insecurity, malnutrition and rural poverty in Bombe Bakundu. The end product al women in elaborates on the facts that rural women in bombe Bakundu played essential significant role in ensuring healthy living standards and balance diet.*

Keywords: *rural women, food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty, role, farming, economic, social, cohesion*

1. INTRODUCTION

The production of food products within local communities had always been a priority and necessity to rural and urban livelihoods in Cameroon. This had made rural communities to be held in high esteem based on their services and aptly capabilities to feed the national population and kombat food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty. At the center of agricultural production in rural communities were the women farmers despite the phenomenon upheld 'that everybody is a farmer in Cameroon'. The chapter focused on rural women farmers and the different farming systems used in the production of food crops in a commercial scale and the different farming operations involved in the production of agricultural food cop production and marketing of the products produced. The segment of interest also diagnosed the innovations and mechanisms of rural women farmers in reforming and remunerating the sector to conform the transitions and evolution of the society over the decades.

The agricultural products of the rural women had unveiled their true nature as producers, caretakers, peacemakers, and nurturers. The overwhelming potentials of the rural women farmers in the Bombe Bakundu placed them at the peak as economic and social stakeholders. They have reversed gender role in the manner in which correspond and respond to political, social and economic happenings. It is on this note; the economic activities of the rural women farmers in food production would be examined and analysed to evaluate the extent of their impact on the rural community of Bombe Bakundu. The Bombe Bakundu community had witnessed and graced the rural women farmers commercial scale food crop production

2. RURAL WOMEN IN COMMERCIAL SCALE FOOD CROP PRODUCTION IN BOMBE BAKUNDU

Rural women farmers have been involved in agricultural food crop production from the pre-colonial to the post independent era in Bombe Bakundu. During the pre-colonial traditional period, rural women cultivated food crops in small scales mainly for subsistence and trade. The last decades of the colonial era witnessed additional responsibilities which cajoled the rural women to produce export products for the Western economy while the transitions were recorded at the post independent era which saw the rural women concern in uplifting and improving the development and living standards of the households, rural and national economy. The quest to foster the development and healthy living

in the rural and urban communities gingered the rural women farmers to cultivate and produce food crops in large quantities for commercial and subsistence purposes.

The cultivation and production of food crops in a commercial scale by the rural women farmers of Bombe Bakundu began in 1982. This was due to increase in demand for agricultural food crops by the dealers and traders. These traders came from towns such as Kumba, Limbe, Tiko and Douala. The increase in demand for food crops was due to an increase in the population and demand for food products in their areas. This increase in demand nurtured the desire of the rural women farmers to expand their spheres of influence in order to enhance massive cultivation and production of food products. This development made the rural women farmers to demand for farmlands. The quest to acquire large farmlands made the rural women to resort to the purchasing of large extensive lands from land owners and lords.

Between 1982- 2012, rural women farmers had purchased and were in possession of over 45 percent of the total hectares of land in Bombe Bakundu. This was encouraged by Eyambe Nee' Achu Margrette, the Mbonge Sub Divisional Delegate for women Affairs at the 2011, International Day of the Rural Women celebration in Bombe Bakundu.

Rural women farmers should claim their rights to land ownership and inheritance. For they did not choose to be females and so, should not remain land beggars. Their husbands should not get angry if they acquired pieces of land to cultivate their crops. It is for the good of the entire family and country.

By 1982, rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu started cultivating food crops in a commercial scale.

The cultivation and production of food crops required huge work force. This work force was provided by the rural women farmers who constituted over 60 percent as some rural women farmers even took part in wage paid jobs in order to cover the expenses and growing cost of living. (This was typical in female headed homes). The rural women farmers also formed co-operate labour groups in which they performed a rotational co-operate labour. They moved and worked in all the different farmlands of the rural women farmers (members only) depending on the set table. This form of labour donation which equally existed in the pre-colonial and colonial era in Bombe Bakundu manifested especially during the periods marking the weeding farming exercise. However, much labour was also provided at the weeding and harvesting era by the members of the family and extended family relations. The rural women also exposed their children to the cultivation and production of agricultural products.

This served as a means of training their children especially the females on the techniques of food production in order to avoid over dependence of their female children to their husbands in the nearest future. The rural women also hired labour services. This was determined by the capital and bargaining power of the women farmers. In periods when the rural women bargaining powers were weak because of inadequate capital, they made use of manufacture product such as 'finish' for spaying grasses which disrupted the growth of food crops. Rural women farmers cultivated different kinds and types of food crops at different site of their farmlands.

The rooted crops such as cassava, yams, and cocoyams were grown o large hectares of lands at hill tops with gentile gradients. This was done because; those rooted crops could withstand long absence of rain fall, coupled with the fertile nature of the soil and the favourable conditions necessary for the cultivation of the crops. Other food crops like the perishables such vegetables were cultivated on the marshy and valley areas as their survival depended on the water. The cultivation and production of these food crops on vast extensive farmlands had increased the quantity of the food crops produced. From 1982-2012, the quantity of the food crops produced in Bombe Bakundu was measured in tons. This was enhanced and ensured by the innovations and mechanisms initiated and implemented by the rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu community on the basis of improving the skills and ensure high yields in food production.

3. RURAL WOMEN INNOVATIONS IN FOOD CROP PRODUCTION IN BOMBE BAKUNDU

Rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu had trusted and developed traditional knowledge in the production of food crops in a commercial scale for the rural and national economies. They had built on it to enhance productivity and sustainability by selectively and carefully re-introducing both

traditional and modern practice in the natural farming systems of agricultural food crop production. Natural or traditional farming systems of agricultural food crops which did not made use of scientific manufactured products like chemicals had been initiated and enforced by the rural women farmers as they believed that traditional farming even though informed by modern science fed the rural and national populations.

The experienced women farmers of over forty years of experience in the sector of food crop production had exposed the natural farming practices which was grounded by traditional farming practices had offered satisfactory solutions to food insecurity, malnutrition and health setbacks for better diet. Many rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu had also modified and introduced new farming methods of producing food crops. These new procedures consisted of the formation of long ground ridges. These long ground ridges with girth of about four centimeter width and six centime length, ensured the steady supply of decomposed dead plants and animals as nutrients to the food plants and preventing the withering of the crops. This was coupled with the application of kitchen waste such as wood ash and pedestrian defecations as manure to the crops. This improved on the quality and quantity of the food crops produced. As the rural women farmers justified the essence that organic waste products increased the moisture capacity holding of the soil and the yields in a commercial scale.

The production of food crops in a commercial scale had equally been made efficient by the rural women farmers who even deployed renovated means to ensure production in sustainable manner. Such means and procedure constituted the nursing of seed food crops for better management and experimentation. These food crops were nursed at the back yards of the women farmers' residence in garden. When the crop plants showed and exposed properties of maturity and growth, they were transferred them to the farmlands where they were planted. This act ensured high yields in food production as the women farmers developed mechanisms on producing high yields seedlings and cuttings of food crops like yams, maize and cassava.

The production of these high yield food crops in a commercial scale was also enhanced by the rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu as they encourage family farming. This encouragement enforced the cultivation of food and export crops like cassava and cocoa since as most rural women were also involved in cash crop production. The development established a platform of intensive co-operation between the men and women farmers in order to improve on the production of both food and cash crops. This co-operation to enhance food crop production made many rural women farmers to develop extension service links with extension workers and traders through the mobile technology. This favoured the circulation of relevant information in food crop production, as many women farmers got held of various ideas necessary for the sustainable production, management of natural resources and marketability. However, the massive development in the social mindset of the women farmers unveiled their potentials to feed the rural and national economies. In conforming to the innovation of women farmers, the office of the United Nation Women commented;

Africa has the potential to feed its self but we cannot eat potentials, we must take every opportunity to advance and improve our agricultural productivity using the new wave of innovation and technology in Africa at the center of which are women and youths

These innovations and development were exposed by the experienced rural women famers at women's gatherings such as the international day of the rural women and women meetings. These innovations and mechanisms were applied on different farming methods used by the rural women farmers at diverse sites and situations.

4. RURAL WOMEN FARMING METHODS IN FOOD CROP PRODUCTION

The traditional farming systems practised by the rural women farmers in the cultivation and production of agricultural food crops were those of irrigation, shifting cultivation, crop rotation and mixed crop farming. These farming modes were influenced by the physical properties of the farming season such as the dryness and the precipitation. Rural women farmers used these farming seasonal methods to cultivate both traditional and European introduced food products in a commercial scale in Bombe Bakundu during the past decades. These food products included; plantains, groundnuts, bush

pepper, vegetables, bitter leaves, cassava, cocoyams, yams, sweet potatoes, and vegetables such as cabbage and green.

Rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu were in possession of farmlands at the banks of the Mungo River, streams, and marshy areas and cultivated their crops using irrigation farming system. This type of farming mode made use of water to nourish and ensured the sustainability of the crops planted on the farmlands. The women farmers used the water on their crops especially at the heart of the dry season when rainfall was inadequate to sustain the food crops. The food crops grown in these areas were cultivated on grown beds and ridges. These products were mostly vegetables and tomatoes. The women farmers used shifting cultivation to divert interest and cultivate their food crops on the farmlands.

In the 1980s, rural women farmers practised mainly shifting cultivation in the cultivation and production of agricultural food products. They cleared their farmlands and planted food crops like cassava, yams, plantains, maize, groundnuts and melon. After a year's cropping, or possibly after two, these farmlands were abandoned by the women farmers while new farmlands that were purchased or hired were prepared. This was to enable the worked soil regain its nutrients and to taste the fertility of other areas. The cultivation of food crops on more than a piece of land made the rural women farmers in Bombe Bakundu to venture into the forest (reserved areas) to cultivate their crops.

The cultivation and production of food crops in Bombe Bakundu was also centered on the crop rotation farming system. Rural women farmers cultivated different varieties of food crops on a particular field in each farming season. This was to keep the soil fertile and produce healthy food crops. Some of the healthy food crops were tomatoes, bush pepper, okra, vegetables and black beans which were cultivated on the wetlands (*lambas*). The women farmers rotated the cultivation of these products throughout the farming seasons. This maintained the balance in the quantity of food crops produced from the farmlands of the rural women farmers each farming season.

Rural women farmers produced food crops with the used of the mixed crop system or method. This method was used to cultivate food crops like ground nut, cocoyam, cassava, and vegetable. In doing this, the women farmers formed ground beds and ridges, where these crops were planted. More than a crop was cultivated on the field at the same time in all the farming seasons. The main aim was to boast the production of food crop. The farming activities involved in the process of food crop production in Bombe Bakundu were deeply performed by the rural women farmers in all the farming stages.

5. RURAL WOMEN FARMING OPERATIONS IN FOOD CROP PRODUCTION

The women farmers in Bombe Bakundu cultivated and produced food crops in large scale using diverse farming systems at different seasons. During the farming seasons, there was strict respect of time, observation and continuity in the processes of food crop activities which ranged from clearing of the farmlands to harvesting of the food crops. These findings were similar to that of Esther Boserup who stated that;

Nearly all the task connected with food crop production is performed by African rural women with the exception of tree felling and other heavy duties.

These farming activities had been shared by the women farmers in respect to the dry and wet farming seasons. This was due to the manner in which they performed the various forming activities. The dry season began the activities of the rural women farmers in the cultivation and production of food crops in Bombe Bakundu. Rural women farmers cleared their farmlands and prepared them for tilling and planting. The type of clearing was influenced by the type of crops that was planted by the women farmers. For example, plantains do not demand clearing that touches the ground but only the exact spot where the plantain suckers was to be planted. Whereas for crops like Maize, groundnuts and cassava, there clearing manner extended down and low that it touches the ground. This was necessary because, tilling would be easily done by the women farmers. These women farmers used rudimentary equipments like cutlasses and curved sticks (*Ngorhboh*) to bring down strong grasses (like elephant grass). The farmlands were cleared to enable the free circulation and direct penetration of sunlight and rainfall, which were very essential ingredients in the cultivation and production of food crops.

After the women farmers must have cleared their farmlands, the cleared grasses were gathered and burnt to ashes (a process known as sweeping to the women farmers). This enabled the rural women farmers to tap and till the soil for manure particles pending the period of precipitation to plant their food crops. The soil was tilled in the form of mounds and ridges with farm working tools, such as, hoes and shovels. This was done by the women farmers in order for the food crops to get sustainable degree of manure which can last for long throughout the seasonal periods.

At the early periods of precipitation, that is around the mid of April to the ending of May, the planting session commenced. This was because; there were many crops that were to be planted on single ridges or on several mounds at subsequent intervals. For example, the rural women farmers used hoes and shovels to bore holes for yam seeds right next to mounds for melon (which grow rapidly and cover a vast portion of the farmlands) but ended up planting melon before the yam seeds to prevent harvest complications since, some food crops grew faster than others. Some of the food crops such as groundnuts and maize were planted with seeds on small mounds, while in other areas; rural women farmers used cuttings and stems of food crops to cultivate the food crops like cassava and vegetables such as green.

The germination of the planted crops during the wet seasons marked another physical exercise as the women farmers tend to do weeding. At this period, the food crops were still weak and this had made the women farmers to weed with care, so as to avoid destroying the shoots of the crops in the course of weeding. The rural women farmers used their hoes-hands and fertilisers such as *finish* to spray grasses. There was continuous weeding of the grasses that might have grown with the food crops. This act prevented the battle of nutrients between the food crops and the undesired grasses (especially the elephant grasses and cover crops).

The food crops were observed and monitored by the women farmers who responded bid by bid to the transitions of the crop's nature until they became matured, ready to be harvested. The harvesting of the food crops to their maturity states differ amongst the several food crops for example, food crops like maize, groundnuts, bush pepper, bush mango, and vegetables take three months before they were harvested, while crops like cassava and yams took about twelve and nine months respectively. The rural women farmers used their craft baskets, hoes, cutlasses and bags to harvest the food crops at subsequent intervals. Rural women farmers harvested over 400 kilograms of food crops every farming season.

When these food crops had been harvested, they transported with Machines (moto bikes) to the storage facilities established by the women farmers. This transportation was done by hired machines and the women farmers who used their craft baskets tied with belts around their waist and head. The food products were stored in facilities known as barns (called *Orbar* by the Ibo women farmers). These barns were constructed with bamboos. The storage facilities provided an environment for the women farmers to select from their products those for commercialisation and subsistence. Huge quantities of these food products were taken to the market for commercialisation or sale with few left for household consumption.

6. RURAL WOMEN AND THE PRESERVATION OF FOOD PRODUCTS IN BOMBE BAKUNDU

The agricultural food produced products served 'two masters' at the same time which were mainly; food and income. The rural women devised strategies to handle continuous preservation and preparation of food in order to conform to the well being and diet stratification. When food crops were harvested, the rural women adopted a selective medium where food products were divided. A chunk of food crops were dished out for commercialisation with the remains preserved for household and local consumption.

Many rural women in Bombe Bakundu have implemented diverse mechanism of storing food crops harvested from farmlands. On an important note, some rural women established *orbars* known to secure and preserve the food crops from damages or getting spoiled. Meanwhile, many other rural women prepared using their kitchens as storage and preservation units with the justification that modern manufacturing preserved tools like refrigerators and freezers meant to act as long time security agents. This has however, brandished the properties and capabilities of rural women to adapt to the changing scenarios of the communal society of the Bombe Bakundu land. Food crop

preservation served diverse purposes especially to combat food insecurity and poverty. Many rural women preserve food to provide food for their families.

7. RURAL WOMEN AND THE PREPARATION OF FOOD PRODUCTS IN BOMBE BAKUNDU

There were several means and mechanisms through which the rural women in Bombe Bakundu utilised to brandish the worth and relevance of the different food products produced. The diverse agricultural food crops have been exposed by the many rural women of also relying on diverse modes and mediums of preparation for consumption. Many rural households in Bombe Bakundu set forth phrases of testing the different taste of food prepared by the women. The rural women had justified the motives in production of agricultural food products which was mainly to uplift the welfare and diet of their children in particular and households and community in general.

Most rural women in Bombe Bakundu provide and produce food based on its availability and desirability. There exist diverse kind and type of finished food to be consumed. This constituted traditional and modern recipients. In this flat form, many rural women have established food list time tables meant to ensure the preparation of balance food diet. This action and mindset pointed to the direction and objective of preserving healthy living and favourable living standard. However, the perspective of rural women in food production repeatedly outlined consumption and marketing purposes.

8. RURAL WOMEN AND THE MARKETING OF FOOD CROPS IN BOMBE BAKUNDU

The traditional markets in the Mbonge Sub Division Municipalities were located at the center of the municipalities. The trade inter practised by the women farmers were inter-village trade. The intra-village trade carried out within the community of Bombe Bakundu. The local marketing of women's products in the local markets was well fashioned and organised.

The rural women farmers also trade with neighbouring villages such as Banga Bakundu, Mbalangi Ekombe, Ediki and Mabonji, which characterised the inter-village trade. These women farmers traveled for long distances to exchange their local farm products for other needs. The prices in these foreign markets were mostly determined by the 'buyers' and the nature of their markets. When these food crops were said despite the price fluctuation, the women farmers used the finance to pay the land owners' for the next farming season.

9. CONCLUSION

The research has been about the role of rural women in agricultural food crop production in Bombe Bakundu. The activities of the rural women in Bombe Bakundu were to unveil the hidden potentials and capabilities to secure home and community interest. The rural women have in line with modernity credence struggle to brandish their essential role in combating social setbacks as elements of healthy living and better living standard. Despite the tight strings of traditional and cultural norms and the pressure they insert to the status of the rural women, the worth of the rural women in food and export crop production had been outstanding. The academic literature has reiterated that the rural women have transformed food crop production to a huge quantum of export crop (cash). This activity nursed to its maturity state has improved on the economic, social and political status of the rural women farmers of Bombe Bakundu.

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