



## Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity of the Cameroon Grasslands: Colonial and Post-Colonial Appraisal

Doreen Bongdze-emNgoran\*, Nixon Kahjum Takor, Mathew Basung Gwanfogbe

Department of History and Archaeology, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

**\*Corresponding Author:** Nixon Kahjum Takor, Mathew Basung Gwanfogbe, Department of History and Archaeology, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

**Abstract:** *In many African Societies, social groups have been very instrumental in providing social capital for local community development. However, discourses on community development have not been very authoritative on the specific roles gender-oriented social groups play especially in patriarchal-imposing cultural settings. Nso', a very patriarchal setup in the Cameroon Grasslands, provides a lens through which the exclusive role of female-constituted social groups in engendering diverse socio-economic changes could be identified and assessed. From the foundational years of the polity right through the colonial and post-colonial eras, the Nso' women improvised and coordinated collective strategies geared initially towards addressing issues specifically related to their needs. With the use of primary and secondary data, the study examines some of the actions of the female social groups and argues that in the course of lending premium to resolving their preoccupations, they parenthetically contributed to transforming their communities.*

**Key words:** *Female, Incidental Benefits, Nso', Social Groups, Cameroon, Grasslands*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Female social groups have been instrumental in the progress of nations and communities. In Cameroon they have been in existence for quite a long time, taking several forms and shapes.<sup>1</sup> Basically, they are voluntary groups formed by women related by an affinity, who pull their resources together for mutual benefits. These groups are always created in response to evolving circumstances, challenges and most often adjust to the ever demanding needs of society. The role of female social groups has been recognized as an important factor in sustaining long term and socio-economic changes.<sup>2</sup> The emergence, diversification and modernization of female social groups in Nso' a very patriarchal setup in the Cameroon Grasslands, is a case in this direction.

Nso' is a highly structured society in the Cameroon Grasslands with a current population of about 307,758 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> In the social set-up, gender division of roles is quite typical with both men and women playing crucial and complementary roles in the socio-economic and political life of the community. It is in this direction that the women (like their male counterparts) in most cases created social groups to respond to their ever increasing needs. Expounding on social formations of this character, Kropp and Suran maintain that a female social group is an informal association of some fifteen to twenty people, mostly women from the community, organized and controlled by the members, based on solidarity, reciprocity, common interest and resource pooling.<sup>4</sup> Mehta, Mishra and Singh on their part are not concerned about the number of persons involved but the objectives that bring them together. In this regard, they define female social groups as voluntary gatherings of

<sup>1</sup> Carnicus Ndi. "Common Initiative Groups in Cameroon (CIG): A True Test of Community Development", <http://communityblogspot.com>. Blogspot.com, Accessed on January 28, 2019, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Mehtsa Rehkla, *Gender in Community Development and Resource Management: An Overview* (Massachusetts: International Center for Research on Women, 1993), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson Balanjo Mbinkar, "Title Holding in the Nso' Fondom 1906-2008 (University of Buea: Master's Dissertation in History, 2011), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Winnie Korir, "Influence of Women Participation on Socio-Economic Development of Rural Communities in Kenya: A Case of Koi Batek District in Baringo Country" (University of Nairobi: Master's Dissertation in Geography, 2013), 20.

women who share needs or problems that are not being addressed by existing organizations, institutions or other types of groups. Its broad goals are to bring about personal and socio-economic change for its members and society<sup>5</sup>. These groups use locally mobilized resources, have local leadership and use indigenous reciprocal and communal assistance principles. They begin as a means of survival. Relatives, neighbors or work colleagues pull some of their resources under the group and use them among themselves in times of need. Members, for instance may use the same funds to start small businesses. In a nutshell, women social groups are voluntary groups that are formed by women related by an affinity, who pull their resources together for mutual benefits. In a bid to improve on their welfare, women through these groups, indirectly contribute to facilitating community development. This is what the paper captures as unintended or incidental benefits. It is from this perspective that the paper examines the basis for the emergence of female social groups in Nso', their primary aims, structure and activities that provided incidental benefits in the Nso' community of the Cameroon Grasslands.

## **2. CONTEXT AND BASIS OF CONTEMPORARY FEMALE SOCIAL GROUPS' ACTIONS**

Most feminist researchers have argued that traditional social theories have either marginalized the place of the woman or rendered insignificant her participation in society.<sup>6</sup> In Nso' Goheen confirms such conceptions by stating that "Men own the fields and women the crops"<sup>7</sup>, insinuating that women play second fiddle roles in the Nso' society. However, this paper debunks such unsighted submission on grounds that, before the coming of the colonial masters to Africa, the African women were active agents in their communities alongside their male folk. Core values of community development such as solidarity, participation and democracy were already embedded in the peoples' ways of life. The spirit of working together to achieve mutual objectives was never uncommon. This conclusion seems to match squarely with the view sustained by Goheen that "in Cameroon, women were referred to as "the backbone of the country"<sup>8</sup>.

The women derived a good deal of their status and sense of pride from their position as primary food producers. In Nso', a woman was a thing of God and a thing of the earth. Women were therefore accorded the status of God in Nso' and were in no way marginalized as most feminists presupposed. Nso' men and women played complementary roles in community issues. Women like men were active in processes of community development. From the history of migration and settlement in Nso', the woman had always been in the process of mobilizing herself through strategies such as social groups to solve problems that affected them as women and as a community. With the introduction of new demands in the colonial era, social groups became one of the most important means through which members solved their problems. Unlike the pre-colonial era where the problems were basically social worries like paying of bride price, attending to funeral imperatives, dance festivals and child birth worries, in the colonial and post-colonial era the problems ranged from school fees for children, medical bills, money to purchase farm tools and money to startup businesses.

Given the absence of banks in rural areas in the pre-colonial and early colonial days and the confidence indigenous people had in these social groups at the time,<sup>9</sup> female social groups served as a lever where women could mobilize actions towards collective financial pooling. These groups were based on mutual trust, cemented by common bond of ethnicity, culture, friendship, neighborliness and expanded to include religious and occupational affiliations, shared experiences, village and regional origins and provided the framework for the construction of new modes of cooperation among the

---

<sup>5</sup> Roland Ndille, Ngome Elvis Nkome, "Sumediang and Subaltern Development in Bakossi-Cameroon: A Historical Assessment of the Impact of a Women's Common Initiative Group Ca 1985 -2015" In *Social Science Review Vol. 1, Issue 1* (<https://www.researchgate.net>, Assessed on February, 2019), 100.

<sup>6</sup>SupriyaPattanayak, "Women and Community Development in India: Examining the Paradoxes of Everyday Practice" (University of RMIT, PhD Thesis in Social Sciences and Planning, 2007), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields* (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Goheen, "The Ideology and Political Economy of Gender: Women and Land in Nso'" In *Nso' and its Neighbours: Readings in Social History* (Massachusetts: Amherst College, 1996), 343.

<sup>9</sup> V.G. Fanson, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges Vol I; From Prehistoric times to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1989), 65.

Nso'. These groups eventually served as traditional sources of credit and financial support to indigenes and prepared the way for the establishment of credit unions in later years. The ease of the establishment of modern female social groups in Nso' by the 1950's was as a result of the indigenous modes of cooperation which was readily exploited by the colonial agents.

During the British colonial era in Southern Cameroons, missionaries, colonial administrators and wives of colonial agents encouraged the formation of female social groups in Southern Cameroons.<sup>10</sup> Among the major developments associated with this initiative was the creation of Corn Mills in Nso'. This was aimed at reducing the burden of women from the tedious method of grinding corn on stones. It was hoped that the mills were going to enable the women to have time for themselves. By so doing, Nso' women were encouraged to socialize among themselves during their free moments. Here, the women were encouraged to create social groups in churches, at quarter levels, age and occupational groups.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind several female social groups came up within this period. For example, the Mbonyar Women's Group created in 1950, the Sabo Salama Women's Group Kikaiom in 1952 and the Christian Women Groups that came up in the early 1960's which could be traced back to the activities of the wives of the early missionaries in the area. The emergence of these groups in no way suggested the failure of the male folk in their responsibility. Though a patriarchal community, the Nso' woman was never constrained by institutional dictates. The coming together of women in groups for their mutual benefits attested to the fact that, the woman had control over their affairs and was in no way underrated. There were however, some isolated cases of men who stubbornly clung to their patriarchal perception and denied their wives the opportunity to participate in socially constituted groups. This was however decisions in self preference not a policy dictated by cultural norms.

Circular 212/60 on the participation of women in public life in British Southern Cameroons<sup>12</sup> stated how women were increasingly participating in the social life and public affairs of their communities and noted that, the development of women's clubs became symptomatic of the new movement.<sup>13</sup> The Nso' women were not left out of this new movement as several women groups sprung up within this period. The British supported such groups especially those with only non-communist and non-political inclinations. British colonial reports listed a number of women's organizations common in the region like Girl Guides, Red Cross, the Mother's Union, Women's Sports Clubs, Women Farm Clubs and Corn Mill Societies.<sup>14</sup>

At independence, female social groups became common place with the enactment of several laws plus institutions and infrastructure put in place by the government. With the enactment of Law No. 67/2F/19 of June 1967 which authorized among other things the creation of associations<sup>15</sup>, and the creation of the Women's Education Department in the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1975, several associations were created in Cameroon as a whole and Nso' in particular. Some associations or groups that came up in Nso' within this time included, Bongkitati Women's Group, Mbveh (1969), Bonghadzem Women's Group, Tobin (1971) and Bongsuiru Women's Group, Meluf (1974),<sup>16</sup> which served as traditional sources of credit and financial support to women. Women from the same clan also came together within this period and constituted social groups for their benefits. This was the case with *Laahbihneen* a social group for women of the Tsenkar Clan in Nso', created in 1976.<sup>17</sup> The economic crisis of the 1980's was a down turn in the economy of Cameroon and this motivated the

---

<sup>10</sup>Melinda Adams, "Colonial Policies and Women's Participation in Public Life: The Case of British Southern Cameroons in Africa" in *Africa Studies Quarterly* vol.8. Issue 3, 2006. (<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v8/v8/v8i3a1.htm>, Accessed on February 20 2019), 10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> H. M. Tatah, *Female identity in Modern African Culture: A Socio-Moral Analysis of Gender Crisis in Cameroon, Bamenda* (Bamenda: Unique Printers, 1996), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Divisional Delegation of Women's Empowerment and the Family Statistics on Women Social Groups in Nso over the years

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Serophine Ntani, Aged 78, Member of the Lahbineen Family Women Group Tsenkar, Ndzengwev Kumbo, 26 August, 2018.

creation of more social groups. Female social groups most often than not were created around a problem and the essence was to pull resources together to address such problems. The worldwide phenomenon of the economic crisis hit Cameroon and its effects were weighty. Cameroon was placed under the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) by the Brettons Wood Institution which consisted of the shutting down of several companies, retrenchment of workers and the devaluation of the CFA Francs. There was also the fall in prices at the international market for cash crops and an increase in the prices of domestic goods.<sup>18</sup> The economic crisis in Cameroon brought untold suffering and efforts were made at national, local, community and individual levels to survive the hardship brought about by the crisis. In Nso' coffee which was the main cash crop, witnessed a decline in its price at the world market and many indigenes lost a major source of employment.<sup>19</sup> This compelled them to look for alternative means of survival and as a result more indigenes joined and or created social groups. Some female social groups that came up in Nso' within this time included; the Bongsiysi Women's Group, Waikov (1987), Bongsiiru Women's Group, Mbveh (1988), Bonglav Women's Group, Bankikai (1988), Social Farmers Club, Bankar (1989) and Loweh Women's Group, Takijah (1990).

Despite early efforts by the government of Cameroon to promote women's action, awareness on women's unionism especially in rural areas was limited to groups exclusively for the socio-economic benefit of its members. Although some associations were formed as early as the 1960's, organized women community based organizations whose activities concerned poverty alleviation, rural development and general improvement of the living standards of the population only began proliferating in the 1990's with the passage of Law No. 90/053 of December 1990<sup>20</sup> relating to freedom of Associations. This also contributed in establishing a platform for the emergence of female social groups in Nso' like the Meluf women in Development (1998), Tobin Women in Development (1999) and Mothers in Development Women's Group Jakiri (2002)

Global initiatives like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) of 1995 also contributed positively in how women's activities were appreciated. It called for the advancement in the goals of equality, development and peace and for the implementation of the human rights of women and girls.<sup>21</sup> In response to BPFA, the Cameroon government ratified several conventions to protect the Cameroonian woman. Some key realizations by the Cameroonian government included the establishment and reorganization of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family in 2004 from the defunct Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1984.<sup>22</sup> Civil and voluntary groups were encouraged to educate women on diverse topics for the interest of women and negative customary practices based on the inferiority or superiority of either sexes were discouraged.

It will not be overstating the case, to mention that the influence of feminism was felt even in rural area and spurred the establishment of more female social groups to foster feminist concerns. Feminism is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns.<sup>23</sup> In simple terms feminism seeks to change this. Through such efforts, new women's movement were encouraged with agendas on leadership, campaigns for greater women's representation and involvement in societies and enhanced women's voices.<sup>24</sup> They equally engaged states on their pitfalls regarding women's issues.

Programs were initiated by governments to increase the level of women's participation in public life

---

<sup>18</sup> Victor Julius Ngoh, *Cameroon History Since 1800* (Limbe: Pressbook, 1989), 157

<sup>19</sup> Masceline Bongkinging Mbinglo, "Potato (*Solanum Tuberosum*) Production and Commercialization in Bui Division 1973-2011: A Paradigm Shift" (University of Bamenda: Master's Dissertation in History, 2018), 46.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Nyambo Temngah, "The Legal Framework of Civil Society and Social Movements Cameroon" in Emmanuel Yenshu (eds), *Civil Society and the Search for Development Alternatives in Cameroon* (Dakar: Imprimerie Graphilus, 2008), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Tilder Kumichi Ndichia, "Beijing + 15: The Reality of Cameroon and the Unfinished Business, 2010" (<http://review.beijingcameroon010/geed/TKN>, Accessed on March 3, 2019), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with George Zofoa, Aged 50, Divisional Delegate for Women's Empowerment and the Family for Bui, Kumbo, 27 August, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Feminism and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

It was on the bases of the above reasons, initiatives, laws and freedoms that female social groups sprang up in their numbers in all of Cameroon. By 2010, Nso' had over 200 women social groups both registered and unregistered.<sup>25</sup> The uniting factor in these groups lay in the fact that they all aimed at mutually benefiting their members. As already mentioned the general motivation behind the creation of these female social groups was the need to help themselves as women. However other reasons necessitated the creation of the groups. Some of such reasons included; the desire to promote a spirit of love, unity and solidarity among women, promote income generating activities, empower women, raise awareness among women and build capacities of women. Over time female social groups began considering activities that could benefit their communities such as advocating the rights of children and women, sensitizations on societal ills and engaging in aspects of community development.

### **3. SCOPE OF INTERVENTION OF CONTEMPORARY FEMALE SOCIAL GROUPS**

Female social groups had objectives which only became a reality by the activities they carried. The activities of these groups were a reflection of the aims of the groups. They held meetings, on weekly (mostly on Sundays), fortnightly, or monthly (either at the beginning or end of the month) as was consensually established.<sup>26</sup> They engaged in thrift and loans.<sup>27</sup> Regular savings were made on meeting days and shared to members on an agreed program. Also, some hoarded money could be directed towards the realization of common projects prioritized by the group. In Most groups which comprised of farmers like Litwonste Women's Group, Tobin, Bonglav Women's Group, Rifem, Bongsum Women's Group, Ngoirin, Salama Women Group, Wasi, Venbati Women's Group, Dzeng, Bongsum Women's Group, Kovifem, Bonglim Women's Group, Tadu, Ghensum Women's Group, Nseh and KisooNsai Women Group, Banten, money which was saved, was used to buy farm implements like fertilizers, hoes, cutlasses and seedlings. Members began contributions at the beginning of each planting season (April) and during the next season, they collected their savings and purchased by themselves, farm inputs or the group did it at subsidized rates from their savings.<sup>28</sup>

Also, from money saved, group members could acquire loans to be paid with interest before the end of the meeting year. Money given as loans was never greater than the individual's total savings. This however changed with time, as groups gave out more than one had saved, provided the one borrowing the money could provide two sureties who guaranteed the repayment of such loans.<sup>29</sup> Loans were given at relatively low interest rates about 2 to 3% or 25CFAF per thousand.<sup>30</sup> This encouraged the women to continue saving as they generated additional money on what was saved. Apart from giving out loans to members, in recent times, groups took loans from financial institutions to solve the financial worries of its groups. Such loans were also used to embark on businesses for the group.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from thrifts and loans, groups engaged in the payment of solidarity fund. Some of such included: *Association Des Femmes Gendarmes*, *Garden Club* of Rohlav, Charity Sisters, Bamkika'ay, Jolly Sisters of Tobin, Police Wives Association Kumbo, *Entré Nous* Women's Group, Tobin, Salama Women's Group, RohMbveh, GHS Jakiri Women's Group, Dynamic Sisters of Jakiri and Harmony Sisters of Rifum. This was a stated amount depending on the group and it was used to attend to issues of deaths, sickness, child births and other happenings. With or without the fund, solidarity was one of the main objectives of these groups; hence they carried out activities like visiting the sick members and their first degree relations, they celebrated in times of child births, marriages and mourned in

---

<sup>25</sup> Interview with George Zofoa, Aged 50, Divisional Delegate for Women's Empowerment and the Family for Bui, Kumbo, 27 August, 2018

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Magdalene Lemnyuy, Aged 81, Retired BBH Worker and Former Member of BBH women Social Group, Squares Kumbo, 17 November, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Jean Hay, Sharon Stichter, *African Women South of the Sahara* (New York: Longman, 1995), 164

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Lydia Layir, Aged 52, President of Litwonse Women's Group Tobin, Tobin, 19 November, 2018

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Christine Berinyuy, Aged 56, Financial Secretary of Bonghadzem Women's Group Melim, Melim, 28 August, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Fai Yenla, Aged 45, Treasurer of BongbatiJem Squares, Squares Kumbo, Phone Call, 02 March, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with TheresiaNyuysemo, Aged 61, Member of Bongkitati Women's Group Meluf, Meluf, 26 August, 2018.

times of deaths. In the Laahbineen Women's Group for example its constitution stated that there shall be assistance once a year per registered member in case of severe illness/hospitalization.

Another novelty in female social groups was the idea of carrying out religious meditations. Before, it sufficed for a prayer to be said at the beginning of the meeting and in some cases, when food was to be served. However, women became more conscious of the goodness of God in their lives with time, and attributed their successes not to their abilities and capabilities but to God's goodness and mercies. As a result, Bible meditations gained roots in these groups and from time to time some went to give thanksgiving in the churches of different members for their lives as women.<sup>32</sup>

Also, singing and dancing during meetings as a form of entertainment was another practice in social groups. Some of such dances included, *toh*, *njangand kidifu*. End of year jamborees eventually became a part of female social groups in Nso'. At end of year jamboree spouses, friends, other groups and well-wishers were invited to be a part of the activities organized by the host group. During such events, apart from taking stock of the year passed, they thrilled their audience in different ways (songs, dances, talks, decoration and recognition of some members and well-wishers), gifts were exchanged among themselves and funds were raised to enable the women carry out their projects.<sup>33</sup> For example during the end of year festivities organized by the Salama Women of Buh in 2009, the women raised the sum of 500,000frs which they gave as part of their support for the construction of a Mosque in the Buh community in Nso'.<sup>34</sup>

With the institution of the International Women's Day in 1977, women the world over began to engage in activities commemorating this day.<sup>35</sup> In Cameroon, the celebration heightened with the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1984, which organized and supervised these activities.<sup>36</sup> Women in Nso' were not left out as the constituted groups got registered and participated in activities earmarked for the celebration of the Women's Day.<sup>37</sup> Activities aimed at celebrating this day included seminars, dances, sports, cleaning of selected places, visitations and was crowned with a march-past on the day proper.

Female social groups in Nso' organized talks within meetings on varied societal issues that affected women. Women were equally taught new skills like how to make vaseline, omo and different types of pastries. Adult literacy classes were organized to help women who could not read nor write. Sporting activities were carried out as a means of relaxation.

#### **4. INCIDENTAL BENEFITS OF FEMALE SOCIAL GROUPS**

Female social groups in Nso', contributed parenthetically to socio-economic changes in the Nso' polity in diverse ways. Primary attention was given to agricultural development which was the principal livelihood of the community. Female social groups learnt and transmitted the new methods of production as brought to them by the government and Non-Governmental Organizations.<sup>38</sup> Female social groups also supported farmers who were not necessarily their members. For example, the Bonglim women social group assisted some Mbonso female farmers with 10,000CFAF each in 2006 to enable them obtain seeds for planting.<sup>39</sup> Also, Salama Women's Group of Yer supported some Muslim women in the Yer Community with seeds for planting in 2008. It was a similar phenomenon with Bongkitati, Meluf which reached out to some women in Meluf with some seed assistance in 2009. These assistance contributed to high yields which went to provide enough food for the domestic

---

<sup>32</sup> Idem

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Mary Niy, Aged 59, President of Kongadzem Women's Group Banka, Phone call, 24 February, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Fatimatu Kidze, President of Salama Women's Group Buh, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with George Zofoa, Aged 50, Divisional Delegate of Women's Empowerment and the Family Bui, Kumbo, 27 August, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Hassan Wirba, Aged 54, Regional Delegate of Women's Empowerment and the Family for the North West Region, Bamenda, 31 October, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Idem.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Florence Yuyen Tata, Aged 59, Regional Chief of Cooperatives and CIGs at MINADER of the North West Region, Bamenda, 5 November, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Theresia Beri, Aged 43, Member of Bonglim CIG Mbonso, Bamenda, 6 March, 2020.

holds as well as extend the excesses to the market to exchange for other basic needs or to appropriate financial returns which could be used for other services like schooling for children and health needs.<sup>40</sup>

Female social groups in Nso' also cultivated in their members the attitude of civic participation in development. Through these groups, members were persuaded to sacrifice financially, morally and physically for community developmental projects. This was done at various levels; education, health, water schemes, roads, infrastructure and architecture. In the domain of education Female social groups contributed in the construction of community schools. These schools started by the community were most often deficient in many aspects particularly in teaching staff and most often than not such institutions were nationalized.<sup>41</sup> The Bonghadzem Women, for example contributed a sum of 3000CFAF each for the construction of the Community Primary School, Melim in 1989 now Government Primary School, Melim. There was a similar experience in Salama Women's Group, Buh where members were levied 10,000CFAF each to assist in the Buh Community School project in 1998. Female social groups also assisted in the molding and transportation of blocks, carried stones, fetched water, and also supported the workers with food daily till the school project was fully executed.<sup>42</sup> They also assisted public, private, mission and community schools in repairing school equipment and contributed didactic materials and benches to such schools. The Nyuytimbiy Women Group of Kai gave benches to the Catholic Primary School Kai in 2008.<sup>43</sup> The involvement of female social groups in education helped to improve the quality and access to education in Nso' land. Female groups also gave scholarships to some brilliant students to enable them further their education. The Salama Women's Groups gave scholarships to some Muslim girls in professional, technical and secondary grammar schools from funds lobbied from government and friendly organizations.<sup>44</sup>

Female social groups also intervened in promoting quality health in Nso' in various ways. They carried out sensitization campaigns among themselves and eventually extended to their community. They gave lectures on health hazards such as Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), and the Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV/AIDS) with emphasis laid on personal hygiene, first aid, good eating habits, and environmental hygiene. The LaaLir Women Group, NtohNso' organized talks on polio in the Fon's Palace in 1997 and educated women on the need to give polio vaccines to their children.<sup>45</sup> Also, women groups played a significant role in the areas of hygiene and sanitation as they organized clean up campaigns to clean their environment. Living in clean environments therefore implied that, people in the community enjoyed good health thanks to the efforts of the women. This was also very common around Women's Day celebration periods when the women came out in their numbers and cleaned their neighborhoods, market areas and other earmarked areas.<sup>46</sup>

Female social groups were also instrumental in equipping community health centers. For example in 1996, the Bongkitati Women's Group Yer equipped the Children and Maternity wards of the Yer Community Health Centre with provision of materials to the sum of 300,000CFAF and this helped reduce mortality rate in Nso'.<sup>47</sup> The Unity Sisters of Kumbo in 2003 provided health equipments to the Kuvlu and Roh health centres.<sup>48</sup> The Female Wing of the Mbam Village Development Association (MBAVDA), provided health equipment to the Mbam Health Centre. In 2005, they

---

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ramatou Bourinyuy, Salama CIG Yer, Aged 44, Member of Salama CIG Yer, Bamenda, 29 March, 2020

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Yeryee, "The Role of Community Participation in Rural Development in Bui", Masters Dissertation in Geography, University of Buea, 2014, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Fatimatu Kidze, President of Salama Women's Group Buh, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Wirngo Mudufe, Member of Nyuytimbiy Wome Group Kai. Phone call, 19 July, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Mairamu Oumarou, Aged 65, Treasurer of Sabo Salama Kikaikom, Kikaikom, 20 November, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Joan Mary Kinyuy, Aged 65, Royal Wife and member of LaaLir Ntohnso, 17 July, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with George Zofoa, Aged 50, Divisional Delegate of Women's Empowerment and the Family Bui, Kumbo, 27 August, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Salah Sule, Aged 45, Women's Network President for Jakiri Subdivision, Phone Call, 28 February, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Jane Lailam, Aged 43, President of Women's Network Kumbo and Member of Bongbati Women Ndzengvev, Bamenda, 17 March, 2020.

provided 10 beds to the Health Centre.<sup>49</sup> The community of Mbiame in tandem with female mutual aid groups employed and effectively paid three nurses, two cleaners and a night watchman for the Mbiame Health Centre. They also purchased a microscope for the Health Centre. All these services benefitted patients by way of a 25% discount on total hospital bills paid.<sup>50</sup>

Female social groups were equally concerned with the provision of potable water services to the Community. In this regard, the first pipe borne water supply system was constructed in Nso' between 1968 and 1970.<sup>51</sup> This was championed by the Mami Fourteen Women Group who in the 60's requested Bernard Fonlon-the Deputy Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cameroon to bring Pipe-borne water to Kumbo and solve the deplorable water problem.<sup>52</sup> This saw the beginning of the Kumbo Water Scheme which was commissioned in 1976.<sup>53</sup> The project was executed with financial assistance from the Canadian Government and the Nso' community which provided needed labor. The men were expected to make a contribution of 1500CFAF and the women 1000CFAF each. Proof of such payments was through receipts issued by the Departments for Urban Development.<sup>54</sup> Even after paying their 1000CFAF as women, female social groups still rallied themselves and made contributions as groups. The Mami Fourteen Women's Groups gave an envelope of 150,000CFAF as support to the water project which they had asked for.<sup>55</sup> Other groups opted to prepare food and supplied palm wine as refreshments for laborers. They were also actively involved in the digging of trenches for pipelines.<sup>56</sup> Water Schemes were also constructed with the support of NGO's, Councils, Associations/mutual aid groups and foreign donors. Members of the community contributed financially, materially and morally in the completion of such water schemes in their areas. Female social groups took active part in such contributions. For example, the Birkong Women during the construction of the Jem Water Catchment in 2009, contributed the sum of 100,000CFAF for the project.<sup>57</sup> Also, women of Birkong alongside other women from other Women's groups like the Jem Women's Groups, assisted in digging and cooking of food.<sup>58</sup> Other groups like LainjoBanboye, Ndzengwev contributed to the construction of the Ndzengwev Water Catchment Project and Kitsem Women's Group in Shisong did same towards the Shisong water catchment in similar measures.<sup>59</sup>

The development of infrastructure was one of those areas that witnessed the contributions of Female social groups in Nso'. Their impact was felt and noticed in the building of halls, mosques and the refurbishment of the Nso' Palace. Women groups embarked on building halls where they could hold their meetings permanently and carry out other social events. They also rented out such halls for those who needed them for one activity or the other. The Bongnyang Women's Group of Taankum, ran an NGO by name Community Development Volunteer for Technical Assistance (CDVTA). They provided basic support to disadvantaged children, youths, women and elderly people with disabilities. They constructed a building which served as their meeting house and also served the NGO as it hosted their numerous activities geared towards reaching out to the disabled. Women groups also supported in the construction of Mosques in their communities. Some Salama Women groups within the KumboMunicipality were very instrumental in the renovation of the Mosque at the Fon's Palace in

---

<sup>49</sup> Interview with ArunaKidze, Aged 58, Former Mayor of Nkum Council, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with SionaKimah, Aged 81, Former Chair Person of the Board of Directors of the Nso' women's Cooperative and member of MBAVDA Female Wing, Mbiame, 19 November, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Lantum, *The Nso' Went to Mvem*, 99.

<sup>52</sup> Ben Page "Communities as the Agents of Commodification: The Kumbo Water Authority in North West Cameroon", in *Geoforum* Vol 38 (Elsevier: ResearchGate, 1986), 488.

<sup>53</sup> Lantum, *The Nso' went to Mvem*, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Ben Page, "Communities as the Agents of Commodification", 488.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Felicia Wongebe, Aged 77, Former President of Mami Fourteen WG, Member of Humble Sisters Tobin, Yaounde, 6 February, 2020

<sup>56</sup> Idem.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with VictorineNge, Aged 47, Divisional Chief for Cooperatives and CIGs in Bui, President of BihkongJem and member of Dynamic Sister Tobin, Bamenda, 2 March, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Idem

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Jane Lailam, Aged 43, President of Women's Network Kumbo and Member of Bongbati Women Ndzengwev, Bamenda, 17 March, 2020.



2009.<sup>60</sup> SamtovSalama Women Group, NjomboSalama Women's Group of Kikaikom, Sabo SalamaKikaikom, MbvehJamaiahSalama, Salama Women's Group of RoMbveh and Salama Women's Group of Ta Mbveh made contributions of one hundred thousand francs each. Also during the construction of the Mosque in Buh (in 2009, Salama Women's Group of Buh, contributed a sum of 500,000CFAF for the project. In 2010, they also supported the palace project with a sum of 200,000CFAF.<sup>61</sup>

Road maintenance was of crucial importance in Nso' due to poor road networks that characterized almost all of the chiefdom. Most roads were earth roads and were usually not maintained by any public management board. Consequent to this neglect, the indigenous population assumed the responsibility to develop and maintain the roads. The community often organized themselves to provide drainage outlets, fill potholes and other makeshift support mechanisms to make the roads traversable especially during the rainy season. This was a common practice during the reign of FonSehmAtaar, dubbed "father of development". He organized the Nso' community and linked them to other communities and fondoms with roads constructed through communal efforts.<sup>62</sup> Women groups threw their weight behind these endeavors and assisted to the best of their abilities. This was true with roads such as Mbonso-Kumbo, Kumbo –Oku, Nso-Noni, Mbah-Jakiri and Shishong-Mbuluv. Also, women groups also joined the men in their communities and on personal initiatives and efforts to open foot paths, make repairs on earth roads, and cleared bushy paths along road links.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, female social groups in spite of aligning with dynamic global trends maintained fundamentals of the Nso' tradition and culture. They upheld and kept sacrosanct the cultural values and traditions of the land in their different unions. Through birth, marriage and funeral celebrations, knowledge of culture was constantly rehearsed and handed down to posterity.<sup>64</sup> Female social groups among other cultural groups in Nso' were therefore custodians of the Nso' culture and had the challenge of handing it down to future generations.

Besides, the groups created multi-dimensional awareness on better socio-economic lifestyles. With the awareness members received from these groups, a good number moved out of Nso' in search of better opportunities. Having created Nso' bases in many towns in Cameroon like Bamenda, Buea, Douala and Yaounde, more persons linked up with old friends and family members and it facilitated their migration from Nso' to these towns. As many as they began to move out they formed branches of their groups back in Nso'.<sup>65</sup> This could be buttressed by the presence of several Bongsuiru, Kongadzem, Bongdzeem, Bongkisheru women groups across the national territory and beyond with similar set up and activities as the groups back in Nso'.<sup>66</sup>

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Conceived, structured and oriented to address the basic concerns of the women folk in the Nso' polity of the Cameroon Grasslands, femalesocial groups became strategic stakeholders in providing social capital for community development. This contradicts feminist arguments that traditional social theories have marginalized and rendered insignificant women's participation in development. The paper argues that women through their manifold activities became central pillars in the development agenda of Nso'. Although the idea of creatingfemale social groupings was not a new phenomenon in the colonial and post-colonial periods, new exigencies and dynamics associated with national administrative policies and legal orderings let alone international trends that militated for more engagement of women in public life, somehow, shaped the nature of the constituted female social groups. In spite of the foundational support and inspiration acquired from the wives of colonial

---

<sup>60</sup> Interview with MairamuOumarou, Aged 65, Treasurer of Sabo SalamaKikaikom, Kikaikom, 20 November, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with FatimatuKidze, President of Salama Women's Group Buh, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Lantum, 95

<sup>63</sup> Interview with TheresiaNyuysemo, Aged 61, Member of Bongkitati WG Meluf, Meluf, 26 August, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Claire Mercer, Ben Page, Martin Evans, *Development and the African Diaspora: Place and the Politics of Home* (New York: Long House Publishing, 2008) 229

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Joan Bobongha, Aged 63, Member of Bongsuiru WG Vekaakuy and Bonguuru Women's Group Bamenda, Bamenda, 11 March, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Idem.

administration, most of the social groups that emerged in Nso' did not deviate from the original code of solidarity in providing support to the male counterpart towards the collective sustenance of the community. It is safe from the investigation to maintain that the contributive role in the different domains of intervention of the social groups in community development though not very evident in the charters of foundation was only resuscitated to adjust to new demands. It is therefore evident that though most of the female social groups in Nso' were created primarily to address problems peculiar to the women folk, they, as crucial stakeholders of community welfare could not be indifferent to the communal challenges. That is why the female social groups graciously contributed to the development of agriculture which consequently augmented subsistence and market-oriented food sources. They also wholeheartedly participated in developmental projects like roads management, water provisioning, and construction of schools and health centers that improved on the welfare of the local inhabitants. Given the lofty nature of the groups, some expanded their frontiers as members moved to different parts of the country and established branches that kept the same core values of solidarity back home.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Abena, F.D. *The Emancipation of Women African Perspective*. Ghana, Department of Linguistics Publication University of Ghana, 1991.
- [2] Banbooyee, William. *Introduction to Nso' History*. Kumbo: Nso History Society, 2001.
- [3] Fanso, V.G. *Cameroon History For Secondary Schools and Colleges Vol I; From Prehistoric times to the Nineteenth Century*. London: Macmillan Publishers, 1989.
- [4] Gamble, Sarah. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- [5] Goheen, Miriam. *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- [6] Hay, Margaret, Stichter, Sharon. *African Women South of the Sahara*. New York: Longman, 1995.
- [7] Kaberry, P.M. *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons*. London: Colonial Research Publications, 1952.
- [8] Lontum, C. *How old is the Nso' Tribe? A Brief History of Nso'*. Bamenda: Annoh Printers, 2009.
- [9] Mercer, Claire, Page, Ben, Evans, Martin. *Development and the African Diaspora: Place and the Politics of Home*. New York: Long House Publishing, 2008.
- [10] Mzeka, Paul. *Four Fons of Nso*. Bamenda: The Spider Publishing Enterprise, 1990.
- [11] \_\_\_\_\_. *The Core Culture of Nso'*. USA: Jerome Radin Co, 1980.
- [12] Neba, Aaron. *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon, Third Edition*,  
[13] Bamenda: Neba Publishers, 1999.
- [14] Ngoh, Victor Julius. *Cameroon History Since 1800*. Limbe: Pressbook, 1989.
- [15] Ngwa, J.A. *A New Geography of the Republic of Cameroon*. London: Longman, 1978.
- [16] Nkwi, P.N., Warnier, J.P. *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*. Yaounde: University of Yaounde. 1982.
- [17] Tatah, H.M. *Female identity in Modern African Culture: A Socio-Moral Analysis of Gender Crisis in Cameroon, Bamenda*. Bamenda: Unique Printers, 1996.
- [18] Rehkla, Mehtsa. *Gender in Community Development and Resource Management: An Overview*. Massachusetts: International Center for Research on Women, 1993.
- [19] Wallach, Scott Joan. *Feminism and History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

#### ARTICLES

- Bongfen, Chem-Langhee. "Traditional Modes of Cooperation in Nso, A Brief Description" in Bongfen, Chem-Langhee, Fanso, V.G., Goheen, M., Chilver, E.M. *Nso and its Neighbours: Readings in Social History*. Massachusetts: Amherst College, 1996.
- Fast, Joyce. "Corn Mill Grinds Out, the A-B-Cs" in David Rogers, *The Peace Corp Volunteer, a Quarterly Statistical Summary, Vol. 1, No. 1*. Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co. 1962.

- Page, Ben. "Communities as the Agents of Commodification: The Kumbo Water Authority in North West Cameroon", in *Geoforum* Vol 38. Elsevier: Research Gate, 1986.
- Temngah, Joseph. "The Legal Framework of Civil Society and Social Movements Cameroon" in Emmanuel Yenshu (eds), *Civil Society and the Search for Development Alternatives in Cameroon*, Dakar: Imprimerie Graphilus, 2008.

#### **UNPUBLISHED SOURCES**

- Aweriya, Susan Edang, "The Role of Women in Community Development in Oshie, 1961-2011: A Historical Evaluation". HTTC Bambili: DIPES II Dissertation in History, 2015.
- Basung, Mathew. "Changing Regimes and the Development of Education in Cameroon 1886-1966, with special reference to the Basel Mission". University of London Institute of Education: PhD Thesis in History, 1995.
- Berinyuy, Francis. "The Place of the woman in the Nso' Culture 1906-2010: A Historical Appraisal". HTTC Bambili: DIPES II Dissertation in History, 2016.
- Korir, Winnie "Influence of Women Participation on Socio-Economic Development of Rural Communities in Kenya: A Case of KoiBatek District in Baringo Country". University of Nairobi: Master's Dissertation in Geography, 2013.
- Konglim, Florence. "The Role of Women in the Rural Economy". University of Yaounde I: Master's Dissertation in History, 2000.
- Konyuy, Lawrence Nyuydine, "The Role of Women in the Socio-Economic Development of Kumbo Central Subdivision 1961-2014". HTTC Bambili: DIPES I Long Essay in History, 2015.
- Mbinkar, Jackson. "Title Holding in the Nso' Fondom 1906-2008". University of Buea: Masters Dissertation, 2011.
- Pattanayak, Supriya. "Women and Community Development in India: Examining the Paradoxes of Everyday Practice", University of RMIT, PhD Thesis in Social Sciences and Planning, 2007.

#### **INTERNET SOURCES**

- Adams, Melinda. "Colonial Policies and Women's Participation in Public Life: The Case of British Southern Cameroons in Africa" In *Africa Studies Quarterly* vol.8, Issue3. <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v8/v8/v8i3a1.htm>, Accessed on February 20 2019.
- Elizabeth, O. K. "Corn Mill Societies in the Southern Cameroons" in *African Women 11955* [www.sites.clas.ufl.edu](http://www.sites.clas.ufl.edu), Accessed on February 20 2019.
- Ndichia, TilderKumichi. "Beijin + 15: The Reaity of Cameroon and the Unfinished Business, 2010". <http://review Beijin Cameroon 010/GeED/TKN>, Accessed on March 3, 2019.
- Ndi, Carnicus. "Common Initiative Groups in Cameroon (CIG): A True Test of Community Development". <http://communityblog spot com. Blogspot.com>, Accessed on January 28, 2019.

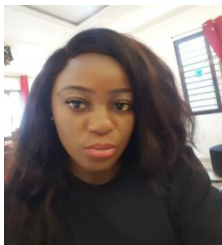
#### **INTERVIEWS**

- Berinyuy, Theresia. Aged 41, Member of Bongdzeem CIG Tandzev, Phone Call, 3 April, 2020.
- Bobongha, Joan. Aged 63, Member of Bongsuiru Women's Group Vekaakuy, Bamenda, 11 March, 2020.
- Bourinyuy, Ramatou. Aged 44, Member of Salamtoug WG Yer, Bamenda, 29 March, 2020.
- Kidze, Aruna. Aged 58, Former Mayor of Nkum Council, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.
- Kidze, Fatimatu. President of Salama Women's Group Buh, Phone Call, 13 July, 2020.
- Kimah, Siona. Aged 81, Former Chair Person of the Board of Directors of the Nso' Women's Cooperative, Mbiameh, 19 November, 2018.
- Kinyuy, JoanMary. Aged 65, Royal Wife and member of LaaLirNtohnso, 17 July, 2018.

## Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity of the Cameroon Grasslands: Colonial and Post-Colonial Appraisal

- Lailam, Jane. Aged 43, President of Women's Network Kumbo and Member of Bongbati Women Ndzengvev, Bamenda, 17 March, 2020.
- Layir, Lydia. Aged 52, President of Liwontse Women's Group Mbonso, Phone call, March 2020
- Mairamu, Oumarou, Aged 65, Treasurer of Sabo SalamaKikaikom, Kikaikom, 20November, 2018.
- Niy, Mary. Aged 59, President of Kongadzem Women Group Banka, Phone call, 24 February, 2020.
- Ntani, Serophine. Aged 78, Member of the Lahbineen Family Women Group Tsenkar, NdzengwevKumbo, 26 August, 2018.
- Wirba, Hassan. Aged 54, Regional Delegate of Women's Empowerment and the Family for the North West Region, Bamenda, 31 October, 2019.
- Tata, Florence Yuyen. Aged 59, Regional Chief of Cooperatives and CIGs of the North West Region, Bamenda, 5 November, 2019.
- Wongebe, Felicia. Aged 77, Former President of Mami Fourteen WomenGroup, Member of Humble Sisters Tobin, Yaounde, 6 February, 2020.
- Zofoa, George. Aged 50, Divisional Delegate for Women's Empowerment and the Family for Bui, Kumbo, 27 August, 2018.

### AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



**Doreen Bongdze-emNgoran**, is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History and Archaeology at the Faculty of Arts, The University of Bamenda in Cameroon. She has been teaching History in secondary schools for the past 9years. She is a member of the Cameroon History Society, the North West Association of History Society and the Young African Women Congress–Cameroon Chapter. Her teaching and research interest is on political, social and economic history, women and development.



**Nixon KahjumTakor**, is currently an Associate Professor of History and chair of the Department of History and Archaeology at the Faculty of Arts, The University of Bamenda in Cameroon. He is a member of the Business History Congress and the Cameroon History Society. His teaching and research interests over the years has centered on aspects of economic and social history, public history, didactics of History, historiography and historical research methods.



**Mathew BasungGwanfogbe**, is an emeritus Associate Professor of History at the Higher Teacher Training College Bambili, The University of Bamenda. He is a social and economic historian with rich and diverse publications.

**Citation:** Doreen Bongdze-emNgoran. "Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups In Nso' Polity of the Cameroon Grasslands: Colonial and Post-Colonial Appraisal" *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*. Vol 7, no. 1, 2021, pp. 20-31. doi: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-7654.0701003>.

**Copyright:** © 2021 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.