



# The Role of Women in the Political Transition of the Bamenda Grassfields Fonship Institutions in Cameroon

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**Abstract:** Women play a fundamental role in traditional political transitions in the Bamenda Grassfields Fonship institutions. Like any other political entity, this institution is subject to political transition, otherwise known as succession. Unlike democratic political transitions within modern states today, political transitions in the area of study are hereditary and founded on patrilineal or matrilineal royal succession. This paper examines the place of soft power that was invisible but very crucial during traditional transitions within the fondoms. Based on a qualitative approach, this paper adopts a historical approach with emphasis on primary and secondary sources. This paper argues that women in the Bamenda Grassfields fonship institutions can be considered what political scientists have conceptualized as deep state actors; that is, they are not visible in the political scene, but the underground role they play in influencing policies and power dynamics within and without fondom is strategic and crucial. Among the several personalities and institutions that facilitate a legitimate political transition in Bamenda Grassfields fonship institutions are women. Historically, the founding myths of most Grassfields Fondoms have generally been linked to women. Far from Western feminist assumptions, women in the Bamenda Grassfields were considered sacred beings, as they were considered the source of prosperity and the perpetuation of the fonship itself. This study refutes the feminist theory that the patriarchal nature of most African societies excludes women from politics.

**Keywords:** Fonship, Women, Political transition, Soft power, and Feminisms

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fonship is one of the most important aspects of the culture and traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields. This has been from time immemorial, where the people enthroned a successor to take over the predecessor to continue with traditional governance. Whether it was a royal or simple family succession, the role of women in the Grassfields was momentary in the enthronement of a successor. Women were not visible in the traditional scene, but they laid the foundation behind the background for a successor to be chosen. Women gave birth to successors and could easily divert the attention of the fon by indirectly telling him who she wanted to be the next of kin. They could decide the fate of the people by manipulating the fon to make decisions that would favor them, as there is a proverb in English that love is blind and because of the blind nature of love, women used their husbands to interfere in the traditional mechanism, and this role could not be underestimated because without a woman, one would not be talking about fonship; therefore, women are the main focal point to determine who could be a successor without being visible. Women are like technical advisers to their husbands in terms of decision-making, and this invisible role could either ruin traditional governance or strengthen it depending on the motive of the woman. They could influence the decisions of the fon by making him succumb to their ideology. Women are peacemakers, and their soft power plays an important role in the political transition of the Bamenda Grassfield. She was the mother of the kingdom, and through her, the land was blessed.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LEADERSHIP

Fonship in the Bamenda Grassfields was and is still part of the cultural heritage of the people that is highly cherished and respected by members of the community because it was believed that any family without a leader or a good successor to organize family matters, implement decisions, to make the family grow was leading the family to doom or catastrophe and this could bring misfortune to this family like early death thus making the family to be stagnant. In order to have good fonship system

women played a crucial role by providing successors or giving advice to the nobles who were in charge of enthroning successors in the Bamenda Grassfields. Women are the backbone of the traditional setup, and nothing could be done in the name of a fonship institution without women. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyze the crucial role women play in traditional institutions.

### **2.1. The Perspective of Soft Power, the Invisible but Very Crucial Role Bamenda Grassfields Women Play in the Political Transition**

The role of women in political transition cannot be underestimated in the Bamenda Grassfields, as they play an important role and influence fonship. For example, Ngongso was the founder of the Nso Dynasty. Even though Ngonso was the founder, she was not made fon because she was a woman. In the Tikar tradition, from where Ngongso originated, it was a patriarchal system where a princess could not be enthroned as a successor. Ngongso entered into a pact with NsoMnta, who equally practiced the same patriarchal rulership system. In this pact, it was accepted that only her first son would become Nso's first fon. Leh was the first son and was the premier fon. Ngongso is the name given to the Nso Cultural Festival in honor of the founder. Even though Ngongso was not the fon directly, she determined the pace of activities in the fonom, and through her soft power, her son was installed as the first fon of Nso. In Kom, regarding the tradition of the people during the enthronement process of the fon, he went to Efum and was received by Nafoy<sup>1</sup> standing at the center of Efum<sup>2</sup> with a basket on her head, collecting a bundle of dry sticks from the new fon and Says "Thank you my son for fetching firewood for me," which signified the fon's last filial gesture to his mother in the sense that it was his duty. The firewood was then burned by one of the elders of the Ekwi<sup>3</sup>, and the fon took his place on the throne and the King installers stepped forward in front of him and clapped as they adhered praises to him (lum-nyam, Cha muffer, Nyam abo), which means big animals and lions<sup>4</sup>. Nafoy<sup>1</sup> washed her hands, took out pounded cocoyam from her basket, and distributed it to all present. This symbolized her material care for her children, the Kom people whose essential needs were entrusted to the new fon. This shows how vital a woman was in the process of political transition in Komfonom. It should be noted that it was the sister's son who succeeded his uncle, and the word succession in Kom was used only for a sister's son who had succeeded and inherited his uncle<sup>5</sup>. If the children of the deceased accepted him as their successor, the female children of the deceased rubbed the legs of their father with camwood and the maternal family dressed him. The female children held the bag of their fathers, and they went out and moved around the courtyard. Women in matrilineal societies were more influential on issues of fonship rights than patrilineal sisters. Many people have argued that matrilineal succession places too much attention on women who are said to hold their families sacred.

After burial in Babanki, all the brothers and sisters, the children of the deceased assemble, and the successor chosen by the late man is shown to the family by the brother of the deceased. The first girl of the family shaves the head of the successor and puts him on the chair and rubs him with camwood. This is to prove that all the children have accepted him as their father in the presence of family members: there is palm wine in the pot where the female daughter takes some and puts in her father's traditional cup and hands it to the successor<sup>6</sup>. The succession process cannot go through without the woman being involved in the political transition.

Women also play a necessary role as far as the enthronement rights of a successor of the royal family in Kuk are concerned. During the process of political transition, the fon is seized and conducted by the older women<sup>7</sup> of the village, led by the senior Natum<sup>7</sup> of the Kefep Women's Society to the installer.

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<sup>1</sup>Nafoy<sup>1</sup> refers to the mother of thefon

<sup>2</sup>Efumrefers to the great shrine of the prince of Kom

<sup>3</sup>Ekwi: they are those who provided successors to the royal family, but it should be noted that it was not all the members of theEkwi

<sup>4</sup>P.N., Nkwi, *Traditional Government and Social Chang, A Study of the political Institution Among the Kom of Western Grassfields*, Switzerland, University Press Fribourg, 1976 p.29

<sup>5</sup>L.K. Ndzi "The Origin and Evolution of the Kom Matrilineal Scession " ' Avi-a-Ngvim, No 005 Yaoundé 1988.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Joseph Agu, Aged 69 Notable Babanki 25<sup>th</sup> July 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Mother of thefon

The heir is stripped naked, slapped, and covered with mud, and told that he is being given power for three reasons: to promote the fertility of women, good crops, and good hunting. After he is washed with water brought by his natum and puts a wreath of creeper around his neck, the fon is allowed to sleep over his predecessors grave “to hear the dead’ and received in a stream of visitors who come to greet him<sup>8</sup>. This is usually a week after the natum rubs him with camwood and presents him to the people and commands him to them as her child in the fons palace and on the court yard celebrations commence and the mortuary Society, Kwifon, Ndong, Njang, and the others performed; the fon is obliged to join Kefep, the most senior of the women’s societies, which is privileged to reprove and fine him should he behave inappropriately<sup>9</sup>. He promised to behave well. Once the heir apparent is approved by the King makers in Fungom and Bafmen, the older women seize and rub him with herbs and camwood.

The role of women in fonship in Zhoa is important because it is associated with the history of Zhoa. From time, immemorial women have played the final role in engendering a fon. This is because the dead of the first fon of Zhoa without a successor allowed only the daughter to have the secret of washing the fon, and when she got married, gave birth, and crowned the son as chief. During the crowning ceremony, women carry water from the stream, which is collected in a special pot that has survived for many years. The stream was a particular one situated at the center of the town, herbs were squashed, and water was used to wash the chief, indicating purification. Ululations characterize the movement of water in the pot to the palace. Without a woman, the authority of the reigning fon is questioned. Mary Ndam said:

I am the one who collects herbs needed for the washing of the fon of Zhoa. I inherited this information from my mother’s family. My mother used to do it, but when she died, it was passed over to Abengong, her maternal brother. However, when I returned to Ekona in 1987. I was given power to continue what was always done by my mother. The pot was handed to me. In the case where the chief died and a nominee was made, I had to carry water from a river running through the village, and I had to move from one town to the other with women making ululations, dancing, and shouting praises. Before this process, I had to search for herbs that were used in the process. After the palace where the cleansing is taking place, I squash the leaves in the water and use them to wash the new fon in the presence of the entire village. It is only by this process that he is empowered, and it is, therefore, the last and final act that empowers him. Though initiated in the NdownNfoit or in to the Ukum society, if this final act that I perform is not done his powers are incomplete hence only this acts endorses him with full rights and powers from women....<sup>10</sup>

The fon was installed in Bali by Lela<sup>11</sup>. On the day of the enthronement of the fon in Bali, a female fon is also crowned and without the female fon, the succession rituals of the fon are incomplete. She was known as Nfongwi and was the half sister of the fon. She had her own throne, residential quarters, and obtained free services from the women of the chiefdom. On return from the purification ceremony during the Lela festival, there is a short stop over her compound, and she feeds the population<sup>12</sup>. She plays an important role in governing women in chiefdom. In Bali, fonship rites may be done with the death celebration where the successor is handed the family cup, and the next day he is shown to the extended family. The death of the family head begins at the gate. It consists of the first round of gun firing and a long loud mournful cry from women to show that a new successor is about to be shown to the public. This is about an hour during which the successor is selected by the family

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<sup>8</sup>NAB, An Assessment Report on Fungom, p. 49

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.,pp.48-49

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Mary Ndam, Queen mother aged 59, Zhoa 24<sup>th</sup> March 2013

<sup>11</sup>Lela is an annual festival with religious political military functions to Bali. It is led by thefon and the appointees who are in three groups:the first is called Sama who are the brothers of thefon, the flag bearers or Tituwan and theGwes or spies. The installation of the fonis done bylela. Lela ensuresthat the will of the deceased fon is respected, initiates thefon in to the spirit world in its shrine and promote and protect the culture of Bali.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Ivo Ba TItaGailgaYebeti,Aged 56, Bali Traditional P.M 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015

and is shown officially for the first time when he approaches the fire gun. The successor is dressed in white mourning attire and escorted to the gate by family members, both men and women<sup>13</sup>. Without women, the process of political transition could not have been accomplished.

Kesu's descendants founded Esu with two wives. He stated that after his death, the first wife's son became the chief. After his departure, the son of the second wife took over, and there were, therefore, changes. When the chief was no longer the eldest member of the family, the next chief was produced. Women throw stones and rub him in mud the last time before his enthronement. On a certain day, youths and adults gather at the inner court of the palace, and the successor is presented by the eldest son, who calls all to accept him as their chief. On his acceptance, all pay respect and homage to him; he is then asked to pour libations and address the people<sup>14</sup>. Women rub the fon with camwood, stay indoors for a month, and are fed special food rituals. Without women, the process of political transition is incomplete and therefore the fon would not have full powers to be regarded as the fon and spiritual leader of the land, which could bring misfortune to the land.

In Mankon, during the installation of the new fon, the new king's mother acquired the title *mafor* when she dies her successor is chosen from among the reigning fons' sister or daughter<sup>15</sup>. The successor is introduced to the kingmakers in Mankon by the *takumbeng* and *kwifo*<sup>16</sup>. During the enthronement of the fon in Mankon, the *takumbeng*<sup>17</sup> also played an important role: an announcement of a *takumbeng* lodge carrying a bundle of five spears stepped forward towards the listening people, calling out to them as another may beat a small double gong with raffia clapper, and told them to accept greetings from the *kwifo*, which also wished good tidings to all throughout the land that has a new father. She ended up pronouncing the name of the new fon as selected by the *takumbeng* members from the ancestors' nomenclature and assured the citizens that their father had returned<sup>18</sup>. The role of women in the Bamenda Grassfields cannot go without appraisals; they are those who are at the center of events as far as the change of power is concerned.

### **3. THE ROLE PLAYED BY WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Ongoing adherence and cultural stereotypes toward male-dominated traditions in fonship succession do not generally mean that women are not important in matters of traditional governance. Women are represented in the traditional administration by queen mothers. She is the mother of the land and her status is protected by the laws of the land. The Queen Mother in the Bamenda Grassfields is respected and given special treatment<sup>19</sup>. She plays a vital function in traditional governance, in diplomacy for instance, the queen mother is a close confidant and adviser to the fon and may influence the fon's decision in key issues affecting the life of the fonom. She is not allowed to shake hands and is identified by cowries which are worn on their hand and in some parts of the Bamenda Grassfields on their heads. The Queen mother receives honour and respect than any other woman in the fonom. In the Bamilekefonom, being the Queen Mother is the most elevated position for the woman in the society<sup>20</sup>. She stands like a mother to the fon, all the children in the palace, women in the palace and the whole fonom, she is responsible for taking care of them as a mother takes care of her children. The Queen Mother is the first woman in the society and she has a lot of work in the palace and in the

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<sup>13</sup>N. Gwannua, *Cultural Encounters, Society Culture and Language in Bali Nyonga from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Bamenda, Unique Printers., pp 68-70.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with KumAcho II aged 68 Fon of Esu 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013

<sup>15</sup>*Mafor* in the Grassfields was a political position of respect and honour with great responsibility, like to advise the reigning *fon*, such responsibility could not be given to any type of woman.

<sup>16</sup>J.P. Notue and Bianca Triaca, *Arts, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom, Catalogue of the Mankon Museum*, 2005, pp. 98-99.

<sup>17</sup>It is the Female secret Society in Mankon.,

<sup>18</sup>B. Numfor "The Content and Form of Mankon Rites of Passage Songs", DIPES II Dissertation in History, ENS Yaounde., 1996, pp.32-33

<sup>19</sup>W. Tohnji Tikum Samah, Women and Chieftaincy: Some Reflections on the Evolution of the Position and Role of Grassfields Women, Cameroonl, Paper Presented on the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), Radio Programme, Woman to Woman, Thursday 31st May, 2006, p. 12. 102 A.P.

<sup>20</sup>Temgoua, Statut et rôle de la femme dans la société Bamiléké précoloniale, in J. Fame Ndongo, M. Nnomo, R. Laurent Omgba, *La femme camerounaise et la promotion du patrimoine Culturel*, Yaounde, CLE, 2002, pp. 66-80.

community at large, for example she is the one responsible for grooming princes and princesses when they are ripe for marriage, settles disputes among the wives of the fon, Solve problems between the fon and his wife, that is in case of any problem in the palace the Queen Mother is the person to solve it and she only reports to the fon when the case is above her. She is responsible for solving problems faced by the women folk in her fondom. The Queen Mother refers to the mother of the fon mere not necessarily the biological mother of the fon but she could either be her sister or her sister's daughter with good character and who is responsible<sup>21</sup>.

The Queen Mother is an important personality, and stands as the role model to every woman and through her encouragement and leadership, the women carry out a number of activities that help in the growth and stability of the society. She goes to the farm when she likes and in some communities in the Bamenda Grassfields such as Kom nobody sits on her seat. She passes her information through the eldest women in that community. She requests women in her community to help her work her farm. After working the farm, she provides them with tips out of her likeness like oil, vegetable and smoked meat, at times not from her pocket but came from the notables in her quarter or the fon provides her with meat and she never went to the stream nor is allowed to go to the farm. Everything needed by her is provided by servants in the palace. These servants are a group of women selected from the masses and they are mostly considered as foreigners who could only be useful in providing services to the royal throne<sup>22</sup>. The Mafor in Pinyin is the eldest daughter of the palace and the society and is selected and enthroned like the chief and by virtue of her office she became the highest princess with the right to assist the fon in the state cult of royal ancestors, handled only by people of royal descent<sup>23</sup>.

The Queen Mother in the Bamenda Grassfields as a whole is the mother of the fon. She is the highest woman in the society and nobody has the right to talk to her carelessly or insult her. The Queen Mother plays an important role in the Bamenda Grassfields as far as the succession of the fon is concerned. She is the caretaker of the fon and the kwifon. In Weh, only the Queen Mother washes the fon, and in some areas immediately after installation it is the queen mother who provides the fon with food to show his role as a mother and she is the only woman who sits beside the fon. She is the mother of the people<sup>24</sup>. She advises the fon. In some places in the Bamenda Grassfields, like in Nkwen she is the biological mother of the fon, in Babanki she is the sister of the fon, but in Kom she could be the mother or the sister.

She does what the mother does to the family that is; she is responsible for the entire welfare of the people. She is the mother of the women; she settles disputes amongst women and organizes them. The Queen Mother takes special care of the fon's wives and supervises his palace in his absence. She is the only woman who has prerogative of sitting side by side with the traditional political leaders of the community to discuss the politics of the state. She is the female representative in the socio-political matters. She is the coordinator of female activities and the Queen mother acts as close adviser to the fon. She heads the women's secret society. The Queen Mother is the coordinator of female activities and the spokesman for women in certain matters. In some villages in the Bamenda Grassfields, she also plays the role of feeding the guest of the palace.

Women also play an important role in traditional leadership by maintaining peace especially elderly women. In case of crisis in the community elderly women are those who mediate peace by bringing the aggressors together. According to Miriam; they elderly were respected by all and played an essential role in bringing peace in the community, that is in case of conflict, solutions are sought from them and through this elderly women, the belligerents could see reasons for cordiality<sup>25</sup>. When this proves unsuccessful they would threaten to expose their nakedness. It was an abomination in the Grassfields to see the nakedness of elderly women because this could bring misfortune to the community. In some situations the women could use their traditional society by reacting against what was not going right in their community like the takumbang in Mankon, Alu in Kom and Fumbwen in

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<sup>21</sup>Interview with AlibaMulome, Aged 74, Notable, Kom, 14th July, 2010.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Micheal, Akon, Notable, Aged 65, Kom, 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2010.

<sup>23</sup>A.S. Mafor, *The Role of the Mafor in the Mankon Society, 1970-2004*, pp. 2-4.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with InciagkomNjuh, Aged 55, Queen Mother, Weh, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2013.

<sup>25</sup>Miriam Agatha C.N., *Role of Women in Peace Building and conflict Resolution in African Traditional Societies.; A Selective Review*, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Nairobi, Kenyatta University, 2006, pp.6-9.

Babanki. Like the case of Babanki in 2004 where their fon was forced to abdicate by women for constantly violating their tradition. According to the Babanki women, they had been living under a dictatorial regime where the fon constantly took decisions that were dangerous to the people. Vugah Simon the fon of Babanki embarked on the sale of land to rich graziers and most of the parcels of land sold were own by farmers and this action brought hunger to the Babanki people since most of them depended on farming for their livelihood and also, he sold almost all the traditional artifacts which were the pride of the Babanki people<sup>26</sup>. They tried to bring him to order but he was recalcitrant and continued going against his people and in 2004 he arrested and detained some youths for stealing AlhadjiUsofuNdampullo's cows<sup>27</sup>, and they women marched to the palace and pleaded with him to intervene for the release of these youths but the fon was adamant and refused and this angered the women who assembled in their traditional secret society house fumbiwen and took a decision to take the palace under siege and through their action, the fon was ousted from Babanki. The role of the women in traditional leadership cannot be undermined because they were those who help to maintain peace and order therefore making the society to have a balance and serenity.

The women in the Bamenda Grassfields play both passive and active role in the traditional leadership. To know the secrets of the neighbouring fondoms, interchiefdom marriages are common. Despite the fact that inter chiefdom marriages were common in the area of study. It sometimes generated hatred and war and in order to come to a compromise reparations and war booties were asked to be paid by those who were the cause of the conflict. Women were given as compensation to the victims. Women were used as spies in the traditional leadership, for this reason inter chiefdom marriages experienced growth and success in the Bamenda Grassfields. Both commoners and fons in the area of study married women from foreign fondoms, for example out of the nine wives of fonTcheybo who died in 1918, five were from Akum, one from Nkwen, one from Pinyin, one from Awing and one from Meta. Similarly, among the wives of fonAngwafor III of Mankon who died in 1920, two came from Meta, one from Bafut, one from Njong, one from Nkwen and several from Nsongwa and Mbatu. Several factors were attributed to the high rate of exogamous marriages in the Bamenda Grassfields<sup>28</sup>. It was considered as a method of diplomatic alliances among independent states chiefdoms, for example a fon got married to the daughter of another fon to cement their relationship or a woman from one chiefdom was given over marriage to another fon after a period of conflict as a symbol of peace.

Eventhough their role was very important in traditional governance they were not given the ultimate right to be leaders in the traditional set up as most of them were only behind the scene without coming to the lamplight to spear head activities in the Bamenda Grassfields. Their power was limited.

#### **4. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL POLITICAL TRANSITION**

Women in Bamenda Grassfields often supported their men, even against their desire as refusal to do so was believed to be sacrilegious and punishable by death. Women were denied equal ownership rights. A woman could not be a fon or kwifon. The pervasive denial of women to be successors in the Bamenda Grassfields is regulated by their customs and traditions. Eventhough women play an important role and influence in fonship succession they cannot occupy certain positions in the traditional structure. Women were seen as weakling and as second class citizens. Cameroon Grassfields is a place where male domination in the issue of fonship is the order of the day. More to that, women were seen as property and they could not inherit land and other assets because property cannot inherit property. Fonship tended towards the assumption that men are more important than women. Women are considered as producers of the lineage. Men in the Bamenda Grassfields were seen as the owners of moveable and immovable property and assets mean while women were liability. Men were seen as a source and originator of all property which had to be preserved in the family to provide posterity and keep the veneration of its originator alive, allowing women to succeed it would likely conflict with this goal, since upon marriage their allegiance shifted to the husband's family<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup>Interview with Martin Vubanssi, Aged 80, Fon;s Father, Babanki, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2016

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Valentine Vusi, , Aged 70, Traditional Doctor, Babanki, 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2016

<sup>28</sup>T.A. Anya "The Chiefdom of Akum, a Social and Economic History, 1800-1961", PhD Dissertation in History, University of Calaba, 1990, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup>C.H Sherring and R.C Bonehill, The law and Practice of Intestate Succession., London Sweet and Maxwell, 1987. p. 164

The exercise of power over population has often been seen as affair of men in a men's world. Men have been seen and continue to be seen as the overall head of the family and communities in the traditional governance system in the Bamenda Grassfields. Few societies do tolerate women to occupy positions of relative importance<sup>30</sup>. In terms of leadership role, men were and are still appointed to occupy positions such as fons. Whether a woman is a nafoyn or mafor, she still remains to a great extent under the influence of the man. The exercise of effective authority lies in the hands of men. Therefore, the status, person and role of women are defined in relation to men's role and status. Women had access to land through male. The uninterrupted adherence to male dominated traditions therefore mean that women cannot take advantage of wide range of benefits associated with fonship, that is benefits associated with ownership and control of property e.g land and other forms of property which could be the basis for more income generation is mostly owned and controlled by the man therefore given much power and right to the men and relegating the women to the background. This has made the women to be view as inferior in the eyes of men. Succession to certain key positions like a fon is forbidden for women in the Bamenda Grassfields and many reasons have been advanced in regard to this:

A woman in her menstrual period cannot perform certain rituals and therefore cannot be a successor. According to staunch traditionalist a woman under her period would instead destroy the powers associated to some rituals and secrets of the tradition<sup>31</sup>. Women during this period were not supposed to go closer to the fon and were not also allowed to enter certain realms in the palace because this could weakened the powers of their traditions and therefore would make the fondom to be weak and the enemy could easily defeat and penetrate their fondom<sup>32</sup>. Customs and traditions did not permit women to perform spiritual sacrifice. A woman is a good thing but when it comes to certain aspects of the traditions women were not allowed to be part of it.

Women cannot be fons because they are not energetic enough to handle political power and that their role is to bear children meaning that women are not inheritors but are meant to bear children, cook for the family, take care of the family and have no saying when a man is talking<sup>33</sup>. As long as a husband's family has paid dowry to his wife's family, wives were not to gain an additional property. Women have security of land tenure only as wives or daughters and could lose access to land upon death or divorce from a spouse. Women lack self-confidence and are the weaker sex not capable or courageous to lead. Women are seen to have low self-esteem and therefore could not take up such important leadership in the traditional setting. Upon divorce, a wife could keep her own personal things like gifts and clothings but any other thing including children were owned by the man. Traditionally only men own land. In Cameroon customary law opposes equality between men and women and according to it women are defined as the property of the husband. The payment of bride price prohibits women from having rights to land independent of their relationship with their father or husband. Traditional political power like the fon requires a large family and therefore traditional rulers may marry as many wives as possible and according to tradition once a fon dies the heir takes over his wife. Most traditionalists belief that a man with many wives and children have supernatural powers like the fon, and for this reason a woman influence in fonship is not significant because a woman could not marry a woman and therefore she could not be involved in traditional political matters which were meant to be known by men. A palace without many wives is synonymous to a palace without a population. When you pass by the palace and hear voices your strength to govern your people would be high and a woman could not achieve this goal because she was not a man that could give birth to many children.

The mobility of women from father's house to husband and sometimes to other relations at divorce or death makes it that top secrets are kept away from them. Some secrets in the family are not meant to be known by women because they would get married. Women would eventually get married and if she procreates, the children would be regarded as strangers to the family especially when she gets married to a foreigner, meaning that the blood lineage of another family has been taken and handed

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<sup>30</sup>P.N. Nkwi, *Traditinal Female Military in a Modern Context*, p.1

<sup>31</sup>Interview with GodloveFuhnui, Aged 73, Notable, Nkwen, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Foshiri III, *Fon* of Bamendankwe, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2022.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Galiga Na Bisanga Aged 88, Queen Mother, Bamenda, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2022.

over power. A woman cannot be a successor because when she gets married she now belongs to the husband's family and if she is made a successor, it indirectly means that it is the husband because the man is the head of the family and she would be the one in control, meaning that he has succeeded the property of another family. This could bring chaos to the family like infertility, poor harvest and high death rate. In the Bamenda Grassfields traditional leaders may marry as many wives as they wish and according to tradition once a ruler dies the heir takes over his wives<sup>34</sup>. Traditionalists believe that men with many wives and children have supernatural powers and boast the economy. A woman as a fon won't achieve this goal because a woman could not get married to more than one man at the same time and could not give birth to many children as the men. This makes it impossible for a woman to be a fon because a palace in the Grassfields tradition is made up of many wives and children.

Cultural barriers against women leadership in the Bamenda Grassfields communities restricts them from taking leadership positions which has contributed to a sort of withdrawal syndrome on the part of the women. They are some magical powers involved in succession which are not supposed to be known by women. During succession, these rituals are usually performed by men who are nobles in the kingdom and some of the secrets especially during enthronement of the fon were known by them and even when the fon is about to journey to the world eternal, he discloses the next of kin to them and not a woman who could easily expose this secret. When a fon is about to die, he confides to the Kingmakers who would be the next of kin<sup>35</sup>. The magical powers are done in the kwifon assembly and a woman is not part of the kwifon, one could not say exactly what really happens there unless you are kingmaker or member of the kwifon society<sup>36</sup>. After all magical powers are performed on him he is looked upon as the link between the living, ancestors and the ghosts<sup>37</sup>. Even from the Bible a woman has never been a king and God made a woman from the rib of a man therefore a man always comes first even according to creation.

According to other school of thought they grew up and saw the tradition put in place by their forefathers and therefore should be respected in order to foster development of the community, preserve culture so as to avoid calamity. It should be maintained as it was because certain secrets of the society were best known by men and if they were exposed to a woman since she is the weaker sex because of anger she could destroy them and sold the secret out of the community, more to that a woman gets married and its therefore meant that if she is made a successor it means that she would transfer the property to her husband's compound. If women gain property and inheritance rights divorce would increase. Lack of support from men also discourages women to be involved in traditional leadership. Most men do not permit their wives to involve in leadership roles. The men fear to give leadership roles to women is due to the fact that the women would become very powerful and disobedient. Most men hate to be under the influence of women.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The role and influence of women in fonship succession in the Bamenda Grassfields is very crucial and could not be underestimated for without her the fon would not be crowned, women are those who give birth to successors and could easily manipulate and instigate the fon in the way they run their fons. They have the soft power to do so even though she cannot be made a fon, she can easily detect the pace of activities in the fons through her tenderness and loyalty to the fon, since she is the wife and therefore putting the village into jeopardy especially if she is doing this for her own selfish motives. A woman can easily make a fon to be powerful or powerless in the eyes of his people. Great men are brought down by women. Caution has to be taken in certain matters that concern the wellbeing of the people. Women are peace makers and they bring the family and society together therefore making it to develop. A woman is a symbol of unity in fonship succession and helps the family and the community to grow.

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<sup>34</sup>Interview with Azefer III, *Fon* of Nkewn, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2022

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Solomon Ngalm Aged 69 ShufaiNso 23 September 2016

<sup>36</sup>Interview with Jude NdeMukongMankon, Aged 70 Nurse 1<sup>st</sup> 2008

<sup>37</sup>NW/HC/ 1/BK, the *Fons* Residence, Extracted from the Core Culture of Nso 1980.



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