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Colonial Policies and Women's Participation in Public Life: The Case of British Southern Cameroons

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Abstract: Much of the literature on colonial policies towards women has highlighted the ways that these policies spread Western notions of domesticity and narrowed the space available for African women to participate in public life. Drawing from the case of British Southern Cameroons, this paper argues that colonial policies and encounters were in fact more complex. While certain policies did seek to propagate European notions of domesticity and to confine African women to the private space of the home, others opened new opportunities for education, salaried employment, and participation in women's organizations. The paper stresses that colonial encounters often had multiple, and even contradictory, effects and that African women were not merely passive subjects, but agents capable of rejecting and transforming colonial policies and ideologies that did not meet their needs.

INTRODUCTION

Colonial encounters in Southern Cameroons affected women in complex and contradictory ways. As multiple scholars have demonstrated, many colonial policies spread Western notions of domesticity, constricting the space available for women to participate in public life.¹ Other policies, however, opened new opportunities to women for education, salaried employment, travel abroad, and activism in local and international organizations. In this paper, I use the case of Southern Cameroons to demonstrate that British colonial and missionary policies did not seek *solely* to domesticate African women. Although certain colonial projects did aim to create "good" Christian wives and mothers for educated African men, others, particularly during the last decade of colonial rule, sought to promote women's participation in public life. This case study supports and extends recent, nuanced work on colonial encounters that complicates relations between Europeans and Africans, demonstrating that African women were frequently active agents, rejecting and transforming colonial ideologies that did not meet their needs.²

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DOMESTICITY: ONE GOAL AMONG MANY

Colonial encounters between African and European women have frequently been studied through the lens of domesticity. This perspective emphasizes that colonial and missionary institutions played an important role in diffusing Christianity, European languages, and Western norms throughout Africa. This focus on domesticity also emphasizes the role that colonial and mission policies played in socializing African women into European gender norms and “appropriate” forms of social organization. In general, this literature argues that European influences—including colonial administrations, missions, and informal organizations—narrowed women’s sphere of activities and increasingly confined them to the home and family.³ These influences propagated “an ideology of female domesticity that laid stress on women’s reproductive and nurturing roles above their autonomy and productivity.”⁴ The major focus of this literature is on how the colonial state and Christian missions contributed to the “housewifisation” of African women.⁵

Nancy Rose Hunt, for example, examines the links between gender and domesticity in the Belgian Congo. Describing the *foyers sociaux* established by missionaries, social-service agencies, and colonial women’s associations with the support of the Belgian colonial administration, Hunt argues that they are a key component in a “Belgian colonial project to refashion gender roles and instill a Western family ideology into African urban life.”⁶ Within the *foyers sociaux*, women participated in classes on sewing, cooking, housekeeping, and maternal hygiene. They also took part in home visits, decorating contests, graduation ceremonies, and other public rituals, all of which, according to Hunt, attempted to re-define gender roles and domesticate African women.

Similarly, Deborah Gaitskell has examined the diffusion of ideologies of domesticity through colonial and mission institutions in Southern Africa.⁷ Specifically, she has examined hostels for African women established in Johannesburg by the Anglican and Methodist churches and the American Board Mission. Gaitskell argues that these mission-run hostels sought to control African women’s sexuality, protect them from the dangers of city life, and ensure a supply of female domestic workers as the men who previously filled these positions turned to work in the mines.

Yet other work, focusing on different contexts, finds that colonial and mission influences on women are more complex, providing African women with both opportunities and constraints. Examining colonial female education in Mozambique, Kathleen Sheldon finds that despite the limitations of the domestic science curriculum emphasized at such schools, girls and women gained some valuable skills through these schools.⁸ She argues that “[c]riticism of the gender bias of [domestic science] programs ignores that some women were able to use that education to enter into new arenas of work during and after the colonial era.”⁹ Through these programs, some women became literate, gained fluency in Portuguese, and learned other skills that helped them survive in the colonial economy. Sheldon concludes:

It has been easy to critique the Portuguese colonial education system for its racism and sexism, ideologies that were central to the overall organization of the mission school system. Yet a history of that system should also include the experience of a small number of Mozambican girls who desired to attend the mission schools and who later found success as workers and professionals.¹⁰

Her findings complicate our understandings of colonial mission activities, demonstrating that while certain aspects of curriculum served to diffuse Western gender norms and confine women

to the domestic sphere, others provided women with valuable skills that opened new economic opportunities.

Other scholars make similar claims, demonstrating that colonial ideologies served both to limit and to empower women. In his study of the Friends Africa Mission in Kenya, Samuel S. Thomas argues that female students subverted the ideology of domesticity disseminated at the mission school.¹¹ These students strategically used the school to “delay marriages and control their choice of partners” and to move beyond the domestic sphere as they used the skills they learned in dressmaking, needlework, and cooking to provide an independent source of income.¹² Barbara Moss, in a study of the British Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) in Rhodesia similarly found that women transformed their women’s prayer union to better meet their needs. Moss argues that these women rejected “the dependent image that Christian missionaries and colonial authorities concocted” and created an organization that enabled them to help themselves and other women in the community “[b]y contributing labor and pooling their resources.”¹³ Thus, African women were not just passive recipients of missionary and colonial doctrine, they were also active agents who reinterpreted and reshaped these messages.

Recent scholarship has also directed its attention to colonial women, emphasizing the diversity of women involved.¹⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, for example, has argued that western women’s experience with patriarchy in their own societies led some to fight for women’s liberation in South Asia. Many of the women who traveled to Africa as missionaries, representatives of international women’s organizations, and even as colonial administrators were iconoclasts within their own societies and viewed domestic science courses not as the goal of education but as a launching pad for other work.¹⁵ Examining the work of the World YWCA in Africa, Nancy Boyd describes how Celestine Smith, an African American who briefly worked for the World YWCA in Lagos, Nigeria from December 1934 to June 1935, felt about the YWCA’s work in Nigeria:

While admitting that, to her surprise, she had enjoyed patching and darning, hemming baby clothes, covering lampshades, baking cakes for the Bishop’s tea parties, and other unaccustomed chores, Celestine Smith was appalled by Miss Bentall’s suggestion that her successor be a teacher of dressmaking and home economics. Pointing out that no one in Nigeria will freeze if she never wears a dress, she advises her to choose ‘the most *intelligent, Christian* YWCA Secretary or social worker whom you can find.’¹⁶

Smith recognized that while enjoyable and sometimes useful, domestic science should not be the sole, or even the primary, focus of the YWCA in Nigeria. European women did not always “push” domestic science classes on African women. In some cases, they responded to Africans’ desire to learn some of these skills.

Though nearly all missions and colonial governments diffused domestic ideologies, these ideologies varied in significance and affected women differently. Class, context, religion, and the colonial administration were all important variables that influenced how these ideologies affected specific women. In certain contexts, ideologies of domesticity were tempered by other policies that explicitly sought to increase women’s participation in the public realm. Moreover, African women frequently subverted these domestic ideologies, taking what was useful and leaving the rest behind.

BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES ON WOMEN IN SOUTHERN CAMEROON

Moving from general findings to a specific case, this section examines how colonial policies

affected women in British Southern Cameroons. Southern Cameroons, which the British controlled from 1922 to 1961, were comprised of what are today the Northwest and Southwest provinces of Cameroon. Specifically, the paper focuses on the last decade of colonial rule from 1950 to 1961, which differed in important ways from earlier periods. Colonial records provide evidence that British administrators strove to instill Western gender norms in African women and to mold “suitable” wives for educated, Christian men. But the records also support the claim that the British administration—at least in the terminal colonial period—sought to incorporate women more fully into public life, by providing certain African women with opportunities for education, travel abroad, and salaried employment. Still, it is important to note that significant disparities continued to exist in the kind and length of education of girls as opposed to boys. Additionally, women were recruited for a narrow range of positions within the colonial administration, and women’s associations were constructed as inherently non-political bodies. The colonial administration interpreted activities that did not challenge British colonial rule and capitalist ideals as non-political. Any activity that overstepped these boundaries was deemed political and, therefore, suspect.

Education

While early colonial policies reflected the biases of the overwhelmingly male colonial administrators, after World War II, the British colonial administration focused greater attention on the education of girls and women.¹⁷ This increased attention to girls’ and women’s education was linked to the growth in the number of female colonial officers in the British administration. The success of these initiatives can be partially gauged through school enrollment and attendance figures for girls and women in the Southern Cameroons. The complex nature of the educational system in the territory, which included government, native authority, and mission schools, presents some difficulty in gathering total school enrollment and attendance figures. Nevertheless, British reports to the League of Nations and later to the United Nations provide general data on girls’ school attendance rates in Southern Cameroons, which indicate that they increased over the course of British colonial rule. Narrative reports also indicate that these gains were not accidental but rather a part of a conscious effort to increase girls’ and women’s access to education. The 1954 report notes, for example: “Prejudice against the education of women dies hard, but the number attending school is increasing gradually throughout the territory.”¹⁸

Describing increases in girls’ primary enrollment rates between 1950 and 1980 in sub-Saharan Africa, Claire Robertson notes: “These figures indicate a strong commitment to increasing girls’ education, both before and after independence, but generally higher preindependence growth rates.”¹⁹ In part, rapid growth rates during the 1950s reflected the low levels of girls’ primary school enrollment before this period. They also, however, indicated administrations’ growing commitment to girls’ education during the terminal colonial period.²⁰

Still, even as girls’ attendance rates increased, the gains occurred overwhelmingly at the primary level, meaning that women were still greatly underrepresented in fields requiring higher levels of education. In 1949, the governor of Nigeria, who also controlled Cameroons, established a commission to examine how to train Nigerians (and Cameroonians) to take on Senior Service posts.²¹ The study placed special attention on women, noting:

It has already been recommended that women should be given equal consideration with men for any departmental scholarship and training schemes for which they may possess

the necessary educational qualifications but the Commission considers that in addition a special allocation of thirty scholarships in all should be made during the three year period to enable women to obtain qualifications overseas for posts, such as nursing, secretarial and librarian and certain other specialists appointments, in which a larger number of skilled Nigerian women officers are urgently required.²²

In 1949, Great Britain launched a special training program to increase the number of educated African women in Nigeria and the Cameroons, and in that year, three women from Cameroon undertook studies in Great Britain.²³ In 1950, five women from the Cameroons were pursuing higher education in either Nigeria or Britain due to this program.²⁴ These gains were small, and women were limited to a narrow range of occupations. One respondent, who benefited from this program, noted: "Only a few [Cameroonians] went to Nigeria for education on government scholarships. Very few girls were selected for these places."²⁵ Despite the fact that only a few women benefited from the program, its existence at least indicates that incremental changes were occurring in colonial policies towards women during the terminal colonial period. Reports throughout the 1950s state that there were a growing number of women working as nurses, teachers, and clerks. By 1958, there were 222 teachers, five nursing sisters, and 55 nurses and midwives, and "a number of women [held] clerical positions in the public service and in commercial concerns."²⁶ In this context, higher education provided by the colonial administration to a limited number of women enabled them to take on new roles outside the home.

The colonial administration also sought to eradicate practices like polygyny and bridewealth through education. British reports on the Cameroons emphasize that legal approaches to eradicating these cultural practices were largely ineffective and difficult, if not entirely impossible, to enforce. Recognizing the limits of legal strategies, the documents advocate education as the best avenue toward social change. The 1950 report notes, for example: "the development of education, notably of girls, will have as one of its results, the spreading of a higher conception of the role of women in society...which will lead them to resist the requirements and usages of old and harmful customs."²⁷ From this perspective, exposure to Western norms and values disseminated through schools and centers would lead Cameroonians to choose European over African practices. Western women, as colonial administrators, missionaries, or wives, were to serve as role models, offering African women alternatives to their traditional gender roles.

It is important to highlight that colonial agents frequently had only a cursory understanding of these cultural practices, which impeded their ability to understand the complex ways that these practices affected women's position in society. In her fieldwork in Cameroon, Fiona Bowie, found, for example, that "[t]raditional marriage with exchange of bridewealth gives women some security as a woman's husband cannot dismiss her without losing his 'investment.'"²⁸ Thus, under certain conditions, the prohibition of cultural practices like the exchange of bridewealth could render women's status in society more precarious rather than more secure.

While opening opportunities for professional employment and seeking to eradicate certain cultural practices, one must not overestimate the "liberating" potential of British educational policies. Throughout its years in the Southern Cameroons, Great Britain also employed domestic science education to create "good" wives and mothers. In this context, colonial policies did seek to spread European notions of domesticity to African women. Consider the following quotation from a 1958 colonial report:

The girls ... come in straight from the hill pagan villages, without having previously attended any kind of school, to learn simple cookery, babycraft, health and hygiene, and local crafts. At the end of their two years they can qualify for a Housecraft Certificate or, if they can read a little a Certificate of Merit. The girls usually marry at once on returning to their villages and they make excellent housewives.²⁹

The domestic science centers established throughout the colonial territory were a means through which European norms of hygiene and domesticity could be transferred to African women. The 1950 British report describes the spread of these centers:

In Bamenda province the domestic science organisation, which is in charge of a woman education officer, made good progress. During the year, at the request of the wives of the African junior staff, a woman's institute was started in Bamenda. The institute is managed by a committee of which the president is the only European, and is conducted on much the same lines as a women's institute in the United Kingdom. At its meetings, which take place once a week, the women learn sewing and knitting, play games and do useful work for the community such as mending hospital linen.³⁰

This school and others like it did not seek to encourage women's participation in the public sphere. Nevertheless, some women were able to benefit from domestic science education. As this quotation indicates, these initiatives enabled women to take on leadership roles, which could, and often did, serve as stepping stones to broader involvement in public life.³¹

Domestic science education also provided some women with an economic livelihood as enterprising students used sewing and baking skills learned in these programs to earn an income or even open a small business.³² Information on hygiene and nutrition reduced infant mortality rates and responded to real needs.³³ It would be a mistake, therefore, to believe that the African women who participated in these domestic science groups and classes unquestioningly accepted the gendered discourses offered by European women. Moreover, as noted previously, many of the European women who led these domestic science classes had ambivalent feelings towards their subject matter, viewing them as a jumping off point into broader studies. Elizabeth O'Kelly, for example, used corn mills societies in the Northwest grassfields to attract women to join women's groups but then used the groups to address a wide range of issues.³⁴

In sum, for some women, education opened new opportunities for travel abroad and professional employment. Particularly during the last years of colonialism, the British administration sought to incorporate more women into the civil service. To do so, it needed to promote women's education at the secondary and university levels. For others—and this includes the vast majority of African women—colonial educational opportunities consisted entirely of primary school and domestic science courses. Yet, even within this restricted framework, Cameroonian women were able to take the elements of domestic science courses that were useful to their lives and leave the rest behind. In some cases, they used the skills learned in these domestic science courses to enter the public sphere as entrepreneurs, teachers, and leaders of women's groups.

Women's Participation in Public Life

Certain colonial practices, intentionally or unintentionally, decreased women's influence in the public sphere by undermining their traditional bases of authority. In pre-colonial societies, women's authority stemmed from both their reproductive and productive roles. The colonial administration's introduction of cash crop agriculture and its preference for recruiting men to civil service posts during much of the colonial period undermined women's status. Other policies, however, explicitly sought to increase women's participation in public life. The 1954 report to the United Nations notes, for example: "In the Southern Cameroons there is a trend towards an increasing independence for women which has the encouragement of the Southern Cameroons Government."³⁵ To track these trends, the British colonial administration in Southern Cameroons collected data on women's participation in "native authorities," supported educational programs that aimed to prepare women to take on decision-making posts, and sponsored female participants in regional and international training programs.

The British colonial administration in Southern Cameroons sought information on women's participation in native authorities and collected data on women's representation in local government throughout the territory. Specifically, the government asked administrators across the territory to provide information on whether and to what extent women were participating in the native authorities.³⁶ Synthesizing the data, the administration found that women's participation was generally quite low. In most areas, participation in native authorities was linked to the payment of tax. Since few women paid taxes, women were, unsurprisingly, excluded from leadership positions, although there were a few exceptions. In general, only women with salaried positions or another form of easily assessable income (primarily barkeepers) were therefore eligible to vote and serve in leadership positions. In a few locations, one or two women participated on the councils on an equal capacity with men. In others areas, provisions enabled special representatives of women's interests to participate in native authorities. In Bamenda, for example, the South West and South East Native Authorities allowed for special representatives of women's interests on the councils (four women participated in the first and three in the latter). These women's representatives, however, did not have the same rights and privileges as male members. They were able to represent women in the community but not the community as a whole. In still in other councils, women had no representation at all.

In particular, women gained greater access to political roles following the adoption of the December 1957 Southern Cameroons Electoral Regulations, which allowed women to vote and to stand for election without the taxation requirements that impeded women's ability to participate in political affairs in the past. A 1957 British report on the Cameroons notes that a woman was present on the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly to represent interests of women, a woman was appointed to Southern Cameroons Scholarship Board, and in "Victoria Division each council...nominated women councilors to represent women's interests on the council and one woman [was] appointed a court member on the Tiko Council."³⁷ In addition, the report indicates that "Native Authorities continue[d] to employ an increasing number of midwives, female teachers and some female clerical staff."³⁸ A document on the participation of women in native authorities also indicates that women were taking on a broader range of occupations. They were becoming telephonists, midwives, nurses, teachers, clerics, machine operators, wardresses, and receptionists.³⁹ Although women's participation increased, it continued to lag significantly behind that of men. Moreover, many of the women who served on these councils represented "women's interests" and, therefore, did not have equal rights with male representatives. Still, these examples point to some positive developments that resulted from colonial policies that had the explicit intention of increasing women's participation in the

public sphere.

Women's Organizations

Particularly as the period of colonial rule began to draw to a close, Great Britain recognized the roles that women and women's associations could play in the territory. Circular 212/60 on "The Participation of Women in Public Life," for example, discusses how women were "increasingly participating in the social and public affairs of the community" and noted that the "development of women's clubs has been symptomatic of the new movement."⁴⁰ Britain supported the formation of women's groups in Southern Cameroons and encouraged these groups to form links with international associations. Its motives for this support are evident in the following excerpt:

[M]uch valuable work can be done through the work in each territory of women's organisations and societies. Such organisations, where sufficiently advanced, can be greatly helped in their educative task by affiliation at the territorial level with appropriate, responsible international women's organizations, such as the International Council of Women, the International Alliance of Women, the Associated Country Women of the World, and other such non-political organisations. Such affiliation may also counter any attempt by communist-dominated bodies, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) to secure allegiance of local women's organisations.⁴¹

Thus, while Britain supported the formation of women's associations in Cameroon and the affiliation of these groups with international women's organizations, it only supported certain kinds of organizations, namely non-communist and non-political ones.

Great Britain not only encouraged the formation of such groups but provided funding for representatives of "appropriate" women's organizations to attend international meetings, which enabled Cameroonian women to establish links with women in other countries. The administration chose Minerva Martins, for example, to represent the Southern Cameroons at a United Nations Regional Seminar on "The Participation of Women in Public Life" in Addis Ababa in December 1960. The conference program addressed subjects like women's participation in all levels of government, the wider implications of this participation, and the factors that facilitated and impeded women's ability to participate in public affairs (e.g. educational, economic, social, and legal issues).⁴² As one of a series regional conferences sponsored by the United Nations, it was part of a global effort to increase women's participation in public life.⁴³ An abortive coup in Ethiopia, which occurred during the conference, created unforeseen difficulties. Martins spent several days at the British Consul in Ethiopia, prompting an endless trail of paperwork between the United Nations and Great Britain over which agency should cover her additional expenses.⁴⁴ Despite this unfortunate outcome, the example demonstrates that the British colonial government took tangible steps to increase women's participation in political life in the Cameroons by providing funding and logistical support for Martins' participation in the meeting.

Missionaries, colonial administrators, and wives of colonial agents also encouraged the formation of women's groups in Southern Cameroons. British colonial reports list a number of women's organizations active in the region. These include the Young Ladies' Improvement Society (Victoria), the Women's Progressive Society (Kumba), The Ladies' Dramatic Society (Buea), the Ndola Bitu Women's Fellowship (Buea), and the Ladies' Glee Club (Mamfe).⁴⁵ The

Girl Guides, the female equivalent of the Boy Scouts linked to the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), also had a small but growing presence in Southern Cameroons. As of 1959, there were 250 registered Girl Guides.⁴⁶ Other organizations included the Red Cross, the Mothers' Union, women's sports clubs, women's farm clubs, and corn mill societies.

The 1950 report to the United Nations notes that a women's institute was established in Bamenda and functioned similarly to Women's Institutes in Great Britain.⁴⁷ Though modeled after a British organization, the women's institute enabled Cameroonian women to take on leadership positions. The Bamenda women's institute was managed by a committee of which only one member (albeit the president) was European.⁴⁸ Thus, even groups patterned after British organizations took on a life of their own and provided women with opportunities to take on leadership positions.

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN CAMEROONIAN AND EUROPEAN WOMEN

Corn Mill Societies

While men greatly outnumbered women in the colonial service, British women served as colonial agents in various capacities, particularly after World War II. Specifically, they tended to work as nurses, teachers and principals, and colonial administrators.⁴⁹ Elizabeth O'Kelly was a British colonial officer in Southern Cameroons from 1950 until 1961.⁵⁰ Upon her arrival in Cameroon, O'Kelly worked at the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) in Buea, where she planned and ran literacy classes and courses on history, geography, arithmetic, hygiene, and diet. In October 1952, she became a woman education officer in the British Colonial Service and was assigned to Bamenda Province in the Northwest grassfields. After talking with Phyllis Kaberry, an anthropologist who worked in the Bamenda area who had recently published *Women of the Grassfields*, O'Kelly learned that grinding corn was one of women's most time-consuming tasks. She created a program to provide grinding machines to groups of women. By 1960, there were 200 groups encompassing thousands of women. Most of this section draws on O'Kelly's perceptions of the corn mill societies since the colonial and expatriate records are better preserved than Cameroonian records. Unfortunately, there are scant written records of the corn mill societies from Cameroonian perspectives.

The first corn mill society was established in July 1954. By October of that year, eight societies were functioning. Groups averaged about 70 members, and each group established rules regarding the use of the corn mill, how the loan for the mill would be repaid, and members' responsibilities. O'Kelly notes that chief rule was "that membership was open to any women regardless of tribe or religion and that the movement was non-political."⁵¹ To ensure that the societies were inclusive, O'Kelly refused to provide a corn mill until it was clear that all women in the area had the opportunity to join. Describing this requirement, O'Kelly states: "Because of this the corn mill societies were perhaps the only group in the country which could claim members from every section of the community and from every tribe and religious denomination."⁵² While earlier organizational forms were primarily emerged along ethnic lines, corn mill societies brought together women of different ethnic and religious groups. For O'Kelly, "One of the greatest achievements of the societies over the years had been the gradual breaking down of the barriers between tribes so that the women worked amicably with each other regardless of their different origins."⁵³ This emphasis on "nontribalism" became even more

central to women's organizations in the immediate post-colonial period as the Cameroonian state sought to build a sense of nationalism.

While the corn mills were an important component of the new associations, they were not the sole reason for women to come together. O'Kelly targeted grassroots women who lacked a formal education and were primarily engaged in subsistence farming. Describing women's ambivalence towards colonial educational initiatives, O'Kelly observed: "women have very little free time and still less inclination to attend the already established domestic science centres which cater largely for the wives of the educated Africans."⁵⁴ This quotation highlights the class distinctions that emerged in the colonial period. At least initially, many women in the rural areas had little interest in domestic science and English classes. Thus, O'Kelly sought to use the corn mills to bring women together to address a wide variety of issues. She states:

[T]he mills were really a bait to attract women to the societies and to classes that might help them in other ways. Now that the women had more time, freed as they were from their most time-consuming task, they did begin to consider other activities. They enjoyed the sociability of gathering around the corn mill and many societies initiated regular meetings. Some women decided that they wished to learn more about cooking and making soap.⁵⁵

In a number of cases, members of the corn mill societies built community halls where they could hold these meetings and classes. These buildings were no small endeavor as they had to be large enough to hold a hundred or more women. Many groups expanded their work to include poultry schemes that relied on the bran from the milled corn to feed the chickens, fuel plantations, which increased the supply of firewood available to women, and, in one case, a cooperative shop.

By 1960, a year before O'Kelly left Cameroon, there were more than 200 corn mill societies comprising over 20,000 members.⁵⁶ The very success of the groups created some difficulties. As the plebiscite to determine whether Southern Cameroons would join Nigeria or Cameroon drew near, male politicians sought to co-opt the corn mill societies. Describing this period, O'Kelly states: "[f]eelings ran high, and as the largest organised body in the country the corn mill societies were under repeated pressure to join one or the other of the two main political parties, and constant vigilance was necessary to ensure that their neutrality was not infringed."⁵⁷ In an increasingly politicized environment, this was not the only attempt to associate women's associations with partisan goals. Emmanuel Konde argues that male politicians similarly attempted to co-opt a traditional, informal women's organization, *anlu*, in the lead up to the plebiscite.⁵⁸ In the immediate post-colonial era, the Cameroon National Union (CNU), which quickly emerged as the most significant political party in independent Cameroon, also sought to bring independent women's groups under the umbrella of its women's wing.

While the accomplishments of the corn mill societies were impressive, at times O'Kelly's discussion of them reflects the patronizing attitude towards Africans common among colonial administrators. Describing how the societies worked in a 1955 article in *African Women*, O'Kelly notes, for example: "it must be borne in mind that arrangements had to be of the simplest when all members are illiterate."⁵⁹ She concludes the article: "whilst gradually, as the women get used to the idea of meeting together, it should be possible to introduce to them a better knowledge of child welfare and hygiene and generally raise their standard of living. That this is necessary there can be no doubt."⁶⁰ These quotations reflect a top-down approach through which information is transferred from Europeans to Africans. O'Kelly also indicates that one

goal of these activities was to explain colonial practices, which Cameroonian women often viewed as arbitrary and authoritarian. O'Kelly explains, for instance, that women in the region did not respond favorably to the introduction of sanitary inspectors in local markets. These inspectors would patrol markets and destroy women's produce that did not meet their food safety requirements. While bringing a sanitary inspector to a corn mill society meeting—a suggestion offered by O'Kelly—would enable women learn more about the requirements and possibly avoid the destruction of their goods, it would not enable them to challenge the very premise of having an external authority impose new rules on food production.

The legacies of the corn mill societies, for good and bad, were far-reaching. During O'Kelly's tenure in the grassfields from 1952 to 1961, the cooperatives experienced incredible growth, encompassing thousands of women. They brought women together to alleviate one of their most time-consuming tasks, to learn new skills, and to socialize. Yet the corn mill societies also demonstrate the pitfalls of relying too heavily on a single leader and on external sources of support, two lessons that still have relevance today. While many of the organizations failed following O'Kelly's departure, others were integrated into programs organized by the newly independent state.⁶¹

The final verdict on the corn mill societies remains ambiguous. Discussing cooperative movements in the Northwest and Southwest provinces, Mark W. DeLancey writes: "A recent report blames the failure [of the corn mill societies] on the inability to increase the functions of the organizations, the lack of cooperative education, the failure to include the women in planning or management, and the inability of the members to locate spare parts for the mills."⁶² A 1977 report published by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) argues that the failure of the corn mill societies decreased women's willingness to enter similar ventures.⁶³ Community development workers provide a different perspective. They argue that the corn mill societies "had become the hub of the cooperative movement in Bamenda."⁶⁴ The success of the corn mill societies between 1952 and 1961 demonstrated that Cameroonian women could successfully form cooperatives and provided experience for the women involved. The societies' subsequent failure, though, made women more cautious of entering into similar arrangements in the future.

Women's Corona Society

Founded in 1937 as a counterpart to the male Corona Club, the Women's Corona Society was an association of women of all races connected in some way—either directly or indirectly—with Britain's overseas service.⁶⁵ The Women's Corona Society established clubs throughout Britain's colonial territories. Members engaged in philanthropic and social welfare work. The organization also provided support to women travelling to and living in Great Britain's colonial territories as well as women visiting England.

Two branches existed in the Southern Cameroons: one in Victoria (present-day Limbe) and one in Buea.⁶⁶ After Southern and Northern Cameroons came under British rule in 1922 as a League of Nations mandate territory, Great Britain ruled these territories as part of Nigeria until 1961. Thus, the Cameroonian clubs were linked with both the Corona Society headquarters in London and branches in Nigeria. According to a letter written by Mrs. J.O. Fields, the president of the Buea branch of the Women's Corona Society, the organization had two primary aims: "service and friendship between members and from members to the community as a whole."⁶⁷

The Cameroon branch undertook a number of tasks. It welcomed newcomers to the community, provided support to members, organized educational programs, and worked closely

with organizations like the Red Cross, the Girl Guides, the hospitals, and the missions. The Victoria and Buea branches held regular meetings “with a varied programme arranged for pleasure, interest, and usefulness.”⁶⁸ Specifically, members organized “how-to-do-it” demonstrations on activities like cake making, embroidery, flower arranging, and dressmaking. They also organized public events like Library Day, Botanist Day, a pet show, and the Victoria Centenary Celebration. Of note is the fact that members of the Bota club refused to help organize a beauty contest as part of the Victoria Centenary Celebration.⁶⁹ Members were willing to support alternate programs such as a children’s party, a history of Victoria, a needlework competition, a parade of traditional African dress, or a baby show, but they drew the line at a beauty contest.⁷⁰

The club’s multi-racial character provided opportunities for its African and European members to have cultural exchanges. Cooking demonstrations, for example, did not only teach African women how to cook European dishes, but also enabled African women to share their favorite dishes with European women. In some meetings, European members provided practical information to Africans travelling to Great Britain, teaching Cameroonian women how to stop a taxi, to greet people on the street, to eat with a knife and fork, to post letters, and to stand in a queue. They also shared advice on dress for Great Britain and where to purchase necessary items. At other meetings, Cameroonian women shared their cultural practices with European members. Anna Foncha, for example, gave a talk on marriage customs in Bamenda province.⁷¹ These exchanges demonstrate that the diffusion of information was not one-way—from Europeans to Cameroonians—but rather a two-way exchange, with both groups sharing information.

The Women’s Corona Society was open to Europeans and Africans, and some, primarily elite, Cameroonian women participated in the organization.⁷² Corona would, for example, invite high-profile women like Anna Foncha, the wife of the future prime minister John Foncha, to baby shows or other events to help raise the hygiene and health of lower-paid Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) workers.⁷³

Still, differences in perspective and priorities between African and European members existed, particularly as independence drew near. A letter written by J.O. Fields to Women’s Corona Society members highlights some of these differences:

Finally, I would ask, with all urgency that I can, that we all do all in our power to foster goodwill between Government and non-Government, and between black and white. Politics are often difficult to understand, and even distressing. Let us try to understand what is going on in these momentous days while Nigeria is being built up into a great country; let us not do harm by ignorance, or by suspicion, or ill will. As women, we do have great influence, we set the whole tone of our homes. Let us, as Corona members, think of this and let us be on the side of the angels.⁷⁴

Despite attempts to bridge cultural differences, Cameroonian women chose to leave the Women’s Corona Society to found their own associations as independence approached. Commenting on these developments, Anna Foncha writes:

In the past women’s activities in the social and economic field were confined to villages or at most in the tribal groups. These activities were soon to assume new faces with the broadening of society and contact with foreign air. As Cameroon was coming into its

own as recently as in 1960 a Corona Society invited a selected number of Cameroon women who enrolled as members. This society may be described as an organisation with a colonial bias, the idea having been mooted by the Colonial Office. It served the needs of expatriate women, some of whose husbands were serving in the overseas territories. It soon became evident that such a society could not serve the needs of a true Cameroon Women Society and this missing link led to the resignation of some Cameroon women from the Corona society.⁷⁵

Foncha believed that this division between expatriate and indigenous women brought Cameroonian women together and led to the creation in September 1960 of the Buea Women Social Organization. As it became clear that colonialism was coming to an end, Cameroonian women chose to form their own organizations rather than continue to participate in those created by expatriate women and linked to the colonial government.

Even as Cameroonian women rejected some of the specific organizations founded by expatriate women, in this case the Women's Corona Society, they engaged in some of the same activities. Groups like the Buea Women Social Organization took on similar projects, increasing the size and number of baby shows, giving talks in hospitals, and sharing information on nutrition and health care. Describing the activities of these new organizations, Burnley stated: "baby foods, baby clothes, and talks in hospitals—these were the kinds of things that kept these groups together."⁷⁶

Though these topics would generally fit within under the rubric of domesticity, discussions of hygiene, nutrition, and health care were far from irrelevant in Cameroonian women's lives. The baby shows taught women how to deal with fevers and other common sicknesses among infants and young children and allowed women to share information on nutritious foods that could increase the health of children. Child mortality was high at the time, and these topics responded to women's real concerns. Describing similar initiatives in Uganda, Tripp notes: "To denigrate domestic training and see it only as part of a civilizing and domesticating imperial project misses its relevance to ordinary women in a very pragmatic sense.... most of it was quite essential to the healthy survival and welfare of children and families."⁷⁷ Moreover, the organization of baby shows served as a means of bringing women together to share information and to address a broad array of issues. These shows initiated conversations between urban and rural women, served as a means to attract new members to women's associations, and led to the "frank exchange of views and first hand information regarding problems common to all in the Federation."⁷⁸ Finally, by mobilizing women around such issues, some women—like Burnley—were able to break out of the private realm to become community activists and politicians. Through tours of West Cameroon organizing baby shows, meetings, talks, and other events, Burnley became well known. These activities raised her profile within political circles and launched her political career. Burnley served as a representative to the West Cameroon House of Assembly from 1970 to 1973 and as a member of the Cameroon's National Assembly from 1973 to 1983.

The newly founded Cameroonian women's groups continued to interact with European women through exchange visits, participation in international conferences, and affiliations with international organizations such as the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) and the International Council of Women (ICW). With independence, significant changes in women's organizing occurred as Cameroonian women formed their own multi-ethnic women's associations. However, continuities also existed as these associations maintained some of the same projects and activities as expatriate groups.

CONCLUSIONS

In pre-colonial Cameroon, women's authority stemmed from their productive and reproductive work. Women gained prestige from their roles as primary food producers and as child bearers.⁷⁹ In many societies, there were also specific leadership roles, such as queen mother, set aside for women, but the authority of these positions was often limited to an advisory capacity and to representing women rather than the entire community.⁸⁰ In these realms, women's influence declined during colonialism as the economy shifted from a focus on subsistence agriculture to a reliance on cash crop production and the power of traditional institutions weakened. At the same time, women gained in other realms, particularly in the area of formal political power. In many pre-colonial societies, cultural norms prohibited women from assuming most political roles.⁸¹ While informal constraints continued to limit women's access to formal political offices, a number of women were able to leverage their education and activism in women's associations into political power in the immediate post-colonial period.

The history of encounters between European and African women in Southern Cameroons was characterized by complexity and ambiguity. To be sure, British colonial agents frequently asserted authority over Cameroonian women and imposed norms of domesticity that were irrelevant to Cameroonian women's daily lives. At the same time, it would be a mistake to deny the agency of Cameroonian women in these encounters. Cameroonians managed to take some of the skills attained in colonial schools, domestic science centers, and colonial women's associations and put them to use in the post-colonial era in ways that increased their status in society and facilitated their participation in the public sphere. Dorothy Gwan-Nulla, writing about women's status in the region in 1963—two years after the departure of Great Britain—made a similar point: “Educated women are on the increase and with their education they are eligible to enter into government service or private enterprises. As working class women, the earning of and free use of money renders them a vast degree of independence.”⁸² Gwan-Nulla also indicated that membership in women's associations grew rapidly immediately following independence, building partially on the foundation established in the last decade of colonial rule.

Specifically, there were at least three legacies of Euro-Cameroonian encounters. The first involved the development of multi-ethnic associations. Both the corn mill societies and the Women's Corona Society brought together women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and sought to bridge ethnic, religious, and even racial divides. Multi-ethnic membership was a significant departure from pre-colonial women's groups, which became even more important in the post-colonial period as the newly independent state sought to establish a national identity. The second legacy involved organizational forms and activities. Cameroonian women carried some forms and activities from colonial to post-colonial groups. While many of the corn mill societies failed following the departure of O'Kelly, those that survived provided a foundation for women's cooperatives in independent Cameroon. The legacies of the Women's Corona Society are easier to trace. Prominent women like Anna Foncha took relevant ideas to new organizations. Thirdly, the corn mill societies and the Women's Corona Society both explicitly stressed their non-political character. Both eschewed participation in political debates, focusing instead on development and social welfare. This choice to avoid political disputes affected the nature and work of organizations after independence, where the norm of “non-political” organizing was disseminated widely.

These encounters also differed in important ways. The corn mill societies were directed at

grassroots women, while the Women's Corona Society sought out educated, elite Cameroonian women. Class differences, in particular, mediated the agency of Cameroonian women. Immediately following independence, the corn mill societies experienced a period of hardship and neglect that stemmed from a dearth of leadership. Women's groups like the Buea Women's Social Organization, in contrast, experienced a period of growth. In fact, a year after its formation, the Buea Women's Social Organization was renamed the Women's Cameroon Society to reflect its broader membership. Unlike the corn mill societies, these associations had a ready supply of educated, politically savvy, and internationally connected Cameroonian women who were willing and able to assume the reins of leadership.⁸³

In conclusion, British colonial policies in the Southern Cameroons affected women in contradictory ways. Certain policies and ideologies constricted the space available to women for public action, while others opened new possibilities for women in the areas of education, salaried employment, public life, travel abroad, and activism in local and international women's organizations. Cameroonian women instrumentally rejected and incorporated elements of colonial practice and selectively incorporated certain gender discourses into their post-colonial activities.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Hunt, Liu, and Quataert 1997; Hansen 1992; Walker 1990, especially chapters by Cock, Gaitskell, and Meintjes; and Gaitskell 1983.

2. See, for example, Special Issue on "Indigenous Women and Colonial Cultures," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 6, no. 3 (2005); Special Issue on "'Destination Globalization? Women, Gender and Comparative Colonial Histories in the New Millennium,'" *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 4, no. 1, (2003); Special Issue on "Revising the Experiences of Colonized Women: Beyond Binaries," *Journal of Women's History*, 14, no. 4 (2003); and Special Issue on "Gendered Colonialism and African History," *Gender and History*, 8, no. 3 (1996). See also Tripp 2004 and 2001; Allman, Geiger, and Musisi 2002; Thomas 2000; Sheldon 1998; and Moss 1997.

3. Mama 1996, 28.

4. Walker 1990, 13.

5. Mama 1996, 29.

6. Hunt 1990, 469.

7. Gaitskell 1979; Gaitskell 1983.

8. Sheldon 1998.

9. Sheldon 1998, 595.

10. Sheldon 1998, 625.

11. Thomas 2000.

12. Thomas 2000, 3, 15.

13. Moss 1997, 103.

14. See Jayawardena 1995; Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992; Strobel 1991; and Callaway 1987.

15. Tripp 2004.

16. Quoted from Boyd 1986, 126-127.

17. Callaway 1987, 115.

18. Great Britain 1955, 80.

19. Robertson 1986, 93.

20. Ibid.

21. British Cameroons was first a League of Nations mandate territory and later a UN trusteeship territory. Great Britain ruled Cameroon as part of Nigeria. In 1961, the UN Trusteeship Council organized a plebiscite in the British-controlled territories to determine whether they would join Nigeria or Cameroon. Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria, while the population of Southern Cameroons chose to reunite with Cameroon.

22. Great Britain 1950, 107.

23. Great Britain 1950, 107.

24. Great Britain 1951, 107.

25. Personal interview, April 10, 2002.

26. Great Britain 1959, 166.

27. Great Britain 1951, 115.

28. Bowie 1993, 17.

29. Great Britain 1959, 166.

30. Great Britain 1951, 107.

31. In a study of female leaders in Cameroon, Emmanuel Konde found that the Catholic Women's Association (CWA) has been particularly successful in getting members in high political offices. Indeed, the CWA is second only to the CPDM in having members in parliament. Konde suggests that the CWA empowers women by emphasizing their individual capabilities. One CWA leader notes: "We encourage all our members. We tell them that each and everyone of them can do something . . . that you're capable (296)." This strategy enables women to envision taking on roles in the public sphere. See Konde 1991.

32. Sheldon 1998.

33. Tripp 2004.

34. O'Kelly 1973, 115-124. See also Tripp 2004.

35. Great Britain 1955, 79.

36. NAB, Safe 1957/1, Participation in Native Authorities.

37. Great Britain 1958, 165.

38. Great Britain 1958, 165.

39. NAB, Safe 1957/1, "Participation of Women in Native Authorities."

40. NAB, Safe 1960/1, Circular 212/60, "The Participation of Women in Public Life," March 1, 1960.

41. NAB, Safe 1960/1, Circular 212/60, "The Participation of Women in Public Life," March 1, 1960.

42. NAB, Safe 1960/1, UN Regional Seminar, December 12-23, 1960 in Addis Ababa, Programme.

43. Other regional seminars on the participation of women in public life were held in Bogota, Columbia from May 18-29, 1959, in Lahore, Pakistan on November 21, 1960, and in Ulan Bator, Mongolia from August 3-17, 1965.

44. NAB, Safe 1960/1, UN Regional Seminar, December 12-23, 1960 in Addis Ababa.

45. Great Britain 1954, 108.

46. Great Britain 1960, 59. Within the literature, there are mixed opinions on the value of such organizations. Ifi Amadiume, for example, argues that the spread of European women's associations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Girl Guides, and Girls' Brigade to Nigeria contributed to the construction of the "daughters of imperialism." See Amadiume 2000, 39-43. In Uganda, Tripp, in contrast, finds that these organizations brought

European, African, and Asian women together through an explicit ideology of nonracialism and served as the foundation for the Ugandan women's movement. See Tripp 2001 and 2000.

47. The Women's Institutes movement began in Canada in 1897 and in Great Britain in 1915. Women's Institutes were rural women's groups that, as written in the first constitution, sought "To promote that knowledge of household science which shall lead to the improvement in household architecture with special attention to home sanitation; to a better understanding of economics and hygienic value of foods and fuels; and to a more scientific care of children, with a view to raising the general standard of the health of our people." In short, organizations aimed to better the home and the community more broadly and to bring women together without regard to "political, religious, or ethical belief." See Jenkins 1953, 7, 12.

48. Great Britain 1951, 107.

49. For more on the roles that women played in Britain's overseas service, see Callaway 1987.

50. This section draws primarily on four works: O'Kelly 1955, 33-35; O'Kelly 1973, 108-124; Fennelly 1985, 119-154; and Bryson, 1979, 92-94 and 136.

51. O'Kelly 1973, 111.

52. O'Kelly 1973, 115.

53. O'Kelly 1973, 123.

54. O'Kelly 1955, 33-34.

55. Fennelly 1985, 133.

56. Fennelly 1985, 142.

57. O'Kelly 1973, 122-123.

58. Konde 1990. Other scholars, though, take issue with his description of *anlu*. See Awasom 2002. *Anlu*, a traditional sanction mechanism used by the Kom women in Northwest Cameroon, is an example of women overtly challenging British authority. Though different scholars offer different explanations of the 1958 uprising, it was at least partially a protest against colonial policies affecting women, including rising taxes and laws regulating farming techniques. For an extended discussion of *anlu*, see Diduk 1989; Nkwi 1985; Ardener 1975; Ritzenthaler 1960.

59. O'Kelly 1955, 34.

60. Ibid., 35.

61. Fennelly 1985, 145.

62. DeLancey 1987, 10.

63. UN Economic Commission for Africa 1977, 28.

64. Fennelly 1985, 145.

65. For a history of the Women's Corona Society, see Swaisland 1992.

66. Victoria (Limbe) is a coastal town in what was British Southern Cameroons. Buea is located several miles inland at the base of Mount Cameroon. Buea has been a key administrative site since German colonial rule. Both towns are located in what is now the Southwest province of Cameroon.

67. NAB, Safe 1956/1, September 9, 1958.

68. NAB, Safe 1956/2.

69. Bota is a section of Victoria (now Limbe), where many expatriates associated with the colonial administration lived.

70. NAB, Safe 1956/2, Minutes of the Women's Corona Society meeting held at Bota Club, June 19, 1958.

71. NAB Safe 1956/2, Minutes of Women's Corona Society meetings.
72. Helen Callaway argues that in Nigeria the Women's Corona Society became an important multiracial organization where African and European women came together to undertake voluntary work. By 1953, the organization had a school, a nursery, and regular activities in Lagos. Schools were later established in Kano and Jos. In Cameroon, the Women's Corona Society was established much later. As late as 1956, the president of the Buea branch notes that the organization "only exists on paper." Thus, the Women's Corona Society in Cameroon was not as effective at bringing together African and European women on a long-term basis. See Callaway 1987, 11, 215-218.
73. The Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) is a government-controlled parastatal specializing in agricultural production. It was formerly called the Commonwealth Development Corporation. The British handed over the CDC to the independent government, which renamed it the Cameroon Development Corporation. Tea, palm nuts, bananas, rubber, and coconuts are grown on CDC plantations. The CDC is currently in the process of being privatized, although there is little evidence that this is actually taking place.
74. NAB, Safe, 1956/2, Letter written by Mrs. J.O. Fields, November 29, 1956.
75. NAB, Safe 1962/1, "National Council of Cameroon Women."
76. Personal interview, April 10, 2002.
77. Tripp 2004.
78. From 1961-1972, Cameroon was a federal state comprised of West Cameroon (British Southern Cameroons) and East Cameroon. In 1972, Cameroon became a unitary state. Immediately following independence, women's associations organized events that brought together women from the two federal states. NAB 1962/1 "National Council of Cameroon Women."
79. Kaberry 1952, 149-150 and Kaberry and Chilver 1961, 365.
80. Awason 2002, 3.
81. Kaberry 1952, 151-152.
82. Dorothy Gwan-Nulla. "The Role of West Cameroon Women in the Family and Society. Paper prepared for a seminar in Germany from April 29-May 24, 1963 organized by the German Foundation for Developing Countries. National Archives, Buea (NAB), Safe 1960/1.
83. These include Anna Foncha, Gwendoline Burnley, Dorothy Atabong, Prudence Chilla, Josepha Mua, and others.

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