

## *Western Education and Women's Social Mobility in Cameroon*

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Women's roles in precolonial Cameroon were at once numerous and varied. Women participated both directly and indirectly in public affairs. In the few societies where direct participation was the norm, a select few did so either as queen mothers, co-chiefs, or as sovereign queens. Only the Bavek are documented to have had sovereign queens;<sup>1</sup> and only among the Ide of the Bamenda Grassfields are women known to have ruled alongside male chiefs.<sup>2</sup> The Ide system of political organization was similar to that of the Ibos of Nigeria, characterized by Kamene Okonjo as a "dual-sex" political system.<sup>3</sup> However, the majority of Cameroonian women were involved in other equally important socio-economic activities, and politics was regarded as a male domain.

Women's province was the private sphere, where they engaged in a myriad of domestic tasks which included working on the farms, nurturing the children, preparing the meals, and keeping the household. Though these activities were important to the overall functioning of society, the indigenous system virtually confined most women to the private sphere--with hardly any opportunity to realize their full potential as political animals.

Notwithstanding, the current feminist revisionist tendency in African historiography maintains that the incidence of colonialism in Africa resulted in a decline of the traditional importance of women.<sup>4</sup> This may have been true of some, but not necessarily all, African societies. In Cameroon, for instance, until the establishment of colonial rule women, as a social category, were not educated to assume repositibility in public affairs. Consequently, when examined from the perspective of the impact of western education, it will be shown that women may have gained more than they lost. Pre-colonial Cameroonian society was male-dominated, and a woman's social position was determined largely by her sex and whether she was of privileged birth or not. In the absence of any advantageous factors of social mobility, some women could be condemned to a life of menial labor simply because the accident of birth had placed them in less-advantaged families.

This paper argues that indigenous education generally equipped women for limited roles which tended to exclude them from acquiring knowledge for public life. Through a comparative study of traditional and western education, it will examine the outcome of both systems for women. It posits that women's acquisition of western education has provided them avenues of access to the public life of modern Cameroon. This view is demonstrated in three sections: the first section discusses the basis of traditional education and the limitations it imposed on women's social mobility; the second traces women's access to western education during colonial times and analyzes the attendant problems involved in securing equal educational opportunities for them; and the third section, through the use of the life histories of three women, illustrates how western

education has altered the traditional roles of women in the public life of modern Cameroon.

The three women profiled in this study are of different social backgrounds--Mrs. Gwendoline Burnley, Mrs. Dorothy Njeuma, Mrs. Susannah Mondo--and have directly contributed to the public life of Cameroon. Their life histories do not only stand out as examples for the younger generation of Cameroonian women to emulate, but may bring them into closer acquaintance with the nuances confronting women in the public life of a male-dominated society. In a society in which an individual is important only in so far as she is part of a larger entity, without the support of their parents, spouses and families, these women might not have succeeded.

#### Women's Education and Roles in Traditional Society

Traditional Cameroonian society<sup>5</sup> was organized along gender lines. This mode of social organization was maintained by a rigid division of labor that was reinforced by the indigenous system of education. The similarity between this and some African indigenous systems of education is most striking. In these societies the prevailing principle was to prepare the young for adulthood, with sex differentiation being introduced at early childhood. Makhoba Maloba has noted this important distinction in the education of baby girls and boys:

The mother would admonish and soft coddle the female toddler. In the case of boys, some cultures dictate that a boy is a sheep and therefore does not cry while a female is a goat and bleats at the slightest provocation. The differing rearing practices resulted in boys and girls or men and women exhibiting different character traits and as a result fostered divergent roles of the sexes.<sup>6</sup>

Although the mother played a major role in educating the toddler, the father gradually stepped in to address himself in cases of misconduct and took over the upbringing of male children completely, along with the community of men of the village, the neighboring villages, or even the country at large. Similarly, female children were nurtured by the women of the household, village, and the country.<sup>7</sup>

Boys and girls usually parted company at the age of seven or eight.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter, the skills a boy learned were those practiced by his elder brothers, his father, and the male community;<sup>9</sup> while the girl was equally immersed in acquiring the skills that her older sisters, mother, and women of the compound passed down to her.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, responsibility for public affairs devolved from older to younger men. By the time children attained adolescence, female and male functions were clearly defined. On the farms the men engaged in the heavy work of opening up the forest by felling trees and clearing the land, while the women tilled the soil and cultivated food crops.<sup>11</sup>

There seems to have developed "a strong universal tendency for men to be allocated tasks within the production sequences beginning with more distant and dangerous...and for women to be allocated tasks in the production sequences beginning with low risk tasks and closer at home."<sup>12</sup> This mode of division of labor, according to Judith Brown, was related to the exigencies of child care among women.<sup>13</sup> Jane Guyer



has noted that this form of division of labor was "an integral part of the ideological system, economic organization, daily family life, and often the political system as well."<sup>14</sup>

Indigenous education was designed to uphold this ostensibly conservative ideological system. Consequently, whatever social change that might have taken place in traditional Cameroonian society did not affect the perennial relationships between the sexes. Whether this system was designed, accidental, or simply the outcome of social evolution, is not clear. What is certain is that this ideological matrix relegated women to the domestic sphere of social life.

Also tied to this matrix was the system of marriage practiced in all the traditional societies of Cameroon. Polygynous marriage was the rule and, only in exceptional cases was monogamous marriage practiced. Christraud Geary has asserted that, "to this day the country's legislators still consider polygynous marriage as the regular form of marriage, and the wish to be married monogamously has to be specifically expressed by the groom at the registrar's office."<sup>15</sup> Though polygynous marriage is still practiced in modern Cameroon, traditionally it served as the primary institution for grooming the characters of young brides.

Because women married when they were still very young, sometimes as early as twelve years old when their characters were yet unformed, it fell upon their adult grooms to mold their characters. Owing to the wide age gap between the husbands and wives, it was not uncommon for the young wives to refer to their husbands as "Pa" (or Papa). With the advent of colonialism, the designations of "Massa" (or Master) and "Sa" (or Sir) were also employed. The young wives never called their husbands by their names.<sup>16</sup> These appellations were part of the socialization process, as "female children were generally socialized to accept the personal condition of their subjugation to male interests."<sup>17</sup> Women's position in the traditional marital arrangement was the ultimate expression of their inferior status vis-a-vis their male partners, expressed in terms of age.

In precolonial Cameroon, it was not out of character for a father who was about to give his daughter away in marriage to inform her that, "as you marry that man, you shall die in his home."<sup>18</sup> Among the Bulu, a husband could kill his wife in a case of adultery. The Douala sanctioned the amputation of an adulteress's left ear.<sup>19</sup> These drastic forms of punishment were accepted by local custom. However, whereas women were subjected to punishment, men had the fiat to commit adultery at will and their wives were by custom prohibited from questioning their actions. The rules of conduct which governed social behavior within the institution of indigenous marriage assigned to men a wider latitude of action which included the right to be promiscuous.<sup>20</sup>

Marriage did not end with the death of the husband, since the institution was not just a contract between the individual partners but between their families. Thus widows were heritable and remained in the families of their husbands. Even after her husband died, the woman could not be free. She passed from under one male authority to another: from under her husband and, when the husband died, she passed on to under the authority of yet another male--either to that of the person who inherited her late husband's estate, or to a man of her choice in the deceased's patrilineage.<sup>21</sup> The practice of widow inheritance existed everywhere in precolonial Cameroon.<sup>22</sup> Among the Beti, "the values of widows and the way in which each added to their husband's

wealth was discussed during the division of property."<sup>23</sup>

The legality of traditional marriage was evidenced by the acceptance of bridewealth, that is, the amount in money, cattle, gifts, services, or other forms of obligation that the family of the bride accepted from that of the groom. The payment of bridewealth made some husbands feel that they held certain rights over their wives. Many Cameroonian men still believe that the payment of bridewealth constitutes an outright purchase of women and the services they render. Being that traditionally divorce was unknown to Cameroonians, wife beating was (and is still) construed by some men as a corrective device.<sup>24</sup>

Such then was the position of women in the traditional societies of Cameroon. But the northwesterly winds of change blowing from Europe would not let traditional society maintain its slow and organic pace. It set in motion a revolutionary form of change which, in the long run, has considerably altered the character of traditional society and with it the primordial position of womanhood.

#### Western Education and Change in Women's Roles

Education is the process through which knowledge is gained and transmitted. The western variety of it is one of the primary agencies of change in the roles of women in modern Cameroon. Traditionally, the kind of education associated with acquiring knowledge (ritual knowledge) for public affairs was controlled by older men who gradually transmitted it to younger men as they grew older. The advent of colonial rule in the late-nineteenth century shook the foundation upon which traditional society stood and cast in doubt many social conventions. Indigenous education was one of the casualties of colonialism.

Two Christian missionaries<sup>25</sup> who preceded the colonial officers to Cameroon laid the groundwork for western education in the country.<sup>26</sup> The first western school was introduced by the British Baptist missionaries in 1843.<sup>27</sup> This new form of education was not open to everyone, just a select few natives whom the missionaries thought essential to facilitating their evangelical enterprise. At first, the majority of women were excluded from attending school,<sup>28</sup> even though one of the pioneer indigenous educators was a woman.<sup>29</sup> When women were later allowed to enroll, the school system was segregated along gender lines with women directed toward home economics. Notwithstanding, the introduction of western education in Cameroon considerably eroded the traditional importance of ritual knowledge, especially in those localities where colonial missionary and political influences were entrenched.

The first women to benefit from western education in Cameroon were not of royal blood, but the daughters of Africans who had settled in the vicinity of mission stations and centers of colonial government. These women, most of them born in the late-1920s and early-1930s, constitute the first large number of African women to benefit from western education in Cameroon. Had they been born earlier, they would probably have lived the lives of their mothers and grandmothers who attended to specific social functions, at the service of their husbands, fathers, and other menfolk in the domestic sphere. But their childhood coincided with the pressures of the early 1930s, that emanated from the League of Nations Mandates Commission, which compelled the Mandatory Powers of Britain and France to design measures to improve the condition of Cameroonian



women.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time American and French Protestant missionaries in Cameroon were determined "not to capitulate to African opposition or lethargy in regard to the general education of girls."<sup>31</sup> These Protestant missionaries are said to have begun the first mixed classes in primary school, setting in motion a revolution that would eventually overturn the traditional system of education. Apparently for this generation at least, by the time the women attained school age, the resistance of African parents toward education for their daughters had slightly abated. The introduction of western education became a factor of social mobility that has since provided both men and women of all social categories with the opportunity to move beyond the constraints of their birth. Apart from her sex, no longer would a poor but intelligent Cameroonian girl follow the path of her mother and grandmother before her. If the success of a privileged woman is insured by the circumstances of her birth, that of the underprivileged could also be greatly enhanced by her ability to learn, determination, perseverance, and hard work.

Of Privilege and Social Edge: Gwendoline Burnley<sup>32</sup>

There are few Cameroonian women whose careers parallel that of Mrs. Burnley. But there are also very few whose social backgrounds are comparable to hers. A mother of four, Mrs. Burnley is married to Mr. Robert Efesoa Gotthilft Burnley, the country's first indigenous agronomist. Her parents, Mr. Ernest Kofele Martin and Mrs. Hannah Nene Martin, had both received some western education. Mr. Martin was an Education Officer with the colonial government and Mrs. Martin was a teacher with a passion for early childhood learning. When Mrs. Martin retired from government service as a headmistress, she opened her own nursery school now a primary school in Limbe. Upon retirement from the service of the colonial government, Mr. E.K. Martin entered party politics. As Secretary of Dr. E.M.L. Endeley's Kamerun National Congress (K.N.C.) party, Mr. Martin represented the Victoria South constituency in Parliament in the multi-party, pre-independence Southern Cameroons.

Born into a privileged family, Mrs. Burnley cultivated the passion for public service very early in her life. This passion was bolstered by her one year experience as a clerk with the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), following graduation from high school. During our interview Mrs. Burnley observed that, "This experience opened my eyes to social problems." While studying in England she became active in student politics, and served as secretary in three students organizations: Nigerian Students Union, Cameroon Students' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, and the African Society of Kings College, New Castle Upon Tyne.

Gwendoline Etonde Burnley, was born on February 29, 1932, at Buea. She is the first English-speaking Cameroonian woman to earn a university diploma. Mrs. Burnley received the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1958 from the University of Dunleirn, England, and took a one year post-graduate diploma course in social welfare at Den Haag University in the Netherlands. She returned to Cameroon in 1959 and joined the West Cameroon civil service as an education officer. Posted to the Government Teacher Training College (GTTC) in Kumba as the government's first African woman education officer, Mrs. Burnley encountered a lot of opposition from both European and African

male teachers. The whites were opposed to having her because she was an African, and the blacks were equally adamant because she was a woman. But Gwen Burnley discharged her functions as best she could. Her father, who was then heading the school, provided her the needed moral support.

In 1961 Mrs. Burnley was appointed an Administrative Officer and she eventually rose to the rank of Senior Administrative Officer in 1963. She was promoted to the rank of Principal Administrative Officer in 1968. Other positions held by Mrs. Burnley in the West Cameroon government include lecturer, then principal of the Clerical School in Buea; and Secretary of the Public Service Commission, a position she maintained for three and the half years.

Mrs. Burnley's promotions did not come easily. She had to fight her way up in the midst of chauvinists. In 1963, out of 31 African Senior Administrative Officers in the West Cameroon Civil Service, only three were women--Mrs. Burnley, Mrs. G.S. Endeley, and Mrs. M.S. Nchami, all of whom were employed in 1959. Each time promotions were made, all three women were conveniently often overlooked. Men who joined the civil service much later were promoted over them, and the women could not rise above the position of Assistant Secretary.

Although "the constitution did not discriminate against women," Mrs. Burnley argued in a petition she wrote to the Prime Minister's Office in 1963, "the application of promotions discriminated against them." This sentiment was repeated in a paper she gave in 1989, at a Ministry of Social and Women's Affairs seminar on "Appropriate Technology for Women." Gwen Burnley told the seminar participants that:

...in our society, you all know, women are property. One man, well known in our community, referred to his wife as 'it'. 'I bought it with my money,' he said. No one, not even women themselves see anything wrong in sex discrimination. Many who condemn racial discrimination, cultural discrimination, and social discrimination or class distinction, see nothing wrong in sex discrimination.<sup>33</sup>

Unwilling to countenance this form of discrimination, Mrs. Burnley asked her female colleagues to join her in protesting the selective promotions system which favored men. When her colleagues proved hesitant and tried to dissuade her from rocking the boat, Mrs. Burnley went it alone. She collected the necessary information, compiled a list of the 31 senior African administrators, including dates of hire and promotions. She then wrote a petition to the Prime Minister protesting sex discrimination in the granting of promotions. Mrs. Burnley's spirited effort won not only her own promotion but also those of her colleagues who had refused to join her in the protest action.

In 1968 Mrs. Burnley left her administrative post to become a politician. Her involvement in politics was not by her own volition but by co-optation, that is, recruited by the Cameroon National Union (C.N.U.) party. As an administrator, during her spare time Mrs. Burnley engaged in volunteer work, a passion she developed from her mother, Mrs. Hannah Nene Martin, a voluntary organizer and founder of the Southern Cameroons Red Cross Society. Mrs. Burnley, along with a group of other volunteers, constructed



and equipped the Bokwango Health Center and Maternity, and started work on the Bolifamba clinic.

Mrs. Burnley also organized social and sports clubs for women and children, created an awareness campaign and toured with a Mobile Women's Exhibition throughout the territory. A collaborative endeavor with Mrs. Anna Foncha, wife of Mr. J.N. Foncha, the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, resulted in their organizing leadership workshops for the leaders of women's groups whom they had identified during the tour. Regular meetings with these groups led to the formation of the West Cameroon Council of Women's Institutes, which later became affiliated to the Associated Country Women of the World. The Women's Institutes raised money and built the first Nursery School in West Cameroon, now called the Buea Government Nursery School. In October 1965, Anna Foncha, President of the Women's Institutes, and Secretaries Gwendoline Burnley and Dorothy Atabong visited London by invitation of the London based National Federation of Women's Institutes.<sup>34</sup>

It was while Mrs. Burnley was doing volunteer work that she caught the attention of the political leaders of West Cameroon, who asked her to apply for nomination on the first C.N.U. party list. Even though Mrs. Burnley declined to do so, they went ahead and nominated her against their own electoral rules. She was already a senior administrative officer and had just been appointed Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Interior, after having served as Secretary of the Public Service Commission where she was the only woman head of department. Mrs. Burnley resented this interruption to what she considered a brilliant professional career. She could not but oblige, however. During President Ahmadou Ahidjo's days,<sup>35</sup> nobody could publicly object to serving the country when called upon. For Mrs. Burnley, it was a "brain drain" to leave her professional job and serve in parliament where most of the members were grades three or two teachers. Nevertheless, following what she calls "my conscription" into politics, "I developed enthusiasm when I realized how effective I could be."

In 1968 Mrs. Burnley was elected to the West Cameroon State Legislative Assembly, where she served until 1972 when the unitary one-party State, the United Republic of Cameroon, was created. Mrs. Burnley became a member of the National Assembly in 1973 and was returned to the Assembly several times till 1988 when she was defeated in the first partially democratic legislative election in Cameroon since September 1, 1966, when the C.N.U. party had become the sole political party of the country.<sup>36</sup>

In 1975 Mrs. Burnley was appointed a member of the Cameroon delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. This appointment came immediately following her return from Mexico City where she served in the Second Committee of the International Women's Year Conference, which drafted the Resolutions of the Women's Year United Nations Conference. As Cameroon's first delegate in the Third Committee of the United Nations, "to my greatest surprise, being that this was my first U.N. General Assembly experience, I was elected 2nd Vice President of the Committee and spokesperson for the African Group." This humbling experience in the long political career of Mrs. Burnley, stands out in her memory. Though out of active politics at the time of our interview, Mrs. Burnley was still the Chairman of the National Advisory Board for the Advancement of

Cameroon Women (NABACW).

Constituted in May 1984 by Presidential decree<sup>37</sup> under the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the purpose of the Board was to examine matters relating to the vocational training of women in general, and any issues concerning women's status. The Board makes recommendations to the government concerning the economic, social and cultural advancement of women, and proposes to the government any activity or program designed to ensure the maximum participation of women in the development of Cameroon.<sup>38</sup>

Of Hardwork and Some Luck: Dorothy Njeuma<sup>39</sup>

The positive influence of western education on the prospects of modern Cameroonian women cannot be fully illustrated than with reference to a quiet, intelligent young woman who rose to the apex of the Cameroon political system at the age of 32. She had neither political connections nor political aspirations. She did have a good "bookish" mind, that is, intellectual prowess, an informed set of parents, and some luck.

Dr. Mrs. Dorothy Limunga Njeuma was born into a family of educated parents<sup>40</sup> in Buea on June 26, 1943. Her father, Mr. Rudolph E. Efange, now retired, served as postmaster with the British colonial government in the Cameroons; and her mother, Mrs. Dora Efange, nee Eko, also retired, was a school teacher. Dorothy Njeuma is married to Professor Martin Z. Njeuma, an historian at the University of Yaounde, and is the mother of two children.

The rise of Dr. Njeuma is linked to the fact that her parents were educated, well informed, and conversant with the rapid developments that were taking place in Cameroon when she was still pursuing secondary education in Nigeria.<sup>41</sup> After primary education at the Government Primary School in Buea from 1948 to 1955, Dorothy Efange was admitted into Queen's School, Enugu, Nigeria. From 1955 to 1960 she took a secondary education course, and proceeded to qualify for a high school diploma at the same school from 1960 to 1962.

The big break in Dorothy's life, an event she remembers vividly to this day, occurred in August 1962, when she returned home from Enugu on holidays. It was the rainy season. Generally, Cameroonian students studying in Nigeria did not come home because the vacation was only a month long and the roads were usually in bad shape. But for reasons unknown to her, Dorothy decided to brace the trying journey home that holiday period. She arrived home late Friday evening and before she even had time to rest, her father informed her that there was a scholarship examination the next morning in Buea for young people to procure scholarships to go to the United States.

Dorothy, who had never given a thought of ever going to the United States, took the chance, wrote the examination and passed. That same month she left Cameroon for Pembroke College of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, as an ASPAU<sup>42</sup> scholar. At Pembroke College Dorothy majored in biology, receiving the Bachelor of Science degree in 1966. From 1966 to 1970, she was enrolled in the Ph. D. program at University College London, where she received a doctorate in Zoology in 1970 at age twenty-seven.

Mrs. Njeuma and her husband returned to Cameroon in 1970. Her charmed life continued as she rose to the top of Cameroon's public life. In 1970 she was appointed



lecturer in the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde, when Dorothy Njeuma was suddenly catapulted to the position of Vice Minister of Education. The university had just completed final examinations at the end of June, 1975. As national treasurer of the Table Tennis Federation, Mrs. Njeuma was tending to final arrangements for her team's trip to Lagos, Nigeria, to participate in an African Table Tennis Tournament, when her life suddenly took a new turn:

On that Monday, June 30th, I had gone to the market to buy some things for my personal use and for our team. When I returned home at 12:30 p.m., I met a security officer posted at my door. He handed me a note from the President. The note said that the President would like to see me at 12:00 p.m., and here I was... 12:30 p.m. My first reaction was to run through my mind what I may have done wrong. I had never met the President in person and did not know him. I could not understand why he wanted to see me.

I discussed the matter with my husband, got dressed up and left for the presidency with the guard. We arrived there at 12:55 p.m., and five minutes later I was received by the President.

The President wanted to know where I had been all morning. I told him what I had been doing. He then said that he did not know me but had decided to appoint me his Vice Minister of National Education. I hesitated for a few seconds, thought over the proposition, and then thanked him--promising only to do my best.<sup>43</sup>

Appointed at 32 years of age, Mrs. Njeuma held her new position from 1975 to 1985. Nevertheless, she does not consider herself a politician. Not only was she not inclined to politics, but she remembers the President reminding them during cabinet meetings that he (President Ahidjo) was the only politician. At present Dr. Njeuma is the Director General of the University at Buea.<sup>44</sup> She maintains that her profession is university lecturer and administrator, not politician. During our discussion Dr. Njeuma said that she had never experienced any incident of sex discrimination in her life, but she was quick to add that, "perhaps it is because she's been lucky not to be exposed to it." She thinks she is very lucky to have had parents who encouraged her to pursue further education beyond the primary school level as well as a supportive husband. Dorothy Njeuma also notes that some of the bright boys and girls she attended primary school with did not go any further. "It was not because they were less intelligent. Rather, I think it was because they lacked the kind of encouragement they needed."

Of Determination and Overcoming: Susannah Mondoa

Mrs. Susannah Ngonsu Mondo, nee Edimo, was born to Hogba Edimo and Sophie Ngomune on March 9, 1933. Susannah Edimo was the second of three daughters. The Edimos were subsistence farmers without formal western education and, under the existing conditions of British colonial rule when Susannah was born, the family was underprivileged. In the context of traditional society, Susannah would have wound

up like her mother, a small trader and subsistence farmer in Buea Town were it not for the older woman.

While Mr. Edimo, a traditionalist in the extreme sense of the word, wanted to see his second daughter grow up and get married, which was the normal future prospect of girls in those days, Mrs. Edimo resolved to make an educated woman out of Susannah. Like most fathers of his time, Mr. Edimo was adamantly opposed to Susannah attending school, primarily because he wanted her to help with work on the farm and at home.<sup>45</sup>

Cameroonian husbands were still all-powerful while Susannah was growing up. The men were lords and masters of their homes, their orders were the law by which the family was governed, and it was unthinkable for wives to openly defy their husbands' orders. However, women circumvented this strictness by applying subtle strategies as means to the attainment of desired ends.

Mrs. Edimo's greatest desire was to have her daughter educated. What she saw in her daughter, her husband could not or would not see. Mrs. Edimo contrived a strategy, which amounted to a defiance of Mr. Edimo's edict, with a view to realizing her objective. She secretly registered Susannah at the Buea Government Primary School, bought her a school uniform and hid it from her husband. Every morning when Mrs. Edimo left for her farm, she took Susannah with her on the pretext that her daughter was going to help with farm work. But no sooner were mother and daughter out of sight of the house, than Mrs. Edimo lead Susannah into a neighbor's house, had her change from her farm clothes into her school uniform, and sent her off to school. After school Susannah changed into her farm clothes, joined her mother on the farm, and mother and daughter walked home as if they had both spent the whole morning engaged in farm work.

This strategy was skillfully deployed by Mrs. Edimo to avert an open confrontation with her husband, and not because she was afraid of Mr. Edimo.<sup>46</sup> The prevailing social conventions seemed to sanction this form of subtle defiance as opposed to open defiance.<sup>47</sup> The maintenance of peace and tranquility in the family was more important than feminist confrontation. Mrs. Edimo derived the strength to carry out this scheme from the fact that she was convinced of the propriety of her actions, and hoped that Mr. Edimo would eventually come to that realization.<sup>48</sup>

After Susannah completed her primary education in 1948, she could not go to secondary school because there were no facilities available for girls in the British Cameroons. Miss Edimo eventually developed an interest in teaching and in 1949 she was sent to Nigeria, where she enrolled in the Women's Teacher Training College at Shagamu, Western Nigeria. In 1951 she obtained the Teachers' Grade III Certificate and returned to teach in Cameroon. Three years later, Miss Edimo enrolled in St. Agnes Training College at Ikeja-Lagos, Nigeria, and took a year-long course leading to the Teachers' Grade II certification.<sup>49</sup>

Upon completion of her training at St. Agnes College, Miss Edimo went back to Cameroon and continued her teaching at Muyuka. During this period she met Mr. James Heinrich Mondo, a pharmacist. They got married in 1958 and began a new family. An avid reader and woman of uncommon intelligence, Mrs. Mondo was encouraged by her



husband and friends to write the university entrance examination. She studied at home for the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A-Level) examinations toward university entrance, while teaching and caring for her family.<sup>50</sup>

Mrs. Mondoia succeeded at the examination and from 1962 to 1964 took a course leading to a first degree in social studies at the University of Ghana Legon, Accra. Upon completion of her studies at the University of Ghana in 1964, Mrs. Mondoia returned to her country and joined the West Cameroon Ministry of Education. She was appointed Assistant Secretary in the Cultural Delegation and held that position from 1964 to 1971.<sup>51</sup> During this period Mrs. Mondoia enrolled at the Buea Linguistic Center, where she read French as one of the pioneer students.<sup>52</sup>

From 1971 to 1974 Mrs. Mondoia took a study leave from her job in order to pursue further studies in the United Kingdom. She earned a Higher Diploma in Education from Birmingham University in 1972, and proceeded to the University of Manchester where she took a course in Comparative Education and earned a Master of Arts degree in 1974.<sup>53</sup> When she returned to Cameroon in 1974, Mrs. Mondoia was appointed to the post of Assistant Cultural Delegate of Education of the South West Province.

A young girl, whose father was opposed to her receiving western education, had risen to the position of second top-ranking education administrator in one of Cameroon's seven administrative provinces,<sup>54</sup> and her father was very proud of her. Mrs. Mondoia began her career with the West Cameroon Civil Service in 1961 as a domestic science teacher at the Victoria Domestic Science Centre. In February 1965 she was promoted to Executive Officer in Education and, by a Ministerial decision of September 1969 Mrs. Mondoia was designated Secretary of the Scholarship Board for West Cameroon. In 1975 Mrs. Mondoia was promoted by a Prime-Ministerial Order to the post of Assistant Provincial Delegate of Education, South West Province--the office she held until her death on November 1, 1986.<sup>55</sup>

Mrs. Mondoia's career advancement was not as smooth as it might appear. The concomitant problems of being a woman in a male-dominated society and of having parents who originated from among an ethnic group not located in the South West Province, within the context of a multi-ethnic polity that follows the logic (or illogic) of gender and ethnicity in determining who gets what, when, and where--weighed adversely on her prospects of rapid advancement.

The Cameroon ethnic policy<sup>56</sup> is having a detrimental effect on the development of the country. It discriminates against its greatest asset: human resource(s). Since President Ahidjo's time, the government policy for allocating high political and administrative posts was based on proportional representation along ethnic and regional considerations. The policy has been continued under President Biya. Appointments are not made on the criterion of competence alone. Rather, ethnic origin plays a disproportionately determining role in almost all appointments.

Those whom the geographical accident of birth has located in regions other than those of the ethnic groups to which they belong, are automatically disadvantaged. By excluding them from positions of power and authority, the government has created a situation tantamount to an internal brain waste.

Whatever the desired effect of this "ethnic policy", it has increased or created more

problems among the ethnic groups of Cameroon than it has solved. Ndiva Kofele-Kale has noted the gravity of the policy: this ethnic arithmetic formula "has not attenuated ethnic differences but has led to their blossoming: Firstly, "in each ministry, preferential treatment in hiring and promotion is given to members of the minister's ethnic group." Secondly, the policy "encourages a form of laissez-faire development that can best be characterized as 'helter-skelter'." For example, development projects are assigned to areas where they are least needed and can least be economically justified. The major consideration in "deciding where critical infrastructural development should be undertaken appears to be the ethnic origin of the minister."<sup>57</sup>

Many times Mrs. Mondoa was approached for political appointments which she gracefully turned down in a gregarious and disarming manner, befitting this woman of quiet confidence, that made even the politicians happy at their failure to persuade her.<sup>58</sup> Her attitudes toward politics was probably shaped by her early experiences when she returned from Ghana. When it was learned that the government was about to appoint her to the post of Assistant Cultural Delegate of West Cameroon, many individuals, among them colleagues and friends, wrote petitions protesting her appointment. They argued that Mrs. Mondoa was not ethnically from West Cameroon. This argument was spurious. For Mrs. Mondoa was not only born in Buea and spoke the indigenous language, but was married to an indigene.<sup>59</sup>

Heart-wrenching for Mrs. Mondoa, she decided to shun politics and made her family (consisting of her husband, seven children and the extended branch of it) and her work her priorities. Her passion for her educational work was affirmed by Mr. F.M. Johnson, who observed that, "no matter how much she had done, she was always ready to do more."<sup>60</sup> An exceptional human being, at her death in 1986 Mrs. Mondoa's funeral bore testimony to her life, reflecting the honor Filomina Steady has aptly described in reference to the Creole:

The greatest honor a Creole can receive after death is to be laid out in church and to have a well-attended funeral spilling over into the churchyard and adjacent streets. A cortege of association members in uniform marching at a woman's funeral procession is testimony of a life well-lived as a Christian."<sup>61</sup>

The government also paid homage by initiating a 21-gun salute which set the funeral procession, consisting of a cortege of cars three miles long by some accounts, that accompanied her remains from Douala to Buea. Her funeral was attended by two bishops, two monsignors, ten priests of the Roman Catholic faith, nearly the entire population of Buea (including the sick and infirm) and by friends and acquaintances from all over the country. Laid out in church, and later at her home in Buea, Father Jan Molenaar spoke her eulogy in these words:

And this is how I will remember her in my heart: tall, honest and upright, an outstanding sight in the world that is so full of crookedness and swaying with the wind. She was an asset to the husband, a very devoted mother



indeed to her children, always concerned for their welfare. Only the best was good enough for them. An excellent administrator in her job, practical and intelligent. A faithful Christian in her church, ready to play her part at any time. In all this she stood tall and straight, saying what had to be said, doing what had to be done without fear or favour.<sup>62</sup>

She is remembered fondly by many as a woman who was gifted with a personality that exuded happiness.<sup>63</sup> One woman who knew her said that "Mrs. Mondoia was a beacon and an exemplar. The way she held herself, her conduct and comportment, motivation and integrity, influenced me to come to the United States for further studies."<sup>64</sup> Given her humble beginnings and the contribution that she eventually made to Cameroon's educational system, Susannah Mondoia's life holds a promise to many young disadvantaged Cameroonian girls.

The lives of Gwendoline Burnley, Dorothy Njeuma, and Susannah Mondoia--used here to illustrate how western education has altered the traditional roles of women in Cameroon--reflect the social circumstances in which many young Cameroonian women find themselves. Dramatic changes wrought on Cameroonain society by the incidence of western education have alleviated traditional constraints to women's presence in the public sphere. It is hoped that this process will continue as Cameroonian women persist in their pursuit of western education (a new form of knowledge introduced in their country barely a century and the half ago), resulting in substantial social mobility for them at all levels.

#### NOTES

1. Jean-Claude Barbier, "Mimboo, reine d'Asem," in Jean-Claude Barbier, ed., Femmes du Cameroun: Meres pacifiques, femmes rebelles (Paris: Orstom-Katharla, 1985), 133-150.
2. Bertrand M. Masquelier, "Women's constitutional role in politics: The Ide of West Cameroon," in J.-C. Barbier, ed., Femmes du Cameroun (1985), 105-118.
3. See Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation," in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 45-58.
4. See Emmanuel Konde, "Reconstructing the Political Roles of African Women: A Postrevisionist Paradigm" (Boston University African Studies Center, Working Papers in African Studies No. 161, 1992), 2 and 5.
5. Traditional society refers to forms of social organization and practices which overlap the precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods of Cameroon's history.

6. Makhoba Maloba, "Education of Women as a Factor in National Development: An Integrated Approach," in Gerard M. Ssenkoloto, ed., The Role of Women in the Process of Development (Douala: Pan African Institute for Development, 1983), 137.

7. Ibid., 139.

8. See Helen Callaway, "Indigenous Education in Yoruba Society," in Godfrey N. Brown and Mervyn Hiskett, eds., Conflict and Harmony in Education in Tropical Africa (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 32; Edwin W. Smith, "Indigenous Education in Africa," in E.E. Evans-Pritchard et al., eds., Essays Presented to C.C. Seligman (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1934), p. 324; Simeon H. Ominde, The Luo Girl: From Infancy to Marriage (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1952); and Hilda Kuper, The Swazi: A South African Kingdom (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1964).

9. See F.L. Bartels, "Akan Indigenous Education," in Godfrey N. Brown and Mervyn Hiskett, eds., Harmony and Conflict in Education in Tropical Africa (1975), 68-70.

10. See M.A. Fadipe, The Sociology of the Yoruba (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), 111-113; Solange Falade, "Women of Dakar and the Surrounding Urban Area," in Denise Paulme, ed., Women of Tropical Africa (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 217-229; and Monique Gessain, "Coniagui Women (Guinea)," in Denise Paulme, ed., Women of Tropical Africa (1963), 17-46.

11. Jane I. Guyer, Family and Farm in Southern Cameroon (Boston: Boston University African Research Studies No. 15, 1984), pp. 18-19.

12. Michael L. Burton, Lilian Brudner, and Douglas R. White, "A Model of Sexual Division of Labor," American Ethnologist 4 (1977): 249.

13. Judith K. Brown, "A Note on the Division of Labor by Sex," American Anthropologist 72 (1970): 1077.

14. Jane I. Guyer, "Food, Cocoa, and the Division of Labour by Sex in Two African Societies," Comparative Studies in Society and History 22 (1980): 356.

15. Christraud M. Geary, "On Legal Change in Cameroon: Women, Marriage and Bridewealth." Working Papers in African Studies No. 113. (Boston: Boston University African Studies Center, 1986): 4.

16. Not only was this view confirmed to me on numerous occasions during my dissertation field research in Cameroon in 1989, but I encountered several women in far-flung areas of the southern part of the country such as Yaounde, Douala, Limbe, and Bamenda who employed this form of reference to their husbands.

17. Jeanne K. Henn, "Peasants, Workers, and Capital: The Political Economy of Labor and Incomes in Cameroon" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978), 67.

18. Maurice Doumbe-Mouloungou, Les Coutumes et le droit au Cameroun (Yaounde: Editions CLE, 1972), 41.

19. Ibid., 42

20. Op. cit., Emmanuel Konde, "Cameroonian Women in National Politics Since the Second World War, 1945-1985: An Historical Study of Women and Politics in a Male-Dominated Society" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1991), 61.



21. An important reason why women were made to pass from under one male authority to another throughout their lives in precolonial traditional society was probably linked to the fact that there were no social mechanisms for sustaining women who were free. Women neither inherited property nor woned houses and land. To survive, the women had to have a house and some land to cultivate food crops. Since it was the men who inherited both houses and land, women could have access to these only through the men.

22. See Judy C. Bryson, Women and Economic Development in Cameroon (Yaounde: USAID, 1979).

23. Jane I. Guyer, "The economic position of Beti widows, past and present," in J.-C. Barbier, ed., Femmes du Cameroun (1985), 315.

24. Cameroon Tribune (French edition), 19 Octobre 1989, 2.

25. These missionaries, the Rev. John Clark and Dr. G.K. Prince, were sent to West Africa by the London Missionary Society in 1840. They landed in Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea) in January 1841, and later that year journeyed across the strait in the tiny boat of goat trader to Douala (Cameroon). See J.-R. Brutsch, "Fernando Po et le Cameroun," Etudes Camerounaises 43-44 (Mars-Juin 1954): 71.

26. See Norman Aste Horner, "Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions Among the Bantu of Cameroun: A Comparative Study" (Ph.D. diss., The Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1956); and Solomon Nfor Gwei, "Education in Cameroon: Western Pre-colonial and Colonial Antecedents and the Development of Higher Education" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975).

27. Victor T. LeVine and Henri M'Ballah, "Federal Republic of Cameroon," in Helen Kitchen, ed., The Educated African (New York: Frederick Praeger Publishers, 1962), 521.

28. See Claire Robertson, "Women's Education and Class Formation in Africa, 1950-1980," in C. Robertson and I. Berger, eds., Women and Class in Africa (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1986), 93.

29. In April 1859, Miss Dibundu, daughter of Joshua Dibundu, gathered together a few children and began teaching them near the construction site of what later became the Victoria Baptist school. See Gwei, "Education in Cameroon" (1975), 33.

30. "Cameroons Under British Mandate: Measures to Improve Condition of Women," File No. 1124, Sa 1933 2, National Archives Buea.

31. Horner, "Protestant and Catholic Missions" (1956), 327.

32.32.22

Unless otherwise indicated, all the information presented in this sub-section (including quotes) was derived from interviews with Mrs. Burnley in December 1989 at her home in Limbe, Cameroon.

33. G.E. Burnley, "Status of Women" (Paper delivered at the Ministry of Women's and Social Affairs Seminar on Appropriate Technology for Women, Limbe, Cameroon, February 1989), 4.

34. Mrs. Burnley corroborated this story by providing me with documentation of their London visit, a brochure published by the Central Office of Information and Tours Facilities, entitled "Tours Program," and dated 22 September - 12 October 1965.

35. Ahmadou Ahidjo was the first president of Cameroon. He ruled the country with an iron fist from 1961-1982.

36. Cameroon was a federation of two states (East and West Cameroon) from 1961 to 1966. In 1966 all the major political parties merged into a single party, the Cameroon National Union (C.N.U.), and in 1972 the Federal Republic was transformed into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon, following the result of a May 20 national referendum. See Victor Julius Ngoh, Cameroon 1884-1985: A Hundred Years of History (Yaounde: Navi Group Publications, 1988), 268-269.

37. The NABACW was created by Decree No. 84-324, of 23 May 1984, which was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Cameroon, June 1984, 1142-1143.

38. Ministry of Women's Affairs to Mrs. Burnley, Chairman NABACW, Yaounde, n.d. (Courtesy of Mrs. Burnley).

39. This reconstruction of Mrs. Njeuma's life is based on information derived from a long interview this author had with her on 1 January 1990 at her home in Buea.

40. Categorizing and classifying families into lower class, middle class, and upper class sequence is somewhat misleading and artificial. For this form of social classification, derived from western social science, does not quite reflect African social realities. The preference here is to describe, rather than classify, human beings.

41. In 1955 there was no secondary school for women in Cameroon. The first one, Queen of Rosary College, was established in 1956 by the Roman Catholic mission. See "Holy Rosary Sisters Leaving Okoyong," Cameroon Panorama 318/319 (July/August 1988), 76; and Konde, "Cameroonian Women in National Politics" (Ph.D. diss., 1991), 110.

42. ASPAU means African Scholarship Program for American Universities.

43. Mrs. Dorothy L. Njeuma, interview with author, Buea, Cameroon, 1 January 1990.

44. The University of Buea was formerly the University Center of Buea. In May 1991 it became a full-fledged university.

45. Mrs. Sophie Ngomune Edimo, interview with author, December 1986, Buea, Cameroon.

46. It is noteworthy that some nineteenth century European travelers who observed African women's behavior misinterpreted their actions as those of beasts of burden, acting out whatever roles designed for them by their husbands. See John Duncan, Travels in Western Africa vol. I (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), 56.

47. Mrs. Edimo noted that her husband knew about Susannah attending school but pretended ignorance.

48. Mrs. Edimo, interview with author, December 1986.

49. Mr. James H. Mondo, interview with author, Buea, Cameroon, December 1986.

50. Mrs. Gwendoline E. Burnley, interview with author, Limbe, Cameroon, 31 December 1989; and Mr. J.H. Mondo, interview with author, Buea, Cameroon, December 1986.



51. Dr. Emil Mondoia (Newark, Delaware), telephone conversation with author, 28 February 1990.
52. See Cameroon Tribune, 18 November 1986, 10.
53. Idem.; and Dr. Emil Mondoia (Newark, Delaware), interview with author, 28 February 1990.
54. Up to August 1983 there were seven administrative provinces in Cameroon. These were increased to ten in 1983 by splitting of the former Centre South Province into two: the Centre and South Provinces. The former huge North Province was similarly divided up into three new provinces: Far North, North, and Adamaoua. The remaining five provinces, East, Littoral, Northwest, Southwest, and West were left intact. See John I. Clarke, "Physical and Political Geography," in Africa South of the Sahara (London: Europa Publications, 1988), 325.
55. See Cameroon Tribune, 18 November 1986, 10.
56. For a discussion of Cameroon's ethnic policy, see Ndiva Kofele-Kale, Tribesmen and Patriots: Political Culture in a Poly-Ethnic State (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 24-25.
57. Idem.
58. Mr. J.H. Mondoia, interview with author, Buea, Cameroon, December 1986.
59. Ibid.
60. Cameroon Tribune, 18 November 1986, 10.
61. "Protestant Women's Association in Freetown, Sierra Leone," in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 229.
62. "Great Catholic Educationist called 'Home'," Cameroon Panorama (November/December 1986), 8.
63. Mrs. Emilia Mossa, interview with author, Limbe, Cameroon, 31 December 1989.
64. Mrs. Grace Mikek, interview with author, Boston, Mass., 2 November 1986.